

Call of the Month: How we learn and dance by Barry Leiba

At the end of last month's column I asked a question about when we think through the definition of a call and when we don't. Perhaps some of you are aware of the debate among educators about how to teach children to read. There are essentially two methods: the "phonics/basal reader" method and the "whole language" method.

In the "phonics" method, students are taught the sounds of individual letters. They're taught the different sounds that the same letter can have in different cases, and they're given simple *See Spot Run* sorts of "basal reader" texts. They learn to sound out the words, and they learn the meanings of new words as they go.

In the "whole language" method, students are taught to recognise words as entities in and of themselves. They do not "sound out" words as in the phonics method; rather they're given material to read and to write, and they're encouraged to put their thoughts onto paper, with the vagaries of spelling and such to be worked out later.

In all of this, the question that comes up is, "How do experienced readers read?" As an experienced reader, do you sound out words or do you read words (or perhaps even groups of words) as whole units? Do you read phonically or in a "whole language" way?

For most of us, the answer is probably "some of each". Most likely, when you see "the" or "and" or even "student", you recognise the word as a word, the whole being more to you than the sum of its parts. But when you see "paralipsis" or "frabjous", or perhaps "different", you probably back up and sound the word out (the first because it's unusual, the second because it's nonsense (from Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*), and the last because it's hyphenated and broken across two lines).

All well and good, you say, but how does this relate to square dancing? We've all learned to square dance, just as we've all learned to read, and the methods of learning and of applying the knowledge are not dissimilar. When we hear SWING THRU and we're in right-handed waves, we (yes, even the new graduates, at this point) probably treat it somewhat like reading the word "the". Few square dancers with much experience actually think through the definition of SWING THRU, which would be analogous to sounding out a word. Instead, we **know** how to SWING THRU from a wave, just as we know how to recognise the word "the" as a single unit.

But if we've just learned a new call or if we hear a particularly complicated call, as when we read the word "paralipsis", we have to

sound it out. The definition hasn't made it into the backs of our brains such that the call is an entity unto itself. That's why a caller will often cue the definition of a complex call, and why the Plus dancers often shout "Hinge, fold, follow, peel!" when LINEAR CYCLE is called. It's developed into general dancer noise, but it started as a mnemonic device to help us to remember how to do the call.

When we hear SWING THRU and we're in a THAR, as we looked at last month, we probably also fall back to the definition - sounding the call out. In this case, it's like the word "different" that was hyphenated earlier; it's a familiar word (or call), but it's in a formation that isn't typical, so we have to slow down and think about it. It's important that we **do** that in such cases. If instead you try to do the call by feel, it will be as though you read the unusual or oddly-formed word as though you knew it. You might get it right, but then you'd be as likely to misread (or misdance) it. When you're unsure of the formation, pull out the definition and go that route.

Sometimes, though, we're not sure that a call is coming in an unusual way - just as we might read an unusual word as a similar-looking, more usual word. When the sentence doesn't make sense, we'll usually go back and re-read it, and we'll get the word right on the second pass. If we hear SWING THRU and we're in a left-handed wave, the fact that we're in a wave might make us do the call by feel, and many will start with the wrong hand, doing a LEFT SWING THRU instead. When we get back home with the wrong person and the sentence proves not to make sense, in this case we can't go back and re-read (re-dance) it. It's not always easy to see when a call's being done from an unusual formation. Always be aware of where you are. In particular, since left-handed waves are "unusual" for many calls, always note when you're in a left-handed wave so you can react accordingly. Then, just as when you read, you can sound the call out and get it right the first time.

For fun, the next time you're dancing try to think about which calls you do as units and which ones you think about the definitions for. Think about what familiar calls you see in unfamiliar ways, and think about how you handle those situations. Er... then think about what that call was you just missed and why your corner's waving at you like a lunatic.

Oh, in case you can't find it in your dictionary, "paralipsis" is what it's called when you highlight something by saying that you won't speak of it, as in "Prokofiev was a good pianist, not to mention his skill as a

composer.” See y'all next month.