

ASK DIANE 03-25-3008 “My Student Has a Crush on Me”

Diane Jarmolow is the founder and director Ballroom Dance Teachers College, the first comprehensive vocational training program for ballroom dance teachers in the country. She is the former owner of the Metronome Ballroom in San Francisco and is widely regarded as the nation’s foremost expert on ballroom dance teacher training. She has trained hundreds of dance teachers including United States and world champions. She consults regularly at ballrooms across the country and around the world on a variety of issues concerning teacher training and teacher support at all stages of a teacher’s professional career.

Ask Diane is a regular advice column in which Diane will offer solutions for common problems and challenges confronting ballroom dance teachers working in the industry today.

This month she responds to letters from a teacher and from a student. Both letters tackle a tricky subject in the ballroom world: romantic feelings between teacher and student.

Dear Diane,

My student is a gifted and attractive young woman who is very serious about her dancing. She takes three private lessons from me each week and we compete Pro-Am at the Open Bronze level. Recently, however, a problem has come up that is threatening to derail our work together.

I’m afraid that she is developing romantic feelings for me. She has begun dressing in increasingly suggestive clothes, to the point that I feel uncomfortable holding her in closed position. She seems to linger after our lessons and continues to hold my hand after we have stopped dancing. Last night she suggested going out for a drink and I declined as politely as I could. We are going out of town next month for a competition and I am very worried that things will escalate then as we are both staying overnight in the same hotel (in separate rooms, of course.)

To further complicate matters I am going through a divorce. My wife was my dance partner. She also works in the studio so everyone knows I am suddenly single. My student is a lovely girl but I am not interested in dating her.

There doesn’t seem to be any good solution to this problem. I don’t want to humiliate her by rejecting her and at the same time I don’t want to lead her on and have her continue to believe that there is the possibility of a romantic relationship between us. Mostly I am afraid that anything I do will cause me to lose my best student.

Sincerely,

David in Illinois

Dear David,

Thank you for this important and timely question.

Your situation is very common, even endemic, in the ballroom world. Romantic feelings between a dance student and a dance teacher have been a part of this industry since its inception.

There is a phenomenon at work here that is well-known in the world of psychotherapy: “transference.” Transference is the unconscious redirection of feelings for one person onto another. In therapy, a patient will often transfer deep romantic feelings onto her therapist. A similar situation can happen in a ballroom dancing lesson, and the teacher will literally stand in the shoes of a student’s idealized romantic partner.

In many ways, a teacher is a perfect date. He smells nice, he’s dressed up, he holds her in his arms and makes her feel wonderful as they glide around the room. He’s supportive and kind and attentive. He never leaves dirty clothes on the floor or uses all the hot water. Add into this heady mix the fact that many students start dancing because they are lonely or have just gone through a romantic break-up, and you can see how a full-blown imaginary love affair can bloom.

Let me be clear: it is very common for a student to have romantic feelings for her teacher and it is not necessarily detrimental to the learning process, as long as the teacher is able to maintain clear, professional boundaries that are absolute.

You can often handle the situation by purposeful non-verbal communication. Your student, because of her romantic interest, will be looking for clues to your feelings in all of your actions. Hopefully, you can avoid having to have what is bound to be a difficult and possibly humiliating conversation.

In your case, you must never accept her invitations for contact outside of her lessons, even if this is not a policy you adhere to with your other students. When she continues to hold your hand after class, gently but intentionally let go. Be sure to confine all your topics of conversation to her dancing. If she brings up her personal life, politely redirect the conversation. You may just have to endure the suggestive clothing while she absorbs your consistent non-verbal messages. It won’t last forever.

Sometimes the non-verbal approach doesn’t work, and the situation unfortunately escalates. If her attraction is seriously interfering with your lessons, you will have to confront the problem directly. Set aside a time to talk to her privately.

The goal of your conversation should be kindness and clarity. Speak from your heart and be intensely mindful of the effect your words. Tell her that you have a long-standing policy against dating your students. At the same time, you really value her as a student and don’t want anything to interfere with your work together.

It may be awkward for a few lessons, but if you approach the situation with sensitivity, purpose, and an open heart, I'm sure you will resolve this temporary glitch in your teaching relationship.

Thank you for this important question, David. I wish you and your student all the best.

Warm Regards,

Diane

Dear Diane,

I've been taking private lessons for about a year and I really love ballroom dancing. I'm writing to you now because I'm starting to feel a little uncomfortable in my lessons. My instructor is becoming increasingly physical. He often places his hands on my buttocks, seemingly in the guise of aiding my technique. He has brought his hand across my breasts "accidentally" doing an inside turn from closed position many, many times.

He always tells me that the advanced Smooth dances require close body contact to facilitate movement across the floor. I know this is true, but I sometimes feel that he is taking advantage of the situation to feel my breasts!

I live in a rural area and he is the only male instructor anywhere near here. He has been in the ballroom world for many years and is very well-known. Ultimately, I would like to compete with him. I wonder if I should just accept his hands on my rear end. Is this the norm in the ballroom world? Am I overreacting?

Sincerely,

Jenna in South Carolina

Dear Jenna,

Thank you for your letter. You are certainly **not** overreacting!

In any other context, your instructor's behavior would be considered sexual harassment. There *is* body contact involved in ballroom dancing, but you should never tolerate any touching that makes you feel uncomfortable or exploited, regardless of what your teacher says.

If you were located in a large city with many reputable instructors, I would tell you to find a new teacher, one with more respect for the profession and for his students.

However, because you are interested in competing with your current instructor and he's the only game in town, you will need to confront the situation firmly and directly.

I suggest you employ a technique called "non-violent communication." First, tell your teacher explicitly how his actions make you feel. "When you run your hands across my chest I feel degraded and angry. It makes it hard to concentrate on my lesson."

Next, you ask him to change his offensive behavior. "Therefore, I request that you stop touching my chest and that you are especially careful during inside turns to bring your hands down to my waist level."

If this clear and direct communication does not change his behavior, I really can't recommend staying with him as your teacher, regardless of his experience in the competitive ballroom world. In fact I would suggest that you report him to the appropriate authorities.

I am so sorry you've had this experience, Jenna. Your teacher's unsavory behavior is totally unacceptable. Fortunately, the vast majority ballroom dance instructors are consummate professionals whose sole focus is on your dancing. If you need help finding a new teacher, please let me know.

Thank you so much for writing. I applaud your courage in confronting this problem directly. Please let me know if I can help you in the future.

Warm Regards,

Diane

Diane Jarmolow welcomes your teaching questions. Feel free to contact her by email at diane@teachballroomdancing.com. For more information about teacher training, support, and professional certification, visit Diane's web site at www.teachballroomdancing.com