

One of the more interesting comparisons I've found myself making this quarter has been that of social dance and marching band. I marched throughout high school, and noticed that the basic mechanics are similar to those of social dance. Keep your feet in time and your upper body smooth as if it were gliding across the field, adjust your step size to how far you need to travel, and so on. Little tricks I learned to help deal with the unexpected helped too: awareness of people around me, and how to fudge my way back into step when I ended up off count. There were also more specific, and surprising, overlaps. For example, recently in class we were told to alternate locking one knee with the other, creating an effect somewhat like marching in place, but with more hip motion. It turns out this is almost exactly the basic step for marching band; it's adjusted slightly to make it easier to play music, but the general idea is eerily similar.

But the reason I found them so surprising is that marching band is largely about group uniformity, presenting a single impression forged from 200 musicians to the audience, while dance is extremely individualistic. Yet there is cross-pollination: the things I learned in marching band helped me in dance, especially as I was just getting into the swing of things in the first few weeks, and learning dance presumably helps one's marching as well.

That said, I have no intention of marching again, while the opposite is true for dance. It's interesting to reflect on why; they have so much in common, so theoretically I should enjoy them about equally. Since this is not the case, there's some difference I must be overlooking. The most obvious to me is that band is so much about the group identity over that of the individual, but I still enjoy playing in orchestras, where the same ideas apply. Perhaps the context is important, but I don't think this is it. The next thought I had was the social aspect; I know plenty of people at Stanford involved in social dance, and have met more through it. But this is just as true of high school marching band, too; while I didn't enjoy the marching aspect, at least I got some great friends out of it. It could be the music, except that there's a surprising overlap between their genres: our marching band somehow played a waltz and a tango, and plenty of music that could be swung to.

The key difference, I think, is the attitude. The notion that there is only one right way to march, one right way to play the music or to do the choreography, makes it much more difficult and stressful. The effect of 200 people marching in unison is impressive, yet I never enjoyed it. It frequently felt as if one couldn't spell 'choreography' without 'chore.' Certainly, this uniformity is a factor in orchestras as well, but it is generally much more obvious that there are often many ways to interpret a passage, and therefore the emphasis is more often on doing what sounds right, what works, rather than what was told to us as The Truth. And the same is true in social dance; there are customs which are useful to know, and things one ought to avoid, but there is so much room within these constraints to improvise, learn, and have fun. I haven't yet done much experimenting, since I don't think I know enough yet to really explore this without a metaphorical roadmap, but I look forward to when I step forward and become fluent in social dance. The ability to improvise, be creative, or make connections among ideas has over and over been a source of enjoyment in my life: wordplay, language learning, music, and now social dance.