

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

There is a lot of debate in the aviation industry about pilot training. The question posed is 'Should a pilot become a flying instructor, or should those with teaching skills be trained as flying instructors?' The premise behind this being, that a good pilot does not necessarily make a good instructor, and the observation that many pilots are unable to transfer their skills to others, mainly through a lack of understanding of the learning process. All sectors have a problem with skill-transfer, so let us look at the problem and see how we can rise above it to benefit our staff and our organisations. Before we start, let us consider teachers, lecturers, trainers and instructors as 'Teachers', since they all intend to 'teach something to someone'.

When I worked as a lecturer in universities and colleges, I came across the 'challenged Teacher problem'. The academic inspection authorities in a major European country recently rated Teachers from a wide range of educational establishments. They found that more than half of them were 'less than satisfactory'. Many countries have the same problem, for the simple and inescapable reason that Teaching is not given its rightful place and respect as a tough, demanding and highly-skilled job; we should stop fooling ourselves if we think otherwise. Teaching is not easy - and it is not for everybody - but we do not only need teaching to take place; more importantly, we need to see evidence of learning and retaining the knowledge occurring in the students - whether at school, college, industry or another Government 'workshop'!

Outstanding Teachers in all sectors (not just schools and colleges, but the professional trainers too) are hard to come by - as anybody who has been to school or on another [boring] workshop knows! Mediocre Teachers are in abundance and, sadly, so are 'less than satisfactory' ones, too.

I lead a team of eight lecturers, delivering high-level, IT-related subjects, including programming, Robotics and Control Technology, and it is not unfair to say that it was difficult to recruit the standard of Teacher that I would have desired - as it is with recruiting into any sector of any industry. The crunch comes with 'teaching the Teacher to teach' - which is a bigger task than teaching the students! Most people, once designated a 'Teacher' or 'trainer', seem to believe that they have achieved a status whereupon they can enter a stasis of learning - and seal their own learning skills at that very moment. Of course, problems related to learning are not limited to the Teacher - most definitely not!

I have often said, facetiously, 'Every parent knows that a good student does well because he is a good student, but lack of achievement at any level must be the Teachers fault.' Of course, this is not the case - only the claim of a concerned parent. A good student will always do well; a poor student may well be studying the wrong subject! There is, of course, a graduation of sixty-four million shades of grey between these two extremes.

If we consider a student learning Economics (one of parents' favourite subjects for their wards, along with the study of Law and Medicine), it is clear that the good student will do well, even if he does not attend all of the lectures. Similarly, the poor student will not do well - even if he attends all of the lectures. Most importantly in this discussion is that the 'average' student's achievements will be determined directly by the quality of the Teacher and the learning experience.

Now, in the classroom there are plenty of books to 'chew and pour' or, as I call it, 'chew and spew'. That may be fine for some, but not me...

In the cockpit, learning is in a dynamic, constantly-changing environment, where no two minutes, let alone two lessons, are the same because of winds, thermals, temperatures, etc., learning must be remembered and engraved in the heart, mind, soul and muscles of the student. It is important that the student pilot be trained to acquire and retain 'safe and appropriate actions and reactions' within the required skills and knowledge for the license, rating or certification being sought. To transmit that knowledge appropriately and in a cost-effective manner (flight training is charged on a 'per-hour' basis) requires a sound understanding of learning theory, as should all learning and training from Primary School to University, seamstress training to pilot training centres!

There are four basic learning 'styles' – theorist, pragmatist, reflector and activist. A good Teacher should have strong tendencies in all four styles and understand their personal strengths and weaknesses, stretching themselves to increase their abilities in their 'less-favoured' styles.

There are still far too many schools and training establishments that fail to promote activist learning methods; that is, experiential or practical learning – or learning by doing, making mistakes and doing again until perfected. Of course, piloting requires a lot (I mean a lot of a lot) of this, and a lot of theory, pragmatism and reflection – but the tough stuff really is the doing – and that is very, very practical. But it is not just piloting that requires this approach; engineering, manufacturing, agriculture, construction, and... well, you can fill this list out, I am sure!

The next challenge in training is Assessment. There are many types of assessment, but what is interesting is what people accept as a 'pass' mark. For me, when it comes to safety there is only one pass mark - one hundred per cent. Of course, the 'assessed' may know the answer to the question, but fail to read the question well and fail; this is a common problem. Assessment often fails to provide reliable results due to the cloud of semantics. Practical assessment can be more reliable – and asking somebody to fly a plane and go through unexpected, simulated emergency actions is something that I really find enlightening.

What should be the required pass mark on assessment, whether practical, question and written answer or multiple guess (I mean multiple choice)? For me, I believe that 80% is the lowest pass mark that should apply in any exam-type assessment. The idea that 50% is a pass – is 100% beyond me! Would you like an accountant that only gets the answer right 50% of the time? Real life is about seeking – and where possible achieving - 100%; we rarely reach it, any of us. One thing that I know for sure is that any pilot, company or operation that openly accepts less than 100% of their operations, production, cash management, quality control, etc is not going to stay in that business for very long! How long would an airline with a '50% success rate for landings' stay in business?

Don't get me wrong, we all make mistakes; but mistakes in business – that is, less than 100% - often prove expensive. Perhaps we need a new approach to 'workshops', in-house training and educational methods, through a better understanding of how we learn, so that we can make sure that the teaching produces learning with retention, and its associated 100% benefits!

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