



Small steps

Is it better to learn by taking small steps or huge leaps? Put like that, many people would opt for small steps. For example, you might consider it was really throwing a novice in at the deep end to teach bell handling by giving a novice a bell that is down, showing him how to make coils and then telling him to raise the bell and set it. In fact, many good ringers have been taught this way. But that does not mean it should be the normal way for everyone to do it.

Now consider another example of being thrown in at the deep end. Many people learn to ring rounds, and then in one step they are expected to attempt plain hunting on five or six bells. Again, many good ringers have been taught like this. But that does not mean that it must be the best way for everyone to do it.

The difference between these examples is that one is widely accepted as normal, while the other is not (in many areas). But many pupils have great difficulty trying to make this big step when trying to learn to hunt.

We have deliberately chosen these two extremes to help illustrate some general principles about learning and teaching.

Small steps

This is the first principle. If you can do it, it often helps to break a process down into small parts. They are easier to understand, and they can be tackled separately. This seems quite sensible advice, but it is not always put into practice.

Adaptability

Every good thing has its weaknesses. The trouble with breaking things down into small steps is that it can make you think in a very procedural way. If you then number the steps (which it is very tempting to do) they seem to become somehow immutable. You feel we have to teach everyone the same way, because it is the 'right' way. Good teachers avoid this trap by remaining flexible.

So the second principle is adaptability. Each person's needs are different, and the way they respond will be different. The same person will have different needs on different occasions. Different bells lead to different sets of problems, so what works in one tower might need to be varied in another.

Always try to be responsive to individual needs. Even with a well proven set of steps to teach, and a set of trusted techniques to teach them, you will need to vary the emphasis. If necessary you should be prepared to go back and repeat 'completed' steps if you suspect the lesson has not 'stuck' (or has come 'unstuck').

That also sounds like common sense, but it is probably a lot less common than it ought to be.

What about fast learners?

Does adaptability mean that some times you would take big steps instead of small ones?

You could, but it is probably better to take

the small steps rapidly. If each step presents no problems, a fast learner might whizz rapidly through them, but will still be aware of them to fall back on if problems later emerge.

Certainly you should not hold back someone who doesn't have a problem? That can be just as harmful as pushing people on when they do still have problems.

A few tips

- Always try to 'think about' how you are teaching, especially if you are teaching something for the first time.

- Read relevant books. It helps to know other people's thinking, even if it is different from your own. But you need to think about how what you read can be applied. Authors often simplify things when writing them down.

- Think about all the things (mental and physical) your pupil will have to do, especially those that are new or not yet fully developed and reliable.

- Think how to exercise each of them, separately if possible, or else built up sequentially.

- Explain each step to your pupil before trying it. If both of you know what you are trying to achieve, you are more likely to do so.

- Assess the performance of each step as you do it, and if all is well move on. If not explain the problem and work on it. But don't wait for perfection. Things often take a while to gel, and do so better when the whole picture emerges.

- If a problem reappears, try to find out why, and be prepared to repeat an earlier step to put it right before moving on.

- Go over the same steps at subsequent lessons unless you are sure that the skills are securely in place.

Small steps in hunting

Let us assume your pupil can already ring steadily in rounds, can ring call changes, and can work out which bell to follow after a call.

New things to learn in order to plain hunt reliably are:

- knowing what place the bell should be in
- knowing which way it is going
- ringing at three different speeds
- knowing which speed to ring at
- changing speed at handstroke & backstroke
- seeing the way among the other ropes
- doing all this continually without any breaks
- listening to control the striking as well!

Here are some small steps that help to

develop these skills. They have to be done in exactly this order. Can you think of any others?

(T) = tutor (S) = student

- (S) Ring with changes called each whole pull.

- (S) Ring with changes called at backstroke.

- (T) Explain that in hunting, adjacent bells keep swapping places with each other (almost every stroke).

- (S) Write it out on paper (showing hunting on different numbers of bells).

- (S) Count the blows to see the difference from normal speed when hunting up and down.

- (S) Draw corresponding blue lines.

- (S) Write out a list of places for one bell to ring in.

- (S) Write on this the speed to ring at each blow.

- (S) Practice counting places and saying speed changes at the right time

- (S) Practice making the speed changes on a tied bell while counting places. (T) Do the same thing on another bell so the student aims to ring at the same time every blow.

- (S) Stand next to tutor covering and call out bells as they are followed.

- (S) Cover to hunting and repeat this.

- (S) Stand next to tutor hunting and count places in time.

- (S) Stand next to tutor hunting and call out bells being passed

- (S) Attempt hunting on small number of bells (T) Prompt places and speed changes as required. Point to bells if needed.

(S) Work up to more bells

Many of the steps above are about 'preparing' to hunt, but actually doing it can also be broken down into quite small steps as well. For example, with six bells ringing:

- Hunt on the front two bells only
- Hunt on the front three bells only
- Hunt on the front four bells only
- etc

Note that hunting on the front four of a six is a very different experience from hunting with only four bells ringing. The gaps, and therefore the speed changes, are much smaller, so the effort is reduced. Plain hunting to a four bell rhythm is a very useful exercise to help develop a rhythmic approach to hunting, but ringers who habitually ring on six (and certainly eight) often find it much harder.

Tail End