



Old learners or ageless problems?

The Learning Curve in May was about people who learn to ring when they are older. Conventional wisdom says they learn more slowly than youngsters, but several things since then make me wonder if it is as simple as that. So this month we return to the topic.

Are they really slower?

At the Open Meeting during the Central Council weekend in Liverpool, Heather Peachey reported her experiences training many new ringers over the last few years. She challenged what 'everyone knows', ie that older people are slower learners and not natural handlers. With mothers and daughters learning at the same time, she could make comparisons. There were differences indeed, but they were between the pairs, not between the generations. Not a large sample, but food for thought. Does aptitude run in families perhaps?

Is there a compensation mechanism that allows older learners to make good their supposed difficulties? They are acknowledged to be more tenacious, so perhaps they can put in more effort to compensate for any shortcomings. They have learnt that you have to work for things you want.

Other factors

There are enormous differences between the rate at which different people learn - at all ages - as the above experience suggests, so age is certainly not the only factor.

Another might be practice. Phil Gay once remarked that teenagers find learning easy 'because it is what they do for a living'. In our first fifteen or so years, we all learn many skills of physical co-ordination like walking, tying shoe laces, putting on a coat, writing, unscrewing lids, playing ball games, cycling, swimming or using a screwdriver. Learning to drive in our late teens is the last time many of us try to acquire a completely new physical skill. What we learn in later life tend to be cognitive or social skills like management, accountancy, computer programming, counselling, planning, organising or teaching.

Anyone who has let their learning skills get rusty will also have forgotten what it feels like to be doing something not very well. By middle age, most of us have become fairly good at the things we can do and long ago dropped the things that we can't.

One group of people - professional actors - do spend a lot of time learning and imitating. Tail End and others recently taught six of them to handle a bell (report for RW in due course) and we were impressed by how rapidly they learnt, compared with others of comparable age.

In these days of longer, healthier life and early retirement, it is not uncommon to meet people who take up activities normally associated with the young like wind surfing or para-gliding. Perhaps we should be seeking to recruit such people because they have retained the ability to learn new skills.

The view from the other side

The other thing that prompted me to think more about older learners was a letter from a ringer in her seventies, who learnt to ring when she was sixty. It is always heartening to get feedback - it proves that someone out there is reading what you have written. It can put a slightly different angle on things, as in this case.

This older ringer recounted her experiences, many of which will be familiar. She was not well taught, something she now realises having been exposed to good teaching over the intervening years. A lot of what she did was without understanding what or why. That is a poor start for anyone, at any age, and is to her credit that she persevered despite it all.

Do people who learn later in life really have different problems or do they merely have different versions of the problems that can happen at any age? If so, should we adapt the way we teach to help overcome them?

Working with mature learners

There seems little doubt that for the foreseeable future, many people will continue to take up ringing when past their youth. The practical question that we face as tower captains and teachers is how best to respond to them. When comparing them with the youngsters, perhaps instead of bemoaning their weaknesses we should play to their strengths, and ask ourselves whether there are any ways in which we should adapt our teaching to ensure that they learn as quickly and as effectively as possible.

Teaching and learning

First a small reminder. As teachers, we may be tempted to see ourselves in control of the whole process. We are 'the experts' and they are 'the learners'. 'We' have the skills and knowledge and 'they' do not. 'We' tell 'them' what to do and what not to do. If we are good teachers, we will also tell them why, and we will give feedback on how well they are doing. We get frustrated when what we tell people does not sink in, and perhaps brand them as poor learners.

In fact the teacher is much less in control of the whole process than we might like to think. Teaching is not about pouring knowledge into empty containers called learners - it is more subtle. Learning is the key process, and teaching is the means to facilitate and encourage it. Those with a knowledge of Latin will know that the word 'education' means 'drawing out'. As teachers, we must draw out and develop the latent abilities in our pupils. Learning is not the inevitable product of teaching, but good teaching will produce more and better learning than bad teaching.

How can we apply this to teaching mature learners, whose latent abilities might be different from those of a youngster? As a teacher how should you play to the strengths of older people, rather than bemoaning their weaknesses. Here are some thoughts:

Treat them as partners - Most mature learners are highly motivated and want to learn. They are prepared to put effort into their learning, so if you can fully harness that effort, there will be two of you driving the learning process. You have the knowledge, but it is your pupil that has to apply it. Knowledge is more easily shared between partners.

Be open about progress - One aspect of partnership is sharing decisions. Mature learners

tend to be more conscious of, and possibly have stronger feelings about, their progress. Some will be impatient while others will 'not want to be pushed'. Either way, it can be demanding on the teacher expected to predict progress, and who wants neither the prediction nor the outcome to be disappointing. Progress depends on so many things.

Help them to understand - My correspondent said she was taught to do things without understanding why. That is no way to learn when you are used to being in control of your life. Children expect to be told what to do (at least they did when I was a lad!) and just do it, but as we mature things change. Any new experience must fit in with the complex set of ideas and beliefs already in our heads. We resist throwing away hard won experience. A teacher should be aware of this, and prepared to explain things in the learner's terms to help overcome these barriers.

Teachers of mature learners frequently complain that they want to understand everything, and clog their minds up with too much information too soon. That is certainly a danger, and probably a symptom of the need to make new ideas fit in. A good relationship with the teacher should help the learner to take some things on trust until such time as 'the penny drops'. It is certainly better than just suppressing questions, which merely hides the disbelief, making it harder to learn effectively.

Coach the whole person - We rightly concentrate on teaching the mechanics, but there is more to it than that. To be successful, a ringer must be at ease when ringing. Many ringers are frightened of the rope. They might not say so, but it is obvious from their expression and behaviour. It is hard for ringers with fluent handling to imagine what that must feel like. Explaining the cause of problems (often to do with rope handling) is necessary but not enough. Often confidence is needed to help overcome the handling problems! Reassurance can help develop a more relaxed and confident style. Confidence (or rather the lack of it in her case) was an issue for my elderly correspondent too, as it is for many others.



Empathy?!

Empathy

Finally a word about empathy. As Old Learner (p 624) suggests, it is indeed hard for experienced teachers to remember how it feels to be a learner, and this probably explains the rather limited supply of empathy in the Exercise.

However hard it is, we must try to empathise with those we teach. Many of us who teach ringers are ourselves past the prime of youth, so if we cannot remember the experience of learning, at least we can share the experience of getting old!

Tail End