

The Learning Curve



A regular feature sponsored by the Central Council Education Committee
www.cccbr.org.uk/education/

Is there another way?

Several things helped to set in motion the thoughts for this month's article. First a couple of comments overheard from visitors to the CC Education Committee's stand at the Road Show:

"The only 'proper' way to do things, as everybody knows, is and anything else is wrong and stupid."

"I have my own way of doing things and no-one is going to change me!"

Then within quick succession there were two other things: a conversation in the bar about whether one should ever discourage a particular approach to training, since people learned in different ways, and a request for advice from a tower captain concerned about people using different teaching methods in the tower.

Those of us who teach ringers normally believe in the approach and in the methods that we use – if we didn't, then we would do things differently – but how do we judge whether they are 'right'? If presented with new ideas, how do we compare them with what we already know, and decide whether the alternative is better? This month we look at these difficult questions.

Does it work?

This question ought to drive all our decisions, but it is not as easy to answer as it looks. If a cure for cancer meant all patients lived for ten years, while other cures had little effect, you might abandon the others. But if some patients live and many die during or shortly after treatment, whichever cure they receive, then you might keep a more open mind.

Now apply similar thinking to the teaching of ringers. There are many different approaches to training at all stages from initial bell handling through to change ringing. Many ringers successfully emerge from training to become competent ringers, but many fail completely and give up, and some of those who survive the training never fully master the art of bell control, or develop good method learning skills.

Is this a fair comparison? People give up for lots of reasons, and innate ability affects how far an individual can progress. Of course more things than training influence whether people give up or make the grade as a ringer, so you can't ascribe all failures to the teaching method, but nor can you ascribe all success to the teaching method. Some people bring natural aptitudes, keenness and determination to their ringing, and will succeed almost regardless of how they are taught, while others fail to progress, however good the teaching.

That doesn't mean that teaching methods and the approach to training don't matter – of course they do – but it should warn us to beware of over-simplified comparisons, or the complacent assumption that 'what I currently do' is best.

The trainee's needs

A new ringer who perfects the full range of ringing skills can look forward to years of

Reprinted from *The Ringing World* 2 December 2005. To subscribe, see www.ringingworld.co.uk/ or call 01264 366620

Collections of monthly *Learning Curve* articles from 1999 are available from CC Publications www.cccbr.org.uk/pubs/ See advertisements in *The Ringing World*.

rewarding activity, but if any of these essential skills is absent or incompletely developed, (s)he faces a less satisfying ringing career. Once a pattern of imperfect ringing has been established it is harder to change or unlearn it later. The cause of problems is as likely to be something that was not taught, as something that was – something missing from the diet, like a baby growing up without some essential nutrients.

A healthy growing baby needs a continual supply of the right sorts of food to nourish it, it should avoid harmful foods that might poison it, and it needs a variety of experiences to stimulate its development. A varied and balanced diet is important, and the same is true of the 'diet' of a developing ringer – it needs the right balance, not a single 'wonder food'.

What matters isn't the food you feed in, but the effect that it has on development. Good training is as much about being sensitive to how trainees respond, as it is about having a rich armoury of techniques and exercises up your sleeve. If something isn't working, ask why, and see if an alternative way might work better. Remember too that different people have different learning styles – visual, auditory, kinaesthetic (by feel) and so on. Sometimes, a change of style, or even a change of instructor, might help an individual to overcome a problem, so be prepared to try it, and see if it works better.

RTFM

In an age when most of us expect to be able to operate complex equipment without bothering to find out how it works, and then complain when things don't work as we expect, we are often exhorted to 'Read the flaming manual'. Plenty has been written about teaching ringers, and to ignore it is wasteful if not negligent. It's not as simple as reading a video recorder manual though – there is no single 'correct sequence of pressing the buttons' to guarantee the right result. Human beings are too complex, and training them is a much deeper process than setting up a video recording.

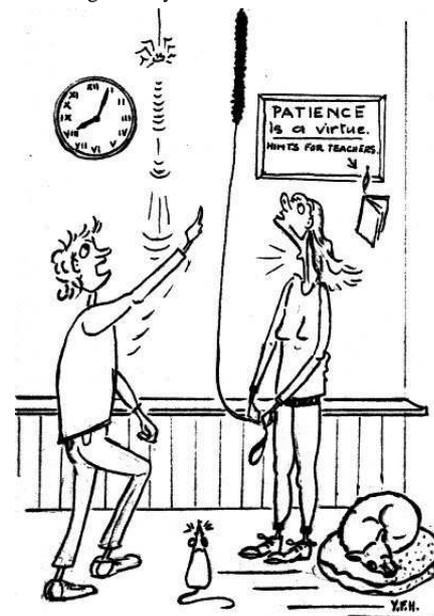
It might be simpler if there were just one single 'correct way' to do everything, but there isn't. Different books advocate different methods. They each have their strong points, and each can be made to work in the right situation. They also each have weak points. None will guarantee success – and certainly not if followed unthinkingly, or imperfectly. A wise teacher will be aware of different approaches, and able to draw from each.

There are several books on teaching bell handling, and a few on teaching later stages (see the CC website for a list). There is also a (quite extensive) section on teaching in *The Tower Handbook*, which includes a brief comparison of different methods for teaching bell handling.

So does anything go?

Accepting that there is not one single 'right technique', does not mean that all approaches are equal – far from it. The wrong approach to teaching, or a poor technique, or poor use of a good method, will be less effective, and may even do harm that is difficult to undo later. There isn't space here to expound all the principles of good teaching – read the books – but you need to be aware of them when judging the merits of different approaches. Training relies on a combination of a broad approach, and a large number of different methods and techniques (a varied diet) that can be used for different

purposes, and to provide variety for the student. Each component has strengths and weaknesses, often dependent on other factors, such as the individual style of learning, the size or age of the learner, the weight of the bell, the teaching resources available, and any particular problems met along the way.



Teaching and learning

Is the customer always right?

They might not pay us anything, but in the modern way of thinking, the ringers we teach are our customers, and we all know the maxim that 'the customer is always right'. Does it apply in this case, and if not, why not? You know more about ringing than your trainee, and there might be times when he or she wants something that you know is inadvisable. On the other hand, your student knows what it feels like, and what is not understood, in a way that you can't, so don't ignore what your student thinks. Remember that the key process is learning, and teaching helps to bring it about.

'Teach' comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'to show' (the same root as the word 'token'). As teachers, we can't actually force anything into the trainee – we need to stimulate the process of learning by showing, by providing useful experiences, and by encouragement and constructive feedback. The best results come from teacher and pupil working together, but the initiative, including possibly trying a different approach, normally has to come from you, the teacher.

Tail End

The end of Volume 3

Every two years, the collected *Learning Curve* articles are published in book form, and this article will be the last in Volume 3 (2004-2005) which will be on sale in the New Year, along with Volume 1 (1999-2001), Volume 2 (2002-2003), and *The Tower Handbook* all available from CC Publications.

The CC website lists books on training at: www.cccbr.org.uk/bibliography/#tchngr

There is information about the Network for Ringing Training (NRT) on:

www.cccbr.org.uk/education/nrt/