

The Learning Curve



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Keep on learning

Lifelong learning is a fashionable concept in the world of education and professional development. The argument goes that you can't expect to learn all you need in a fast changing world right at the start, and then expect to go through the rest of your life on the strength of your initial learning. Of course things were never quite like that in many walks of life anyway, where people have always sought out new knowledge and continued to develop new skills and insights with experience. The pressure for Continued Professional Development (CPD) in the professions merely formalises that.

Does any of this apply to ringing, or can we safely rest on our laurels once we have learned to ring, confident that we need learn no more, except maybe the odd extra method?

Climbing the learning curve

The Learning Curve is all about continued learning – progressive development, extension and refinement of ringing skills and knowledge. The steady drip feed of articles on diverse topics month by month was intended to add a new dimension that would be complementary to other sources, including books on specific topics, and be accessible more regularly to more ringers. In compendium form, the books of collected articles reach beyond readers of *The Ringing World*, and provide a more permanent resource. This article will be the concluding chapter (24) of *The Learning Curve, Volume 4: 2006-2007*. So it is opportune to look back and reflect on the topics covered in the hundred and two articles that have appeared since the series began in June 1999.

The most numerous topics, around 30% of the total, are about the motor skills of ringing, and how to develop them. That is a lot of words on what can seem deceptively simple actions, but beneath these actions there lies a complex mix of physical skills that must all be perfected in order to produce excellent ringing.

Next most frequent among the topics, around 20% each, are articles about the cognitive and perceptual skills used in ringing, and articles about specific methods.

Several groups of topics come in at around 10% each, including teaching, conducting, understanding the mechanics, and 'quality' aspects like striking. There are a few articles each on other topics including notation, ringing in hand, mini-rings, simulators and bell music.

Key themes

Looking beneath the surface, some recurrent themes run through many of the articles.

- **Stability** – The collective nature of ringing provides particular challenges when you consider that good striking requires each participant to time the swing of a bell accurately to a few hundredths of a second. Doing that with just a rope is a feat in itself, but for several people to do so in synchronism with each other becomes almost

impossible if they present each other with an unsteady target. Thus the stability of the whole band becomes a key issue, as well as individual bell control. Good striking can only be achieved when each member contributes steadiness rather than unsteadiness to the whole performance. You need a rhythmic approach to ringing, which has been discussed several times.

- **Self reliance** – Ringers need to be self reliant in many ways – not just ringing methods without needing help, but being able to self-correct when inevitable small trips occur. The deeper understanding of methods needed to do this has featured often. At a more fundamental level, to achieve stability, ringers must be able to place their next blows confidently without reliance on seeing the previous bell, and even when seeing it in the wrong place. That requires a mix of skills, and the confidence to use them. In return, it also generates confidence.

- **Horses for courses** – Ringing is a complex activity, that needs to draw on many skills. Some are interchangeable, but some are not. For example, while ropesight is very good for seeing what is happening round you, working out what to do and making gross corrections, it is a poor guide to accurate striking, which should rely much more on rhythm and listening.

- **Variety** – If you are willing to learn new methods, prepared to look at things from different perspectives, and open to suggestions of alternative ways to do things, you not only become a more rounded and better ringer (or teacher) but you will also get more from ringing.

- **A mature approach** – Some subjects are difficult, but that is no reason to avoid them. Honest discussion, respecting the views of others, and genuinely trying to help, is best.

- **Something is better than nothing** – Don't let the best get in the way of the good. For example, many people avoid conducting because they think they will be expected to keep everybody right, which few people can. But if you can learn to spot and correct the occasional trip, that is still worth doing. Likewise, some shy away from new ways of learning methods, because they can't take it all in. Again, doing a bit, and blending it with the way you already learn, may make the difference between being able to recover, or not to recover, from a slip.

Overheard

The Learning Curve has several times drawn its theme from an 'overheard' incident. They might seem contrived for the purpose, but they were all based on real events. Here is an interesting incident from nearly fifty years ago.

A keen young ringer was making rapid progress, avidly learning new methods. Moving from Surprise Minor to Major, Bristol took her eye, so she decided to learn it first. She hoped to ring it at a forthcoming 8-bell ringing meeting, but while cycling the six miles to get there began to have doubts. The ringing master was a stern figure who set high standards. Would he let her to ring Bristol if she hadn't rung Cambridge. [Things were more authoritarian in the '60s.] She knew Cambridge Minor, so she got out her diary and learnt Cambridge Major while cycling along. [Lanes were also quieter in the '60s.] She rang Cambridge Major, and then asked for Bristol. Youthful confidence led her to the Tenor, but the ringing master intervened: "I know you can ring the bell perfectly well, but you would be better trying a new method on a lighter one".

Can we learn anything from this? Learning a new method need not be hard if approached in the right way, especially if it relates to one you already know. But perhaps don't do it while cycling on modern roads!

That's all

As well as concluding Volume 4, this article is also the last in *The Learning Curve* series, which has run for eight and a half years.

So we end as we began, with one of Yvonne Hall's cartoons depicting the four readers we hoped to cater for:

- The beginner wondering what it is all about
- The helper or tutor providing support
- The tutor/captain responsible for training
- The seasoned ringer, never too old to learn

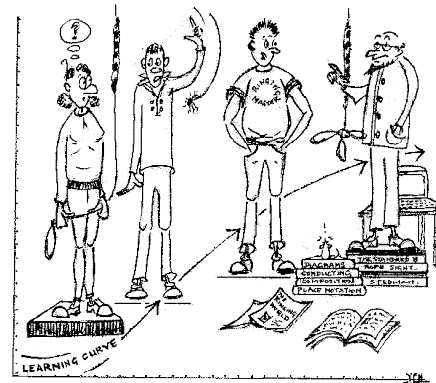


Figure 1: Participants in *The Learning Curve*

I would like to thank Tina Stoecklin, the former editor of *The Ringing World*, whose brainchild *The Learning Curve* was, and Robert Lewis the current Editor, for their encouragement. Writing articles that exactly fill a page, and delivering them on time every month imposes a considerable extra discipline. Some articles were easy to write while others proved more difficult to perfect, and I am grateful to the panel of reviewers for their critical comments, which always helped to produce a better result. My thanks also go to those people who contributed to guest articles on various topics in the early years.

At the start, it might have seemed impossible to write a hundred and two articles about learning and teaching ringing. But they have been produced, and with very little overlap in content. The fact that so much can be said provides an indication of the richness of our art.

I feel privileged to have written *The Learning Curve* for the past eight and a half years. It has been both challenging and rewarding, and I hope it has made a useful contribution to the ringing community. In the process, I too have learnt things. Trying to describe something clearly often raises questions in your own mind, which then drive you to investigate further, and possibly to change what you were going to say, before writing the final version.

But all good things come to an end, so now I shall tie up my metaphorical rope for a well earned rest (or at least for a change, which I am assured is as good as a rest).

Tail End

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