

Learning & Teaching

To make progress with teaching a learner there are three principles that must be satisfied:

- They must be given a fighting chance.
- They must be given an opportunity.
- They must be supported or coached through the experience.

When learning a new method or technique, a learner will initially be using significant conscious effort to achieve their goal. It is essential that sufficient opportunity to practice be given so as to make ringing the new method or using the new technique more automatic, i.e. drive the method or technique down into the unconscious, thereby freeing up 'brainpower' to learn something new again.

Now we can define a 'fighting chance' as:

- Possess pre-requisite skills.
- Understand the theory of what they are about to try to achieve.
- Have spare conscious effort available with which to try something new.

Speed of progress is dependent on both the aptitude of the learner and the ability of the supporting band (e.g. accuracy of bell placement and tolerance to mistakes). It is common to see people struggling to learn because they have yet to achieve the pre-requisite skills required for the new task. This can be because they have not been made aware of a deficiency, or have not been taught a required handling technique such as how to strike a dodge accurately, or shorten the rope to 'cut in' when handling a heavier bell. People struggle when they have not been given sufficient opportunity to practice what they have just been taught sufficiently before being pushed on again, and they cannot keep up even if they are keen and willing.

If someone is unable to strike plain hunt accurately, then his or her bell control or listening skills are not sufficient to move on to plain bob. If the learner does vaguely make it to the dodge, the dodge is unlikely to be sufficiently accurate, and when the hunting resumes, the rope sight will be impossible for the learner to observe. The result will require significant instruction from a minder to put the person back in the right place, possibly not even in time for the next piece of work. Therefore, success in the pre-requisite skills needs to be judged as:

- This person can achieve the pre-requisite method(s) or technique(s) without a minder's help.
- This person can achieve a standard of striking good enough for divine service ringing.

The latter is very much open to interpretation, and will be judged relevant to the experience and ability of the teachers. One way in which this may be judged is when the local band ringing together without any minders is consistently unable to complete a touch due to a fire up. This would indicate a series of miss-struck blows, either through too many methods mistakes or through poor striking in spite of no method mistakes. Perhaps then, this touch should be reserved for practice night?

Service ringing provides an excellent opportunity for members of the tower to consolidate what they have learned. Ideally, no one will ring anything they are not proficient at. Ideally, every touch will be as if for a striking competition! Practically, ambition always gets the better of us, and it may simply be that no one is taught anything new at service ringing. Therefore, service ringing could be used as an opportunity to allow someone to practise what he or she successfully demonstrated on practice night, in spite of requiring significant conscious effort. By being given this opportunity, the process of driving the new skill or technique down into the unconscious and making it more automatic can begin, providing the ringer is prepared to put in the same amount of effort that it took to succeed on practice night. This will eventually provide a reliable set of pre-requisite skills for a learner to use to reach for something new on practice night so that the cycle can begin again. This will, at the same time, increase the quality of the service ringing, which after all is supposed to be a public performance!

One Short?

Every tower is always one short to ring the next most ambitious method they think they are ready for. This means that at some point in your ringing career, when you are one of the 'best'

in your tower, you will wonder how you are to make your next improvement. A ringing team may decide that they wish to push the boat out and be adventurous by attempting a more difficult method. In this case, there will be no one to coach or teach the band. You are on your own. Of the three principles required to be satisfied for teaching and learning, you are missing the third. In order to make progress now, you must rely on the other two more heavily.

- Your pre-requisite skills must be well rehearsed and honed indeed.
- You must know the method far better than if there was someone standing behind you to help.

In addition:

- You must be prepared to try many times before any success is achieved.
- You must be prepared to revisit this new territory many times, all the time striving for improvement in the striking.
- You must accept it is not enough for the touch to come round, but that the touch must be sufficiently well struck to be distinguishable from a fire-up. Remember, you are aiming for 'metronomic' striking (even if no ringer has ever got there).

Commonly you may hear 'well if you never try, you'll never succeed'. This is indeed true, but it alone is not enough. Consider twelve novice ringers shut in a ringing chamber and told not to come out until they have successfully completed a course of Bristol Surprise Maximus. What are their chances of success? Why then should it be different for any other step increase in difficulty of method? *Yes you must try, but you must also have the pre-requisite skills.* All too often, failure to ring something a little more difficult fails due to lack of attention to this important detail.

There are so many ways of gaining and honing the missing pre-requisite skills too. Trying for Surprise? How well does the same band on the same bells ring Kent or Little Bob? If the ringing is less than good with the simpler methods, you are going to have lots of problems with the harder ones! What can service ringing usefully achieve again? Good ringing deserves to come round. If a conductor drags a touch round, what have they achieved exactly? Did the band, or a particular learner, actually ring that touch well enough for them to say 'I have rung it'? Perhaps not, and perhaps the public audience should have been spared the ringing from the point it was more than a simple trip?

Is this way of learning ever going to work? Yes! The early pioneers of change ringing were once struggling through the first ever Grandsire Doubles, Bob Major, and Surprise Maximus. It was risky and thwart with heroic failures, but they got there through sheer hard work and determination. Now we are lucky to have a wealth of people who have benefited from their efforts. When your team of ringers is in the same position, with no one else to help, you are effectively re-pioneering the same methods. Think laterally as to how you might achieve your ambitious goal. What else, such as an exercise, might you ring as a team in support of it? E.g. 'Dodging practice' with the adjacent bell from rounds in order to rehearse the move that enters your team into the second lead of plain bob. Another example is to ring one lead at a time of a surprise major method, stopping and trying again, then stopping and swapping a couple of people over, until everyone's rehearsed enough for a half course of the method.

Another way of looking at the problem is, you have a choice.

- Bash away at your ambitious goal over and over again with little or no success.
- Step back, solve the individual problems, and then put the stronger individual pieces together.

The second way is not quick by any means, but it is more likely to achieve your goal, be less demoralising for the ringers, more constructive in the teaching, whilst producing better ringing to be heard outside the church on average. You have lots of smaller and more manageable steps because you have divided the problem up. However, many people choose the first way because it is more interesting, or in their haste for results, or through a lack of understanding of the problems the band is facing and of the need to get the pre-requisites right first.

Philip Abbey
Reviewed by MBD, JC-C, JRR & HCR
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