

Teaching Others How to Teach Us

Don't make your teacher guess

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Marty began his fourth flying lesson by removing his tennis shoes and placing them neatly in the rear of the airplane. "Why'd you do that?" I queried.

"Well, bare feet on metal gives me greater touch sensitivity to the rudder pedals," he said.

"No way," I replied. "Real pilots don't fly barefoot. Sheesh!" On went the shoes. End of story — or so I thought.

The following afternoon, as I walked to the airplane for Marty's next lesson, I saw him pulling on the tow-bar, attempting to nudge the airplane's wheels from their grooved residence. Something, however, seemed peculiar. With each tug his legs did a little jig — a little dance — on the tarmac.

Losing his grip, he fell to the hot asphalt, exposing the bottoms of his shoes. The bottoms were gone! With surgical precision he had excised his soles, leaving his bare feet exposed except for a lone strip under each arch. We laughed at his foiled ruse, and I said 120-degree tarmac on bare feet would make me boogie too. From then on Marty was free to train without shoes — and became a better pilot because of it.

That was more than 20 years ago, and I still remember the lesson I learned. Marty tried to teach me how to teach him, but I wasn't paying attention. Since then, I actively try to find out how a student prefers to be taught.

Teaching the teacher how to teach us students is the key to effective learning. This proactive approach to education is not putting the cart before the horse. It's taking responsibility for our training.

When you think about it, it's amazing how passive our approach to learning is. We plop down in a small aerodynamic container with our instructors and fully expect them to know how to teach us.

On what do we base this assumption?

Most students assume instructors know how people learn. That may be true, but it doesn't mean they know how we learn. Why leave such an important item to chance?

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For someone to understand your learning preferences — you must tell them. Without this kind of communication, all an instructor can do is guess (or ask).

Over the years I've encountered very few students who volunteer their learning preferences. One exception stands out. He was a young psychologist who was precise about his learning style. He wanted me to demonstrate each maneuver slowly, three to four times, before he tried it himself.

"You mean I can demonstrate something without the guilt of holding the controls for that long?" I asked.

"That's right," he said. At which point I felt like saying, "How much is this going to cost me?"

What came next was even more interesting. "After watching you," he said, "I want to feel free to play with the maneuver without the pressure to perform. Your job is to keep me from hurtin' myself...oh, and hurtin' you too." I thanked him for his consideration and proceeded to have one of the most enjoyable teaching experiences I can recall. As an instructor, I wish this would happen more often.

If you're not clear about how you learn, think back to your last significant learning experience. Take your computer for instance. How did you learn to use it? Did you read a book? Did you see someone use it? Perhaps you experimented with it a little bit before jumping into the text. The method you choose is a clue to your learning style.

Of course, we assume your learning style is a successful one. If you think your CD-ROM tray is a cup holder or if you need to call tech support every time your mouse runs off its pad, you might want to choose another learning model. Everyone has some clue to their own learning preferences.

If your teacher is a psychic like an Edgar Casey, Jean Dixon, or Uri Geller, then traditional training methods will work fine. There's no guesswork here because these folks can predict your learning style, foretell earthquakes, and look for Atlantis at the same time. Until then, you have to teach your instructors how to teach you. ☺