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The Psychology of Sailing Instruction

Instructing students is our shared passion. We all do it! Some of us have had more students, some fewer. There are instructors that have been at it for a long time, and, fortunately, we are seeing many new sailors master the IQCs. Effective instruction is one of the first challenges we have to face in the Basic Keelboat IQC. Here we are familiarized with the *Teaching Techniques* and the *Instructor's Code of Ethics*, we are presenting our teaching samples and eventually pass the test to become Certified ASA Sailing Instructors. An accomplishment in its own right!

Most of us soon find out, though, that the teaching environment is much more challenging than we expected: We discover aspects that we thought we knew, but find ourselves unable to explain to a novice or sometimes even an advanced student. Beyond that we are challenged by our own personal limitations, and, despite what some may believe, we all have them. Much has been written about Emotional Intelligence¹ and its role in communication and leadership processes. Interacting with students in the cloistered environment of a sailing vessel over the course of many days is as much a test of our technical abilities as it is of our ability to relate to the students.

It is the hallmark of the best instructors to be, consciously or unconsciously, aware of key non-sailing aspects in the instructional process that can make the difference between a successful course and one that misses the mark. Most of these aspects are rooted in the psychology of humans, highlighted by the unique environment of the boat at sea. In many discussions with other sailors, the following topics always come up as key differentiators for instructors who are evaluated highly by the students:

- 1) Solid knowledge, more-than adequate experience, physical fitness and health form the bed-rock of a functioning social structure on board. The instructor is the master of the vessel and needs to fully step up to that role even in difficult situations. This is not limited to technical abilities but also includes effectively controlling his/her emotional states of e.g., stress, anxiety or frustration. These should never blur the role the instructor/skipper has to fulfill.
- 2) Respect for everyone's strengths and weaknesses, which provides the interface to the crew and sets the tone for all interactions. The instructor needs to understand the emotional states of everyone on board and influence them to the degree necessary. The crews, especially the more novice sailors we interact with, tend to go through much more of a psychological challenge than we often recognize.

¹ One of the more authoritative websites with a lot of information is maintained by GENOS <http://www.genos.com.au/>, a company that was started by a group of psychologists from Swinburne University, Australia. Other references can be found at this website or through a web search.

- 3) A good instructor establishes a structured environment for operational standards, responsibilities and communications. The first thing that comes to mind is SAFETY. The student, not really understanding all the vagaries of life at sea, looks to the instructor to frame a safe environment. Beyond that, the instructor is challenged to establish a 'culture' on board which includes, among other things, the clear assignment of roles and the overall tone of communication.
- 4) Everyone onboard is involved in the decision-making process (the ultimate decision-making responsibility remains with the skipper) and, when it cannot be followed, the instructor discusses afterwards why certain decisions had to be made. He/she creates an atmosphere of trust in which the decision-making process is learned by the student. The objective, after all, is to turn out the next generation of sailors and captains.
- 5) The instructor should not be afraid, and at time even be eager, to catalyze 'fun' on board. Our boats are neither the *Pequod* nor the *Bounty*, and the skipper/instructor needs to be human (at least sometimes...). At the same time, the student needs to recognize that 'fun' can only go so far before we need to keenly remember risks to safety that always exist on the water.

Teaching sailing is a transformational process: We educate and help people grow into new and challenging roles, and they trust us as professional certified instructors to do so in an environment of safety and support. To do this effectively, we need to continuously challenge our self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management in addition to our technical knowledge and presentation skills. Bringing it down to the point, honesty and integrity coupled with a strong desire to grow ourselves might just be the true hallmark of a good instructor.

This article is dedicated to the late Capt. Warren Goff. His insights and inspirations have become the foundation for many sailing careers. Fair winds and following seas, Warren, wherever you are!



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