

Training ringers – What’s the problem?

Presentation to Suffolk Guild AGM Boxford, 14 April 2012

A little bit about me. I started teaching people to ring in my teens, when I’d been ringing for a couple of years. No one taught us how to teach. We just did it – and we didn’t know it was supposed to be difficult. Mostly we taught people younger than us, but I remember teaching one much older man – probably in his late 20s!

I was lucky to run a tower in my teens – it probably wouldn’t be allowed these days. And I was lucky to start teaching on easy bells, with neither problems nor inhibitions. I’ve learnt a lot more since then, from a lot of people. Training isn’t always easy, and it can go wrong.

To begin at the beginning, ...

... training someone to ring isn’t like fuelling a car – open the lid and pour in the fuel.

A better analogy is ‘growing’ vegetables, where the ‘growing’ comes from within the seed itself, and the gardener prepares the ground and provides water, shelter from frost and so on. When we talk about ‘growing’ vegetables, what we really mean is providing the right environment for growth, with support, nurture and guidance. The same is true for ringers.

‘Training’ comes from mediaeval French meaning to draw out or to pull, and education comes from Latin ‘educere’, to lead out.

So let’s rid ourselves of macho ideas about teachers injecting skills into ringers. We can certainly make a big difference, by teaching well or by teaching badly, but the result comes from the pupil, not directly from us. We must provide the opportunity to learn, the stimulus to learn, and the guidance to learn effectively.

What’s the objective of training?

I don’t mean ‘there wouldn’t be any ringers if we didn’t’, or ‘putting something back in return for what we took out when we learned’. What are we trying to help new ringers to achieve? Making up the numbers on Sunday morning? Or something more?

We should inspire our trainees to want to perform well. Some people would say there’s no point thinking about performance until the learner can handle a bell. I think that’s wrong, but it’s a view reflected in our language.

[Bell ‘handling’]

We talk about ‘bell handling’ lessons, not ‘bell control’ lessons. Being able to ‘handle’ a bell, suggests you are safe in charge of it, but not much more, whereas to ‘control’ a bell implies making it perform for you.

That isn’t just semantic pedantry. It reflects a widespread ringing culture that accuracy is an optional extra. If you were teaching someone to play an instrument, playing in tune wouldn’t be an optional

extra. It is a fundamental skill that has to be learned, not something to think about, if you get chance after joining an orchestra.

The key skills needed ...

... to become a competent ringer are the ability to ring rhythmically, the ability to hear whether your bell strikes in the correct place, and the ability to make precise adjustments to keep it striking in the right place. Other skills can be added, but without those core skills, any performance is broken.

The human ear can detect rhythmic irregularities of a few hundredths of a second, though it will tolerate bigger deviations if there’s a consistent overall rhythm. Swinging half a ton of metal to a precision of a few hundredths, or even a tenth, of a second doesn’t happen by chance. It takes skill and technique, which have to be learned, and developed.

It’s not easy, and of course some performers will be better than others, just as some singers are better than others. You don’t expect a village choir to be as accurate as an elite choir, but you do expect them to be sufficiently in tune that most of their audience, most of the time, don’t hear mistakes. If only village bands of ringers were trained to the same standard!

How does traditional training help?

Learners are often taught on a silenced bell. They can learn what the bell feels like, but they get no idea when it sounds. How does that help them to focus on the instant when the bell strikes? Imagine learning to throw darts without seeing where the dart lands on the board.

Learners often have extended periods of solo practice, with no reference to an external rhythm, and they often ring more slowly than normal. How does that help them to learn the discipline of ringing to a rhythm?

They then try to ring rounds with other ringers – faced with lots of ropes, lots of sounds and lots of pressure. Does that encourage calm, rhythmic ringing?

They are told to follow the rope in front. Does that encourage them to listen – if they even have any idea which sound is their own amidst the confusion above?

Many bands do a lot better than this. They provide sound from the start (using sound control or a muffled clapper or simulated sound) and the pupil learns to ring rhythmically with a simulator quite early on, alongside other bell control exercises. That makes learning to ring with other ringers a smaller step. With rhythm & listening are already learned, the pupil can focus on coping with irregularity, and integrating ropesight. Solo ringing with a simulator also continues alongside collective ringing, to provide additional rope time, and to reinforce rhythmic ringing.

Another change often occurs ...

... when the trainee starts to ring with the band – other tuition stops. So 40-50 minutes a week of solo ringing reduces to maybe 15 minutes rope time taking turns with everyone else on a practice night.

In no other performance-based activity would people expect to make progress with 15 minutes practice a week. 5-10 hours a week is often recommended. Is it any wonder that ringers take so long to develop, and lose interest?

Being able to ring with other ringers is an important milestone, but it’s not the end of training. To paraphrase Churchill, it’s just the end of the beginning. Bell control coaching should continue through to the dynamic control used to hunt and dodge accurately in method ringing.

Ringers are taught by ...

... whoever in the tower is willing to do it, with no requirement for any skill or knowledge about teaching.

Most people teach more or less how they were taught – or rather the bits they remember – which leads to a ‘lowest common denominator’ style of teaching.

It’s not all like this. Some people acquire good teaching skills and approaches, either from mentors, or from courses or books, and some bring skills and insights from outside ringing.

People of my age ...

... tend to think that things were better in the old days, so let’s see whether they were.

The Victorian belfry reformers were passionate about promoting change ringing, and about improving the standard of ringing. Societies employed paid instructors to go round the towers teaching ringers. They couldn’t do all the hands-on teaching, but you can bet they gave a lot of advice. They spoke with the authority of the society, which implicitly meant the clergy, who to a large extent ran the societies.

Most references to training in Central Council minutes were in the latter 20th century, with hardly any before the war. Was there no problem, or didn’t they care?

In 1932 they proposed booklet on teaching, and during the debate Canon Coleridge said ‘... whenever he heard bad striking, and had the opportunity of going into the belfry and looking at those who were perpetrating the fearful enormity, he nearly always found it was owing to the fact that they had never learned to handle their ropes properly. The proper handling of ropes was the foundation of good striking’ ... ‘He went into belfries and constantly found people absolutely ignorant of the very elements of ringing because they had never learned, or had never been taught, how to handle the rope properly ...’. He referred to ‘... men who had rung peals of Superlative, Cambridge and London whose

striking was awful, the result of never having been taught to handle a rope properly.’. Notice the link between performance quality and standard of teaching.

The booklet, *Hints for Instructors and Beginners In the Proper Method of Handling a Bell Rope*, opens with the words: ‘You complain, rightly, that so many young men learn to handle a bell and then give up. You blame the Cinema, Motor-Cycles, Dances, etc. You blame the young men themselves, and deplore the fact that the present generation is not as good as it was 20 years ago; but it does not occur to you to blame yourselves’.

That was 80 years ago, but it seems very familiar.

In the late 1950s ...

... there was an attempt to put training on a much more formal footing, with the foundation of the College of Campanology. It devised a series of qualifications for both trainers and ringers, and made some headway, but failed to gain widespread support, partly I suspect because of personalities. But it did publish *Bellhandling & Control in the Elements of Change Ringing* in 1960, which was the most comprehensive, and most structured scheme of teaching available at the time. The style of writing seems quaint today, but it’s got some good ideas that you won’t find in most other books on training.

The next attempt was in the late ‘90s ...

... when the Central Council Education Committee proposed an ‘Instructors Guild’. Quite a few people supported it, but there was also vehement opposition, using the same arguments as the letter in *The Ringing World* a few weeks ago. If teachers are accredited, the powers that be would ban anyone who isn’t, and since most tower captains either can’t or won’t get accredited, there won’t be anyone to train ringers.

Just imagine what the media would make of that story if they got hold of it. *The Mail* ‘Bellringers demand right to keep incompetent teachers’. *The Mirror* ‘Want to experience bad teaching – try bellringing’.

I was elected chairman in the middle of this, and the problem landed in my lap, like a ticking bomb. We put a lot of effort into it, but in the end we couldn’t see how to put the infrastructure in place against strong opposition, and without clear support from ringing societies, many of which felt threatened by it. We didn’t want to create something that followed the College of Campanology into obscurity.

But I was convinced that if it already existed, everyone would accept it.

Two good things came out of the ashes ...

... of the Instructors Guild. One was the Network for Ringing Training – usually known as NRT. The aim was to form an informal embryo training community that we hoped would eventually provide ‘bottom up’

pressure to do what we failed to do 'top down'. It was a 'club for improvers' – a phrase that Steve Coleman used during the debate on the Instructors' Guild. It ran a successful e-mail discussion list for many years, and held two conferences, though the second was less successful. Sadly, for various reasons, it lost momentum. In 2008 the Education Committee set up the Belfry Forum, but that didn't last long.

The other legacy of the Instructors' Guild ...

... was the Framework for Training Ringers, which you can download from the web¹. It defines a set of structured objectives – for management, resources, people and the training process – that a good training regime should achieve, without trying to mandate 'how they must be achieved. You can use the headings as a checklist and an agenda for improvement. You could base a code of practice on them. Or you could use them as a structure for the accreditation of both trainers and training organisations (towers or ringing centres).

We invited societies to promote the Framework, which many did, but I wonder how many bands gave it serious consideration? And of any that did, how many made significant improvements as a result?

I skipped over ringing centres –

which is the other training innovation of recent decades. The original proposal, 20 years ago, was for a single centre of excellence, but it morphed into a network of centres across country. Ringing centres do much good work, but there are fewer than 40 of them – that's less than 1 for every 100 towers – and most bands carry on doing their own thing much as they did before.

Books about training have also been influential

I've mentioned the 1930s CC booklet and the College of Campanology's 1960 book. In 1976 the Council published *The Tutor's Handbook* – Wilf Moreton wrote the part on bell control and Norman Chaddock the part on method ringing.

That book had a big influence. People assumed it was the 'official' way to teach. I came back to ringing after a 10 year gap in the late '70s and I felt I ought to follow it, despite the fact that it was different from the way I had successfully taught lots of people in my youth, and despite the fact that when I first saw the method in use, as a student, I thought it looked rather dangerous!

It seems Norman and Wilf each wanted to write the other half of the book. 10 years later, in 1986, Wilf wrote *Teaching from Rounds to Bob Doubles*, and in 1989 Norman wrote his *Manual of Bell Control*.

Norman's method was completely different from Wilf's. I don't know why, but Norman published privately, so his approach got much less prominence. You can still buy Wilf's book, which was revised in 1995, whereas Norman's book is long out of print.

There have been other books on teaching. Sussex County Association published Peter Hurcombe's *The Tower Captain and Training of Ringers* in 1986, and the CC published Richard Pargeter's *One Way To Teach Bell Handling* in 1995.

There are pros and cons ...

... of all these different approaches, and I would recommend you to read them all if you haven't already done so. They all have weaknesses, but they can all be made to work by competent teachers. But is that the method or the teacher?

In *The Tower Handbook* (whose aim was to say something about everything, but not to say everything about anything) in the section on teaching, I presented a composite picture that drew on all of these different approaches – and some that weren't published like the way we taught in the '60s – to show how they related to each other, and how they differed.

I was flattered when I found that Pip Penney based her approach to teaching on the skeleton descriptions I had written. But what Pip injected, especially with *Teaching Unravelled* and to a lesser extent *Tips for Teachers*, is a new dimension, scarcely covered by previous authors. She encourages us to think much more about about 'how' motor skills are learned, and about the 'process' of teaching, not just the exercises.

Let's now look outside our own little bubble

Lots of other leisure activities use performance skills that need training, and potential ringers will make comparisons with them even if we don't. Children these days can do lots of things, and when they (or maybe their parents) decide what to take up and what to drop, ringing is 'just another activity' alongside orchestras, sports teams, gymnastics, dancing, canoeing, and so on.

Ringing is almost certainly the only one with no recognised instructors, no tests of competence and no certificates of achievement. It's also probably the only one where tuition is free.

Tight fisted ringers might think that's a fair trade-off, but if parents thought the same way, we'd have people queuing up to ring while all the orchestras and sports teams went begging for lack of recruits. But we don't! Parents seem to care more about the quality of what they get, than about getting it for nothing.

Another problem is fragmentation.

Most teaching is done by people working in individual towers, not working with other trainers, so they can't support each other, or learn from each other, and they have no way to assess or improve their performance.

Even when someone wants to learn to teach, this fragmentation can get in the way. ODG hosted one of

the pilot ITTS courses. The course was good, but the follow up required students to teach someone under the guidance of their mentors. Many didn't, because there was no one in their tower to teach.

It's like trying to learn medicine by setting up as a GP. Much better to learn in a teaching hospital, with plenty of mentors and a steady flow of patients to practise on.

In ODG we've had some thoughts about the idea of groups of bands pooling their teaching in some way, for mutual benefit, but they are only embryonic thoughts.

So far I haven't mentioned aptitude

We've all seen trainees who are never going to make the grade, but how often do we face that fact? Mostly they work it out for themselves and give up, but not all do. That's a big drain on training resources.

Many organisations screen recruits and select those most likely to succeed in training, but do we? Ringers often say 'anyone can learn to ring a bell', but you wouldn't say that about any other sport or instrument. If someone developed an aptitude tests for ringing, would we use it?

I'll end with some questions

- Can we continue with fragmented training? Must we train in every tower, even if it is bad training? Or would it be better for bands to pool their resources? Would bands be willing to give up their autonomy?

- Do we really believe that the only training worth having is free? Or might we be able to provide more, and better training, if people paid for some of it, as they do for almost every other activity?

- Do we really believe that keeping teachers who would be incapable of achieving a qualification is more important than putting training onto a proper footing?

- Should we continue to teach anyone willing to have a go, regardless of likely success? Or should we try to focus resources on those who show the aptitude to be likely to succeed?

- Can we inspire the ringers we train to be want to be performers, are not just content to turn up? How can we do that amidst a culture where performance is low on the agenda, and criticising poor striking is seen as negative or hostile?

I'll stop there.

Training is vital to the future of ringing.

There is more to learn, but we already have lots of knowledge – if only we could use it more widely and more effectively.

Some things need to change. But are we capable of change? Or will we carry on the way we always have?

And what future will ringing have if we do that?

¹ <http://cccbr.org.uk/education/framework/>
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