

Thinking the unthinkable – 3

Teaching and standards

Performance is the essence of ringing, and although the best ringing is performed to an excellent standard, much would scarcely be acceptable from performers of other types of music. But ringers put up with it.

The way we train ringers has a huge impact on their ability to perform well. Good training helps them to develop the requisite skills, while poor or indifferent training limits their potential by failing to develop those skills and allowing, or even encouraging, the formation of habits that undermine their capability. By failing to train ringers well, we condemn them to a life of under-performance. Is it any wonder that with so many ringers permanently hampered in this way, they have come to tolerate the reduced quality of performance in which they are regularly immersed.

Teaching

It is significant that the commonly used term for training prior to ringing rounds is 'bell handling' and not 'bell control'. The ability to 'handle' a bell implies safety on the end of a bellrope, but not a lot more, whereas to 'control' a bell implies making it perform as intended. This is not just a semantic nicety, it reflects the dominant concern of most ringers – safety is important, with accuracy as an optional extra.

The key skills to be taught to produce a competent ringer are the ability to ring rhythmically at normal ringing speeds, the ability to hear whether the bell strikes in the correct place, and the ability to make precise adjustments to keep it in the right place. Without those core skills, all the mental gymnastics of learning complex methods, and all the diagnostic insights of ropesight are at best patches on a broken performance.

How well can ringers be expected to acquire these skills with the widespread traditional pattern of teaching? On a silenced bell they learn the rhythm of a swinging bell devoid of knowing when it sounds – the most important point in the cycle – thus focusing entirely on the 'pull' at the start of each cycle. They ring extensively on their own, mostly more slowly than normal ringing, and with no reference to an externally set rhythm. So they develop a passive relationship with the bell. Then they are expected to attempt rounds with other ringers. With lots of flying ropes, lots of sounds and lots of pressure, they struggle to follow the rope in front. The sound is just a jumble, and they have no idea which bit of it is from their own bell, if they are even listening. The inevitable heavy corrections militate against rhythmic ringing.

Many bands would not dream of putting their trainees through such an inadequate process, but they are in a minority. There is plenty of scope to improve the average standard, and there are inspirational examples like the Worcester teaching centre, with its investment in resources, community involvement and equipment.

Teachers

Ringers often find themselves teaching out of necessity because there is no one else to do it. Apart from the tiny minority who have received some sort of training in how to teach ringing, or who have teaching skills learned outside ringing, they are likely to do it in more or less as

they were taught (as far as they can remember). It is quite likely that the people who taught them had not been taught how to do it either. Thus is passed on a 'lowest common denominator' style of teaching, which probably omits more than it includes of what could be done,

Some ringing teachers are exposed to good teaching practices, and absorb them. They may attend courses on teaching ringers, or they may bring externally acquired skills and insights into ringing. They may operate within a band or a ringing centre that provides the support and resources for good training. But many teachers don't have these advantages.

Putting training on a formal footing?

When our ringing societies were set up in the late 19th century, they often employed paid instructors, maybe brought in from outside, to go round their towers teaching ringers. Their emphasis was on change ringing, and as periodic visitors to a tower, it seems unlikely that they had a major hand in teaching basic bell control, but they may well have given advice.

In the late 1950s, there was a move to put ringing training on a formal footing with the foundation of the College of Campanology. It planned a series of qualifications for both trainers and ringers. The College failed to gain widespread support, but it did publish *Bellhandling & Control in the Elements of Change Ringing*, which was the most comprehensive, and most structured, scheme of teaching available at the time.

In the late 1990s, the Central Council Education Committee proposed the formation of an 'Instructors Guild'. The idea drew support from many, but many others saw it as the death knell of ringing, on the grounds that if there was a scheme to qualify instructors, then church authorities, backed by the insurers, would insist that only qualified people should teach. You might think that sounds like a good thing, but their reasoning was that many current teachers either would not or could not obtain a qualification, and so would be banned, with towers falling silent as a result. (The media would have loved that story had they got hold of it.) I became chairman during this period, and we decided that against such vehement opposition, it would be impossible to put in place the widespread organisation and support structures that the Instructors Guild would need to make it work. We didn't want to set up something that followed the College of Campanology into obscurity. I remember at the time saying that if it were already in place, we would all accept it as normal, just as trainers in other leisure activities do.

Two things came out of the ashes of the Instructors Guild. One was the Network for Ringing Training (NRT) in 2001, to help share good practice and to form an embryo training community that might later provide 'bottom up' pressure to do what we failed to do 'top down'. It ran a successful e-mail discussion list and held two conferences, but the hoped-for local initiatives never came, and it lost momentum.

The other product of this initiative was the publication in 2006 of the Framework for Training Ringers (see: <http://cccbr.org.uk/education/framework/>). It sets out a systematic approach to training that covers management, resources, people and the training process. It

provides goals that a good training regime will achieve, without trying to mandate 'how' they must be achieved. Its headings can be used as a checklist, as an agenda for improvement or as the basis of a code of practice. It could provide the structure for the accreditation of both trainers and training organisations (towers or ringing centres) if required. When the Framework was published, societies were invited to promote it among their members. How many bands gave it serious consideration as a result? And of any that did, how many made significant improvements after doing so?

Looking over the fence

Ringing has many unique features, but we delude ourselves if we think it can't be compared with anything else. Many other leisure activities need performance skills, and hence skill training. Many of those activities compete for the attention of potential and actual ringers. A parent deciding whether to encourage a child to take up (or stick at) ringing will rank it alongside things like 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. You might set against that the fact that the tuition is free, but if that was all that motivated parents, we would have people queuing up to ring while all the orchestras and sports teams had none. Maybe parents reckon that they get the quality they pay for.

Time for change?

Does our current approach to training produce and retain enough competent, motivated ringers for the Exercise to thrive? If not, should we not consider making some radical improvements. Should we not do much more to ensure that existing good training techniques are more widely applied?

Do we really believe that only free training is worth having? Would it really be impossible to provide more, and better training if people paid for it, as they do with most other training? And do we really believe that retaining trainers who would be incapable of achieving a qualification is more important than putting training onto a more formal footing?

Must we train in every tower, even if it is bad training? If we can't resource all towers with quality training and support, should we do more in centres that can deliver quality, and where both tutors and pupils can learn from each other? There would be logistic issues, but not necessarily insoluble ones. Many people don't walk round the corner to their local tower any more. And how many youngsters walk to their trombone lessons, squash coaching or swimming sessions? Having to travel a bit farther for good training might be worth it.

Quibbles

I have painted a picture where most training is poor, and a tiny minority is very good. Of course reality is less tidy. Some may quibble that I have under-played the middle ground. We are good at such quibbling, but it is a distraction from recognising the poor overall standard and doing something about it. So how can we change so that most ringers, not just a small minority, receive high quality training?

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