

It Takes a Pro



Photo by H. Dean Chamberlain

to Make a Pro: Professionalism in Flight Instruction

Quick – who was Ira Biffle? Never heard of him? But who *hasn't* heard of Charles Lindbergh, who was one of his flight students? Let's try again: Who was Charles Todd? Again, virtually unknown today, except for his association with a student - Jimmy Doolittle. And, finally, how about Obie O'Brien? O'Brien was flight instructor to the legendary Chuck Yeager.

Although very few flight instructors become famous, what we do, and how we do it, lives on in those we teach. And, though unknown for themselves, one thing we can safely guess is that the qualities that these three instructors

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possessed, and transmitted to their famous students, included professionalism. Most instructors will never know the extent of their influence, and most flight students will never be famous. But, as FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt observes in his article on page 10, the tenets of professionalism apply to instructors regardless of whom we teach or the aircraft type. Instructor professionalism is the foundation for excellence and success. We read about it, and we talk

about it. So what exactly is it, and how do we embody that crucial characteristic?

Characteristics of Professionalism

A business definition of professionalism is “meticulous adherence to undeviating courtesy, honesty, and responsibility in one's dealings with customers and associates, plus a level of excellence that goes over and above the commercial considerations and legal requirements” (www.businessdictionary.com).

Professionalism is typically achieved only after extended training and preparation. This training usually requires significant self-study and practice and is typically accomplished with formal education. It brings to mind the seemingly endless hours of education, training, and practice one undergoes on the path to becoming a doctor. The path to becoming a flight instructor has similar requirements – not just in terms of formal academic study and training, but also in terms of what we might call the unwritten requirements. Let's take a look at a few of them.

Skilled pilot. The aviation instructor must be an expert pilot, one who is knowledgeable, proficient,

skillful, and safe. You should be very proficient on the equipment you use, especially avionics. Be alert for ways to improve your qualifications, your effectiveness, and the services you offer. Stay abreast of changes in regulations, practices, and procedures. Make a habit of referring to the current Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM), Airport/Facility Directory (A/FD), Sectional Charts, Handbooks, Manuals, and Practical Test Standards (PTS). You should also read aviation periodicals, browse the Internet, and attend meetings and seminars. And, of course we recommend that you have (and use) an account on www.FAASafety.gov.

Strong teacher. A flight instructor must have strong skills and abilities in two major areas. First, he or she must be a competent and qualified teacher, with all of the “soft skills” we attribute to teachers. These include communication skills, people skills, and patience.

In order to understand the progress your students are making, you must understand the four levels of learning - Rote, Understanding, Application, and Correlation.

To simplify my own comprehension of these principles, I reduced the concepts to concise, understandable definitions.

Rote	The ability to repeat something which was learned, but not understood
Understanding	To comprehend or grasp the nature or meaning of something
Application	The act of putting something to use that has been learned and understood
Correlation	Associating what has been learned, understood, and applied with previous or subsequent learning, or the ability to apply learning to a specific unpracticed situation

Practical psychologist. You need to understand anxiety and how to address it with a student. You must know that reactions to stress can be normal or abnormal, and be ready to act appropriately. You soon learn that obstacles to learning can be different for each student. You learn how to address impatience, worry, lack of interest, apathy, anxiety, discomfort, illness, and fatigue. You must work within your student’s other interests or enthusiasms. You must discover how to help the student with a multitude of troubles; you may even have to show your student how to handle fear.

Also important is your understanding of the laws of learning. Your student’s progress will be enhanced if you remember that a student *learns* because of Readiness and Effect, but *remembers* because of Primacy, Exercise, Intensity, and Recency.

Readiness	Ready to learn: strong purpose, clear objective, definite reason. Your student should understand the “why” for everything they do in training.
Effect	Emotional reaction of the student. Pleasant vs. unpleasant
Primacy	The first experience should be positive, functional, and correct
Exercise	Things most often repeated are best remembered
Intensity	Vivid, dramatic, or exciting vs. routine or boring. The real thing vs. a substitute.
Recency	Things most recently learned are best remembered

Capable Coach. The best flight instructors use a syllabus, set achievable goals for their students, and use a well-designed lesson plan. You should personally prepare for each lesson, whether ground or flight, and personally prepare for each individual student. Not having an organized plan is, in fact, a plan...for failure. No two students are the same; they must be treated as individuals. You are the key to their success.

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Positive role model. Consistently using a checklist is another mark of professionalism. We all get excited or rushed at times and the use of a



Photo by Susan Parson

checklist is the only way to ensure we don't forget something. Students will follow the behavior you model, so do it right.

A flight instructor must also have high standards of personal appearance, which means that you must be neat, clean, and dressed in a manner appropriate to the situation. Your personal habits must be acceptable. As a chief flight instructor, I once had a student request a different instructor because his instructor had an overwhelming body odor. I discovered that the instructor worked at a physically demanding job before reporting to the flight school. Moving his first lesson by an hour solved that problem. In addition to personal hygiene, you cannot be rude, thoughtless, or inattentive, and you cannot be profane or obscene.

Sincere. Professionals are true to themselves and to those they serve. Your sincerity of effort must be such that inadequacies are admitted, not hidden, and are corrected for the future. A Code of Ethics is a good reminder of the need for honesty, impartiality, fairness, and equity. (See the Model Code of Conduct in the sidebar)

Inquisitive. True performance as a professional is based on study and research, and professionals are always searching for the "why." Perhaps you can imagine the hard work required to produce a doctoral thesis. Becoming a flight instructor requires that same dedication to learning. Let's look at an example from a private pilot syllabus for flight training.

Let's assume you are going to teach a student to perform turns-around-a-point. We all know this lesson begins in the classroom. To test understanding, you ask your student to place an "X" at the point on the circle where the bank angle is the greatest during the maneuver and then tell you why he chose that point. Assume the wind as shown and left-hand turns. Before you read on, place the "X" on the circle yourself.



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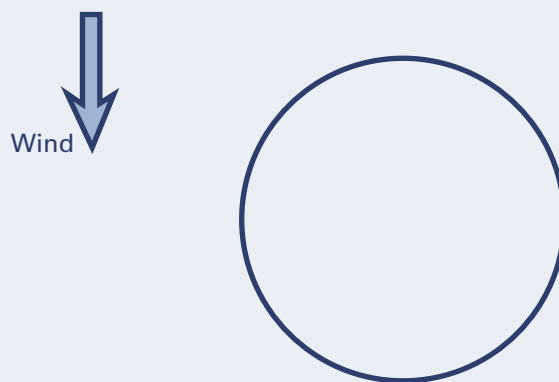


Figure 1

Many instructors place an "X" at the bottom of the circle; some place it half-way between the bottom and the direct left side point. Why are these not the correct answer? Remember, we are searching for the "why." The key is to understand that the aircraft's ground speed is the greatest at only one point. It is at this point that the wind will be pushing the aircraft away from the desired track at the greatest velocity. (See correct answer on page 31.)

Creative. You don't have to be a mathematical genius to be a pilot or a flight instructor. While a flight test pilot and an aeronautical engineer may need higher math skills, the typical pilot, and flight instructor, gets by quite easily with the basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division skills one learns in grade school.

However, a professional flight instructor must have other qualities that could be defined as intellectual skills. These include the ability to reason logically and accurately, as well as the ability to make good decisions. Even though aviation has standard practices for normal and abnormal situations, we must also appreciate that some situations may require thinking outside the box.

You Touch the Future ...

As *Challenger* astronaut Christa McAuliffe famously proclaimed, "I touch the future - I teach!" Whatever your eventual goals in aviation might be, never forget that being a flight instructor is a real job that has real - and lasting - impact. Make it count.

Bryan Neville is an FAA Operations Inspector presently assigned as the program manager for the FAA Safety Team web site, www.FAASafety.gov, with general responsibility for the management of the WINGS - Pilot Proficiency Program and the AMT Awards Program, both hosted on FAASafety.gov. Before coming to the FAA, he worked in general aviation, primarily as a flight instructor and FAA Designated Pilot Examiner. His years of experience have given him great insight into what personal characteristics make a great flight instructor. Chief among these is professionalism.