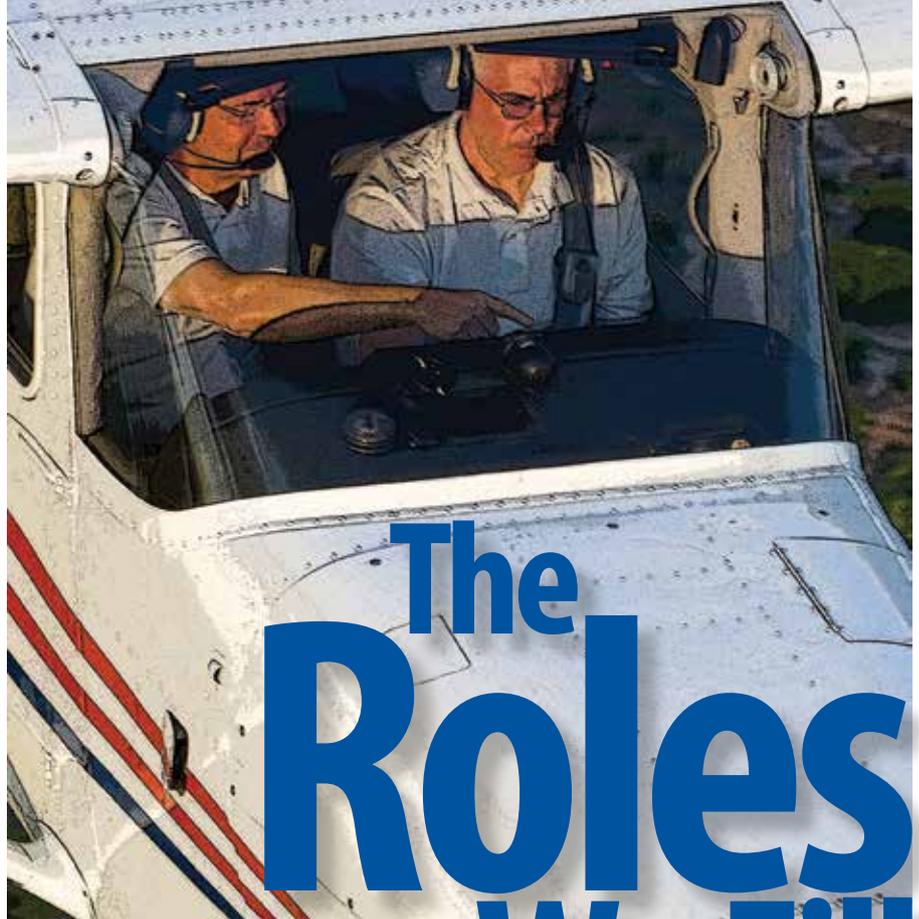


For more than a year I have served as a flight school manager in addition to working as a flight instructor. This has been a very interesting and exciting opportunity while I completed an MBA degree. Recently, I haven't been able to toss aside my strong feeling that we as flight instructors need to get back to the basics and knock the rust off. We need to revisit the basics of the do's and don'ts when it comes to being effective and compassionate flight instructors.

One thing that I have been exposed to in my current role is talking to students who are coming to my flight school or learning at other schools. I have been shocked, maybe because of my own ignorance, at the staggeringly high number of students who have previously had negative experiences. I am one of the first people to remind others that there are always two sides, at least, to every story. Thus, I suppose it is possible that the flight instructors were not aware of the crucial mistakes they were making.

I'm not sure if there are more of these negative experiences now than there were in the past, but I know that there are just too many. The good news is that we, as instructors, can actually have a positive effect on this. We can improve the experiences for our customers, the students.

While teaching flight instructor candidates we spend a great deal of time discussing and learning about the fundamentals of instructing and what the FAA considers important. Whenever possible, I try to present scenarios from my past instructional experiences. I also make it a point to invite my CFI students to sit in on lessons with my primary students or in the ground school courses I teach. I want them to see how the students actually act, plus how I perform. I am always interested in the feedback that my CFI students provide, and I have found in many cases they have given good feedback that I could use to improve my own instructional activities. While they sit in, I hope my CFI students see the roles that I play as a flight instructor. These are the roles that we all play as instructors, and the roles they will fill in the future.



The Roles We Fill

Matthew T. Elia

Whether it is to engage the student, encourage the student or even entertain the student, we go further than just teaching our students.

By varying the approach we have with students we can actively promote positive learning experiences. It is very important that we do not use a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. It simply does not work. One student after a flight lesson asked me if he could continue his training with me. He was a new student to our school, so I explained how I have a limited schedule based on my dual role. His response took me by surprise,

Students are exactly what we call them — students — and as a result they don't know what they don't know. It is very important that we encourage them. This means that negative learning experiences must be avoided at all costs.

"I'm okay with that. We can definitely make it work. I really enjoyed this experience; the last guy I flew with, well, it wasn't very much fun. It was like flying with your old middle school gym teacher." After hearing this, I gladly accepted the student and helped him schedule his next month of lessons.

The "old gym teacher" comment got me thinking, and it occurred to me that sometimes instructors believe it is their way or the highway. Sometimes this is good, occasionally a stern approach is necessary, but as flight instructors we need to fill multiple roles, and more importantly, we have to know when we need to fill these roles for the benefit of our students. We must go beyond simply informing our students and being the teacher. As students' instructors it is our job to encourage them and share our passion for flying with them. We



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have to engage our students and get them to play an active role in instructional activities. Finally, we must entertain them from time to time. Let's face it, some of the stuff we teach can be pretty dry, but it does not have to be. We can make a great impression of important material on our students by adding in humor or by employing other techniques besides lecturing.

Every student is different: some will study and read ahead in their textbooks, and others will simply show up for a lesson having done nothing flying related since their last lesson other than flying Microsoft Flight Simulator for 10 hours. Some students simply do not want to study, and that is fine. It isn't our job to change them; it is our job to teach them what they need to know to be safe pilots. By engaging our students we give them the ability to learn more efficiently. The students who are prepared and study will find engagement in training activities as a positive reinforcement. Whether it is simple questions and answers or a discussion about the aircraft after a flight while still at the airplane, engaging students with unique opportunities improves their learning experiences by adding value beyond simply lecturing in a classroom. Similarly, for the less-than-prepared students who do not study, these types of engaging activities help to aid in the instructional process by going beyond the simple flight and quick debriefing. The students will receive information in a manner that they will likely remember better because of the unique experience it was matched with, such as a visit to the maintenance shop. For example, seeing a Cessna 172 with the cowling off is much better than reading about systems in a book.

Students are exactly what we call them — students — and as a result they don't know what they don't know. It is very important that we encourage them. This means that negative learning experiences much be avoided at all costs. Being negative or threatening goes in the exact opposite direction of what we need to be doing. Sure, using a veiled threat to get students to study

may be effective in some cases, but this could be done just as easily in a positive manner. By highlighting the benefits of studying, such as doing a good job on the next written stage check in a Part 141 environment or on the next oral quiz in the Part 61 flight-training world, students are not faced with negatively framed concepts.

Remember those students who did not do anything to prepare for a lesson? I'm sure everyone has stories about their own encounters. Well, those students need to be entertained and intrigued. Whether that means an animated ground lesson or being involved in the decision-making process about whether to head to the north or south practice area, there is a lot we can do as instructors to entertain our students and keep them actively involved in the lesson. Why is it our job as instructors to entertain the students? Well, if it provides a better learning experience for our students if they are involved and active, then why wouldn't we do it? Those were of course rhetorical questions; there is no reason not to do those things.

Beyond ensuring that we inform, engage, encourage and entertain our students, there are some things that we must make sure do not occur during the training we provide. Negative learning experiences hinder students' enjoyment of flight lessons, and that is something we have to ensure does not happen. After all, if the students do not enjoy the lessons, they will not continue with the lessons, and that means fewer pilots in an age when we need all the aviation enthusiasts and pilots we can get!

We must remember that students are by far the most important part of the aviation community. Too often I have seen instructors make jokes to get a chuckle out of their co-workers, occasionally at the expense of their students. One person I spoke with during my research for this article explained a story about a negative experience, which left me disappointed but not shocked. She explained that during her private pilot training (she has since earned her certificate) an instructor once made a point to embarrass her in front of others because she did not know an approach frequency off the top of her head. This is the kind of thing that may seem benign, but can truly cripple a student and cause her to drop out of learning to fly whether she is doing it for fun or in the pursuit of a career. I have always said that there is no reason to memorize something like a frequency that can be easily located on a chart. In time the student will remember it and be able to recall it, but this is not something that should be mandatory. This is just one example of an experience I have either witnessed or been told about. I am willing to bet that every instructor has observed this type of destructive behavior on some level by another instructor, if not recognizing it in themselves at least once.

By revisiting the basics and actively making our students our priority we can all pitch in to make the flight-training community better. In an age when the national news is running stories about the impending pilot shortage, we need every pilot we can get and we need effective instructors. By remembering these four roles of the modern flight instructor we can all be better. We have to inform our students; we have to engage our students; we have to entertain our students; and we have to encourage our students. If we make a conscious effort to be effective instructors, we will have more students turning into pilots.

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