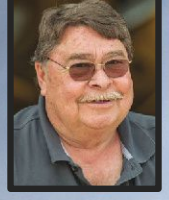

STEVE KROG
COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

A Good Instructor Is Always Learning

Things my students have taught me

BY STEVE KROG

THIS MORNING WHILE A line of thunderstorms passed through, two instructors that work with me were sipping coffee. The three of us began comparing notes on the students that we each have flown with during the past four days.

Each student enrolled in our flight school is assigned a primary instructor. But, after every fourth or fifth flight, a different instructor will fly with the student. We do this as a phase check of sorts to make sure we, as instructors, aren't overlooking something in the flight training process. It also helps students become acclimated to having a different person in the cockpit other than their instructor. Otherwise, the student is not exposed to a different "passenger" until the day of the checkride, causing undue stress when checkrides are stressful enough.

We try to do an abbreviated version of the morning conference each day before our flights begin. However, today we had time to approach it in a much more leisurely and lengthy fashion.

One instructor mentioned having a student that pushes evenly on the rudder pedals so hard it is near impossible to overpower the student when having to "rescue" him from a flight situation needing corrective rudder inputs. You would think the student would eventually relax his legs before the onset of muscle spasms, but he does not. Vocal reminders to relax do not seem to register with the student.

How would you overcome this obstacle if you were the instructor in this example? Wiggle fingers and toes ...

Years ago, I taught in a university flight school. Each semester I would acquire seven or eight beginning students. In this instance, the fall weather was nearly perfect and I ended up giving seven first flights to seven different students in one day. Under these circumstances, one can become a bit lax with the details by the time the seventh student is introduced to the pleasures of flight.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JIM KOEPNICK**

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STEVE KROG

After demonstrating each of the key controls, aileron, elevator, and rudder to a student, I would introduce the trim system. We were flying Cessna 150s, so the trim system is not only quite accessible but also very effective.

My spiel began with, "Pilots are basically lazy and want to be able to fly with only three fingers and light control pressures." I would have the student try to keep the airplane straight and level while turning the trim to a full "up" position. The student would have to push hard on the yoke with a lot of force to maintain level flight. "This is the type of force a pilot might have to apply without the help of a good trim system," I would add. Then I'd have the student readjust the trim until the student could take both hands off the yoke and maintain level flight.

Once again in level flight I would adjust the trim to the full "down" position with the student struggling to hold enough back-pressure to maintain level flight. Once the point was made, the student would then readjust the trim to reestablish level hands-off flight.

The previous six students had carried out the exercise without flaw. However, student number seven, when asked if he now understood the importance of the trim system, promptly let go of the yoke. Instantly, that poor little Cessna 150 did the first half of an outside loop. Our headsets flew off, and dust, miscellaneous coins, pencil stubs, and sunglasses were flying everywhere! I immediately pulled the power back to idle and regained straight and level flight, but it sure made a lasting impression on me. Thereafter, I never demonstrated the trim system in this manner. A lesson learned! Just when you think you can relax, a student will find a new way to create a situation you may have never before experienced.

On another occasion, I was working with a student in a Piper PA-12 Super Cruiser. He was flying in the front, and I was in back. We were doing takeoffs and landings at a towered airport in preparation for his private pilot checkride. The first two landings were uneventful, and the student was comfortable handling the radio. I began to relax and felt he really had the situation under control. As we approached the runway for the third time, he began to level off. Instantly the plane dropped hard to the runway and bounced about 20 feet into the air. I grabbed the stick, added power, and began initiating a go-around. Before I could ask what he had done, he turned around with the control stick in his hand. The safety pin had fallen out and the stick came out of the control socket just as he was beginning to apply back-pressure.

No harm was done to the airplane, but both the student and I learned a valuable lesson. Always check the safety pin or bolt anchoring the stick to the control socket. I've found one missing lock pin and a couple that were loose and working their way out of the stick fitting.

One warm, sunny summer afternoon, an acquaintance asked if I would ride around the patch a couple of times so that he could become current in a rented Citabria. After looking the aircraft over, we were off. Before attempting the first landing, I suggested departing the pattern and getting the feel of the controls as he hadn't flown in more than six months. A few turns, some slow flight, and a couple of stalls later we were back in the pattern for a normal approach and simple three-point landing. Stretching to look over his shoulder on final approach, I noticed the pilot wasn't making the necessary power and attitude adjustments. As we got near the runway, I began making corrective comments prompting him to reduce the power a bit, add slight back-pressure, don't let the nose drop, etc., but the pilot wasn't responding. I placed my hand on the control stick and tried to move it. It was frozen in place! My verbal inputs became a bit louder but still nothing was happening. Finally, I whacked the pilot hard on the right shoulder and told him I had the controls. We landed without incident, and while taxiing back to the ramp the pilot remained silent.

After shutting down and exiting the aircraft, we sat silently for several minutes at a nearby picnic table. I finally asked the pilot what happened. He replied, "Steve, I don't know. I just froze! It has never happened before." I had heard other instructors mention having students freeze on the controls, but it had never happened to me. I learned another good lesson that day. Never relax and never assume the individual flying the airplane is doing what is supposed to be done. Always remain ready!

I had a student who was working on a private certificate several years ago. It was finally time to send him on his long solo cross-country flight. He had completed a shorter cross-country flight the previous day, and all had gone well. The weather had been checked, all calculations made, and he was ready to launch. The Cub he had been assigned holds 24 gallons of fuel, so there was plenty on board for a safety margin, even though he had calculated that it would take a little more than three hours to complete the flight.

The student launched at about 1 p.m. When 4 p.m. arrived, there was no sign of the Cub, nor were we able to reach him by radio. Then 5 p.m. arrived and still no Cub. As his instructor, I was becoming concerned but still had faith that he would soon turn up. Maybe he had gotten lost for a while.

When 6 p.m. arrived, I was genuinely concerned. If he had been flying continuously, he would have experienced fuel exhaustion by now! Thankfully, this flight occurred in late June, so we still had plenty of daylight.

Never relax and never assume the individual flying the airplane is doing what is supposed to be done. Always remain ready!

Finally, as the clock approached 7 p.m., a Cub appeared southwest of the airport. The student called in and proceeded to fly the pattern and land. After counting to 100 several times over, I approached him and firmly inquired as to where he had been. Had he experienced some kind of trouble? Did he get lost? I was probably speaking about 500 words a minute, so he knew I was just a bit upset.

He waited for me to calm down and then said, "You didn't tell me I had to fly the route and return right away. When I landed at one of the airports on my route, I noticed some hangars were open and there were a number of interesting airplanes. I decided to stop and check them out and forgot about the time."

Ah, another lesson learned by a then somewhat frazzled flight instructor. I must be more specific about what is allowed and what is off-limits when sending a student on solo cross-country flights!

The positive experiences I have lived and learned from while flight instructing far outweigh the negative experiences. However, there are days when one wonders, "Why do I do this?!"

I do this because I have a true appreciation and love for flight. And, even more important, I love to share that love of flight. There is nothing more satisfying to me than seeing the smile on a person's face when they taxi up to the hangar after the first solo flight! That erases all frustrations and makes the effort most worthwhile. EAA

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