STEVE KROG

An Instructor Wears Many Hats

Teacher, tester, counselor, and consoler

BY STEVE KROG

ONE EVENING AFTER A day of flying, several local pilots and I sat at the hangar picnic table observing the sunset and enjoying a Wisconsin beverage. After a round of bravado about the perfect landings each pilot had made, I asked a question. "Take a moment to reflect on your primary flight instructor. Now, think of one word that best describes your instructor. What would that word be?"

The first to respond said his instructor was "quiet," mostly looked out the side window and offered little or no critique nor encouragement.

The second pilot used the word "enthusiastic." Then went on to say his instructor was full of energy, was always ready to fly, and often suggested flying somewhere for lunch. "He made every lesson fun but challenging. He was quite knowledgeable and always willing to share that knowledge. Every flight was fun. I became absorbed with that level of enthusiasm and approach every flight I make today with that level of enthusiasm."

It was obvious the flight instructor each pilot worked with made an impression. One was positive, and the other neither positive nor negative. The takeaway confirms that flight instructors make a deeply imprinted impression. I can confirm this based on my own experience. Had I been forced to continue working with my first instructor, I would have given up on the idea of becoming a pilot. Thankfully, another instructor recognized my frustration and invited me to work with him. This was the best decision I ever made concerning my flight training. Fifty-five years later, I continue teaching in the style and enthusiasm he imprinted on me.

Recently, I began working with a student working toward becoming a certificated flight instructor (CFI). During a short break after

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an hour of concentrated ground school, she asked me, "What makes a good instructor?"

I replied, "If you're going to be a good instructor, you must wear many hats. First, you really need to take instructing seriously, believe in and love what you do. You must be a good teacher and evaluator. Sometimes you also need to be a counselor, consoler, listener, and adviser. But vitally important is the need for patience."

Every student learns differently. It is the responsibility of a good CFI to get to know each student and find the best way to communicate with and teach the student. One student may be able to read and comprehend the details of a maneuver and then perform it with little or no instructor help. Another student may need to see the maneuver demonstrated and then perform the maneuver with a bit of instructor assistance. Sometimes it takes several demonstrations before the student truly grasps the proper method for satisfactorily performing a maneuver.

A good instructor never takes anything for granted. Just because you've performed at least two dozen steep turns with four students earlier in the day doesn't mean the fifth and last student will know how to perform the turn. It's easy to become lax, abbreviating your explanation. This is often where an instructor earns every cent of the fantastic hourly pay. The student rolls into a steep turn to the right and then starts applying left rudder, thinking this will prevent the bank from getting too steep. You, the instructor, look at your cellphone to check messages and the time, thinking you've got to stretch this flight out for another 30 minutes.

Bam! The left wing drops so fast you drop your phone. The right wing comes over the top, and suddenly the earth's rotation becomes quite rapid. Instant panic and then your vast repertoire of experience kicks in, stopping the rotation and returning the aircraft to level flight. If this happened to an instructor 30 years ago, it would have been time for a Marlboro, followed by a calm attempt at explaining what happened without further frightening the student.

Unfortunately, in today's flight training market, many new young instructors' approach to the job resembles going through the motions, and then totaling their logbook at day's end. They have either never been taught or don't understand how vitally important the instructor's work should be. A marginal or lackluster instructor turns out marginal, lackluster new pilots.

Many of these new pilots have never been taught potentially life-saving maneuvers like full stalls, cross-controlled stalls, true minimal control airspeed, or even short- or soft-field takeoffs and landings on a turf surface. They really don't know how to react should they get themselves in a critical situation.

Beyond being a good and truly dedicated flight instructor, one must also be able to recognize when a student is influenced by something outside of flying.

In addition to being a good teacher, one 'hat' that is overlooked even by good instructors is being a good evaluator. Students need positive and honest reinforcement.

The designated pilot examiners (DPEs) we work with regularly confirm this situation. So often, instruction is done to check the box but never to make a safe, competent, and experienced pilot. There's a good reason why only 50 percent of the private pilot candidates pass their checkride the first time. Yes, that number is correct!

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A while ago, I was flying with a young man who was nearly ready for his first solo in the J-3 Cub. The previous flight two days earlier was nearly flawless. I had made up my mind that if the wind conditions were favorable, this young man would certainly solo on the next flight. He arrived that afternoon and began preflighting the aircraft. He seemed unusually quiet, but I attributed this to his anticipation of soloing.

We taxied to turf Runway 18, completed the pretakeoff checklist, announced our intention, and made the takeoff. The first landing wasn't perfect but not unsafe. The second was about the same. And the third wasn't as good as the first two.

I mentioned it seemed he was preoccupied and not focused on what he was doing. I asked if something was troubling him. After a bit of hesitation he offered that his grandmother had passed away earlier that morning, and he was close to her. I suggested we taxi back to the hangar and call it a day. After chocking the airplane, I asked why he didn't call me and reschedule the lesson. His response was he loved to fly, knew he was close to the first solo, and didn't want to cancel the lesson.

However, after some discussion about how emotion can significantly impact the ability to fly safely, he agreed that he shouldn't have tried flying that day. A week later, he was back, and by summer's end he had earned his private pilot certificate.

In addition to being a good teacher, one 'hat' that is overlooked even by good instructors is being a good evaluator. Students need positive and honest reinforcement. Did your student just perform a less than acceptable steep turn? Did you candidly observe and evaluate what they did or did not do? Or did you think, "That's good enough"? Failure to evaluate a student's performance, and then not discussing it with them after the flight, is doing a great disservice. A good instructor must also be a good evaluator.

This trait is vitally important when prepping a student for the checkride. As a good CFI, you've devoted a great deal of time demonstrating, explaining, teaching, and correcting your student. But, now it's time for checkride prep. It is important that you, the instructor, sit back, ask your student to perform various maneuvers, and evaluate how they've performed at the conclusion of the flight. As instructors, it is nearly impossible to set aside your teaching hat and wear an evaluator hat.

Why is this so important? It becomes clear on the actual checkride. The student is used to having you point out what's right and wrong. But the DPE is strictly an observer and evaluator. This can really rattle a student who is already nervous.

To prepare a student for the checkride, we conduct two practice rides. The first gives the student pilot the tasks to perform. However, if the performance is substandard, we can call a timeout, review the maneuver, and then resume the practice checkride. If additional instruction is needed, it is done at the conclusion of this flight.

A day later, we conduct a second rigid practice checkride. No discussion of a failed or weak maneuver, just normal vocal tones requesting various maneuvers be performed, or establishing a simulated situation and observing how the student responds to the situation. Discussion is done only after the flight's conclusion and we're back in the classroom. This exercise is difficult for an instructor trained to teach. It's hard to sit quietly, observe, and evaluate. By nature, we want to jump in and correct the student.

One final thought I want to leave with new instructors is this: Many of your students have never truly experienced life in three dimensions. That first hour of training needs to be handled carefully by explaining, demonstrating, and sharing the pleasure and awe of flight. If mishandled, it will drive a new student away before they can even sign up for a second flight. Sadly, I've inherited students that experienced a poorly conducted first flight. Thankfully, they decided to give it one more try before giving up the desire to learn to fly.

I often wonder how many potential pilots are out there never going beyond the first flight due to an uncaring instructor. EAA

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