

## **Necessary Traits for Becoming a Driving Instructor**

### **A Primer for Parents**

*What Am I Supposed To Do? I'm a Parent, Not an Instructor!*

Obviously, a driving instructor must have an in-depth knowledge of traffic laws and safe driving practices. An instructor must also possess an understanding of why these laws exist, and why certain driving practices are safer, or more dangerous, than others, so that he or she can better explain them to the student. It is not enough to simply tell a student to "aim higher" or "use caution". These are vague terms to a novice driver, and will, most likely, be misunderstood or forgotten by the student unless an explanation of why is given for each term used in the training.

An instructor also needs to be able to analyze problems, such as what to do in any given traffic situation, so that both the instructor and the student can safely maneuver through or around any dangers. In addition, every individual, whether in a classroom or in one-on-one training in a vehicle, has different rates of understanding, and the instructor must be able to analyze, and then solve, any problems relating to getting the students to understand the instruction being given.

Communications skills are a prime requisite for anyone involved in any kind of instruction. Communicating does not always equal "talking". It also involves listening, demonstrating, explaining a concept seen in a video or text, and encouragement of the student's own sense of self-confidence in his or her driving skills. When we hire a person to be an instructor, one of the first things we look at is his or her "personality" and conversation skills. Every instructor uses the same basic "text", the Vehicle Code. The difference in instructors is how they communicate that text to the student in an understandable and memorable manner.

Going hand-in-hand with communication skills is the ability to be patient, understanding, and compassionate about the students skills, or lack of skills. Some students are truly terrified of driving, while others are boastful of their driving abilities, whether real or imagined. Any given classroom will have a varied mix of these types of individuals, and the instructor must be able to accommodate the learning curve of all of them. In addition, not all students will be willing teenagers; you may find yourself driving with a rehabilitating stroke victim who may have poor speech patterns, or with immigrants with trouble understanding you. The wise instructor also takes the time to explain and encourage parents regarding their children's lessons.

In most cases, you will be driving in a vehicle plainly marked with your school name, address, and phone number. A professional instructor will always strive to present a professional manner while driving. If a student witnesses an instructor violating traffic laws, or "shrugging them off" while driving, the instructor's credibility is tarnished, and

his or her "professionalism" is in question. The attitude of an instructor must be professional at all times, in class, in the car, and in all driving situations.

Needless to say, if an instructor does not have a working knowledge of the vehicle, as well as other vehicles the student may meet up with while driving, it will be impossible for the instructor to impart the required knowledge of safety and defensive driving techniques. Knowing that a front-wheel drive vehicle handles differently than a rear-wheel drive car is important to students driving in tight curves or bad weather conditions. The difference between Anti-Lock brakes and regular brakes, during hard braking maneuvers, can be the critical difference between life and death, and must be explained by the instructor.

None of the "traits" mentioned so far has any meaning if the instructor lacks a true desire to teach. If instruction becomes a "job" and the instructor has no drive to instill knowledge and safety to a novice driver, then no real instruction is being done. Driving instructors who have a desire to teach are the ones that students respect and ask for in subsequent lessons; they know that they are actually learning something! The desire to teach also makes the instructor find various ways of communicating to the students, rather than "going by the book".

Instructors must always be looking for new and inspirational methods of communicating. Such methods include "participative lecturing", teaching-by-coaching, role-playing and problem solving games, to name a few. Mundane teaching or reading bores many students, and a bored student is a student who is not learning.

How would you feel about a doctor, or a lawyer, who practices in cut-off shorts, scraggly beards, unkempt hair, and dirty hands? Probably not very comfortable. What makes you think that your students, and their parents, don't look at you and your vehicle the same way? When you take a teenage student for a lesson, the parents are, quite literally, putting their child's life in your hands. They want the comfort of knowing that a professional instructor is at their side, and your appearance, as well as the vehicle they will be in, is the first impression that they have of you. Remember, you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

As mentioned earlier, listening is a vital part of communicating. A good instructor listens to not only the words a student may be using, but how they are being used, and the inflection. Quite often the student in your car has poor communication skills themselves, so it is up to you, as a professional, to listen intently and make sure that understanding, comprehension, and learning is taking place.

The novice driver is also a nervous driver. It is the job of the professional instructor to calm the nerves, build self-confidence, and impart knowledge to the novice driver. This can only be done if the instructor maintains a pleasant and comfortable demeanor. The instructor knows that we all make mistakes now and then, and so he or she must also have the ability to laugh at himself or herself, and not take life too seriously.

Finally, the professional instructor not only cares about his or her students, but also finds ways of showing it. A student more readily understands the inherent dangers of driving when that student feels that the instructor actually is concerned, and explains the dangers in a way that shows he or she actually cares.

#### Be Consistent

One of the most difficult tasks facing you, the parent, is to QUIT being a parent! Your teen needs two things right now: someone to INSTRUCT them on safe driving habits, and an AUTHORITY figure to make the teaching credible. If you try to be a PARENT, your teen (who is, after all, in his or her "rebellious" years) will likely let many of your statements go in one ear and out the other. Remember, they SEE you drive every day, they KNOW (or at least THINK they do!) what your "parenting" skills are like, and they will, very likely, only drive "correctly" when you are around.

The wise parent is able to set aside their "Mommy / Daddy" personality and adopt a "Teacher" one, which requires a constant conversation during the drive. This conversation will entail descriptions of WHY a certain driving action is done, WHEN it should be done, WHERE it should (or should not) be done, and HOW it should be done, both correctly AND legally.

You must "prepare yourself" prior to taking your teen driving. Accept the fact that mistakes are going to happen, and think about how you will handle them; reaching over and calmly taking control of the steering wheel, instead of "grabbing" it, using the parking brake on the console (if your car has it there) as your own secondary brake, informing your teen at least a block ahead of a desired turn, or other maneuver, using a "baby monitor" mirror (available from most department stores for around \$5.00) as a secondary mirror so that YOU can see traffic to the rear and sides.

One of the things I look for in an instructor is the ability to remain calm during potentially dangerous situations. I take them out and become a horrible student, one that they must constantly correct and advise. If they rattle easy, I don't hire them. YOU can do the same: take another adult along with you on a drive (WITHOUT your teen!), and let them make mistakes, such as over-turning on a right turn, failure to stop for a stop sign, etc. YOU make the corrective action for them, and think about how you would advise them on a change in their driving skill during the maneuver.

## The Theory of Learning

Learning comes in three basic types:

- **New Knowledge** (where new ideas or concepts are learned...Driver Education is this type);
- **Behavior Modification** (where ideas and concepts are changed or altered from what was previously learned...Traffic Violator School is this type);
- **Skills Based** (where a set of mental and motor skills, involving eye-hand coordination is involved, is learned...Driver Training is this type).

No matter which of these three types are being taught, there are certain precepts to learning that should be understood.

### Comprehension

Comprehension involves understanding and accepting some form of learning.

Comprehension occurs in several ways:

1. **Absorption of Ideas** - Ideas, which are intangible thoughts about tangible things, can be absorbed by a student through proper delivery methods by the instructor. An idea must be explained in such a way as to influence the student to accept it as true. Simply stating an idea, without explanation or conversation about it, will almost never succeed in having the student accept it. Ideas require "proofs" such as charts, tables, pictures, or statistics to influence the student. A dialogue between students, with the instructor acting as a facilitator, can also produce the desired result. One of the best methods of getting ideas across is called the Socratic Method, after Socrates' argument to the Athenians in ancient Greece. Rather than argue a point, Socrates simply asked for justification of the points as they were made. By continually asking questions that required rational answers, he forced the Athenian Council to accede certain points, by proving the absurdity of them with words that came from them, instead of from him. Ask questions of your students when you are trying to change their way of thinking, or when they seem reluctant to accept the idea you are trying to convey. When they give you answers, ask them to justify the answer. Eventually, you will have them agreeing to your concept.
2. **Prerequisite Building Blocks** - it is assumed that *some* knowledge of the subject is already known to the student, and the newer learning can best occur by building on top of what they already know. For example, they already know that riding a bicycle downhill makes it go faster and is harder to stop. When explaining the natural laws, and their effect on driving a car, using the bicycle as a simile can enhance the comprehension by the student. When a new idea is being presented, try to find some similar idea that has been learned in the past and then build upon it.

3. **Vocabulary Delivery** - if the student cannot understand the words you are using, how can they understand the idea those words represent. Most textbooks contain a glossary, which briefly defines the new words introduced in the text; you must provide your own glossary, as you talk, so that the students will follow along with the words being used. Most driving skills and knowledge use fairly simple words anyway, and if you try to impress the students with your knowledge by using larger, unfamiliar words to them, you will lose their confidence in you as an instructor.
4. **Attention to the Delivery** - if the student is distracted, or simply not paying attention to you because they are bored, then NO learning can occur. It is up to you, the instructor, to maintain their attention. Some instructors like to have the class read out loud, one by one, a paragraph or two at a time. When this is done, the other students are not listening, they are reading ahead to where they will be asked to read, or simply waiting for you to call on them. In addition, many students have difficulty in reading out loud, dyslexia, or other ailments that may be embarrassing to them. If they feel humiliation after reading, or fear prior to reading, again, they are not paying attention. Think of a roller coaster, and the up-down, slow-fast rhythm of it. That is the way your classroom should be, so that the students are always alert and ready for the next change in pace.

## **Recall**

When the student comprehends the new learning, and can then recall it on demand, you have arrived at knowledge. Comprehension without recall is simply memorization, or "rote learning". Testing, quizzes, and questions are all methods of reinforcing the recall ability of the learned material.

## **Creative Thinking**

Once the knowledge is obtained, it is time to put it to use by creating scenarios where a driving danger may occur, and letting the student apply a logic sequence to the scenario for avoiding or evading the danger. No book or video can cover all possible problems that a driver might come up against, so it is imperative that the instructor comes up with imaginative ways to make the students think about possibilities and risks they may come across. Knowing what to do in an emergency is half of surviving that emergency.

## **Discussion Method**

Discussion is useful when exploring new ideas, or debating the merits of one. It only works when there is already a base knowledge of the subject at hand, however. You can have a discussion in several methods:

### **Open-Ended**

In an open-ended discussion, questions are asked, or topics are talked about, with no clear, precise answer immediately available. This is helpful when trying to arrive at a consensus of opinion, or to generate ideas on why a certain law exists, or to explore alternate methods of achieving something. Generally, the instructor acts as a facilitator, keeping the students on track with the topic, or inserting new thoughts or questions when

the students seem to be lagging in answering. You will find some students who will wish to monopolize the discussion. Don't let them! Instead, use them as leaders to steer the discussion in the direction you, as the instructor, wish it to go. If they try to monopolize, stand up, walk to them, turn around, and, using your body, block them from the conversation. This allows others to raise their hand or interject their opinions while the "monopolizer" is "out of sight".

## **Raised Hand versus Calling Out**

To maintain control over the classroom environment, it is imperative that the instructor has a set of rules for answering questions or responding to other comments. The raising of the hand to signify a desire to answer helps to maintain that control. However, there are times when you may want the students to call out their answers, such as when playing a game of Q & A, or when rapid-fire questioning to test retention of material.

## **Rhetorical**

Rhetoric is, by definition, directing one's words with specific intentions towards specific audiences. Rhetoric is used to convince, either through reason (called "logos"), through establishing credibility with the audience ("ethos") or through emotional response ("pathos"). All rhetoric (the words you use) must be thought out in terms of the target audience you are presenting your instruction to. For example, you would use different phrases, arguments, and questions to a group of senior citizens, than you would with adult traffic violators or novice teenage drivers. It is always important to recognize who your audience is, what they "need" to know (even if they themselves don't know that they need it!), and how best to get them to agree with what you are teaching. Rhetoric, when done correctly, is a powerful tool for convincing others; Martin Luther used it to convince the public of Erasmus' errors in Christian thought, Socrates used it in ancient Greece to convince others of his innocence, and Hitler used it to convince his countrymen of their superiority over others.

## **Questioning**

The use of questions is another powerful tool of the instructor. Questions can be used to command attention to a certain subject; they can be used to get feedback from the students on subjects as they are being taught; they can be used to reinforce ideas or concepts already taught.

Questions MUST be "open-ended", that is, they demand a full sentence to answer (not simply *yes* or *no*). This makes the student think through a proper response. If you ask a question that can simply be answered by a yes or a no, you automatically have a 50% chance of getting the correct answer without any thought being given to it!

## **Responding to Questions**

Just as you should never ask a "closed-end" question, you should never give a closed answer. Every question a student asks, no matter how insignificant it may be, is an opportunity for learning. Even if the student is asking what he or she thinks is a "dumb" question, if the instructor stretches the answer into a discourse on that very subject, he

opens minds to more learning. People do not ask questions that they have no intention of listening to the answer.

When responding to a question, repeat the question so that everyone knows precisely what you will be answering. Never assume that all of the students heard the question. Also, if you think the class already has a basic grasp of the topic being questioned, you can feed the question back to the class for further discussion, instead of just answering it yourself. You may need to re-word the question, or change the wording slightly to get the class on the right track.

### **Keep It On Track**

One of the biggest mistakes many instructors make is to let the conversation get away from them. This is often the result when you allow too many "what If?" type questions. Training should always be linear, that is in a straight line. If you cause the students to lose focus on your subject, by drifting into other subjects, it is the same as taking an unfamiliar detour. You may find your way back eventually, but you have lost valuable time meanwhile. If the students seem anxious, as a group, to discuss another subject, however, don't let the opportunity to teach get away from you. Make a notation on your desk, on the whiteboard, or somewhere you can refer to, as to where the current discussion left off. If the students are anticipating a new topic, then by all means give it to them. They will learn much more if it something that they WANT to learn.

### **Don't Let It Stagnate**

Another mistake many instructors make is to "over-do" the subject, and lose the concentration of the students. A major error for any instructor is to believe the student should know ALL that the instructor knows. If that was true, the student could teach the next class! The student needs to have a few questions remaining after the session in order to keep the interest alive. Remember that you can't teach them everything! Move on to the next topic BEFORE boredom sets in!

### **Lecture Method**

There are two basic styles of lecturing; the " Professor " style, where the instructor simply talks to the students for a period of time, with no interaction (a Sunday sermon is of this type, you simply don't interrupt the preacher); and the " Participative " style, where the instructor talks in short paragraphs of detailed knowledge, and then opens it to discussion from the students. The participative style is, by far, the better method for dealing with students who need to learn something new, like safe driving techniques. It allows knowledge to be doled out, a little at a time, with feedback for the instructor, so that he or she then knows when to proceed with the next bit of knowledge.

No matter which type you use, you must begin with a broad overview of the topic to be discussed. There is an old saying that goes: " Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them. " This adage aptly defines lecturing, no matter what the style you use.

Once the overview has been given, bring the lecture down to specific points...if you use a teacher's guide, you may want to "bullet" the actual specific points to help keep yourself on track. Once again, do not let the lecture stray from the specific topic, or you risk losing your students. Try to work in any current events, such as newspaper articles, or video clips from the local news, to make the subject fresh and appropriate to the students.

## **Demonstration Method**

### **Visualize**

Most people are quite capable of learning new things, and new skills, by watching others show them how. As an instructor, anytime you can visualize a concept or idea, you have a greater chance of retention by the student. For example, simply sitting down in a classroom chair and then having the students try to explain to you how you should properly sit in the drivers seat, can be not only amusing as they try to vocalize the instructions, but can be used as a learning tool to show why the arms should be properly positioned, why a seat belt should be properly used with a shoulder strap, etc.

### **Traffic Observation**

Have the students, as a group, simply walk to the corner of the street where your school is located, or assign a group of three or more to a certain location, to simply observe and make notes on what they see. Not only flagrant violations, but aggressive driving, inattentive driving, number of drivers holding a cell phone or newspaper as they drive, etc. Then, share these notes with the rest of the class and discuss the common things they saw, as well as the occasional things they saw while people were driving.

### **Hand-Over-Hand Steering**

The simple prop of a steering wheel on a broomstick can be highly effective in teaching the concept of hand-over-hand steering. Have several students demonstrate left turns, right turns, progressive curves, etc. You, the instructor can stand next to them and assist them, but let the student do the actual work. This is a foreign concept to many students, and you will find many who lock up at the elbows when they are actually driving. By visualizing this type of steering with props, in the classroom, you make the student feel more comfortable and confident once they are actually driving on the road.

### **Hand / Arm Signals**

Again, having the students demonstrate to you the proper hand and arm signals in the classroom, can make them feel more confident when they take their driving test, and helps to ensure that it is a remembered skill later on.

### **Guest Speakers**

Law enforcement professionals make excellent guest speakers for your classes. They have an instant credibility with the students, and their knowledge goes a step or two deeper than the instructors', as a general rule. They can usually give dramatic examples of the results of careless driving, as well as the costs in both penalties and possible jail time.

Medical personnel, such as emergency room nurses or EMT crews, are another example of people able to give dramatic exposure to the consequences of unsafe or careless



driving. They have seen these results first-hand, and usually have several heart-rending stories to tell your students, as well as advice on safety devices, such as air bags, safety belts and head restraints.

When discussing the parts of the vehicle, and its maintenance, a local mechanic or Service Director can be used to better explain costs for replacement and repair, as opposed to preventive maintenance. Be careful to use an ASE-certified technician to maintain the credibility of the guest speaker.

Other professional drivers, such as taxi drivers, truck drivers, racecar drivers, etc. can also be used. The danger is that many of these people have "preferences" or opinions towards driving that may be contradictory to your way of teaching. Be sure to "interview" them before allowing them to speak to your class, since they may end up undermining your own credibility with your students.

### **Student Reading Method**

Many instructors, realizing the amount of information in the required text book, think that the best way to get through it is to have the students read it out loud. While this may be appropriate on occasion, it can backfire on you easily. Recognize the fact that not every word needs to be learned by the student; it is the idea or concept that the words represent that is important. It may be less embarrassing to the students, and more productive for the instructor, to ask for a volunteer to read a few paragraphs and then discuss the idea / concept that was presented by the reading.

If the text is short, only a few pages, then the students can be given a time period to read, followed by a short discussion or quiz to ensure retention and understanding of the topic. Lengthy "quiet" reading is seldom productive. The student is not motivated to read, the instructor has no way of knowing the students' comprehension rate, and several topics may be covered in one section, leading to more confusion or misunderstanding

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I hope these tips have been useful to you.

Regards,

Glen Munson

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