

A photograph taken from inside an airplane cockpit, looking out through the windshield. In the foreground, a small, light-colored stuffed dog with dark spots and a dark collar is sitting on the dashboard. The background shows a runway stretching into the distance, flanked by dry, brownish-yellow fields. The sky is clear and blue. The text "Problems in Paradise from Lazy Flight Training" is overlaid in a stylized, yellow-outlined font.

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Problems in Paradise from Lazy Flight Training

By Mike Jones

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Not sure why, but suddenly I have a bushel of buddies who have been bitten by the flying bug. Now, I am convinced flying is the most fun you can have with your clothes on, but 99.9% of the rest of the world has no idea. What has stirred the aviation soup? I searched for a common link but didn't find one. They come from wildly diverse backgrounds. They only recently acquired their passion for flight. They are all very inexperienced, with between 15 and 30 hours in the sky. Maybe this new-found enthusiasm is merely coincidence.

But one thread is not an accident: every one of them are worried about the quality of their flight training. Indeed, some of the training has been so inept as to be borderline scary.

It's often been said you never get a second chance to make a great first impression. That makes it an extra shame that for so many new pilots their first glimpse into aviation is less than satisfying. Here's a brief review of three friends, including their progress and their worries.

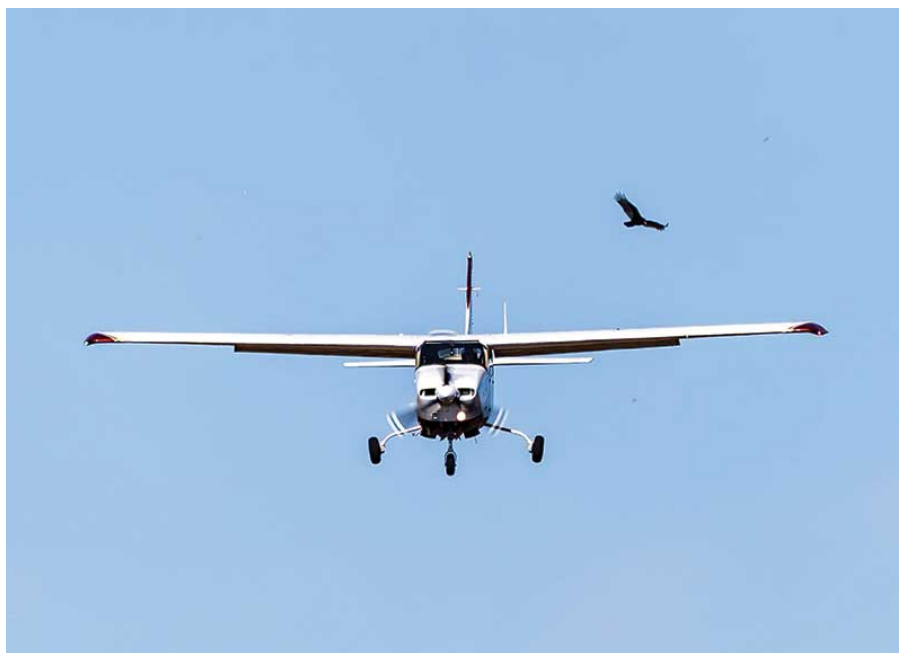
Rick's Tale

Rick is well on his way to his PPL, collecting hours like a squirrel looking for acorns in autumn.¹ Rick reports his instructor is very mature, experienced,

¹ Full disclosure: I've renamed everybody in this report. If you see yourself in these words, you're wrong.

and attentive. For example, while pre-flighting Rick's Cessna, his instructor asked Rick to produce all the POH supplements which should be on-board the airplane. Rick had them all, safely in a box in his garage. That was a good teaching moment.

Together they revised the checklist that Rick used when pre-flighting his plane. His instructor even added a few items tailored to Rick's level of experience and his avionics. Rick is particularly tickled that they will fly on days with gusty crosswinds when other instructors and students sit ground-bound. Superficially, it appears Rick and his instructor are doing well.



Departures and landings are the most challenging skills for new pilots to master. Time feels compressed as students deal with crosswinds, pitch, power, airspeed, aircraft configurations, radio work, and all that jazz. A good landing has three prerequisites: a stable approach with the appropriate wind correction; proper airspeed control, and the touchdown target fixed and immobile in the windscreen.

I am less sanguine. As Rick describes his flying lessons, I hear an instructor who is focused on the wrong details. Two specific examples: during take-offs and landings, Rick reports the instructor constantly touches the yoke, making corrections without

explanation. Nothing wrong with the instructor being involved, but the lack of explanation and teaching is concerning.

Another concern I heard was his instructor's unusual emphasis on altitude control. This topic flared up when Rick repeatedly questioned me about the altitudes I use when landing. He reported his instructor repeatedly asks Rick to

confirm his altitude as he flies the pattern, persistently questioning it even on short-final. As a result, Rick has become fixated on his altitude.

Students learn from being uncomfortable. Most importantly, they learn from their mistakes, such as seeing what “too low” looks like or wandering off the centerline. Being prevented from making [small] mistakes deprives students of quality teaching moments and extends the learning journey. Certainly, good altitude control is the sign of a competent pilot. But fussing with the altimeter on short final? I never even look at the damn thing. When I told that to Rick, he was flabbergasted.

The critical elements of a good landing are three: a stabilized approach, proper airspeed, and gentle corrections to keep the plane aimed at a consistent touch-down point. His instructor is simply wrong: altitude is not a focal item mandatory for a good VFR landing (see Sidebar for further discussion of this point).

Kellie's Tale

Kellie is a young woman eager to learn. She soloed at twenty hours and is working on her cross-country flights (which admittedly can be tough in the winter months). She earned a scholarship to the EAA's Air Academy at Oshkosh this year, and she's started looking at colleges with strong aviation programs. She's smart, enthusiastic, and articulate. Any parent or flight school would be proud to have her on their team.

“Experience is a terrible teacher: first you flunk the test, then you learn the lesson.”

But I was dismayed to discern significant gaps in her training. She had trouble explaining to me the key elements of aeronautics, such as the “four forces of flight.” We browsed under the cowlings of my bird and discovered she

was unable to identify more than a handful of components. Even more alarmingly — from the perspective of troubleshooting an in-flight emergency — she was unfamiliar with the functions of those devices. Can you spell “magneto”?

Unhappily but not unexpectedly, she failed her first attempt at the FAA’s ground school test.

When Kellie and I went flying, more deficiencies appeared. She flew my big Cessna smoothly, held her altitudes nicely, and used the rudder properly. But as we entered the pattern she was unable to slip the airplane to accommodate a crosswind. Slips and crabs are, to my mind, essential skills which should be taught and practiced at every opportunity, especially as one prepares for solo flights or cross-country adventures.

Tim’s Tale

My friend Tim is a mid-life arrival into aviation. He’s enjoying a successful business career and a happy homelife. When his kids departed for college he decided to devote some grey cells to aviation, a skill he has always admired and wanted to learn. I have never flown with Tim but we were enjoying a beer together when he shared three complaints about his instructor.

First, that young instructor never stopped talking. The “sterile cockpit” concept — which Tim had discovered in popular flying magazines — was an unknown concept to this chatterbox. Tim found his instructor’s lugubrious commentaries on girls and games a distraction on short final.

The second complaint pertained to bookwork. His instructor always wanted to get into the plane, Tim related. Sometimes they would be airborne and practicing new maneuvers without any introductory discussion on the ground.

“The cockpit’s not a good place to be hitting me with new stuff,” Tim said, “It’s noisy and bumpy and I’m working hard, and then my instructor starts talking about something new, like soft-field techniques.”

Tim’s third complaint struck home hard: he had never been to another airport.

In the fifteen or so hours he had accumulated in the sky, every one of those hours had been at his home airport. There are 75 airports in North Carolina; one is only eight miles away. But Tim had never seen any of them. Never flown a right-hand pattern, never been to a short or a skinny runway, never seen an airport surrounded by rugged terrain, never been to a controlled field. When Tim asked about this, the instructor was terse: the hours spent motoring to distant aerodromes aren’t particularly rich training environments, he said. He urged Tim to go exploring once he had his license.



Huh? How can a student manage a cross-country flight without visiting other airports? Based on Tim’s report, I don’t think he’s experienced the twenty hours of flying he’s inked into his logbook. He’s only got one hour, repeated twenty times.

Diagnosis: Selfish

There is a pattern to these complaints. To my eyes, these instructors are advancing their own careers, making their lives easier, more interesting, or

more comfortable, at the expense of the student's training. They are focused on themselves and neglecting the needs of their students.

Rick's instructor is tighter than a new pair of skinny jeans. Having his hands on the yoke at all times is poor teaching technique. People learn from their mistakes, which means they need to make mistakes. If Rick doesn't see the plane settling too low, or wandering off to the side, or turning final too early or too late, or flying the pattern too tight or too wide, he won't know what those situations look like or how they feel in the seat of his pants. Even more critically, he won't know how to correct them.

Kellie has an unengaged instructor. His behavior suggests he doesn't have the urgent desire to share knowledge. Instead, he merely offers the bare minimum. What he teaches, she gets. But as a newbie, Kellie doesn't know what she doesn't know. The gaps in Kellie's learning are not Kellie's fault. My guess this flight school is one where management takes a "hands-off" approach to supervising their instructors. Kellie's uneven education is the symptom of an instructor who would rather be "slipping the surly skies" from the left seat, untrammelled by the burden of students and explanations of the pitot-static system.

Tim's got a lazy instructor. He socializes instead of coaches, failing to recognize a flying lesson isn't a social engagement. He doesn't provide pre-flight lessons structured around the day's goals. His unwillingness to invest in experiencing different airports avoids the need to fill a few cross-country minutes with relevant coaching ("OK, what runways does this airport have? What altitudes will you fly? How do you find that frequency?"). My guess is his instructor is building towards his 1,500 hours and is consequently uninterested in making the cognitive investment in Tim's needs, such as ground school or lesson planning. Tim clearly is getting short-changed.

An Alternative Example

In my flying career, I have always tried to push my flying skills to their limits. I took spin training from Gen. Bill Finagin, probably the most experienced spin instructor in the country. I have taken lessons in “gentleman’s acrobatics.” I am very proud of my taildragger endorsement and my hours flying a World War II Stinson AT-19 warbird. Those instructors let me make mistakes, and I am a better pilot because of their patience and skill. I honestly feel that even after almost forty years in the cockpit I still learn something new every time I start the engine.

One of my most vivid memories during my early flight instruction was a trip around the pattern at the uncrowded but towered airport in Hartford, Connecticut. As always, my instructor, an older gent named Arnold, languidly sat with his hands in his lap as I worked with ATC and struggled get the plane



It is essential that student pilots visit a variety of airports to become more comfortable with the variations different aerodromes throw at visiting aviators. It's not just the length of the runway, but also the width, its surface, any obstacles which might be lurking in the pattern, surrounding terrain and gusty winds, competing traffic, and much more. Consider these two airports; which one will be more challenging to master?

onto a right downwind. About mid-field, tower cleared us to land (which may have been a slight mistake on their part). Just as I was smugly and confidently planning a nice, tight, descending turn on to base, tower asked if I saw the faster traffic on long final. Unconcernedly, I reported negative contact but continued turning base.

Somnolent Arnold jumped like a crocodile grabbing a wildebeest. He grabbed the controls and yanked us back on to the downwind as a LearJet blasted beneath us. We looked at each other, equally surprised.

“Never turn towards traffic,” he coached me gently, “unless you absolutely have the other aircraft in sight. Now, let’s see a good landing.” Then he leaned back and closed his eyes.

It is said that experience is a terrible teacher: first you flunk the test, only then do you learn the lesson. My mistake over Hartford has stayed with me for forty years. I failed a test I didn’t know I was taking. But I learned a vital lesson that has forever been burned into my brain.

Students who are never tested, never challenged, never make a heart-stopping mistake will never reach their full potential. They may complete their training, but it will be a pale, feeble, stunted version of what they might have become.

A person taking flight lessons is not just a student, they are customers. Customers deserve respect. They should receive value for their money. They should expect and receive well-planned, thorough, and professional flying lessons.

If you have a feeling your instructor isn’t working as hard at teaching as you are working at learning — even if it is just a scintilla of a skosh of a feeling that something’s not right — then it’s time to speak up.

Tell your instructor what you want, need, and expect. If they don't respond to your coaching, fire them. You're the customer, you're the boss. Don't settle for less.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones consults with G.A. airports, speeding them on their way to more



revenues, more grants, and more community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's been writing for this and other aviation magazines for a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. Email him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.