

Mentoring in ringing

The idea of a mentor goes back to Ancient Greece. It appears as master-apprentice in mediaeval guilds, and guru-disciple in many religions. It is fashionable in modern management. Definitions include:

- A partnership where one person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspective to foster the development of someone else.
- Supporting and encouraging people to manage their own learning ... to maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance ...
- Informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience and a person who is perceived to have less.
- ... a wise and trusted counsellor or teacher ... an influential senior sponsor or supporter ... sharing the knowledge and insights that have been learned through the years ...

Mentoring is distinct from teaching. It is not the transmission of a package of information from teacher to pupil. It is an extended relationship where someone is encouraged to develop by drawing on the accumulated knowledge, experience and guidance of the mentor.

Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen and a push in the right direction – John C Crosby

ITTS has brought mentoring to prominence for developing teachers, but it is also relevant to developing ringers. This note considers both.

Mentoring ringers

A typical ringer receives one-to-one tuition while learning to handle, and then progresses to 'attending normal practices', often with little further skill coaching (bell control, listening, ropesight) and only rudimentary guidance on learning methods. 'Standing behind' is common, but it is often confined to the duration of a touch, and limited to advice about method mistakes, and general encouragement.

Some ringers become 'self starting' very quickly. They seek out new information, ideas and ways of looking at things, and instinctively try to find better ways to do things. But many more don't. They just accept what they are given, and do what they are told. They don't stretch themselves, and often drift along once the momentum of initial learning fades. They could do much more if given encouragement and guidance.

A good tower captain or ringing master will of course try to encourage everybody, but it is impossible for one person to give everyone the attention that a mentor can give. Running the ringing is a full time task if done properly.

Some new ringers already benefit greatly from being 'taken under the wing' of one or more experienced ringers, and there is a good case for encouraging more widespread mentoring of ringers as they develop.

Skill coaching continued over an extended period could help more ringers to become competent performers, rather than slipping into habits that limit their future progress. Active coaching in method learning could help more ringers to develop flexible learning styles that give them greater confidence, and enable them to acquire a richer method repertoire.

There is no set formula for mentoring. How you go about it depends on your personality and on the personality of the person you are mentoring. It is a relationship between the two of you.

Mentoring teachers

Mentoring a ringing teacher is likely to entail more than pure mentoring. For example, someone teaching a raw beginner for the first time will normally need supervision as well as advice. Within ITTS the mentor role is further complicated by inclusion of administrative tasks relating to log book, teaching plans and so on.

When mentoring a teacher there are several balances to be struck:

- Proactive v reactive – If you spot something that could be done better do you: Interject and volunteer the information; Steer subsequent conversation around to the topic; Do nothing unless asked?
- Showing v telling – In general you are supporting the teacher doing the teaching, so by default you should try to offer suggestions that the teacher can then put into practice. But occasionally it may be simpler and more effective to show the teacher how you would do something.
- Telling v asking – Advice from you is only useful to the teacher if he/she can integrate it with what is already understood. If you just say 'do this' the teacher has to work out how (or if) to fit the new information into his/her mental model of what the teaching is about. Sometimes it is more helpful to start with a question related to the underlying reason for your advice, to help the teacher work out 'why' you have a concern, and possibly to work out the answer before you give your advice.

Mentoring teachers, like mentoring ringers, is a relationship between two people, and how you approach it in detail will of course depend on your personalities, as it would in any other relationship.

The Guild runs a support network for its members who teach ringing. This is based on an e-mail list, and is complementary to, not a substitute for, having a good mentor. For more details see: <http://odg.org.uk/education/teaching/>