Teaching Methods and Personal Experiences of Three RNIOs

Mike Channon,

Mike Rose & John Nixon

Introduction

Teaching in the Royal Navy naturally has a great deal in common with teaching in ordinary schools, colleges and universities. In the era we cover (1970-1996), the vast majority of Schoolies would also have acquired teaching skills either in teacher training colleges, the Royal Naval School of Education and Training Technology (RNSETT) in Portsmouth, or in other colleges/establishments. In many instances, however, the art of teaching in all its manifestations was based on what is commonly found in universities whereby graduate and post-graduate qualifications are sufficient to teach a specific subject.

In general, for any teacher there are essentially six generic questions to be asked before teaching begins:

1. What must I teach?
2. Do I have the required knowledge?
3. What resources do I have or need?
4. Can I plan and deliver my lesson?
5. Can I test the efficacy of my teaching?
6. Can my teaching/lesson be improved?

However, a number of unique circumstances were experienced by RNIOs, associated with a plethora of service requirements and environments, and the vast spectrum of students they taught. In this brief article we attempt to explain some common experiences with the technology and training methods of that era in what we hope is a witty and informative style. The initials of the co-authors are used to indicate specific, illustrative examples from their RN teaching careers.

Lesson planning

The first question of "What must I teach?" is dealt with by reference to the course syllabus, which may have been highly structured as in the case of BTEC or GCSE syllabi, or defined in terms of aims and objectives in relation to 'bespoke' RN training modules or *ad hoc* courses/lessons.

Having met the first objective, it was then time to revise or acquire the required knowledge to deliver the lesson using personal course notes or other published material and textbooks as required. This element could vary wildly from virtually no 'revision' required to lengthy periods of time reading books and asking colleagues for advice. Fortunately for Schoolies, RN establishments invariably had several useful educational and training resources and colleagues to meet this need, although this would be much more challenging when serving in ships, which had limited space and resources.

The requirement was then to create a lesson plan, which was simply a written breakdown of topics, content, timings, example exercises and resources. So, armed with a lesson plan and supporting documentation for both teacher and student, it was time to deliver. After waiting in the common room or office the class leader knocked on the door and said, for example, "Class A101 ready for instruction Sir!" in the case of a class of junior or senior ratings. In the case of an officers' class, the statement was rather less formal.

Entering the classroom

Entering a typical Royal Navy classroom as a commissioned officer was no 'ordinary' experience, especially when students were junior or senior ratings. This is because the class leader would call out "Class Ho!" as the instructor entered, resulting in class members sitting up straight and 'to attention'. Once the instructor arrived at the front the classroom, the class was told to "relax" or sit "at ease". This created a very distinct and formal start to each lesson and afforded Schoolies, or any other officer teaching the class, the usual respect that they commanded. When teaching officers, it was usual practice to simply enter the classroom with a friendly greeting.

Teaching resources

The general aim of using various teaching resources was to provide an efficient means of knowledge and information transfer. Blackboards and chalk, used in conjunction with dictation and student notebooks, were the principal means of achieving this in the earlier phase of the period covered. Blackboards were later to be described as 'chalkboards' due to political correctness concerns. Associated with chalk and chalkboards was a condition that could be termed 'chalk and talk fatigue', which arose from long hours at the chalk-face with chalk dust all around, causing slight breathing problems and clogging up uniforms and equipment.

A Schoolie Lt. at the chalk-face, 1965
Source: RNIOA Gallery

This problem was usually minimised by the wearing of a white lab coat (or brown, for those instructors who were senior ratings).

MC: "Regarding this issue I recall that when I joined my first teaching post at HMS *Pembroke*, Chatham, in January 1969, we used old fashioned static chalk boards and dusters. At that time there were no "woolly pullies" as part of the uniform (they came in in the early 70's) and we weren't allowed to wear white lab coats when instructing. The chalk dust played havoc with my Number 5s, which had to be brushed and cleaned pretty much twice a day and necessitated an extra set of working 5s (at personal expense), in addition to the ceremonial 'doeskins'. At least at *Sultan* where we had the updated technology of revolving chalk boards (still just as messy) I was able to wear a white lab coat when teaching. Back in the old drinking culture days, a couple of pints at lunch time were a good cure for chalk and talk fatigue!"

During the 1970s **white boards** with felt pens started to replace chalkboards and were easier to use – especially in teaching labs with live equipment – and helped to minimise the dreaded chalk and talk fatigue.

JN using a whiteboard and projector, HMS *Sultan*, 1988
Source: RNIOA Gallery

Overhead projectors (OHPs) and acetates became very popular in the 1970s as they could be prepared ahead of lessons; created imaginatively with coloured felt-tipped pens that were often used to group categories of text according to the subject matter being taught.
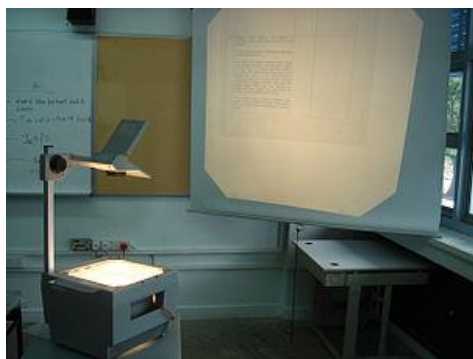
A typical OHP of the 1970s
Source: Wikipedia

Some Schoolies, however, certainly went to town in the production of their acetates (later produced using printers) and the length of a teaching 'ordeal' could be flagged by the number of acetates being carried under a Schoolie's arms when entering the classroom. Such overzealous use was often referred to as "death by acetate" by students.

Simulators and audio-visual aids were also commonly used as teaching aids that had the advantage of not requiring lengthy explanations as the equipment being taught was there for all to see.

A Schoolie teaching at RNEC Manadon, 1965
Source: RNIOA Gallery

Class control

All teachers and instructors are aware that learning cannot take place without an effective level of class control being present. The success in achieving this, however, is dependent on many factors. The obvious advantage in the RN context is the usual situation of rank difference between teacher/instructor and his/her students, although a reliance on this factor would be unfortunate. In extreme examples, however, the naval discipline act could be invoked, which was a clear advantage regarding class control.

Two strategies that are helpful in this aspect of teaching are:

1) Getting to know the names of students and their personalities

2) Asking questions in such a way as to make all students potential responders and therefore remaining alert.

In this regard, Schoolies often started their first lesson with a class by making a layout plan with names, which was then used in Q&A sessions. The dominant method for asking questions was affectionately known as the 'PPP' method (Pose-Pause-Pounce). Introverted students needed a degree of understanding in Q&A sessions while extroverts invariably helped to generate enthusiastic and often humorous responses. However, this could go wrong at times.

JN: When forming my student layout diagram for one class of apprentices at HMS *Sultan*, I was given a name that was new to me and wasn't sure

how it should be pronounced – largely due to my (then) ignorance of the English writer Evelyn Waugh. When I asked apprentice Waugh how to pronounce his name he replied that he 'didn't mind' and as it looked rather like 'cough' I suggested a version that rhymed with that word. "That'll do fine, Sir" was his generous response. So for six weeks, I rather 'barked' out his name each time I nominated him to answer, which I'm sure delighted him in knowing that he had exposed a gap in my English Literature knowledge.

MR: When I was teaching Maths at HMS *Fisgard*, my first appointment, I created a game that lasted five minutes and which I did at the end of most classes. The challenge encouraged my students to obtain a score of 100% and remain alert. The game involved giving the class a calculation verbally (for example, "the square root of 121", or "a quarter of 12 squared"), waiting five seconds and moving on to the next one (without repeating). The artificers had to write the answers down pretty quickly - it was a game of speed. After about 10 or 20 of these, I would give the answers verbally and ask who achieved 100%. Rarely was this achieved, but when it was, loud expressions of joy were emitted by those achievers. Everyone seemed to enjoy this light-hearted method, which was effective in not only improving mental arithmetic skills but also in maintaining class control as everyone remained alert/hoped for high scores.

Being observed by your HoD

The teaching performance of the vast majority of Schoolies was monitored from time to time by one's head of department or section head. This occurred randomly and didn't always coincide with a Schoolie's 'favourite' topic. As career progression often hinged on teaching skills, it was usually a fairly stressful event when a senior Schoolie suddenly appeared at the back of the class with a notebook to hand, as related in the following.

MC: There is one mildly amusing experience I had of being supervised while delivering a lesson. In 1972/73, at HMS *Sultan*, my Senior Instructor Officer (SIO) came into my classroom to observe me teaching a class of Leading Stokers as part of their Mechanical Training Course (MTC), which would qualify them for Petty Officer. I continued my mathematics lesson (fairly basic mechanics) when my SIO interrupted me by pointing to an ammeter that was on a table in the corner, and asked me whether that was part of my *current* lesson.

Thinking he was making a joke with a play on the word "current" and the ammeter (which measures current flowing in an electrical circuit), I replied with a remark along the lines of "Very droll Sir - good one!" At that point he got up rather huffily and left the room. I was later summoned and reprimanded for having a distraction (the ammeter) in the classroom that was nothing to do with my lesson!

Teaching 'alien' subjects

The stresses that came from teaching subjects that Schoolies had very little knowledge of was invariably a challenging and reasonably common experience.

JN: I recall one morning being informed that I would need to stand in for my SIO at HMS *Mercury* to deliver a lesson to a class of Principal Warfare Officers (PWOs) on a radio transceiver, used in helicopters, of which I had absolutely no knowledge or experience. Quite naturally, my audience expected me to be an expert on this system and to discuss its finer points. I believe the session lasted for 1-2 hours but I cannot imagine what I found to speak about for such a long period. The fear in these scenarios was that of being 'found out' and 'exposed' in the role of 'pretender.' I think the common response was to use, where available, the knowledge base among class members, and be honest with them about knowledge gaps. Alternatively, teach something you do know about that is tangentially related to the lesson's aims!

MC: I also remember being told with no notice, to deliver "Communication Training" (this was basically encouraging students to communicate verbally and discuss topics of interest) to a class of WRNS officers on the Short Secretarial Course (referred to locally as the Short Secs/Sex Course) at the Supply School, HMS *Pembroke* in Chatham. This was normally delivered by the SIO who was sick that morning. Like most Schoolies, I followed a didactic teaching methodology which worked well in the military environment with students playing the subordinate, passive role. Running a discussion group which would or should be largely student-led was new to me. I entered the classroom with no idea of what I would do, but after a quick "lightbulb" moment, I wrote on the chalkboard "*To be a successful WRNS Officer implies the negation of womanhood*". This prompted an immediate outburst and very lively discussion for the next hour or so, very much achieving the lesson objective. I think I would be taken to task for suggesting that topic today.

MR: When I was teaching artificers at HMS *Collingwood*, I was delegated to teach Maths and Digital Electronics, which suited me perfectly, since my degree was in maths, which included several modules on computing, programming and digital theory. So it was a firm case of a round peg in a round hole.

Then everything changed. A fellow officer was appointed at short notice to another establishment, which left a hole in the teaching schedule. Apparently there were no immediate plans to replace him, and I was asked to fill his shoes. His subject – Electrical Engineering – a subject of which I knew very little. I then had to start reading, understanding and practising exercises from the course material. It was not easy going, as I found the material quite challenging.

As the weeks rolled by, I always found myself only one chapter ahead of the class, racing to keep ahead of them. During the class I was always dreading a question which I could not answer. However, a fellow Schoolie gave me a piece of valuable advice. He suggested that, if I couldn't answer a question, respond with something like "What an excellent question! Maybe you could research the answer and tell us all next time!" I don't remember ever having to use it, but it eased my worries considerably!

Beware of 'farewell' speeches

Completing a long course with the same class always invokes a sense of relief as well as achievement, but the 'parting' gestures, emotions and words need to be chosen carefully as the future regarding your students may be uncertain.

JN: To illustrate this point, I learnt early in my teaching career that I should not give an overly long and emotional farewell speech to my classes at the end of a lengthy module. This is because I did this on one occasion at HMS *Sultan* to a class of artificers, telling them how much I had enjoyed teaching them and that it had been rewarding to see how well they had performed in their exams, and to wish them well in their futures, anticipating that I wouldn't be teaching them again. However, classes, as I quickly discovered, commonly 'returned' for later modules in their course so the first 'new' lesson with this particular class felt a little awkward to say the least.

Objective Training

MC: In the mid-1970s I was given the job of Training Assessment and Quality Control Officer as a result of Objective Training being introduced for the engineering specialisations. It was a fairly tough sell to the Senior Rating Instructors, many of whom had been training "their way" for years. In HMS *Sultan* it became known for a while as "Objectionable Training"!

Objective Training in the RN was the forerunner of the widely used Systems Approach to Training (SAT). SAT is a cyclic management process that defines, designs, develops, delivers, evaluates and validates training as shown in the depiction below:
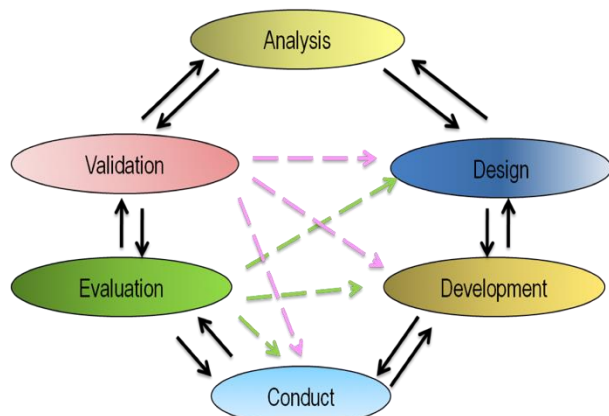
The Systems Approach to Training

Each phase is further simply expanded below:

SAT, an Alternative Depiction

Objective Training was slowly introduced Navy wide during the 1970s and gradually morphed into SAT, which is being used to this day, albeit with slight variations in terminology.

Discussion

The dominant teaching pedagogy adopted by the Royal Navy has traditionally been the 'didactic' method. The main features of this approach are that the teacher/trainer is 'an authority, in authority' occupies an elevated teaching position in the classroom, wears distinguishing dress and students sit in neat rows one behind the other. The 'master' imparts the required knowledge, often in conjunction with rote learning and drills, to students/trainees, who are mostly regarded as 'passive receptacles' of that knowledge.

The main alternative to this is commonly referred to as the 'experiential learning' method whereby the teacher facilitates 'discovery learning' and is not placed in an elevated teaching position. Students usually sit in a semi-circle, or in groups at different desks, and the teacher's role is to create a learning environment in which students are encouraged to discover principles and knowledge for themselves through trial and error.

Perhaps through the development of modern technologies and computer software, these two methods became increasingly complementary over the period we have covered. A more detailed account of the work of RNSETT and its associated training units, including Objective Training, can be found in 'Not Just Chalk and Talk' (Abram and Binks, 2013) and particularly articles authored by Don Cripps (pp 164-170) and Keith Hart (p 42-43).

We would warmly welcome comments and relevant accounts of teaching experiences from other former RNIOs.