

Bruce Thompson

Things the Pandemic (and Our Club Burning Down) Helped Me Learn About Teaching Bridge Using Online Lessons.

About a year before the pandemic broke out in March, 2020, the Savannah Bridge Club “Director of Directors” asked me to take the ACBL test for certification to direct Club-level duplicate bridge games. After I passed the test, I was tasked with directing Novice games, and I preceded each game with a brief 15-20 minute lecture.

In early March, 2020, I taught the last “in-person” lecture in the Savannah Club, on the topic of “2 Over 1”, the first of three planned lectures. The other two did not happen for several years, due to the pandemic. Then, in early September 2020, much of the building housing Savannah Club burned down, and our Club House was no longer available!

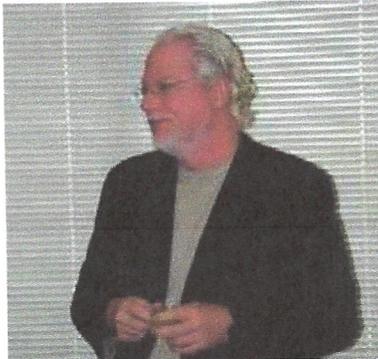
Back in March, 2020, I began directing Novice and Limited games on BBO for the Savannah Bridge Club. I could no longer teach short lessons before games, or longer lessons on a stand-alone not-game-affiliated basis. But my players needed, and very much wanted, instruction! What was I to do?

My Background, and My Initial Online “Esther Bridge Lessons”

Prior to moving to Savannah in retirement, I had taught graduate statistics to doctoral students at the University of New Orleans, and Louisiana State University Medical Center, for 11 years. I then taught at Texas A&M University for 26 years. So, I had a background in instruction!

I could no longer teach in person. So, obviously, I had to help these new players using web-based on-line instruction. I decided to create an on-line hypothetical bridge Life Master, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, who could engage with me in dialogs about cardinal bridge bidding and play principles, with Esther as my teacher, and me as her naïve interlocutor. I decided that in order to be credible Esther should have a LOT of ACBL masterpoints.

So, I decided that Esther had 20+ million masterpoints. That is even more masterpoints than earned by the real ACBL Member Jeff Meckstroth, who has a mere 100K+ masterpoints, and is featured on the cover of the December 2023 ACBL Bridge Bulletin! More information about Esther, and the lessons, are available at: <https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>



Being “Silly” and Humorous Can be Very Important When Teaching New Bridge Players

New bridge players are often very nervous and apprehensive. I remember a pre-pandemic event when the Savannah Bridge Club held an “Intro to Bridge Lecture” followed by 12 practice Boards played with senior Club members “on hand” to provide advice, as requested. One new player was so terrified by this that she was quite literally physically trembling! Do, not, underestimate the fear that some new players have about learning bridge!

One thing I have learned from decades of teaching graduate students who are TERRIFIED about learning statistics,

is that HUMOR CAN HELP! And I think being silly can be especially helpful in relieving anxiety! It is quite ridiculous that Esther holds 20,000,000 ACBL MasterPoints, when Jeff Meckstroth, a real human person, apparently, holds a mere 100,000 MasterPoints!

As an additional element of this essential silliness, in about half of the “Esther Bridge Lessons”, Esther bristles at being called “Esther”, and instead insists on being called “Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen”, and in the other half, bristles at being called “Ms.

Klinktoast-Houstonhousen”, because “I am a warm and caring person”, and instead insists on being called “Esther!”

Use the Pedagogical Structure That Is Most Suited to the Content That You Are Teaching

The initial “Esther Bridge Lessons” involved dialogs between Bruce and Esther. In half of the lessons, Esther is mean to Bruce, calling him various names, such as “my Malodorous Misanthrope”, and in the other half of the “Esther Bridge Lessons”, Esther is quite complimentary to Bruce, calling him “my Gracious Giver”, and “my Generous Gadfly”! More humor = Good; Less Humor = Bad!

There are two very critical pedagogical aspects to teaching using these dialogs. First, Bruce takes the perspectives of the lesson learners, asking the questions that these new learners would have, if they had never been previously exposed to this new bridge content and ideas. So, Bruce anticipates what learners would be asking when first learning this content, and Esther can then directly and immediately address these concerns and confusions!

It is fundamentally important when teaching to be able to take the perspective of the learners! When you are teaching, do not think about what you as a learner sitting in this lesson would think. Instead, think about what you as a new, naïve learner would be thinking, and confused about. And immediately and directly address exactly those concerns and confusions!

Second, the use of structured dialogs, structured exactly like the script for a play, allow me as Instructor to slow things down. This is critically important! Do not teach as if you were stuffing a firehose down the mouths of your students to “teach them the most you can, as fast as you can”! If you “overteach”, you may end up actually teaching nothing at all! Teach at the pace your students can absorb, and not at the maximum pace you can teach!

Adjust Your Pedagogical Methods to Fit the Nature of the Content That You Are Teaching

Discussion of boards, and of bridge bidding and play principles, fits well structurally with dialogs that can “go slow”, and in which Bruce can promptly ask Esther the questions that learners would be thinking of if they were sitting in a class learning about these principles, and she can immediately address these confusions and concerns. But other pedagogical structures are more appropriate for other content!

The pedagogical structure for teaching bridge conventions is less suitable to a dialog-based instructional approach. Teaching conventions involves teaching a highly coherent, highly integrated set of ideas for which direct instruction is more appropriate. So, to teach conventions, I did not use Esther dialogs with Bruce, and instead used non-dialog lessons taught either by Esther, or by Bruce. These Convention lessons are “didactic”. As Wikipedia notes, “the didactic method of instruction is often contrasted with dialectics [dialogs] and the Socratic [dialog] method.”

So, I created non-dialog instruction lessons in a section of the “Esther Bridge Lessons” website, on conventions such as:

- 2 Over 1
- Jacoby 2NT
- Roth Responses to Partner’s 2♣ Opening
- Roman Key Card 1430 [and 3014]

These are in the section of the “Esther Bridge Lessons” titled, “Conventions”.

“Cognitive Press” is Very Important in Instruction

Researchers have for decades explored which teacher behaviors lead to positive learning outcomes for learners. What we have learned is quite limited. But one thing we have learned is that it is very, very important for teachers to force learners to engage, and think.

A very destructive, and counter-productive instructional behavior is for teachers to ask learners a question, and to promptly, almost immediately answer their own question. Instead, competent teachers wait, very patiently, until learners

pose possible answers to the teachers’ questions. This forces learners to engage, and think. This is especially important in bridge instruction, because indeed thinking comes in “quite handy” when playing bridge.

To create “instructional press”, I then created the “Esther Bridge ‘Pop’ Quizzes” website at:

<https://esther-bridge.com/quiz.html>

These quizzes each present 1 to 5 bridge questions, involving boards, hands, or other specific situations. The quizzes then link to “answers” that provide detailed analysis to the posed quandary, together with links to related and more detailed explanations within specific “Esther Bridge Lessons” postings.

Summary

If as teachers we wish to effectively engage our learners, we must follow a number of instructional principles, including:

1. We must be cognizant of, and sensitive to, and help proactively resolve, the fears of our bridge learners.
2. Humor ain’t a bad thing when performing bridge teaching!
3. We must use pedagogical structures and approaches that match with the content we are teaching. Some instruction is best taught with Socratic or dialog approaches. Other content is best taught in more direct didactic pedagogic approaches, no holds barred!

Bridge instructors can, in fact, readily master concepts such as “Socratic” and “dialectic”, as against “didactic”. More importantly, bridge teachers can follow these or similar principles, to the benefit of our learners, who after all are the proper focus of all our endeavors as bridge teachers!

When things might go badly wrong

(a note from the editor)

Whilst reading and editing this article, just as with others, I check for a number of things, including phrases that I have not heard before. How common are they? Is there a slightly better way of saying the same thing?

Initially, this article came to me with the word “firehouse” instead of “firehose”. At first, I thought ... “hmm maybe that means something like chimney. Strange word to use”. I googled the word and it just did not seem right. Could Bruce really mean that USA teachers routinely, metaphorically, stuff public buildings down people’s throats? Does this extend to the county hall, a jailhouse?

A short email exchange clarified the single character typo. In a modern world of autocorrect, we all need to be on the lookout for software-induced typos and errors.