Perfect Presentations

Five ways to improve your ground-school courses

by Christopher Sorenson

When you think back to your earliest ground schools—back when you were still the student—you'll remember that some of the information presented to you was simply unforgettable: a funny anecdote, a specific interesting subject, or even a particular presentation. Chances are your ground-school instructor delivered this information to the class in this manner on purpose. Good instructors recall from the *Fundamentals of Instruction* (*FOI*) that the Theory of Intensity suggests "the more vivid and exciting a learning experience, the better the overall learning experience."

You, too, should keep this concept in mind when you structure your ground-school courses. Indeed, there are endless possibilities on how to make a course dynamic and interesting, and successful ground-school presentations are seldom just the result of "gifted" instructors. Instead, they're the result of your ability to stay organized, use effective teaching methods, and utilize various teaching media.

Most experienced and effective instructors have a diverse "bag of tricks" when it comes to their teaching task. Here are five ways to add to yours.

1. Setting the Stage. On the first day, let your students know that you're working for them right from the start. A student who puts trust in the instructor will soak up information easier than one who feels that his instructor is just going through robotic teaching motions. Build that trust by offering one-on-one meeting times, extra tutoring, and opportunities to talk after the class sessions.

You can also demonstrate your dedication by showing a high level of organization and pre-class preparation. For example, on the first day of class, you should hand out a detailed syllabus. Among other things, a good course syllabus includes the dates of each class, topics covered during each session, reading assignments, test dates, class rules and expectations, and homework assignments. Use the practical test standards, Federal Aviation Regulations, and other FAA training documents to aid in the creation of your syllabus.

Remember, it's important to stick to the syllabus throughout the entire course, because staying on track means you're staying organized. This is your flight plan. Most people—and pilots in particular—don't feel comfortable with disorganization and change (just look at the stacks of checklists in any seasoned pilot's flight bag), and the first hints of disorganization and lack of preparedness will cause apprehension in your students. Conversely, a good syllabus, and good discipline in keeping to it, allows students to use this document to cross-check their progress as they attend each session.

2. "No Student Left Behind." There are many techniques used throughout *flight*-training progress to monitor success, including phase checks, flights with other instructors, solos, and checkrides. However, when it comes to ground-school training, progress often goes unchecked until the night of the final exam.

A solid foundation of ground knowledge is just as important as flying skill, so no progress should go unchecked. Encourage your students to speak up if they're missing a concept. If you're dealing with a shy group, here's an idea to encourage the students to speak up: Make up small signs that say "LOST COMM 7600," and mount them on Popsicle sticks. Pass them out to your students to hold up if they become lost or confused during a lecture. This may help quell their feelings of ineptitude if they can approach their confusion in a light-hearted manner. I'm always pleased with just how effective this technique works in the ground schools I teach.

3. Beat "Crunch Time:" Schedule periodic quizzes, subject tests, or "block exams" to evaluate your students' level of understanding. These "knowledge assessments" can be given at the beginning of each ses-

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sion, and they should cover topics from the previous class. You can choose to test your students with multiple-choice questions (taken directly from the FAA written exam, or simply ones you've made up), concept-check questions, or even scenario-based questions. In fact, these tests don't even have to be legitimately graded. Just go through the answers after the quiz, and let the students correct their own. Most students who recognize that they have answered a question incorrectly will remember this information next time.

On the other hand, grading isn't such a bad idea. Holding a high standard for these progress checks can work as a huge motivator for your students that can inspire them to prepare better. For example, if your ground school is taught at the college level, tests and quizzes can allow the students to earn points toward their final grades (sometimes college-aged students need a little extra nudge toward success, too). You may even want to require a minimum passing score for the tests as well. While 70 percent is acceptable to the FAA, you may want to aim higher. Remember the old saying: "They will only jump as high as you hold the bar."

4. Shut Down Shut-Eye. Don't let your lecture become a time to catch a snooze. We've all experienced those "head-nodding" lectures where our eyes strain from staring at the wall clock, hoping by some miracle to speed up time, so if you've chosen to use the lecture method of presentation, be careful to avoid this problem. Offer your students—and yourself—a 10-minute break every hour. If your class is held in the evening, schedule the part of your lecture where you dim the lights for a PowerPoint slide show or video for early in the session.

Keep the class involved, too. You should have told them the first day that you're open to all questions and comments regarding the material, so encourage this back-and-forth exchange to keep your students engaged. You can also solicit involvement from your students by prodding for their opinions on subjects, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging brief commentary.

Also consider that not every student will benefit from the same type of instruction. The *FOI* teaches us about the various learning styles: visual, auditory, and written. Vary your presentations with an assortment of lectures, training videos, pictures in your PowerPoint presentation, visual aids, and open discussions.

Don't be afraid to assign homework, either. Obviously, this encourages learning outside of the classroom, and it will also help those students in your class who learn better by reading or completing a task. Homework can include reading assignments, decoding weather text, or answering question packets. The list of possibilities is virtually endless, so use some creativity to make it interesting.

Some of the best learning is done outside of the classroom. If time and location permit, hold "field trips." Take the students outside to visit an airplane without its cowling to view the assorted engine parts. Schedule a tour of an operating control tower. Relocate to the flight-planning room to get a mock weather briefing. Even a walk out on the tarmac to view airport operations can be beneficial. For example, give a presentation on airport lighting while standing under the operating rotating beacon at a noncongested airport. Don't be afraid to have an open mind; again, the Theory of Intensity plays a huge role here.

5. Training Tech-Savvy Students. There's no doubt that today's students are highly immersed in technology. You'll recognize these students by the clickity-click of laptop—and even cell phone—keyboards as they collect their lecture notes.

Unfortunately it's an all-too-common scene in the classroom to see the instructor working hard to get a point across while less-attentive students secretly text their BFFs and LOL at funny videos they found on YouTube. That means you've got to keep a handle on the inappropriate use of these tools. Set class rules early to help with this potential problem, and capitalize on your students' affinity for information technology by incorporating it into your program—including your own selection of Internet videos that support the subject of the day, such as decision-making or even crosswind landings.

You can also encourage the use of technology in ground training by developing your own class website that includes links to aviation web pages, quizzes, videos, discussion forums, course calendars, and so on. Encourage your students to use this website during breaks or in the comfort of their own home to supplement their ground training.

Remember to have fun when you are up in front of the class; those instructors who do are a delight to learn from. Work for your students, and pass along your knowledge in ways that your students remember. A well-educated pilot needs to gather solid skills and essential knowledge from all of her instructors—whether they were gained in flight or on the ground.