

Empathetic Instruction

Right-seat reminders

By Michael D. Hodge Jr.

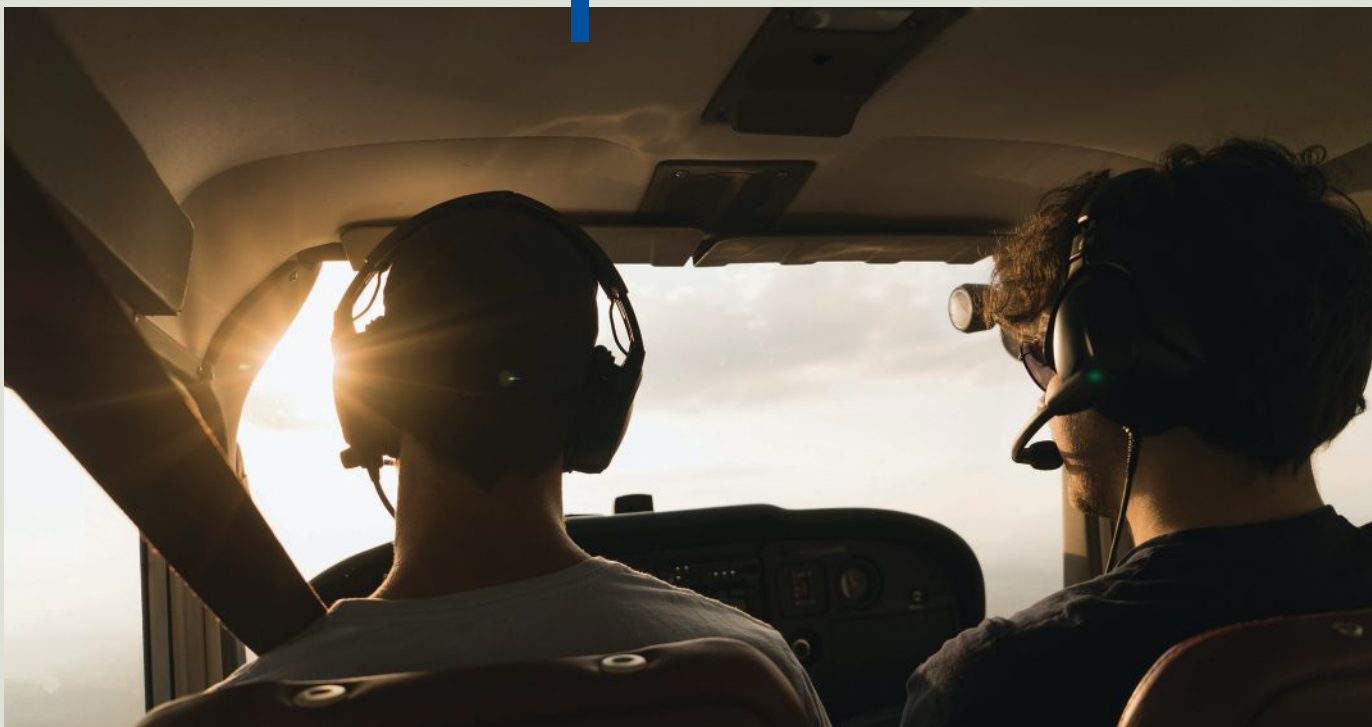
Learning the art that is teaching is not a destination but a journey. For my CFI students, that journey begins with a flight in the right seat. You wouldn't think moving a pilot a few inches to the right would make such a stark difference in how they control an airplane, but it does. Often the students themselves are surprised by how much of a difference it makes.

■ Usually, fresh out of commercial training they are sharp, knowledgeable, and confident in their flying abilities. I know it's going to be a great lesson when one of the first things out of their mouth is something along the lines of, "Wow, this is weird."

That first flight is usually just a right-seat familiarization flight. The intensity of that first flight in the right seat is usually strong enough that recalling their name can be difficult. I certainly don't expect them to fly with any similarities to that of the commercial pilot that they are. "Let's keep it simple and do a little pattern work," I'll say, and off we go. After the flight, I'll ask them how they are feeling. The responses run the emotional gamut. Some are excited, some are nervous, some are frustrated, and most are surprised by the sudden increase in difficulty. During the debrief, I don't mention much, if anything, about how they performed in the airplane. After all, that's not the point. The point is how they *felt*.

That transition to the right seat is an amazing opportunity to remind new instructors how it feels to be a student pilot, and to remind them of some of the normal emotions their learners are going to feel when they are in the left seat for the first time. On my first flight in the right seat, I distinctly remember pulling the mixture to idle after doing the run-up. The engine sputtered and then died. From the left seat, I heard the faintest of chuckles coming from my instructor. "Yeah, yeah, laugh all you want," I said, "but whatever you do, please don't let me do that in flight." It was a poignant reminder that what once was comfortable and familiar is now strange and surreal.

Oftentimes, when learning to instruct, we get so caught up in all the material we have to be familiar with. Between the FAR/ AIM, advisory circulars, letters of interpretation, and creating our lesson plans, it's easy to get lost in the minutia. I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing.



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After all, that minutia is important. However, more important than that is the human element of flight instruction. I firmly believe that it doesn't matter how much of the regulatory material you have memorized or how "perfectly practiced" and developed your spiels are. It's not your ability to teach the intricacies of aerodynamics in such a manner that a third grader can understand it that sets you apart from your peers. What matters is simply your ability to connect with your students and empathize with them. Caring deeply about the outcome of your students' success will usually self-correct any deficiencies in the knowledge that you may have, if simply from a desire to do better.

The ability to be an empathetic educator is not innate. Like a lot of things, it is a skill that can be improved upon and worked on. A good first step is to **simply observe**. You'd be amazed at what things you can pick up on when you are open to seeing them. Take a learner on their first flight. While this may be the second or third of these flights that you've done this week, for them it's the first time in the airplane. How do they seem? Do they look tense? Is there a tremor in their hand when they put the keys in the ignition? Are they asking zero questions or too many questions? All these things are clues to point you to how they are feeling.

Secondly, **ask questions**. If I notice that my student's hand is a bit shaky when starting the engine, I may pause them and ask them to just check in with me on how they are doing. It's not an uncommon learner reaction to have the inevitable adrenaline of that first flight cause a bit of muscle twitchiness. What if it's not excitement that they are feeling but rather fear? Just because a student has wanted to fly their whole life doesn't mean they aren't going to be a little scared when they finally get a chance to do so. If you can get them to open up with how they are feeling, that can allow you to tailor how that flight is going to go, inevitably making it a more effective lesson. By asking ques-


tions we can gain further insight into how they are feeling, which allows us to work *with* the student's emotions, not against them.

Finally, **offering reassurance** can be immensely impactful. Every pilot has experienced moments of nervousness, frustration, or fear throughout their flying career. When your student encounters a challenge, take the opportunity to connect with them on a personal level by sharing a story of your own struggles and how you overcame them. This not only humanizes you as an instructor but also provides comfort to the student, reminding them that their current difficulties are temporary and surmountable.

Early on in my instructing career, I was with a student practicing an emergency descent. My plan was to have them do this emergency descent and then set up for ground reference maneuvers. As we rolled out from the descent at 1,500 feet AGL over the mostly barren farm fields of southeastern Wisconsin, the airplane started vibrating. Violently. As my brain tried to diagnose what was happening, my student let out a scream. This scream was so guttural in nature that it sent chills up my spine. Never before had I heard anyone react in such a way, let alone a student. I immediately said, "I have the flight controls," and went through the engine roughness checklist. I started a climb at V_Y and subconsciously turned

right 30 degrees or so. To this day, I'm not sure why I turned right. It was as if Orville and Wilbur whispered in my ear, "Turn right, my son." At our 12 o'clock and about 10 miles away was the New Holstein (8D1) airport. As the plane climbed, the vibration went away, and all was well. Carburetor ice.

On the way back home, I asked the student how he was feeling. With a lot of shaking in his voice, he said, "I'm just glad you were here with me in the plane." I held up my left hand, which was shaking a little from the adrenaline. "Everything you are feeling right now, it's OK to feel that. You are human, as am I, and as you can see from this slight tremble in my hand, I succumb to the same human physiological reactions that you do. The only difference between you and me is that I have the training and proficiency to know what to do when it happens. You'll get there, too." We landed and debriefed and spent some time talking over the next couple of days to make sure that he was handling things OK because while it may have just been carb ice to me, it was very distressing to him. Reflecting on moments of vulnerability and shared experiences, like what we experienced, reinforces the bond between instructor and student. By acknowledging and validating the range of emotions students may experience, we can help foster an environment of trust and support.

While that first flight in the right seat marks the beginning of their journey as instructors, it also serves as a powerful reminder of the emotions and uncertainties that accompany learning to fly — an insight that enables us to guide and mentor our students with empathy and understanding every step of the way. 

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