

Instructors' Workshop Handout

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What this handout is not

This is not the Cal Sailing way to teach dinghy sailing. There's no such thing. We don't teach to a standard, as other schools do (see below). As an instructor, you will have to see what works for you. The point of the workshop is to expose you to the information, methods, and points of view in the Club to help you do that.

What this handout is

This is how I teach and why. I don't claim that this is the only way to do it or even the best way to do it. I have a certain approach that may not work for you. For example, I like to break things down into steps, so the student learns one step at a time.

The handout is something you can take away and write on, crossing things off that don't make sense to you, and writing in other ways of doing it that do.

Another great resource is Paul Kamen's 1994 document (updated since) on Dinghy Teaching on the website.

Cal Sailing vs. Most Other Schools

Most other schools teach to a standard (e.g., American Sailing Association or some other). That means that the instructors are certified to teach to that standard, and pretty much any class at a given level in any certified school is the same. We don't do that. We teach lessons, not classes. Students are matched to instructors on a first-come-first-served basis, and the instructor crafts the lesson to meet the students' needs.

We also don't have a standard way of doing anything. Different skippers have very different ways of doing various maneuvers, and the Club doesn't attempt to decide what's the best way or the Club way. This approach has positives and negatives. The positives are that students are exposed to a variety of techniques where there often isn't a single "right" way to do something. They can then find what works for them. The negatives are that the students can become confused, occasionally they are given completely wrong information, and worse they are sometimes told that something is the only correct way to do it.

I think it works best when you teach what works for you and explain why. If you know other ways to do it that also work, maybe explain that also. But tell the student that the right way for them is what works for them, and they have to find that, given a range of possible techniques. You can show them one or more of these. What matters in the end is the result. If you can tack close-hauled to close-hauled maintaining control of the mainsheet and the tiller, it doesn't matter how you pass them off from hand to hand. If you can come to a stop right next to a MOB within 2 minutes every single time, it doesn't matter how you do it.

The Student

Every student learns in his or her own way. Your success will depend on being able to identify the student's learning style and respond to it. Classic characterizations of learning styles are intellectual (lots of info, think about it), physical (do it and get the feel for it), observation (watch others do it), etc. And there are many more. Think of how you learn a new skill, and how someone else you know well does the same thing.

Also, some students want to move fast, others don't. This is really important to identify, as it tells you how much to push a student. Research shows that learning takes place when the student is pushed beyond their comfort zone, but not too far (rubber band analogy).

At the beginning of the lesson, you should talk to each student to find out where they are and what they want to learn in this session. That's a good guide, but be skeptical. For example, if they say they have a solid tack and gybe and MOB, and they want to learn small circles, test their skills on the water. Have them do a few tacks and gybes beyond the wind line and throw the MOB target over during this. If all goes well, move on to small circles. We have new members who have sailed a lot elsewhere but have never experienced our conditions, so for them you're teaching how to apply their skills to much bigger conditions. The same thing with members who have learned in the winter and never seen a 15 knot wind.

What you do on the water

- Have a plan for every student in every lesson. Talk to them ahead of time about this.
- Drills are good, but so is letting the student play around with it
- Don't overwhelm the student with information (but some want to get a lot of it)
- Praise and critique gently, but take command when necessary
- Don't take control of the boat unless absolutely necessary. Capsize is OK.
- Try to get the student to recognize when things aren't right – what's wrong and how to fix it
- Talk about the Club and where they can find information

What you should do on land

There are a few skills that are hard to teach on the water, as you have to visualize them from above to understand them

- Sail trim upwind
- MOB
- Slow sailing to a target (e.g., docking)

I have a points-of-sail diagram and a little model sailboat to help do this.

Theory vs. Practice

Unlike most other sailing schools, we get never-sailed-before students on the water with no discussion about how it all works. And that works very well – they get used to driving the boat upwind and tacking with someone else controlling the mainsheet.

But at some point they need to progress to controlling both tiller and mainsheet, and they need a bit of theory to understand that. I think it's best to explain this on land (see above) with visual aids. If you don't have a little model sailboat, you can do it on the white board in the clubhouse.

Progression – never sailed to Junior

Here's my progression:

1. Steering on a close reach and tacking, heaving-to
2. Close-hauled sailing
3. Feeling the boat power-up and power-down as you turn into and away from the wind going upwind
4. Working the mainsheet and feeling the boat power-up and power-down as you sheet in and out on a constant course
5. Downwind sailing. Hold a run and just keep from back-winding.
6. Gybeing
7. Slow Sailing and Docking
8. MOB
9. Small Circles

Somewhere in here you do capsize recovery and anchoring, and it doesn't matter much when. One instructor I talked with said he did it early, to get it out of the way, as students seemed afraid of it, and he wanted to show that it wasn't a big deal.

In all of these steps, you choose where to do it – in the Novice Area or beyond the wind line.

First Lesson (never sailed before)

- Talk with them a lot on land to make them comfortable. Show them around the club and point out what gear is available to them and where to change.
- Key points: don't take anything on the water you can't afford to lose (show where to put backpacks and keys), don't wear cotton, use eyeglass retainers (make one from the yarn in the clubhouse if necessary), and use sunblock (there's some in the clubhouse).
- Explain how the lesson will work. They'll get about 1/3 of the time on the tiller, but they will learn a lot watching others drive, and there's other work to do as crew.
- 5 points at the dock:
 - How to step on and off the boat (especially the first person). Call "stepping on" and "stepping off" if you're not the first person.
 - Moving weight on the boat to balance the wind.
 - How to furl/unfurl the jib
 - What to do in the event of a capsize (no big deal, happens all the time, it's a water sport – we'll be up in under two minutes; stay connected to the boat)
 - What to do if you (the instructor) falls off – if they can do an MOB, do it; otherwise either uncleat main and jib sheets and turn into the wind (you'll swim to them) or capsize the boat. If they are brand new, no choice – capsize.

- At the dock, demonstrate steering (which way the boat turns when you push/pull the tiller) and tacking, including moving across the boat. Have them do it a few times.
- Unless there are unusual circumstances (low tide or very high wind), I like to let the least experienced person take the boat from the dock. My theory is that it shows them that anyone can do this. Explain very clearly what they are going to do with the tiller on your command. Stay on the dock and push them off to try it, with you holding on to the bow line. Then do it for real.
- Generally, the instructor will be on the high side all the time in the crew position. This means that everyone switches sides on a tack or gybe. Make sure everyone understands this before you leave.
- You or (better) a skilled student will be controlling the mainsheet.
- The lesson will be steering close reach (beam to the seas), keeping the bow pointed at a target on shore in the distance and tacking.
- It may take some time for the student to get used to how the tiller turns the boat. That's OK. Just make sure they don't turn downwind and gybe. "Push the tiller to the sail! Push! Push! Push! That way!".
- The common errors in tacking are dropping the tiller, turning too far, and not turning enough.
- Be aware of your student's comfort level, especially beyond the wind line. It can take someone new to sailing a while to adapt to the rough conditions in the Bay, so be sensitive to this. For some students, it will be best to stay in the Novice area. Radiate confidence and lack of worry. Ask them how they're doing, and give them positive feedback. Correct gently.
- Teach heaving-to (both ways) to get the boat stable to change skippers

Student with Several Lessons

- Perfect upwind sailing
- Tiller control and weight movement during the tack
- If the wind is up, timing of the tack – spin the boat on the top of the wave
- Weight – static and dynamic
- When you get overpowered
 - Hike out
 - Ease the Mainsheet
 - Pinch the boat
 - Any or all of the above
 - If you think the boat might go over, blow the main completely and hike out hard if necessary
- Slow upwind turns to feel the boat de-power and recover by falling off
- Slow downwind turns to feel the boat de-power and recover by heading up
- Jib trim and steering close-hauled using the tell-tales
- Beginning of mainsheet trim
- Weight shift during tack
- Ideally have a shore session on points of sail and sail trim using sailboat models

Downwind Sailing

- Turn to broad reach and hold it
- If the boat heels, turn down to flatten it (opposite of upwind sailing)
- Sail on a run, using the jib as a signal that you're backwinded
- Wing-on-wing, using someone as a preventer on the boom

Gybeing

- Demonstrate and practice tiller moves at the dock – slowly bear away, and then stop the turn
- Start in the Novice area
- Start on broad reach
- Turn slowly downwind
- When the jib backwinds, simultaneously throw the main across and stop the turn with the tiller (quickly to the other side, then quickly back to center).
- If you're sailing main only, use pressure on the falls to signal when to pull the main across and stop the turn
- Gybe run to run in quick succession
- Move to stronger winds
- Fine tuning on higher winds and waves – time the gybe when you pick up speed surfing down the wave. The instantaneous increase in boat speed will create an instantaneous decrease in apparent wind.
- Very fine tuning for higher winds – blow the vang just before the gybe

Slow Sailing and Docking

- Discuss slow sailing on land
- Demonstrate on the water in an open area
 - Simulate docking
 - Get to a beam reach with the main all the way out and the jib furled
 - Turn up slowly to find the slow sail point
 - Accelerate/brake/accelerate/brake but don't lose steerage
- Pick up the white buoy 100 yards upwind of our dock
- Dock on the "virtual dock" that extends 100 yards south of the real one. Recognizing the slow sailing course and sailing it.
- Docking preparation
 - Crew preparation
 - Course estimation using the windscreens (close reach is 60° to the true wind)
 - Which way you turn if you come in too hot (VERY IMPORTANT – turn away from the seawall if you have any doubt)
- Practice "missed approach" – sailing backwards using a backed main (on the proper side), powering up and tacking using firm control on the mainsheet falls, and tiller snaps; if a gybe is necessary, hike out hard

- Touch and Goes at the dock – try to hit the dock as gently as possible, back out and go around for another one. If you come in hot, turn in the correct direction just before hitting the dock. Sculling if you're just short.
- Pick a dock where there's a lot of room and very little traffic
- Have the student try to select and hit a small section of the dock every time

MOB

I teach the broad reach/tack around/slow sail method. I think most club instructors teach this, as it's the simplest, but not all do. It can be very confusing for the student to be taught a different method every lesson. So for a first lesson on MOB, I'll teach this, but if a student has been using a different method, we'll talk about it and then see how they do. If it makes sense, I'll try to help them get their method to work. If it doesn't make sense, I'll switch them over to the one I normally teach.

This is an advanced maneuver, and you have to be really good at it to teach it. If you're not perfect at it, go out and practice until you are. Work on recovering from being too far upwind or too far downwind of the victim until you can do it every single time. If you can do all of that perfectly, you will quickly recognize what problems the student has and be able to show them how to correct them.

The biggest problem I've seen is that the student doesn't know when they are on a broad reach. Typically they go to a beam reach, so when they tack around they're on a beam reach. They will then have to go downwind a fair amount to be able to slow sail to the victim. Occasionally they go too far downwind, and the only way to recover is to go out and try it again.

I think this is something that a shore discussion helps with. You need to see the maneuver "from above", which is pretty difficult on the water.

Small Circles

See my blog post

<http://www.cal-sailing.org/blogfrontpage/recent-blog-posts/entry/small-circles>

Sequence:

- Fast upwind/downwind turns without tack or gybe. Pull in on the mainsheet fall and hike out going upwind/hike out hard going downwind while blowing the mainsheet.
- Fast downwind turn into a gybe and keep turning (don't stop the turn). Student needs to turn very quickly and not pick up boat speed. Weight transfer is key – keep the boat flat through the gybe turn.
- Circles around buoy or MOB target:
 - Approach beam or close reach as close to other buoy as possible downwind of it
 - Tack when able to clear the buoy upwind (can't get too close because of anchor line)
 - Fast downwind turn immediately when buoy beam-to
 - Fast upwind turn right after the gybe
 - Tack again when able to clear the buoy upwind

- After the first downwind turn, control the main on the fall with sheet all the way out
- Experiment leaving the jib as-is after the tack
- This is hard work, and learning stops when the student gets tired. Look for that, and take a break

Capsize Recovery

- Everyone in the water
- Check on crew – everyone OK and loosely connected to the boat
- Explain how to hold on and to scoop themselves in as the boat comes up
- If a student is doing the recovery, the instructor should climb up first, and straddle the boat forward, to see what the student is doing and to coach them
- Make sure the masthead float doesn't sink. If it does, get everyone off the boat and into the water (but still connected loosely). When climbing up the boat (especially a larger person), keep weight as far into the boat as possible.
- Make sure the crew is not impeding the recovery (e.g., by holding onto the U Bar)
- In wind and waves, either use crew as a sea anchor on the bow or anchor (see below)
- Everything works better if someone can get into the boat as it comes up to prevent another capsize or the boat powering up. It doesn't have to be the person doing the recovery.
- Anyone in the water comes in over the transom (Bahia). Have them get horizontal in the water and swim un, with a person on the boat pulling simultaneously on their life jacked strap (never pull on their arm)
- Practice in the Novice Area before doing it in wind and waves

Anchoring (while capsized)

- Thoroughly check out the anchor before you leave the dock
 - Line ready to run
 - Line goes from anchor chain over the semi-circular bow bar, then under it and tied securely to the bar at the mast
 - Line on the side of the forestay opposite the jib furling line
 - Anchor secured so it will not deploy on its own
- Always deploy the anchor on the same side of the forestay where it's rigged, so you can pull it in from behind the mast
- Play out the line slowly, test that it's set, and continue to play it out slowly until it's run out
- If you do it correctly, it will not be tangled in anything, and it will be easy to retrieve from behind the mast (very important when you're single-handing)

What Junior Skills are Really Important

There's no detailed standard, and every tester tests differently. What we're signing off on is the member's ability to take out an inexperienced crew in up to 15 knots of wind safely and to deal with problems in the Junior Area with the Day Leader available to help. Here's a good reference on what it really is:

<http://cal-sailing.org/images/stories/files/JuniorTest.pdf>

Personally, I am a hard tester. I expect the candidate to do the required maneuvers very well, to have good situational awareness, and to have good crew communications. I don't expect flawless execution, and I am impressed with someone who calls off a failed maneuver explaining what went wrong. I am especially impressed with someone who aborts a maneuver because of a collision potential or because of equipment or other problems. I want the candidate to pass, but I also want them to earn the pass.

These are the things that I look for in a Junior candidate:

1. Good sail trim on all points of sail, and ability to get to and recognize a specified point of sail
2. Sail close-hauled with good trim hiking out and using the tiller extension
3. Handling puffs and lulls with weight out, mainsheet trim, and pinching
4. Flawless gybes in the wind
5. Recognizing when to heave-to and reef (I always require leaving the dock with full sail, and I tell the candidate that they can reef whenever they want)
6. Flawless MOB using whatever procedure they were taught
7. Very tight small circles. I am less concerned with the circles themselves than the ability to do very tight upwind turns (with a tack) and very tight downwind turns (with a gybe), as this will save your butt in tight maneuvers near the dock and elsewhere.
8. Leaving the dock and docking. Saturday morning conditions, with lots of boats. Gentle docking.
9. Capsize recovery and anchoring. I want to see a flawless anchoring while capsized, as this will save your butt in real life. It's saved mine.
10. Solid rules of the road, especially the practices of dealing with windsurfers, distinguishing between the Novice Area and the Junior Area.
11. Knowledge of the Junior Area boundaries.

After the Lesson

Get feedback from the students on how it went, what worked and what didn't, especially the latter. You'll become a better instructor by getting this feedback.

How to be a better Instructor

- Get feedback from your students
- Talk to other instructors about technique and especially about problems, what didn't work, why, and how to fix it
- Go out with other instructors and see how they do it
- More of these workshops
- Forum?