

THE BEST WAY TO HELP EACH STUDENT FLY

BY KELLY MATTHEWS



How does one learn to fly a plane?

For most educators — driver's ed teachers excepted — the stakes of the skills we teach are seldom as high as those for flight instructors. If students don't master verb conjugations or spelling or quadratic equations while they sit in our classrooms, they will usually get another chance at a future date — or they will build a life without those skills and perhaps be none the wiser.

But the way pilots are trained might give us useful parallels we could consider in fields where there is more room for error. How does an experienced pilot teach a novice to fly?

Aspiring pilots begin in the classroom, where they learn terminology and the requirements for preflight equipment checks, a mandatory step prior to every takeoff. Students might also use a flight simulator to practice basic maneuvers while sitting safely on solid ground.

But relatively early, flight instructors take their students into the air, allowing them to apply their skills in a real-world setting. They use a plane with dual controls so the student can carry out each skillset needed,

one step at a time, building their confidence as well as their motivation to learn more.

I witnessed an example of this the day my father invited me to join him on one of his flight lessons. Attaining his private pilot's license had been a goal ever since he retired from being an attorney. He had passed all of the physical stress tests required, as well as training on a flight simulator, so that he was now logging flight hours with an instructor as his co-pilot. My visit to see him coincided with a day he would be up in the air.

Sitting side by side with his instructor in a single-engine Cessna, my father executed the preflight equipment check, then taxied and took off. At each step of the journey, the instructor, who was decades younger than my father, gave suggestions for improving his procedures, presented him with hypothetical scenarios and challenges, and remained ready to take control whenever needed.

As I watched and listened from the back seat, I was reminded of the education theorist Lev Vygotsky, who proposed that true learning

Kelly Matthews went along for the ride when her father, Pat Matthews, took a flight lesson in 2014. A retired attorney, he earned his pilot's license at age 70. Photo provided by Kelly Matthews.

happens best when a student is guided by a more capable peer. In my field, English Language Arts, this is why teachers implement peer editing, writing workshops, and other collaborative structures. Students learn best when they can internalize advice from another learner who is close to their "zone of proximal development," the sweet spot where a student must reach from where they are now to the level they could next achieve.

This also connects to the concept of "scaffolding," first coined by Jerome Bruner to describe how skillful teachers construct the right level of support as their students are learning new skills, and then gradually reduce those supports as the students gain mastery — similar to the process of dismantling scaffolding after a building is sturdy enough to stand on its own.

That day in the cockpit, my father's flight instructor carefully judged when



IN MEMORIAM

CHARLES VERNON CHANCE JR.

(California State University, Sacramento) was an avid golfer and devoted fan of the Oakland A's who "loved spontaneous and surprise trips to the ocean, foothills, and anywhere to be together with his wife and pup," a local obituary noted. He met Lori, his wife of 29 years, while they were competing in a steel darts league. Chance died Dec. 24. He was 64.

MARGARETTE CHASE JENNINGS

(University of Maryland, College Park) studied psychology at UMD and worked as a grants and contracts officer at the American Psychological Association in Washington, D.C., before retiring in 2003. Jennings died in May. She was 87.

DR. MORTON H. LEVITT (Florida Atlantic University) earned an engineering degree before studying medicine. As a pathologist, he worked for the U.S. Public Health Service and for several hospitals before being recruited by the U.S. Air Force, where he had a long career before retiring and starting yet another career in academia. Levitt died on March 7. He was 78.

TIMOTHY E. MACKLIN (Ohio Northern University) earned a doctorate in engineering from Purdue University and had a long career at Lockheed Martin. A local obituary noted his "love for his family, quick wit, and humor." Macklin died on Jan. 28. He was 71.

to allow his student to manage alone, and when to guide him in adjustments to altitude, speed, or technique.

My father ascended through all the required steps and eventually earned his pilot's license at age 70. His pride in learning, even at an advanced age, testifies to the mind's endless adaptability to gain new skills, and the sense of accomplishment our students can achieve when we guide them skyward while supporting them, one step at a time.



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