

## Learning

As I write my fiftieth column for *Billiards Digest* I think about the past four years and the pleasure of seeing my words printed every month in a national glossy, just like *Harper's* or *The New Yorker* only better since those guys have no apparent use for pool prattle. And while the ego boost is undeniably tasty, my real gratification comes from the learning experience. After teaching pool for so many years, I've never found it difficult to spout off on any conceivable piece of the game. But casting those ramblings into print for thousands of informed readers is a different matter and one that requires careful consideration to avoid sounding foolish or leading anyone astray.

Over the past few years much of what I've learned relates to the various ways in which individuals learn. Some time ago, after teaching pool for over a decade, the job started to become dull and repetitive—always saying the same things, the same way, day after day, week after week. I knew that I was dispensing useful information and passing along instruction that worked. But, in spite of a lot of positive results, I also knew that I was not reaching everyone. And whenever that seemed apparent I believed that those students who weren't improving merely needed to work harder. I even thought occasionally that some people simply cannot learn. Naturally, the more I met with such unproductive episodes, the more disheartening my profession appeared.

For a long time I viewed myself in the teacher/student relationship as the pool player and the guy with the knowledge. Anyone who listened carefully and followed my instruction might someday also be a pool player. And while that may be a fairly common educational approach (I must have picked it up somewhere), it's far from effective. Eventually I examined what I was doing and found a way to change things. Instead of regarding each student as a novice who might, one day in the future, claim the title of pool player, I decided that anybody engaged enough to seek improvement must be a pool player already, even the most inexperienced beginner. Although it may sound a little crazy to toss those words around so freely, that small change in thinking enhanced my respect for every student and shifted the responsibility for each person's learning onto me.

Once I understood where the responsibility belongs, I realized that I was dealing with individuals and then made the leap to see that people learn differently from one another. Amazingly that was all it took to transform the teaching experience for me. Immediately I found that when I paid attention, I could respond to the student and change something if our connection started breaking. In other words, when I see a vacant look moving into someone's eyes while I'm talking, I know that it's time to shut up and try something else. And now, with a little basic jargon at my disposal, I can tell you that person may not be an auditory learner.

I like to get my hands involved right away when I see a new activity, which makes me a tactile learner. If we're talking about basic information such as facts or trivia, I remember more from hearing than reading, so I'm also an auditory learner sometimes.

Since I have no artistic aptitude I don't think of myself as a visual learner. With its deep complexity pool calls on us to respond, at different times, with all three types of learning, and it's very fascinating to observe how various, beginning students relate to different features of the game. An artist may find the ability to visualize long shot sequences as a beginner while an engineer may gravitate toward the calculations for various diamond systems. Of course those are only generalizations and will not prepare someone for potential surprises. Still, a good way to address someone's learning is to inquire about that person's other interests and occupation.

Students respond best to achievement, and the fastest way to generate success is to make them comfortable, a task accomplished easily with a little conversation. For example, if I'm working with a musician I can help put that person at ease by pointing out that rhythm and tempo contribute as much to success on a pool table as skill. And I've observed that musicians tend to make the transition from analytical thinking to creative execution effortlessly. Over the past few years I've worked with at least four violinists, the principle from the Colorado Symphony among them. As one would guess, all it took with each of them to bring out a beautiful, silky stroke was a simple reminder to imagine the cue as a bow. Because pool is so rich and varied, there's always an opportunity to relate the game to other activities and present it to everyone as something familiar.

My favorite and most rewarding learning experiences often spring from my more unusual encounters. Last month, I began working with a very talented and eager 11-year-old boy, unusual since, despite thousands of students, I've only dealt with a few kids, and none so skilled. His is currently my favorite weekly session and one where I continue to learn at least as much as he. I see now that learning can be playful while I'm witnessing how brilliantly the young mind works to tackle some of the game's most advanced challenges, two discoveries that are sure to resurface as benefits in the future. Somewhat more unusual was an experience that I mentioned here once before from several years ago when I had the honor of learning how to teach pool to a blind person. Neither one of us knew where to begin yet the experiment succeeded beyond all expectation when he competed and won three games in a 9-ball tournament with a very classy field. We began with some inspired guesswork and wound up asking ourselves what kind of shameless hustler makes his way to the table with a cane.

Recalling the disenchantment that once crept into my job, I feel very fortunate for finding a way to turn things around so completely. And when I think about every unique and rewarding teaching experience it's hard to believe that, at one time they all seemed to run together into one, long, canned lecture. With so many great pool players who honor me with their time and trust, I feel good when I can return the favor and very lucky to be deeply involved in a passion where the learning never ends.

