

Special thanks to Jim Adelman
A PCA/CVR member since 1990. Instructor since 1994

“Instructor”-- who are you now?

Why would anyone choose to sit in the passenger seat of a car, next to a student driving at high speed on a race track, without the control of his very own steering wheel or brake pedal? A student energized by a great learning experience motivates instructors to return to that seat time after time, despite bouts of occasional terror. In order to achieve that “great experience” with any student, whether a novice, intermediate, advanced, instructor candidate or another instructor, a good teacher must assume several different roles during the instructing process. The quality of learning and the quality of the experience for both instructor and student will be determined by how well those roles are incorporated into teaching.

It's natural for any student to feel apprehensive sitting in the closed classroom environment of a powerful car, anticipating what they're about to attempt to accomplish on a race track. The instructor as a **psychologist** works to put the student at ease, as well as find out what's on their mind. Specific questions can give both instructor and student insight into the other person, revealing if there are compatible skills and attitudes to make the time together a fun, safe, learning experience. “Being nervous is natural, and helps you concentrate.” “What would you like to accomplish today?” “Setting your personal best lap may not be in your best interest, at this time.” Look beyond first impressions, they can be deceiving. Students you expect to be a problem and challenging can become the most focused and progressive drivers. Others, who seem to exhibit all the appropriate positive traits in the paddock, can abruptly become possessed by demons when entering the track.

The instructor as **strategist** clarifies terminology and sets objectives for what both student and teacher expect to happen on the track, depending on the experience level of the student. During the course of a run session, a student can be refocused on the immediate task at hand by referring back to the original objectives. “What are you supposed to be working on in this session?” “Let's learn where you should be on the track before you attempt to pass anyone.” “Enter corners slower then gradually, you'll be able to exit faster.” With a more advanced student, “How precise and consistent can you be?”

The **diplomat** establishes his authority -- without it both instructor and student are doomed. There can be only one of you in command in the car, and if there is any question of who it is, then it's time to rethink your approach. “The car behind you has at least 1,000 more hp than you and that's why it's there, so let it pass.” “Are you far enough behind to avoid hitting him if he spins?”

The **tactician** changes priorities as needed. When someone is suddenly overcome with the “red mist” or having difficulty with a task, it's prudent to instantly refocus the driver's attention. “Forget downshifting and brake hard!” “Slow down enough to be able to touch every apex.” “Drive in one

gear for a few laps.” For an advanced driver it may be a new challenge, “Enter all of the corners off line on this lap.”

The **communicator** is responsible for the proper flow of accurate information and is sensitive to the amount of information that can be absorbed, which varies among individuals and their level of driving experience. In general, anything said by the instructor while on the track should be clear and succinct. Explanations about car dynamics, etc. are best left for another time in the paddock. It’s also important to occasionally check to be sure that what is being said is actually being heard and understood. “Are you breathing?” “What did I ask you to do?” “Are you comfortable at this speed?” From the student, “Brake? I thought you said Great!”

The **disciplinarian** sometimes needs to appear for everyone’s safety, not only for the instructor and student, but for other drivers as well. A student may need to take a break after repeated failure to follow directions. “If you do that again, we will go in and discuss it in the paddock.”

Driving well is not inherent. Many Driver Education students are accustomed to succeeding in their everyday lives. They assume a simple Driver Education course will quickly lead to the same success, but the learning curve is not usually as quick as expected. The **nurturer** addresses their frustration over frequent mistakes as they attempt to perform unfamiliar and challenging tasks in a stressful environment. The student needs to hear something positive, a compliment about anything they did well. “Nicely done, that was an excellent corner; good brake release, nice squeeze of the throttle.” A recognized success, no matter how minor, will do wonders to snap a student out of feeling overwhelmed and discouraged and toward feeling they have some control and an opportunity for improvement.

The **motivator** encourages continuing success. The incentive to achieve a specific reward for successful performance sharpens a student’s focus. “If you continue to do as well in the next few corners, you’ll be able to pass other cars.” “Drive the rest of the run as smoothly, you’ll be able to drive solo.” “Touch every apex and we’ll move on to our next goal.” The student must be redirected to do what will help them improve, when they make mistakes or express dissatisfaction with themselves. “Don’t beat yourself up over that last corner; we’ll work on it next time around.” “Pay attention to what’s coming up.” “Everyone messes up, ease off a few mph to get your rhythm back.”

The instructor as good **sportsman** sets the example for good behavior. Showing respect for others on and off the track are qualities you expect and require as part of the driver education culture. “Following too closely isn’t helping you or the driver in front of you.” “When passing, give plenty of room before you go back on line.” “Give them a wave when they let you pass.”

Displaying a **sense of humor** helps steady your nerves when a student shows up in a new million hp machine, tricked out with full race equipment, and says, “I just finished a professional race school and my objective is to see how fast I can make it go.” A good response might be, “I throw up if I get nervous.”

Ultimately, the instructor as ***pragmatist*** must assess if the relationship is working to the student's advantage. If not, ego must be set aside, regardless of the reason for the incompatibility, and a change in instructors should be made ASAP. Instructors should learn something from every experience, bad or good.

A good instructor is also a ***good student***, open to new ideas and techniques to use and pass on to others. Every instructor has an opportunity to improve whenever they are in the company of a student. "Tell me if what I say isn't clear." "Do you have any suggestions for me?" "Is this too much or too little information?"

So, who are you now? As an ***instructor / coach*** you play all of these roles, with no one role being more important than the other. Teaching someone to find their way around a race track appears to be a relatively simple task, but it is a complex interaction between two people. A better understanding of this interaction, with improved insight into the person sitting next to you, may help create the feeling of accomplishment and offer the rewarding experience that keeps you in the instructor's seat.

by Jim Adelman

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