

Learning – what helps, what hinders 6
“Methods to Memorise Methods”

by
Wendy Graham

When the teacher has guided the beginner through handling, then rounds, until the new ringer is ready to join with the rest of the band in ringing call changes for church services, the time comes to start learning methods. Initially it is generally Plain Hunt, followed by the first real method, most frequently Plain Bob Doubles.

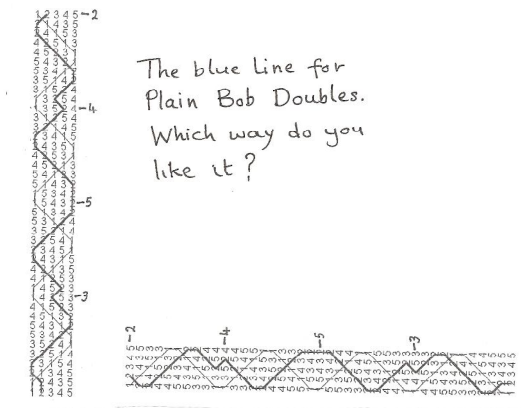
While many learners find it fairly easy to memorise these, this is not the case for all. Yet I have rarely heard of a teacher who discusses with novices the different ways they might go about learning ringing methods. It seems rare to go further than handing out a photocopy or ascertaining the learner owns at least one of the many excellent books which discuss method ringing.

Here are a few ideas the teacher could suggest to the struggling learner:

Numbers Teachers often say, “Don’t learn it by numbers.” This is not good advice for two reasons. Firstly, beginners will, almost certainly, learn first methods by numbers but, if the teacher has told them not to, won’t admit this and it is possible to be a far more effective teacher if you know how your pupil is going about learning. Secondly, inexperienced ringers, with little ropesight or ability to hear the bell, will only get the “feel” of the method by knowing which bells to ring over. It is a first stage and, of course, the good teacher will point out from the start that this will only take them so far. They must learn about things called “touches”, it is desirable to know whether one is at the back or the front and they should soon be working towards counting their places. However, certain more advanced ringing skills – knowing the coursing order and where to pass the treble, for instance – are really just learning by numbers in a slightly more sophisticated way.

Blue Lines A little time spent while teacher and pupil examine the blue line together is worthwhile. Point out that the treble’s work is usually shown as a faint or dotted line and it generally does something different – plain hunting in this case – from the other bells. The actual blue line usually follows the course of the 2nd. All the working bells perform the same circle of work but starting at a different point, as shown by their little “start numbers” on the right. Suggest that, if the whole thing seems a bit much to learn all at once, break it into pieces, according to the

numbers on the right, thus learning where each bell starts and getting the idea of learning by place bells at an early stage. Most important of all, show the beginner that it is possible, not only to look at the blue line, as it is usually printed, wagging from side to side down the page, but also, by turning the page through 90 degrees, the blue line is closest to one when at the front and furthest away at the back. It has always made more sense to me like that and has been a revelation to some beginners but, of course, many find it clearest the way it is printed.



So, the blue line must be learned but which way will best suit your learner?

Writing it out Writing out the blue line over and over is likely to appeal to the Visual Learner (see Chapter 2 “Styles of Learning”) Writing out the circle of work may help too. I must have covered reams of paper with blue lines. I wonder if they think it is some kind of secret code at the recycling centre?

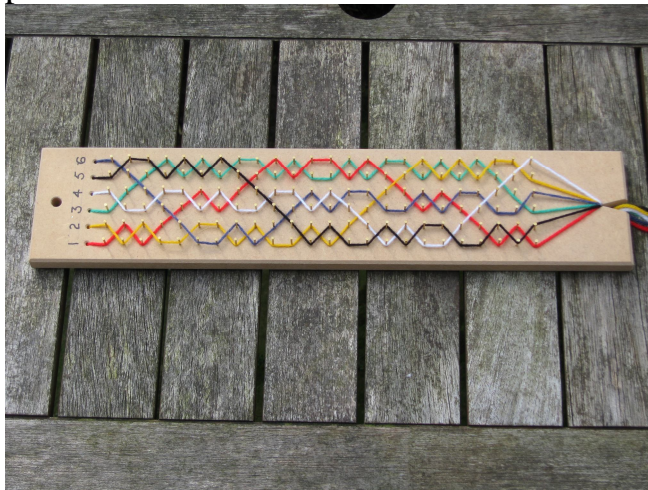
Saying it over and over The Auditory Learner is more likely to talk it through to him/herself. This can well be done during routine tasks – washing up, driving to work, before sleep, like counting sheep! If your learner, with or without your help, can make it into a rhyme or convert it to a quirky or slightly (or not so slightly!) vulgar saying, that will certainly help retention.

Computers There are several computer programs designed to help learners. *Abel* (for PCs with *Mabel* for Macs) is used with many simulators but can also be used at home, pressing a key when your bell should sound. *Beltower* is another and, I understand, *JBlueLineME* can be used on a mobile ‘phone. There are numerous others and, no doubt, yet more will be produced even between me writing this and its publication. I shan’t try to evaluate them and, indeed, couldn’t, as they do nothing for me, but those who enjoy using computers and those young enough to think of the computer as the obvious learning tool, may find these the best

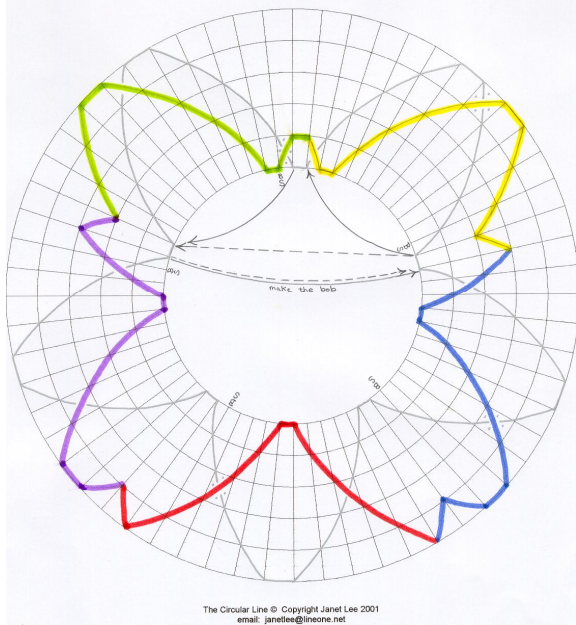
way to learn. Surf the net and ask your friends until you find the program that suits you.

Stairs The Kinaesthetic Learner wants to do in order to remember. I have seen Plain Hunt “danced” in a grand chain which is fine if there are several of you. But nearly everyone has access to stairs and it is easy to practise methods walking up and down, consistently using one foot for hand, the other for backstroke. Two steps on the level for a full lead, up and down for dodges etc. Fun for all!

Method Maker One of the many brilliant aids for learners produced by the late Pam Copson is the Method Maker, a framework of nails with 6 pieces of wool attached on which methods can be woven. (Two leads of plain hunt methods, one lead of treble bob.) It can be used to show how a method is constructed, how all the bells work together, to demonstrate coursing order, course and after bells and many other facets of ringing. Every tower should have one! Details of this and other Sherbourne Teaching Aids can be found on the internet along with how to obtain method makers from Alan Hartley who produces them. Currently the price is £10.

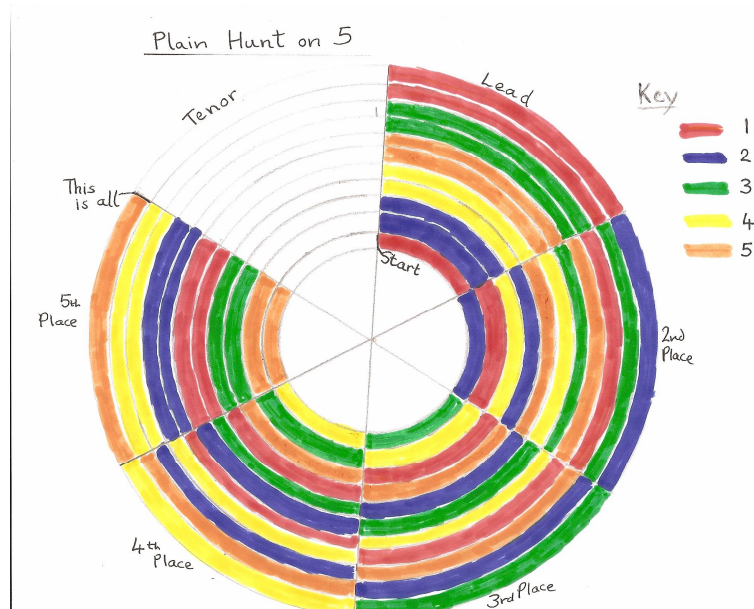


Cards Either playing cards or any piece of paper upon which a number has been written can be placed in a straight line or circle. Leave out the number the pupil is learning e.g. 1 if the treble line is being learned. Then turn each card over as the treble rings over it and back again and again until “This is all” would be said. Several people have described variations on this using, for instance, mugs, egg cups or coloured counters. In its most basic form it is a way of learning by numbers but can be developed to help remember the order of work, see the coursing order and to count places.



Janograms Finding it easier to learn methods from a circular diagram, and, after all, the bellropes in the majority of ringing rooms fall in a circle as well as the construction of methods being circular, Janet Smith of Long Melford drew patterns. These cleverly combine the blue line and the circle of work while the start point of each bell is shown by a different colour. Janet's tower captain christened these "Janograms". If learning methods this way appeals to you, or your beginner, Janet will sell you a set of 8 with explanatory sheet (Proceeds to her tower's funds). Arrows are used to show what to do at bobs and singles. (E-mail below)

Concentric Circles Most learners begin by knowing what just one bell does. However, it made no sense to me to learn the route taken by a single bell unless I knew what all the others were up to. And, indeed, there are many good reasons for studying the whole pattern and construction of a method. So, when I started to Plain Hunt I drew circular diagrams like the one below. Each concentric circle, starting with the innermost, shows a line of the method. Working out the pattern and then drawing it was sufficient to give an understanding how the method was put together and I don't think I would have managed without these. Luckily, by the time I got to ringing Triples methods I had learned to see the full pattern from a blue line. The circles were becoming impossibly large!



A Thought Imagine an alien who has never eaten arrives in your garden. To start off you give him bread, then bread with a little butter, but he sees you put cheese (and other things) on your bread and he wants some too. So you kindly give him a big lump of cheese which proves to be so indigestible that, to your horror, it puts the alien off eating altogether.

There is some evidence that the high drop-out rate of learner ringers works the same way when the traditional progression of teaching is followed. Rounds and call changes (bread) are fine. Plain Hunt (butter) is not easy but a sensible move. However, Bob Doubles (cheese) has just too much new to master – a circle of work, dodging and making places. The problem is that the learner is not going to succeed for a good while so each practice can feel like failure, motivation dwindles and the learner gives up. A series of intermediate exercises may be the answer. There is a great deal to debate here and I don't propose to do so beyond suggesting that any teacher, who feels learners trying to master Bob Doubles are becoming despondent, might consider this. Some ideas for intermediate steps can be found in Pip Penney's "*Teaching Tips*".

Wackier Ways If learners are having no trouble memorising methods, don't even let them see this section. However, a few – perhaps an adult who has not had to memorise anything for a great many years or a dyslexic child – may need extra help and being ingenious and creative will be the key.

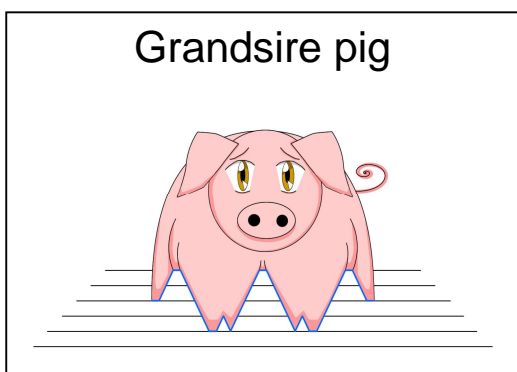
The problem with learning methods in these kinds of ways is that, although it may be effective and fun, it leads to the ringer having an unconventional view of the method. So, a little like learning by numbers, it often needs to be a halfway house. When the ringer has become confident with the method, traditional terminology, at the least, will have to be learnt; otherwise that ringer will have communication problems with other ringers. For instance, it may be very difficult for a conductor to put him or her right.

Sound I have a friend, not a ringer, who is a professional musician and has perfect pitch. If a group first demonstrates so he can hear the "tune", he can ring handbells. A few very gifted musicians can learn methods by knowing when the note of their bell should sound. For these people it is the "tune" of the method they learn. Of course, it is very important for all good ringers to listen to their bell and to use the music of the method to help them ring well but, without knowledge of the construction of the method and especially the variety of possible touches, this is limiting.

However, for a few, learning the “tune” may be the best way of getting into method ringing.

Stories At a recent Guild meeting one of our Ringing Masters was asked to join a band to ring something she had never rung before. I noted her staring at the unknown blue line and muttering to herself, “Then it’s the dragon’s back bit, then up to the battlements, three dodges and straight down to the dungeon” etc. The fact that she is a primary school teacher might have something to do with this but turning the blue line into a story could be a great help for certain, frustrated (probably Auditory) learners.

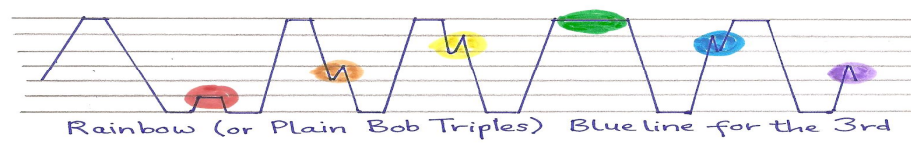
Pictures and Colour Troubled Visual Learners are more likely to be helped by relating a method to something they can see. Maddie Stanley from Shirenewton taught herself



Grandsire Doubles by turning the blue line on its side and drawing it as a set of pig’s trotters – and a very charming little pig it is. A picture like this would make the blue line splendidly memorable.

I use colour a great deal to help memorise all sorts of things. I was having difficulties remembering the

order of work in Plain Bob Triples. Seeing my hat with its rainbow coloured tassels hanging by the ringing room door gave me the idea of turning PB Triples into “Rainbow” and assigning the colours in order to the order of work. No more problems in knowing what came next or where in the pattern each bell started!



Details for purchasing resources mentioned above are to be found at:

www.abelsim.co.uk (Abel and Mabel)

www.beltower.co.uk (Beltower)

www.stmarkschelt.co.uk/JBlueLine/J2ME/install.php (for mobile ‘phones)

www.btinternet.com/~copson/ for Sherbourne Teaching Aids and the Method Maker

janetsmith2000@cbb4u.co.uk for Janograms

www.cccbr.org.uk/pubs/pricelist for Pip Penney's "*Teaching Tips*"