How to Teach Dinghy

This is intended for new Juniors who want to put in their volunteer hours (or maybe just round up some crew to sail with) by teaching, and may find this helps settle their thinking about how to do it. I am not trying to tell you how to sail or what to teach about how to sail; first, I am far from the club's most knowledgeable or skillful sailor; second, even among those, there is disagreement. (One lesson you should give your students: take lessons from as many different instructors as you can, and when instructors disagree, choose the method you prefer. One lesson for you: try to give your students the reason for every dictat. If you don't have a reason you can give them, you need to look into it yourself; and equally important, knowing the reason will help the student remember the instruction and make them more likely to carry it out later.)

The lesson begins before you meet your students. Check the windspeed beyond the restaurant, to aid in your decision whether to reef before sailing. Check the tide predictions on the club blackboard to minimize the chance of embarrassing yourself by getting stuck in the mud.

Try to have your instruction begin in the yard with safety/capsize recovery instructions, the pre-launch checkout and rigging procedures, and technical pointers that are easier to demonstrate on land. If your boat is already in the water and you have students who would benefit from the above, consider taking them into the yard and using a boat there. When all your students are assembled, tell them to check that their PFDs are tight enough not to slip off if they have to be pulled back into the boat; this has the secondary effect of focusing their attention on the hazards of the venture on which they are about to embark, no puns intended.

Ascertain how many lessons or other sailing experience your students have had. Ask if each student has looked at the Introductory Handbook for Sailing Boats on the club website on the File tab on the Resources pulldown. Mention that this handbook was written specifically for the Bahia and that they are likely to benefit from rereading it over the coming months. Feel free to administer a small dose of humiliation to brand newbies who have not looked at this file, not least because repeating its contents cuts into lesson time.

Take time to point out the following essential survival tips to your students: First, foremost, and above all, make sure they know about the bungees under the gunwales, when they are likely to be needed and how to use them. Then emphasize that in case of capsize, they must try their utmost to keep hold of some part of the boat so as not to drift away. Mention that while holding on they should try not to pull down on the boat, as this will increase the chance of sticking the mast into the mud and breaking it, and also make it harder for the person on the centerboard to right the boat. Explain to them that the anchor is to be deployed in case of dire need, i.e., when the boat is drifting uncontrollably toward the rocks or when the skipper and anyone else who can sail the boat is incapacitated or separated from it, and that since they may be called on to deploy the anchor while floating in the water beside a capsized, storm-tossed boat, at least a vague idea of how the anchor is secured in the boat is likely to be helpful. Point out that if they have to drop anchor in high winds the anchor line needs to go under the bar at the bow so that the boat will point into the wind and thus not recapsize repeatedly, and that if possible they should lower it rather than just drop it, so that the rode doesn't get tangled in it and keep it from setting. Mention that recovering the anchor is a pain, so it should be well-secured so that it does not self-deploy in a capsize. Tell them that they can summon help by waving their

arms or by lowering the mainsheet, but that the skiff will come and check on them if they stay capsized for long or if they re-capsize several times in a row. Try to ease their capsize anxiety, which is common in beginners and will inhibit their learning and their enjoyment, by telling them it is kind of fun and exciting, plus something that will happen many, many times if they push to extend their range of skills; that they are not likely to feel cold because of the adrenaline; and that if they do get cold they should ask to be brought to shore for hot chocolate, which you will gladly do. You might want to give them your estimate of the odds of a capsize, based on wind conditions and their experience levels (and yours).

With newbies, while the boat is still on the dolly it is also helpful to point out how to furl/unfurl the jib, how to raise and lower the centerboard and rudder, how to tighten and loosen the shrouds (with emphasis on the vile sinfulness of leaving the shrouds tensioned while the boat is in the yard), and the location of the vang or gnav (because pointing it out verbally from the dock to a sail-raising newbie is very hard).

I would put your most experienced student on the tiller to start, if that's not an obvious idea – partly because they are the least likely to crash into the seawall or the second dock, and partly because the less experienced students gain by watching others learn and make mistakes and are not subject to the immediate stress of being responsible for steering the boat. If none of your students seem up to the task under the conditions of the day, you may need to sail the boat out yourself until you are far enough from the dock that a capsize would be manageable. In high winds the lesson may end up being you sailing while they learn jib handling and boat balance and maybe spontaneous capsize recovery.

Which brings up one of the main points about teaching dinghy – make/let the students do everything, except if you want to demonstrate a maneuver, or if none of them can handle the conditions.

Teaching dinghy essentially consists of moving your students up a ladder of skills. They are, in order:

1. Balancing
2. Sailing in a straight line
    a. Tiller only; instructor on mainsheet
    b. With both tiller and mainsheet
3. Tacking
4. Jibing
5. Man overboard/docking

And, somewhere between 3 and 5,

3.5-4.5. Slow sailing

With first-timers who seem insecure or sort of clueless, have them get on the boat at the dock, stand facing the mast, and rock the boat from side to side. This gives them a feel for balance on the boat and some sense of control. Normally just having a first-timer stand facing the mast and raise the main will accomplish this.

Items one through four are largely coordination skills. After simple instruction, with perhaps a demonstration, once the student knows at least intellectually how to perform the basic move you should let them practice. Studies show that the less you talk to/give instructions to a student who is practicing, the faster they will improve.

With three students, you have time for each of them to sail the boat out of the novice area into the wind zone to the far edge or corner of the junior area, practice the next maneuver on their skill ladder several times, and sail back.* I normally have students on their first few lessons go close-hauled out so that the only variable they need to manage is their angle to the wind; tack (and tack a few more times if they seem to be doing well), and coming back just aim for the dock and trim sail accordingly. For real beginners, just doing this out-tack-return once establishes a foundation of skill and confidence on which all the rest can be built (again, once they have the rudiments of steering, don't distract them by "instructing" or "teaching" any more than is absolutely necessary). For more experienced students, this outbound run gives them time to refresh their boat-handling skills before attempting more advanced maneuvers (close hauled also brings them close to the upwind edge of the Junior area, i.e., as far from the downwind rocks as possible on one tack) and also gives you a chance to see what sort of maneuvers they are really ready to undertake in the day's wind.

Since your most experienced student does this first (or while you do it yourself if none of your students have ever sailed and winds are too high), your perhaps completely inexperienced student can learn to run the jib, which gives them invaluable exposure to wind/sail and weight shifting/boat situation relationships.

If they seem worried about their mistakes or about the possibility of making mistakes, reassure them that the whole point of this part of the lesson, and in fact of the lesson as a whole, is for them to make mistakes.

A word about wind speed: to gain skill and confidence, students need to practice each of the sailing maneuvers in progressively higher winds. If the wind is 6 knots and you are taking out a student who has done no more than tack in 6 knots, it is time for them to learn jibes. If the wind is over 10, though, it is time to practice tacking in higher wind.

Emotional care and feeding: praise students for skills they demonstrate; praise them a lot for skills they gain during the lesson; when they perform a maneuver for the very first time, make sure they and everyone else on the boat appreciate their accomplishment. If they are doing something fairly well and you start correcting their lesser flaws, assure them that they are doing the basics so well that now you are helping them refine their skill. When the lesson is over, sum up their accomplishments, congratulate them, and tell them what they are ready to work on next.

Tips:

In the beginning, you might be much happier with only two students. The dayleader will accommodate you without a second thought.

When a student seems to be able to competently perform skills 1-5 above and you've run out of specific maneuvers to teach them, consider small circles around a buoy or man overboard, to beat tacks and jibes into their muscle memory and, if winds are over 10 knots, also to exhaust them fairly quickly.

In low-wind conditions, consider capsize recovery lessons.

In winds too moderate for your students' skill levels, you can get a ball from the yard and provoke a game of dinghy dodgeball, pick another boat and play follow-the-leader, or experiment with rudderless or backwards sailing. Rudderless in particular builds skill, confidence and enthusiasm; you will be surprised how excited students can get, but you yourself have to be fairly good at it to begin with. You can also have one student on each side hike out as

far as possible while balancing each other, trying to get their shoulders to touch the water, or trap out yourself on one side while a student traps out on the other, which will not only relieve boredom but enhance their boat balance.

Last, and I hope I don't get in trouble for this, it is not unreasonable for you to get as much tiller time as any one of your students, to refine your own skill and, perhaps, to show your students how it's supposed to be done.

*Regarding teaching beyond the wind line vs in the low-wind area: in the wind zone, the wind is higher but it is much more consistent than it is in the novice area. I believe that for this reason it is easier to sail, and thus to teach, in the wind zone. In my view, sailing is fundamentally about the relationship between the wind and the boat's sails, and the constant rapid changes of wind speed and direction in the novice area makes it very difficult to teach and to learn about this relationship, whereas for a beginner going close hauled in a consistent if rather high wind reduces the variables they must master to one: boat direction in relation to wind speed and direction. And having gained this ability, consistent wind allows them to take the mainsheet and learn to control it in relation to wind speed and direction while steering in a straight line. I use the low wind area only to teach students who are having great difficulty learning how to move across the boat while changing hands on the tiller, since by leaving the main loose the wind can largely be ignored, and second, to teach capsize recovery if the wind is too low in the wind zone to practice sailing (and to generate organic capsizes).