

Learning to Drive - the Stubborn Truth (How to make novice drivers crash, part 2)

Stephen Haley (Jan 2009)

This was to have been an article about the false beliefs that live in the minds of young people and obstruct their path to safe driving. But that will have to wait a while.

Discussion with instructors and drivers has brought to the surface one single belief that casts such a long shadow that it merits separate attention. Especially now, as the Driving Standards Agency is considering major reforms in driver training. This belief has been uttered by so many people for so long that it seems to just exist. Surprisingly though, its damaging effect comes not from it being false, but because it is so true.

The Stubborn Truth

It is of course, the relentless old adage, "You really learn to drive after passing the test". This saying has been nestling deep in our driving culture for so many decades that we no longer see it as a nonsense and a verdict of failure. Instead, it just sits heavy as a lead weight astride the process of learning to drive.

But why do people say it anyway? There are two main 'proofs' in the public mind. First, novice drivers have a notorious and persistently high crash rate. And by definition, if we are unhappy with the carnage, then drivers are not being well prepared for being set free on the roads. Second and much stronger, is that 'test driving' is so totally different from the 'real-world driving' that ambushes novices after passing the test.

So learners will often hear this maxim said. From their peers, friends and family - especially when having private practice. Instructors might also make comments that distinguish between driving before and after the test. But most powerful is the shock that novices get as they suddenly drive without supervision.

Unfortunately, none of the changes made to driver training over the years have managed to dent this Stubborn Truth. It persists as true today, and entrenched in the public mind, as it ever was.

From the viewpoint of the learners, we should expect them to feel confused. How can they accept that the act of passing the test has the effect of throwing them headlong into the highest risk category of driver? Why would anyone create a situation like that? Predictably, they prefer to imagine that crashes happen to drivers who choose to be deliberately reckless - this seems to make much more sense. But in reality, things go wrong across the full spectrum of novices - including the ones who want to be safe.

Let's look at the effect that this maxim has on the learning process.

Consequences

Some recent research adds to our insight into the driving minds of young people, and especially how sceptical they are of the learning process ¹. We know that many believe that passing the test has little to do with actual competence, and a lot of their thinking is a vivid reflection of the Stubborn Truth:

- Learning to drive is about passing the test - "The test is an obstacle to being allowed to drive, so I want to get through it as soon as possible."
- Preparing for the test does not teach 'real' driving - "Apparently I have to pick that up afterwards, and just hope not to crash in the process."
- Pre-test training is irrelevant to good driving - "After the test I can forget the unnecessary things and drive how I think it should be done."
- Driving ability is a matter of 'natural talent' - "If this is all they teach, then the rest must be down to whether you've just got the talent or not."
- Passing the test has a lot to do with luck - "I want to try the test as soon as I have a chance of scraping through, and hope nothing tricky happens on the day."
- Crashes are inevitable - "We're bound to make mistakes with so much more to learn after the test."

Alongside the clear implications for safety, there are broader consequences in this picture too:

- There are strong signals that many new drivers, especially young males, quickly feel they know more about driving than the system that taught them. This is a *critical condition*, but not surprising.
- There is a bias against instructors who want to raise the game. Trying to lift a pupil above being able to just pass the test can be akin to defying gravity. There might also be accusations of 'unnecessary' lessons. Many instructors bow to the pressure for a quick pass, simply to keep the client happy.
- For most people, the Stubborn Truth is a major part of the reputation of the driving instructor industry, and it works to undermine the value that they feel is being provided.

- Any negative views that new drivers hold about their pre-test training are likely to also rub off onto their respect for road safety more generally. For most of them it all comes from the same source. And a lack of faith and trust is natural if the training system is failing to deliver what it should.

Realistically, new drivers will always have a lot to learn from their experience after the test. But the problem lies in the scale of what is left untaught. This huge vacuum also gives grounds for the 'talent model' of good driving to arise, which denies the role of training, but will continue to thrive until it is proved to be wrong.

All of this means that if the magnitude of novice casualties is unacceptable, then in the same breath so too must be the existence of the Stubborn Truth and its consequences.

What are novices learning?

A strong image of new drivers taking to the road is that they are more likely to crash than the rest of us. But something *very successful* happens there too.

Their risk of crashing *falls very sharply* during the initial two years of driving ², and this raises a vital question. How do they do that? What exactly are they learning by themselves that makes this happen? Asking them does not help much. Even experienced drivers struggle to explain what is really going on when they drive, so it is impractical to expect sparkling insights from our novices.

Let's look first at some common assumptions that are actually *not* responsible for this effect:

- **Just experience**: We have a long tradition of saying that novices simply 'gain experience'. This lets us hide behind the dubious claim that, "You can't teach experience". There may be some comfort in keeping the responsibility weighted towards the novice, but complaining at them while leaving them stranded helps no one. And 'gaining experience' is too vague to have any meaning.
- **Better car control**: The weight given to physical control for the test can give the impression that this must be the thing to continue improving afterwards, but this is not the answer. Most learners master vehicle control quite easily to the level required for public roads, and novices do not start avoiding crashes with extreme physical actions. This is also not how experienced drivers stay safe either.
- **Motorways, darkness and bad weather**: There are advocates of rolling into the pre-test stage what are effectively some of the Pass Plus modules - motorways, driving in the dark and driving in poor conditions. However, official studies have found a lack of evidence that Pass Plus reduces a driver's crash risk ³. It seems unlikely therefore that gaining this sort of experience on their own could result in a sharp increase in novice safety.
- **Better attitudes and behaviour**: A definite surprise in recent research is that key behaviours get slightly but steadily *worse* during the first three years of driving ⁴. This is about specific 'driving violations' and 'hazard involvement' that have been linked to crash liability. Clearly, these behaviours are vital to safety, but improving them is not a route that novices are using to help themselves.

So what are novices doing? The answer is that by being forced to *think for themselves*, they are beginning to *manage risk*. With the safety net of a supervising driver being suddenly removed, the brain gets quite a jolt. Decisions are now truly life-and-death events, and a deep instinct kicks in to cope with the new danger.

Linking with the debate on frontal lobe development, we could even say that novices are beginning to exercise and develop this vital area of brain function - and perhaps after years of under-use in childhood.

In some chaotic fashion specific skills are being gained which are about hazard *control* - making risk safe. And this is how novices achieve the falling crash curve. Crucially, though, this area of competence on the road is currently neglected in learner training, and this is the core weakness that creates the casualties.

Reform of driver training

Declaring the Stubborn Truth to be unacceptable is long overdue. As well as being a severe criticism of our training regime, it is in itself an active barrier to raising standards. The *expectation* of weak training leads people to behave in ways that also *cause* it to come true, such as treating the test as just an obstacle.

It is worth noting too that the idea of placing restrictions on novice drivers (on passengers, night driving, etc), would serve to reinforce the maxim, and appear to mark an unhelpful surrender to poor training.

How could this barrier be removed? The obvious answer is to start teaching learners what the novices are picking up on their own. And this is no longer as difficult as it was before, because the problem and the solution are now better understood. The hurdle today is in making the decision to update the training.

From the new driver's perspective, we should recognise that:

- They have a deep sense themselves that 'something important' is missing from their training. But

they struggle to explain what they mean by 'real driving' or to define 'good driving'. This is precisely what they have not been told about, and they rightly expect the trainers to have the answers.

- Novices get no meaningful guidance about their period of self-learning after the test - what it should contain or how to do it. This ensures a process of *experimental trial-and-error*.
- The 'real world' post-test experience *should be* a smooth continuation of their test preparation. The feeling that going solo involves a daunting disconnection is a critical symptom.
- When pupils blame failing the test on bad luck and factors beyond their control, it shows that they cannot imagine how to take more responsibility for the result. And this is because they have not been given the skills that would let them do so.
- Young people have a genuine appetite for learning how things really work. It captivates them in the task, and they normally welcome the opportunity. In driving, they *want* the real skills to be explained. The joy of learning is a natural and powerful energy of youth, unless we press it out of them.

Taking the training point of view, we must stop pretending, and realise that many of the key skills that experience builds *can most definitely be taught*. Introducing even three topics into pre-test tuition would dramatically reduce novice risk and the disconnection in post-test driving:

- Mental skills - explain *why* safety is mainly about using mental skills. Describe how these skills work alongside the traditional focus on vehicle control and the Highway Code to achieve real, good and safe driving. This extends far beyond proposals to introduce training on 'attitude'.
- Risk management - teach the active control of danger. Use a realistic model of how risk behaves and can be controlled (such as the Speed, Surprise, Space model). The current Hazard Perception Test falls far short of this, but could be developed to make a much better connection to real driving. Using a practical structure for their thinking also simplifies the driver's task and helps avoid overload.
- Learning from experience - teach pupils *how* to learn from their experience. This is a skill in its own right, and is readily teachable to improve the speed and usefulness of learning. Vitally, it places the mechanism for lifelong learning *within* the drivers themselves. Most drivers, of all ages, waste their experience by only learning (if at all) from obvious severe events, such as crashes or near-misses.

These are some of the critical 'revelations' that new drivers are struggling to work out for themselves in a stumbling voyage of discovery. But drivers should be using these tools and skills from the start, not trying to reinvent them. If they were properly taught, it is even possible that new drivers could be safer than the current average on the road. And that would *really* change the reputation of the training system!

In conclusion

Today, the most important thing about the Stubborn Truth is that it *could be removed*. It should no longer, therefore, be shrugged off or ignored out of discomfort or momentum. In the total strategy for road safety, this deep-seated maxim describes a cavernous hole below the waterline that really should be plugged. Along with the casualty figures, it stands as a clear beacon of failure.

It is time to take responsibility for what feeds this public perception, and to *stop regarding it as inevitable*. Genuinely breaking this belief sits at the heart of what we should set out to achieve.

Yes, it is a bold ambition, but a necessary and overdue one. And only by accepting the explicit objective will it stand a chance of getting done. The Driving Standards Agency must square up to this relic of history, and recognise the deadly omissions in training. The missing safety skills could be taught, and making a start should be an urgent aim as they define the new training syllabus.

Continuing to withhold the skills of safe driving is simply neglect. It is already illogical to blame novices as generally as we do for their crashes. Our anguish of not knowing what else to do no longer makes sense.

The industry's vision of "Safe Driving for Life" is an unattainable mirage for as long as people continue to say, "You really learn to drive after passing the test".

¹ "[The Good, the Bad and the Talented](#)", DfT Research Report 74, Jan 2007,

["Young People's Forum on Learning to Drive"](#), DSA/SHM, Jan 2008,

["Feeling Safe, Itching to Drive"](#), DfT Research Report 86, May 2008

² "[Cohort II: A Study of Learner and New Drivers](#)", Vol 1, DfT Research Report 81, May 2008, p131-2

³ "Cohort II", Vol 1, p110, and "Monitoring and evaluation of safety measures for new drivers", TRL Report TRL525, 2002

⁴ "Cohort II", Vol 1, p123-5