

DiveRetailing.com’s “Teach Different, Teach Better” Library

Much of what passes for “open water” training isn’t *open-water* training at all. It’s a repetition of pool training masquerading as open-water dives. The bottom line: It’s only an open-water training dive if you *actually go diving*. Anything else just creates *certified non-divers*.

A STORE OWNER once asked me to watch one of his instructors conduct a weekend of open-water training dives. The instructor in question was a conscientious individual who followed standards and provided good control and supervision — but he was also relatively new to teaching. What he had not had the opportunity to learn through experience led to frustrations for both himself and his students.

The sad part is, there is information available that could have led to a more positive experience for everyone involved. Unfortunately, that information is not being covered in many instructor courses. That’s why we decided to make it available here.

This information comes from a variety of sources. Some of it is a result of having had the opportunity to work as both a dive boat captain and a resort dive instructor. Other information comes from sharing information with some of diving’s most experienced dive educators. All of it can not only help you teach better, but also help you get students to stay involved in diving on a more long-term basis.

Your Job Description 3

Your primary responsibility as a diving educator is to keep students safe and follow standards... right? If that’s all you do, *you’ve failed*.

The Best Way to Learn to Dive Is...? 5

This one should be obvious. Unfortunately, it’s not. Once you discover its importance, however, it will change the way you teach.

You Can’t Have Fun if You Can’t See 7

Have you ever had students who go through class in a fog? The ability to see clearly is critical to both learning and enjoyment. Yet far too many instructors seem indifferent to their students’ unnecessary vision impairment. No wonder so many students get certified then never dive again!

Build Better Habits. Save the Reef. Save Lives..... 9

Building better, safer dive habits means more than just getting students to not put their masks on their foreheads, or leave tanks standing upright. The critical habits you want students to develop involve issues such as gas management, buoyancy control, slow ascents and safety stops, and intelligent dive planning.

Limit Ascents and Descents..... 14

Would you knowingly teach students that it’s okay to make bounce dives, follow sawtooth profiles or set themselves up for a lifetime of ear-related pain and misery? Guess what? It’s possible you already do.

How Many Students Can You Guide at One Time? 17

Fewer than you may think. This issue is not about what standards may allow. It’s about your students’ safety, learning and enjoyment.

Don’t Knock Your Local Dive Site 19

Instructors and stores that succeed understand the importance of promoting local diving. What you say to students about your local dive site may have more impact than you realize.

Better Gear, Better Divers 22

There’s a direct relationship between the quality of the equipment your students use, how well they learn and how much they enjoy diving. This is true of both your students’ personal equipment and the gear you supply or rent them.

Imagination, Adventure, Discovery, Fun..... 24

What makes a good open-water training dive? What makes a great one? We’ll give you a hint: These four words have a lot to do with it.

Your Job Description

SOME YEARS AGO, I trained instructors for a fellow named Rick Ashley. At the time, Rick operated two dive stores in the San Francisco Bay area. I lived in Florida, so I would fly to San Francisco several times each year to conduct these courses.

During one visit, Rick asked me to sit in on one of his instructor meetings. When the staff had assembled, Rick went to the white board at the front of the classroom and wrote this:

Your job as an instructor at this store is to teach customers how to

HAVE FUN

while learning to scuba dive safely

It’s interesting to note that, while Rick was not an instructor himself, he understood this essential truth better than any of the people who taught for him.

The Restaurant Analogy

When you eat at an established, reputable restaurant, there are two things you assume going in:

- You won’t get food poisoning.
- The food won’t be so bad as to make you vomit.

Imagine, however, if this was how restaurants promoted themselves. You know: “Eat at Joes. You won’t get food poisoning and the food won’t make you vomit.” Boy, that really makes me want to dine out. How about you?

Fortunately, restaurants know that what diners are really interested in is *does the food taste good?*

How does this apply to diver training? Students at any level of training have a right to assume two things:

- Your course will give them the opportunity to learn the essential knowledge and skills.
- Assuming they pay attention and follow directions, they most likely won’t drown.

This much should be a given. However, if this is all you do as an instructor, *you’ve failed*. Miserably.

Why? Because *students don’t sign up for scuba classes because they want to learn to dive*. They sign up for scuba classes because *they want to have fun*.

Did You Do Your Job?

The real test of whether you’ve done your job as a professional diving educator is not whether your students mastered the necessary knowledge and skills — or even whether they survived the experience. These two things should be a given. Instead, it’s:

- Did your students learn *how to have fun* under water, and . . .
- . . . *did they have fun doing so?*

Unless you can answer both these questions with an enthusiastic *Yes*, you’ve got some work to do. In the articles you’ll find throughout the balance of this section, we’ll show you how.

The Best Way to Learn to Dive

Most of us who have had the opportunity to work at dive resorts share a common experience. It's no secret that one of a resort dive instructor's primary responsibilities is to conduct what are commonly known as “Intro” or “Resort” courses.

This is where resort instructors take interested non-divers, explain the importance of breathing continuously and equalizing early and often, show them how to recover and clear a regulator and deal with a partially flooded mask, then take them on a shallow reef dive.

Odds are, many or most of the students you teach to dive have already participated in one of these experiences. However, for every such person you see, there are dozens you don't. Most people who take part in resort courses try it once or twice, then go on to other activities. A few are so taken with diving, however, that they eventually become certified.

Some resort course students don't even wait to get home. They sign up to go diving the next day — and the next. It's when you have a resort course graduate come with you for that third or fourth day that you start to notice something:

Even though there is a lot resort course grads still don't understand, those with several days' experience nevertheless tend to look more comfortable, more relaxed — and more competent — than many of the certified divers who are accompanying you. What's truly amazing, however, is that these resort course grads frequently look more capable than the referral students who are completing their first open-water training dives with you.

It's at this point where yet another one of those essential truths hits you. That is: The best way to learn to dive *is not* to just sit on the bottom and do skills. The best way to learn to dive is to go *diving*.

Certified Non-Divers

In 1991, I had the opportunity to watch a newly certified Open Water Instructor in Lake Travis, near Austin, Texas. Despite his newness, this was a pretty decent guy. He followed standards, exercised more than adequate control and supervision, and never put his students at risk (sounds a lot like the instructor I saw more recently, doesn't he?). And, as was the case in what I saw recently, his lack of experience robbed his students of a critical opportunity.

The weekend I saw him, the instructor had nine beginning students, plus two assistants. Not knowing any better, he simply took all nine students down at once.

Needless to say, by the time he got all nine students to the platform, then did a half-dozen skills with each of them individually, the students had just enough air remaining to swim the 60 feet to the stairs and get out.

This pattern repeated itself for all four training dives. As a consequence, although the students had the opportunity to practice all of the skills mandated by standards, they never had the opportunity to go diving. What the instructor ended up creating was nine certified non-divers. (And I pity the dive boat captain who had any of these individuals show up on his door step, claiming they knew how to dive.)

The Golden Opportunity

The single greatest opportunity open-water training affords us is the ability to *actually take students diving* in open water. By all rights, this should be the focal point of open-water training — not something that gets tacked on the end, if time allows.

Unfortunately, most agencies’ training standards place primary emphasis on the skills students must demonstrate in open water, and not on how much actual diving they get in.

Nevertheless, just because your training agency fails to recognize the importance of real, open-water diving experience, it doesn’t mean you can’t. If, for example, you are a dive store owner or manager, you can set a store standard for the minimum amount of time staff instructors must spend simply taking students diving.

Creating the Necessary Time

At this point, you may be asking, “With so many students — and so many required skills — where am I going to find the time to just go diving?” Here are two suggestions that can help:

- **Take Smaller Groups** Just because standards limit the number of dives that students can make in one day doesn’t mean you can’t make twice as many. Divide your larger classes into two or more smaller groups. If you take four students down at a time, instead of eight, you’ll move through the required skills twice as fast. This will help create just that much more time to get out and dive for fun.
- **Use Your Assistants More Effectively** When you take too many students down at one time, your assistants will be busy trying to keep an eye on those people you can’t. By splitting your class into smaller groups, however, you’ll be able to do skills with one group, then turn them over to an assistant for a guided tour while you go back and start with another group.

By the way, “taking students for a tour” should involve a helluva lot more than just leading them around like they have rings in their noses. It should involve exploration, adventure, discovery and imagination — all hallmarks of a higher standard of instruction and care. We’ll talk more about this shortly.

You Can't Have Fun if You Can't See

HAVE YOU EVER HAD STUDENTS who go through class in a fog? By that, I don't mean they are not paying attention. I mean that they literally *can't see* because their masks are perpetually fogged up.

Think back to when you learned to dive. Would learning have been any fun if you were perpetually blind? (Who knows? Perhaps you were.)

The ability to see clearly is critical to both learning and enjoyment. Yet far too many instructors seem indifferent to their students' unnecessary vision impairment. No wonder so many students get certified then never dive again!

Keeping students' masks clear requires both thought and effort. Here are some ideas that can help:

Don't be Afraid to Clean Masks Yourself: When we sell masks to students, most of us emphasize the importance of cleaning the inside of the mask with an appropriate cleaner or detergent, to get rid of any residual preservative and help ensure that the de-fog we sell students will be effective. How many students never get around to doing this? How many more attempt to clean out their masks — but fail to realize just how long and how vigorously they have to scrub to get their masks clean enough for the de-fog to work.

You can try to dismiss this problem by saying, “Well, I told them so . . .” It still won't make up for the fact your students can't see what is going on around them.

The fact is, if you want your students' masks to be truly clean, you are going to have to do it yourself. A good time to do so is immediately after you have rung up the sale. The extra five or so minutes you spend will help show students how much effort they need to put in the next time they purchase a mask. It will also give you an extra five minutes to talk about equipment, upcoming trips and activities, continuing education — and just how much fun they will have in class.

What if you don't have the time to do this when a student buys his or her mask (i.e., other customers are in the store, the student is on a schedule, etc.)? Why not have the student leave the mask with you? He or she can always pick it up later. Believe me, it's your willingness to put in this kind of extra effort that will demonstrate to students why it's clearly better to buy from you than from someone on the Internet.

You most likely know from experience that it may take more than one attempt to clean the preservative completely out of the inside of any new mask. Make students aware of this.

Make Certain Students Understand How De-Fog Works: The key points are:

- De-fog must be applied while the mask is still dry. If you wet the mask first, the water may form a barrier between the de-fog and the glass.
- Use only the tiniest amount of water to rinse excess de-fog from the mask, once you apply it. Students often rinse their masks too vigorously, rinsing out all of the de-fog they just applied.
- Once you apply de-fog, keep the mask out of the water. I frequently see students holding their masks in their hands, under the surface. They then wonder why it is their masks fog.

The bottom line is: *The best things students can do after de-fogging their masks is to stick them on their faces and leave them there.*

Teach Students to Carry De-Fog With Them: Unlike “normal” dives, students in confined- and open-water training are flooding and clearing their masks constantly. It doesn’t take much more than a couple flood-and-clears for the de-fog to be completely rinsed out. The solution is to have students purchase de-fog and carry it with them in their BC pockets. This way, any time spent on the surface can be time used to re-apply missing de-fog.

Be Sensitive to Other Vision Problems: Students who have had Lasik surgery or wear contacts may also have glasses they use for reading and other close up work. Under water, these students may have difficulty reading gauges, compasses, etc. It’s almost a sure bet that any student you have over the age of 40 will have difficulty seeing things close up.

Often, students don’t realize they will have this problem until after they get in the water for the first time. By then, they may be too embarrassed to mention it to you.

Early in training, you need to ask students to be frank with you about their ability to see close up. For those who are having difficulty, solutions may include simply holding gauges at arm’s length, or adding self-adhesive bi-focal lenses to the inside of the mask.

Build Better Habits. Save the Reef. Save Lives.

IF YOU’VE WATCHED the Discovery Channel, you probably know just how grueling “BUD/S” (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL) training is. What you may not realize, however, is that if a sailor manages to make it through BUD/S and become a Navy SEAL, his training is by no means over.

The fact is, unless the SEALs and their counterparts in Army Special Forces, Air Force Special Ops and Marine Force Recon are on deployment, they are training almost as hard as they did when they first earned their elite status.

Why?

Because the military knows that such highly specialized skills cannot be maintained unless they are practiced constantly.

How does this apply to recreational diver training?

Many dive instructors are under the mistaken belief that, because we cover emergency skills such as ESAs and alternate-air-source ascents a limited number of times during entry-level diver training, these skills will somehow magically stick with students — even though they are never practiced again.

In reality, the best we can hope to achieve is an awareness that such emergency procedures are theoretically possible. However, unless recreational divers practice these skills on a regular basis (which, face it, they simply don’t), it’s unrealistic to expect that divers will be able to use these abilities when the need arises.

The bottom line is, the only skills divers have a realistic chance of mastering *and* maintaining are those which are an integral part of everyday diving. That’s why it’s more important to have students master the everyday diving habits that will help *prevent* diving emergencies than it is for them to obtain limited (and soon forgotten) exposure to skills designed to deal with those emergencies.

In this article, we’ll identify the habits that it’s most important you develop in students and the steps you can take to do so.

”RTFG” (Read The Freakin’ Gauge!)

Conventional thinking is that our students are supposed to master not one but four separate responses to out-of-air emergencies (five if you count buddy breathing). Theoretically, a diver who runs out of air is supposed to remember which of these responses is most appropriate to his or her particular situation, then perform that skill adequately — even though years may have passed since he or she last practiced it.

Dob! Are we, like, being totally moronic here or what?

Clearly, it is better and more realistic to get divers to develop habits that will *prevent* such situations from occurring than it is to think they will be able to respond correctly years down the road. The good news is, all we have to do to achieve this goal is to get students in the habit of “RTFGing” — *Reading Their Freakin’ Gauges*.

”But wait!” you say, “Don’t we have students already do this?” That depends on two factors which are key to learning any skill: *repetition* and *reinforcement*.

- It’s not sufficient to only have students consult their SPGs a couple of times during the course. You need to begin with the very first pool session, asking every few minutes, “How much air do you have?” This needs to continue right through open-water training.
- You must also reinforce the importance of maintaining a constant awareness of tank pressure through stories, examples and exercises.
- Some cave diving instructors I know tell students that, “When I ask you for gas pressure, I want you to be able to tell me what it is, within 200 psi, without looking at your gauge.” Of course, the only way students can do that is if they are monitoring tank pressure constantly.

When you think about it, there are several potential underwater *problems*; however, there is only one true *emergency*: running out of air. You can hope that students remember a complex set of procedures for dealing with that emergency . . . or you can simply train divers to *prevent* it from happening in the first place.

Buoyancy Control

There are few skills more critical to the safety of both divers and their environment than buoyancy control.

- Divers whose buoyancy *is not* under control are more likely to damage coral and other fragile aquatic life than divers whose buoyancy *is* under control. (They are also more likely to stir up silt and sediment, thus diminishing the enjoyment of others.)
- Divers who cannot control their buoyancy are less likely to reach the surface in an emergency, or stay there once they arrive. They are also at greater risk of injury due to uncontrolled ascents and descents.

”But I teach buoyancy control,” you say. “My students can do fin pivots and hover, Buddha-like, with the best of them.” Guess what? That *is not* buoyancy control.

- Buoyancy control is when your students can swim, almost effortlessly, while maintaining a near-horizontal body position.
- Buoyancy control is when your students respond quickly and automatically to changes in depth by venting or adding the right amount of air to their BCs as needed.
- Buoyancy control is when your students can hover easily at safety-stop depth, with 500 to 1,000 psi in their cylinders and *no* air in their BCs, because they are properly weighted.

The following are not examples of good buoyancy control:

- Fin pivots *are not* buoyancy control. If a student’s fins — or any other part of his or her body — is in contact with the bottom, their buoyancy *is not* under control. Fin pivots *may* be an acceptable *developmental* skill — the buoyancy control equivalent of using training wheels. By the time students get to open water, however, their buoyancy control skills should have developed well beyond this. Continuing to use fin pivots as a buoyancy-control exercise at this point only serves to reinforce bad habits.
- Hovering, Buddha style, above a training platform or pool bottom *is not* buoyancy control. With the exception of ascents and descents, any time your fins are the lowest part of your body

(and especially when doing so would put them inches away from fragile coral, loose silt, etc.), your buoyancy *is not* under control.

- Hovering effortlessly with your knees nearly level with your shoulders and your fins well above the plane of your body — now *that* is buoyancy control.

The bottom line is, you may *think* you are teaching buoyancy control because you cover some of the development skills in the pool, or have students demonstrate abilities that are actually examples of *poor buoyancy control* on a training platform or sandy bottom. However, unless your students can demonstrate the good habits just outlined (and avoid the bad ones), they are not really *learning* buoyancy control.

Solving the Problem

WHAT CAN YOU DO to help ensure your students master the skills of *real* buoyancy control? Here are some suggestions:

- **Avoid the temptation to overweight students in the pool:** Sure, it may appear to make those initial pool sessions easier — but all it does, in the long run, is to instill one of the *worst possible habits* in students. Students need to learn that completely venting a BC will generally *not* initiate a descent. What they need to learn instead is that only by venting their BC *and* exhaling completely can they expect to leave the surface.
- **During open-water training dives, work to reduce the amount of weight students use:** It’s not unusual for students to be able to shed up to four pounds or more by the last dive. Remember: *The less weight divers use, the easier it will be to control buoyancy and the safer they will become.*
- **Conduct Realistic Weight Checks:** “A properly weighted diver floats at eye level& . . .” Pulleez! *Who came up with this nonsense?* The point at which a properly weighted diver floats at the beginning of a dive depends entirely upon the type and thickness of the exposure suit he or she is wearing and the weight of the breathing gas consumed during the dive. It *might* be at eye level — but, then again, it might not be. While pre-dive weight checks might be a helpful starting point, the best time to conduct a *real* weight check is at the end of the dive, when divers have between 500 and 1,000 psi in their tanks. A properly weighted diver with this much air left should be able to hover effortlessly at safety stop depth with no air in his or her BC.
- **Teach students to be ready to control buoyancy at any time:** Your students need to understand the importance of maintaining a visual reference with the bottom or sides of the pool or dive site (or an ascent/descent line), and have their hands on their BC inflators, ready to add or vent air as needed, any time they sense a change in depth.
- **Discourage contact with the bottom:** Teaching students that it’s okay to plop down on the bottom any time or place they feel like it only encourages callous disregard for the fragile aquatic environment. Explain to students why it’s okay to maintain *limited* contact with the pool bottom, training platform or that sandy spot on the ocean floor for training purposes — and why it’s to be avoided at all other times.
- **Never let students sit on their butts:** When students sit on their behinds, or allow their tank boots to come in contact with the bottom, it demonstrates total and complete disregard for the safety and well being of the environment. If students absolutely must be in contact

with the bottom, it is better to have them rest on their knees or fin tips, in a face-forward or face-down position, so that they maintain better awareness of what is going on below them.

- **Be a role model:** As an instructor, you should almost *never* be in contact with the bottom. Students will pattern their behavior after what they see you do. Set a good example.
- **Get your students out diving!** There is little you can do on a training platform or sandy patch on the bottom that reinforces good buoyancy control habits. As discussed earlier in this series, you need to minimize the time spent resting on the bottom during open-water training dives and maximize the time spent diving. The more you can expose students to constant changes in depth, and the need to be neutral whenever they stop to look at something, the better their buoyancy skills will become.

Slow Ascents and Safety Stops

As the average age of divers (and dive instructors) increases, so does the risk of decompression sickness. Among the best habits you can instill in students is making slow ascents on every dive, and safety stops on all but the shallowest dives.

- An increasing number of dive stores equip students with dive computers. This is extremely helpful in that most computers flash or beep at students if they exceed an ascent rate of more than 30 feet per minute (or, sometimes, even less). It is difficult for students to otherwise determine exactly what a sufficiently slow ascent is.
- Even if your students never exceed a depth of 30 feet during open-water training, it will help to have them practice making safety stops. Although such stops may not be absolutely essential for dives to such shallow depths, they will be on the dives that students are likely to make soon after certification. Thus, safety stops are good practice — and a good habit to get into.
- Proper ascent rates should not be limited to just “normal” ascents. If your training agency’s standards mandate alternate-air-source ascents, these should be made at the proper rate as well. After all, one of the primary reasons for having alternate air sources in the first place is to enable out-of-air divers to make ascents at an acceptable rate — and, thus, avoid the need for dangerous, uncontrolled “emergency” ascents.

This leads to an interesting question: *How do you conduct Emergency Swimming Ascent (ESA) training while maintaining a proper rate of ascent?* The answer is: *You can’t.*

The fact is, not only does “emergency” ascent training expose students to ascent rates that are way too fast, it asks instructors to do several such ascents in rapid succession. What kind of message does this send to students?

Sooner or later, we — as an industry — are going to have to ask ourselves whether the benefits of conducting emergency ascent training in open water outweigh the risks such training poses to students and instructors. Consider this:

- It’s not as though we don’t already have students practice ESAs horizontally across the swimming pool bottom. What additional learning does practicing actual ESAs in open water provide that this experience does not?
- The odds that a diver will run totally and completely out of air under water are already excruciatingly slim — and can be reduced further by emphasizing pressure gauge use and better dive planning.

- The odds that divers might actually have to make ESAs can be further reduced by emphasizing buddy diving skills and alternate air source use.

It would be naive to say that there is no possibility that a diver would ever have to perform an ESA. Nevertheless, you have to ask, *do the benefits of conducting emergency ascent training in open water offset the risk it poses to students and instructors?*

Dive Planning and Logging Dives

All too often, we leave students out of the critical process of planning their open water training dives. Ask yourself: During every open-water training dive, do your students enter the water with a clear understanding of:

- Planned and maximum depth limits?
- Planned and maximum time limits?
- Turnaround pressure and minimum safe ascent pressure?

Even though students may lack the knowledge and experience to determine these limits for themselves, you need to convey the fact they are important — for everyone, on every dive.

Odds are, your training agency standards mandate log book use after every single dive. In fact, for all intents and purposes, *a training dive is never really over until it is logged.*

Whether your agency’s standards require logging dives or not, it’s a good habit to get students into. Some things to keep in mind:

- The data logged from previous dives are an important part of planning repetitive ones.
- Your dive log sets an example for students. Even if you rely on your dive computer’s PC upload capabilities to maintain your log, bring printouts from previous dives and tell students, “This is what I’ll be extracting from my computer when I get home tonight.”

Of course, if you bring a laptop with you to the dive site, you can entertain students by doing this right in front of them. (You’ll also stimulate dive computer sales as a result.)

Other Important Habits

There are a number of other important habits that dive instructors already routinely instill in students. These include things such as:

- No masks on foreheads.
- No cylinders standing upright unattended.
- No suiting up or entering without buddy assistance.

These are all important; however, nothing will do more for the safety of your students and the environment than getting students in the habit of:

- Monitoring pressure gauges.
- Maintaining perpetual control of buoyancy.
- Making slow ascents and safety stops.
- Establishing and staying within safe depth, time and gas-supply limits.

Do these things and you will create better, safer divers. Period.

Limit Ascents and Descents

MARY AND JOHN WERE EXCITED about the prospect of completing their open-water training dives. They'd had a great time in the pool and were eagerly looking forward to their planned vacation in the Bahamas. Mary had a little trepidation about ear clearing; however, she knew that if she took things slowly and did not force the issue, she'd be fine.

Her first dive went okay (although it was a bit of a letdown, as all she did for a half hour was kneel on an ice-cold platform and do skills). Nevertheless, she made it down the descent line without too much difficulty — and she and John even arrived there ahead of some of the other teams.

It was on Mary's second dive that things started to go straight to Hell. Her initial descent did not go as easily as it had on the first dive, but she did make it to the platform. Unfortunately, on this dive, her instructor decided it would be a good time to knock off a number of ascent/descent exercises.

The first of these was an alternate-air-source ascent. The instructor decided he wanted everyone to do this once as both donor *and* receiver.

Mary had no difficulty completing the first air-sharing ascent with John. It's when she attempted to return to the platform that the trouble really started. At ten feet, her ears just plain locked up. Despite repeated attempts, Mary simply could not equalize. Finally, she and John gave up and returned to shore.

Mary spent the night in considerable pain. The next morning she returned to the dive site, scared that she would not be able to get down. This fear was compounded by the knowledge that she and John were already behind the rest of the class.

After a lengthy swim to the descent line, the instructor signalled everyone to go down. Mary struggled to make it the first ten feet. No luck. Finally she gave John the “go up” signal and returned to the surface, now in excruciating pain.

When the instructor returned to check on them, Mary announced she was done for the day. The instructor offered to allow John to continue; however, in a gesture any SEAL or Special Forces operator would understand, John announced, “I'm not leaving my buddy behind.” (Wouldn't it be great if all our students lived by that ethic?)

When the class returned to shore, they found Mary in tears. In her mind, she'd let down her dive buddy, ruined their upcoming vacation and embarrassed herself in front of her classmates. More than that, however, her ears just plain *hurt*.

“Don't worry,” her instructor said, “we can always complete this next month.” (He'd forgotten that Mary was supposed to be on a plane to Nassau in two weeks.) Mary nodded in assent — but you could tell that, in reality, she would never dive again.

Okay, those of us who teach scuba know that some students will simply have a harder time equalizing than others. Mary was among the unlucky ones. Was it her fault she was unable to complete her open-water training dives and become certified in time for her vacation? *No, it was her instructor's.*

Staying Within Limits

The ideal training dive is like any other: Students make just one descent and one ascent. Any more than this and you greatly increase the likelihood that students with ear problems will be unable to complete the dive. (In the previous example, if Mary had only had to make the one descent on her second dive, she most likely would have been certified.)

Equally important, multiple ascents and descents set a bad example. After all, don't we teach divers to avoid bounce dives and “sawtooth” dive profiles?

On the dive where Mary injured her ears, her instructor had been planning to have each student do two alternate-air-source ascents, plus an ESA. That's two ascents in which the rate of ascent would probably exceed the recommended 30 feet per second — and one in which it definitely would.

Now consider this: The instructor had seven students. This meant that where his students would be making *three* too-fast ascents in rapid succession, he was planning to make *21*. What kind of message does that send?

“But wait,” you say, “these are just shallow training dives.” Yes, they are — and isn't the risk of bubble formation greatest in the last 15 feet? Students don't remember what you say as much as they remember what they see you do. If you show them that it's okay to bounce like a yo-yo between the surface and 30 feet, they'll assume it's okay to do so between the surface and 60 feet...or 100.

In the early 1990s, I managed a large dive operation in the central Pacific. We operated two good-size boats, had a staff of over two dozen instructors and took more than 10,000 people diving every year. A number of these were students completing open-water training.

Our instructors ended almost every day making multiple ascents and descents with students in 20-25 feet of water. Our instructors did more of these ascents and descents in a month than a typical dive store's instructors do in ten years.

Guess what? In one year alone, we had not one but *five* of our instructors go to the chamber. All of them identified the multiple ascents and descents they did at the end of the day as the most likely culprit.

We were lucky. Only one of these five instructors elected to sue us (and the insurance company was able to settle for a “mere” \$30,000). The University of Hawai'i was also kind enough to let us pay her \$15,000 chamber bill on the installment plan.

As a dive operator, do you want to incur this kind of liability on behalf of your instructors? (I didn't think so...)

What To Do?

At this point, you may be wondering how, with all the ascent training your agency mandates, you can limit students to one descent and ascent per dive. It's usually not that difficult:

- First, do not make more than one emergency ascent exercise per student, per dive.
- Second, on dives that include an emergency ascent exercise, try to make that *the only* ascent for the dive.

It's important you understand what your training agency's standards require of you, and what they don't. For example:

I'm not aware of any training organization that expects students to make an alternate-air-source ascent in open water as both donor *and* receiver.

Better Living Through Chemicals

We all know that it's a bad idea to allow or encourage students to dive on decongestants. There is, however, a natural alternative that, reportedly, can help divers with ear problems — without the risks associated with decongestants. It's papaya extract.

John Wall, of “The” Dive Shop in Fairfax, Virginia, suggests that students and divers with ear difficulties buy a bottle of papaya extract tablets at their local health food or drug store and, before each dive, allow the tablets to dissolve between the cheek and gum. Reportedly, the results border on miraculous.

Whatever you choose to do, bear in mind that ear injuries are nothing to be taken lightly. Students are at risk for more than just perforated ear drums. Damage to delicate inner-ear tissues can lead to a lifetime of hearing impairment, pain and loss of balance. I've been told it's the number one cause of lawsuits against dive instructors.

The more you can do to protect your students and instructors against ear damage (and DCS), the better. Limiting the number of descents and ascents they make is one good way to start.

How Many Students Can You Guide at One Time?

WHEN IT COMES to actually taking your students diving (as opposed to keeping them stationary on a training platform and watching them freeze), how many students can you or one of your assistants effectively guide under water at one time? “Well, standards say . . .” Well, *who cares?*

Just because standards say you *can* guide six, eight or even ten students at one time doesn’t mean you *should*.

I can’t tell you the number of times, in just the past year, I’ve seen instructors get into real difficulty because they thought that, just because they had a class of six students to teach, they were somehow compelled to take all six diving at once. *Dob!*

As a point of comparison, in Hawai’i, where visibility was generally in excess of 80 feet or more, it was company policy that our instructors guided no more than six certified divers at one time, and no more than four students, under any circumstances.

Visibility is the Key

Ultimately, the maximum number of students you can safely and effectively guide under water is dictated by visibility.

According to both common sense and standards, to maintain adequate control and supervision of entry-level students, *you must be able to see the students clearly at all times*.

What this means is that, in an environment where the visibility may only be ten feet or less, the maximum number of students you can guide *might* be as many as four — but more likely it is as little as two.

Can Qualified Assistants Make a Difference?

That depends on how you use them. I’ve seen a number of instructors say something like, “Let’s see. I’ve got six students to take on a tour. I can’t see them all at once — but if I have my trusty assistant bring up the rear, we’ll just keep the ducklings sandwiched between us.” Guess how likely this is to work?

- If you try to guide students that way, sooner or later your “group” is going to become separated. You may surface with the first buddy team; your “trusty assistant” may surface with the last team. Now what has become of the students in the middle?
- If one of those students fails to show up, there is going to be a lot of finger pointing between you and your staff, with many repetitions of the phrase, “I thought he was with *you*.” Meanwhile, your insurance company will already be working on a settlement amount with the attorney for the missing student’s heirs.
- Even if you have one certified assistant for every buddy pair, it’s tough to keep a group of even four students together in less-than-ideal visibility. The more you and your assistants find yourselves having to surface in order to get the group back together, the more students you will lose to ear clearing and other problems.

It's a cinch that if your students feel as though they are being herded like cattle, or spend more time trying to get back together than they do getting to see cool stuff under water, they are not going to be having a lot of fun. And, as mentioned at the beginning of this series, if your students are not having fun, you've failed at your first and most important job as a dive instructor.

So What's the Solution?

There are two, actually — the same two we mentioned earlier:

- **Break your class into smaller groups and make more dives:** You've got the better gas consumption, the warmer exposure suit and the greater overall experience. Certainly you can make at least two dives for each student's one.
- **Use your assistants more effectively:** On dives that don't need to finish with an instructor-supervised ascent exercise, turn each buddy team over to a certified assistant and let them go have fun. They'll be safer and have a much more enjoyable time.

As an instructor, you are responsible for keeping students safe, making certain they learn — and for making sure they have fun doing so. You can't do that while herding students like cattle. Don't even try.

Don't Knock Your Local Dive Site

HAVE YOU DECIDED you've had enough of the dive business? Are you eager to get out as quickly as possible? Here's a shortcut that will help:

Knock your local dive site. Do everything in your power to disparage the notion that anyone in their right mind would actually want to dive close to home. Stress the cold water, lack of visibility and the fact there is little to see in the way of tropical fish and pretty coral.

Do these things and, I promise you, you'll be out of the dive business in no time.

Successful Dive Stores Know Better

Dive stores that succeed in the long run do so, in part, because they know the importance of promoting local diving.

- The fact you are not limited to diving on vacation makes scuba diving attractive to a greater number of people.
- Local diving gives customers a reason to buy equipment, rather than to merely rent on those limited occasions when they travel.
- Local diving makes it possible for customers to dive more actively. This means their skill level improves and they have more fun on dive vacations.

There is a direct relationship between how much customers dive and how much money a dive store makes. Thus, unless stores actively promote local diving, they never reach their potential.

It Starts at the Beginning

Customer attitudes toward local diving begin the moment they first talk to you about learning to dive. How do you present the available options for open-water training?

The fellow who taught me to dive (longer ago than I care to admit) was great at promoting dive travel. Unfortunately, this was also his undoing.

The first night of class, he'd present students with the options for open-water training as follows:

"You can come with us to the Florida Keys and help catch lobster. You can go with us to the springs and play with the manatees. We've got this great liveaboard dive trip coming up that will take us to the Bahamas. Or..." (and his voice would drop here) "...you can always go to the...*rock quarry*."

Yessirree. I think I'll go to the rock quarry — just as soon as I get done with my recreational root canal.

Just exactly what did my friend accomplish by portraying local diving this way?

- Did he increase participation in our open-water training vacations? A little. But he also conveyed clearly his feeling that no one in their right mind would want to dive locally — and that if you couldn't dive regularly on vacation, diving wasn't worth doing at all.
- He further made the students who had no choice but to complete their training locally feel like second-class citizens — which discouraged them from diving even further.

Make Local Open Water Training Your Number One Choice

Local open-water training shouldn't just be an option for students. It's what you should be presenting as the preferred choice.

- Divers who complete their training locally typically use thicker exposure suits, face more challenging environmental conditions and generally end up better, more capable divers.
- Divers who learn to dive locally won't be limited to diving on vacation. They possess the knowledge and skills necessary to dive any time they want, whether weekends or evenings after work, at sites that are only a short drive away.
- While it's not necessarily true that, “If you can dive here, you can dive anywhere,” it's generally true that divers who learn to dive locally are better able to adapt to new environments than divers who only dive on vacation.

Most customers who come to you planning to complete their open-water training dives on vacation aren't going to spend a week on a liveaboard or at a dedicated dive resort. They most likely are planning to go somewhere like Cancun or Hawai'i, and dive only two or three days during their stay.

- If they elect to do their open-water training dives on referral, they'll spend most or all of their dive time kneeling on the sand, doing skills, rather than exploring reefs and playing with the fish.
- On the other hand, if they get certified before leaving for vacation, they'll get to spend all of their vacation dive time having fun.

Divers who complete their training locally get to do so with instructors and equipment they know and trust. There are fewer uncertainties and fewer unknowns.

It's Not Just What You Say, But How You Say It

How do you describe your local open-water training site to students and customers? Do you routinely use terms such as *cold* and *bad visibility*? Do you refer to it as a *rock quarry* or *gravel pit*, rather than as a *lake* or *dive site*?

What you say, and how you say it, go a long way toward shaping your customers' attitudes toward local diving.

- Is your local visibility truly “bad,” or is it just “somewhat different” from that of the Caribbean?
- Is the water truly “cold,” or just “cooler?” (In the summertime, surface temperatures at many local dive sites are actually warmer than the average temperature throughout much of the Caribbean.)

Skilled instructors use their imaginations to describe local diving conditions. For example, when describing a dive in limited visibility, you might say:

”Diving here is like solving a mystery. You're just swimming along, following a trail of parts across the bottom when, suddenly, an entire city bus (car, boat, truck, etc.) appears right in front of you.”

And, when describing cooler water:

”Do you enjoy winter sports? When you go outside in the winter, you know it’s cold — but, because you are dressed for it, it’s not the least bit uncomfortable. Well, it’s the same when we go diving around here.”

You Have to Mean It

To successfully promote local diving, you have to enjoy it yourself. You can’t BS students here; they’ll see right through you. Fortunately, the key element here is just a little imagination — and a willingness to get out and discover what’s truly great about your local diving.

I’ve spent most of my life living and diving in places such as the Eastern Caribbean, Southern California, Florida and Hawai’i. For the past two years, however, nearly all my dives have been made with beginning students in Midwest and Mid-Atlantic rock quarries. If you think this is something of a letdown, don’t. I’m having a ball.

I let students know this, too. The minute I hear them suggest there is anything the least bit wrong with our local dive site, I let them know that, despite all the places I’ve gotten to dive, I don’t miss an opportunity to spend a weekend at our local “lake.” It’s that much fun.

If you don’t feel this way about your local dive site, you most likely don’t know enough about it.

- If it’s a man-made site, research its history. See if you can find pictures of what the area looked like before it flooded and show them to students.
- Do you know where all the “cool stuff” is? If not, make a map, or update an existing one.
- Become your area’s leading expert on things to see and do at your local site. Find out where the fish hang out. Get the history on all of the artifacts now resting on the bottom. Research the correct scientific name for that peculiar species of algae that clumps up in such alien-looking shapes.

If you own or manage a dive store, it is especially important that you, personally, be “into” local diving. Far too many store owners dive only on vacation, and leave the local diving to their least-senior instructors. What kind of message does that send?

If you truly cannot get interested in local diving, it may be time to consider changing careers — because this one may not last that long.

Better Gear, Better Divers

”DIVING IS AN EQUIPMENT-INTENSIVE SPORT.” We all know that — or do we? When I think about the equipment I see some students using, whether it is their personal gear or equipment provided by the store, I wonder whether instructors and store owners are getting the message.

The fact is, the quality of the equipment students use has a direct bearing on their ability to learn and have fun under water.

By this, I don’t mean that students have to have the absolute latest in whiz-bang gadgetry. However, their personal gear must be better-quality equipment that functions well and will last. And, the equipment you supply must be comfortable, easy to use and convey the message that quality equipment is a worthwhile investment.

Start With the Basics

One of the things about several stores using the same open-water training site is that you get to see whose students are buying what.

- The students I see from one of our local stores more often than not have top-of-the line split fins made from advanced polymers.
- Students from yet another local store most often seem to have cheap, plastic-bladed fins whose buckles are notorious for coming apart under water.
- Guess which store’s students have an easier time learning how to dive?

The key to getting students to invest in better quality personal gear is stressing the difference between *price* and *value*.

- If students get the right personal equipment to start, they won’t end up having to replace it prematurely.
- Cared for properly, equipment such as masks and fins can last up to ten years or more. Looked at this way, spending an extra \$100 to get a truly decent set of fins costs less than \$10 a year. Would you spend an extra \$10 every year if it would substantially increase your enjoyment of diving? Guess what? So would many of your students.
- The cost of better quality personal equipment is negligible compared to the cost of a ruined dive vacation. A customer once told me about how his brother’s \$5,000 Red Sea dive vacation went straight to Hell because he couldn’t bother to invest \$70 in a decent mask.

Unless you take the time to explain these facts to students, they won’t see any need to spend more than the least possible amount to get the equipment they need for class. Unfortunately, your students will suffer for that ignorance later — and make your life harder in the process.

Sell Through Example

”Students seldom feel the need to purchase anything substantially better than what you give them to use in class.” I first heard that statement in the late 1970s and, in the years since, its truth has been proven time and again — most recently this past year in the Chicago suburbs, where having better-quality equipment in our rental line was reflected directly in the quality of the equipment we sold . . . and the ease with which students learned to dive.

There is a temptation, when equipping your rental and teaching department, to buy the least expensive gear possible. This can turn out to be a costly decision in a number of ways:

- **Cheap equipment doesn’t last:** You end up having to replace it sooner.
- **Cheap equipment is often harder to use and harder to learn with:** The less fun your students have learning to dive, the less likely they are to invest in equipment of their own.
- **Putting students in cheap equipment leads only to the sale of cheap equipment:** By putting students in cheap rental gear, you are saying, “This is all you will ever need.”

What to Look For

WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR in rental and teaching equipment? You don’t necessarily want the absolute top of the line; however, you do want equipment that is at least middle-of-the-line or above in quality. Here are some suggestions that may help:

- **Wetsuits:** Durability is important, of course. Equally important, however, is warmth and the ease with which students can get in and out of their suits. Suits that are hard to get in and out of may only result in students who hate wetsuits, hate local diving — and hate you, too.
- **BCs:** Comfort and fit are key here, of course. Pay particular attention to the ease with which students can vent air while in a normal swimming position. If students have to struggle to vent air to get under water, or have to twist into unusual contortions to vent air on ascent, they’ll have difficulty mastering buoyancy control — and they won’t be having much fun, either.

By the way, if yours is like most stores, the only recreational BCs you sell are weight-integrated models. Are you providing students with adequate training in how to use them?

- **Regulators:** In every major manufacturer’s line, there seems to be one regulator that has proven itself over time as offering an excellent combination of price, performance and (critical for rental gear) ease of maintenance. I don’t have to elaborate; you most likely know which of the regulators you sell best meets this description. Not coincidentally, you probably want to see your customers purchase a regulator at least this good — and, if you let them learn on one, they will.
- **Computers:** If you want to sell dive computers, let your students use dive computers. In fact, as it’s been proven time and again that, in the real world, divers just don’t use tables, it can be argued that you have a duty to provide students with at least an introduction to dive computer use.

Better gear — whether personal or rental — results in better divers. It’s that simple.

Imagination. Adventure. Discovery. Fun.

THROUGHOUT THIS SECTION, we’ve stressed that the most important aspect of any open-water training dive is the opportunity to actually *go diving*. The more students can practice real-life diving skills such as buoyancy control, body position, propulsion, communication, buddy awareness, etc., the better divers they will become.

What makes a great open-water training dive? One measure is that everyone surfaces with a smile on his or her face. Another is that every student can answer the question, *Did you have fun?* with a resounding “Yes.”

There’s a lot more to a good open-water training dive than just herding students around like cattle. The best possible open-water training dives combine elements of showmanship and magic. In this article, we’ll examine several techniques that can help you accomplish just that.

Plan to See the “Good Stuff”

Where the ocean is filled with natural beauty, freshwater training sites often need a little bit of help to make them interesting. Sites such as rock quarries and man-made lakes often have artifacts, such as mining or construction equipment, that are left over from before the site flooded. Then there are the things that find their way to the bottom through accident or intent, including cars, boats, busses, trucks and airplanes.

Most of these derelicts wouldn’t get a second glance out of the water. Put them at the bottom of a rock quarry, gravel pit or lake and, suddenly, they become as fascinating as a sunken galleon. Even the dumbest things can bring a smile to students’ faces: an old barbecue grill, a soda machine, a dentist’s chair, a playground swing set — all special because they are among the last things you expect to find while diving.

Whatever your local dive site offers in the form of “treasure,” you need to be able to find it quickly and easily, and show students enough of it so that they will want to come back to see more. And, when you take students to see these items, make certain you can tell them at least a little bit about what they saw, how it got there and its history prior to becoming part of the local underwater landscape.

Magicians Never Reveal Their Secrets

With the exception of cautioning about possible hazards, there is nothing that says you have tell students ahead of time that, “We’re going to go see a bus.” Much of the fun of underwater exploration comes when these items reveal themselves unexpectedly.

Our local dive site features a large PVC pipe construct we refer to as “the space station.” Suspended in mid-water, it’s a place divers can practice their buoyancy skills while pretending to “space walk.” I never tell students we’re on our way to visit the space station. If I did, they might be underwhelmed by what they find.

Instead, I tell students we’re going to follow the wall to a certain landmark, set our compasses for 270 degrees, then swim out ten kick cycles at a depth of 40 feet and “see what’s out there.”

This way, the space station comes as a total surprise. I can't tell you the number of times students have told me this is the best part of the dive.

Learn Where the Fish Live

The opportunity to see fish and animals under water is one of the big appeals of diving. At most dive sites, the fish and animals tend to congregate in just a few areas. Find out where these are, and how you can take students to see them without unnecessarily spooking the animals. (Learning how to do this, by the way, just might increase your own appreciation of local diving.)

Stimulate the Imagination

There's a part of our local dive site where algae colonies grow in giant, amoeba-like shapes. Before taking students there, we'll tell them that, on our next dive, we are going to visit the planet Omicron IV. This always brings quizzical expressions to everyone's faces.

”No, seriously,” we say, “If you've ever wondered what the surface of an alien planet would look like, wait until you see this next dive.”

Suddenly, the opportunity to visit a part of the lake some might characterize as “ugly” or “disgusting” becomes an adventure in alien exploration.

The Simplest Things Can Be Entertaining

Why do air rings expand as they move through the water column toward the surface? Learn to blow them and you can ponder this question with students afterward.

Sometimes the simplest things can be incredibly entertaining if you do them under water. I'll frequently pick up brick-shaped rocks from the bottom and give them to students to carry. Then, when we reach a rock ledge, I'll have them use the rocks to build a stone sculpture or “castle.” Afterward, we discuss how long our “masterpiece” is likely to last, and what natural forces might cause it to crumble.

Create Lasting Memories

One of the best tools any instructor can have is a small, digital camera in a compact housing with a wide-angle lens. Equip it with a stainless snap and you can clip it off to a BC harness D-ring whenever you need both hands free (which is most of the time).

When the opportunity arises, however, you can use the camera to not only record your students' explorations, but — better still — allow them to take pictures of each other.

Afterward, you can transfer the images to CD-ROM or post them on your store's website, so that students have a souvenir of their adventures to share with family, friends and co-workers.

Remember: Most of our new students come from word-of-mouth. Anything you can do to stimulate this process will increase enrollments in future classes.

Imagination. Adventure. Discovery. Fun. These words should be the foundation upon which your open-water training dives are built. Make it so and your reward will be better-trained divers and more enthusiastic customers. ■