

Continuing education fills in the gaps



Ed Leahy begins an Advanced Entertainment Rigging Training course.

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, in the days of in-person training, it happened every time. I would start a public rigging class and ask people to tell me about why they were there, how they fit into the industry. Someone would stand up and tell me how they were in the first class of ETCP riggers and had been working in the industry for 30 years. At the beginning, this always stopped me in my tracks. What could I possibly teach someone with that kind of time on the job? It did not take long for me to start hoping for these people to attend my courses. Experienced hands who understand the benefits of ongoing training, even as masters of their craft. Having these folks in class, indeed having a class filled with a range of different skill sets and experience levels, always makes

for a better experience for everyone.

As technicians, we spend years working and learning. We try to fit in with those who know what to do, those people who know how things work—the go-to crew. When we get to a level where we feel competent and confident, it is natural to feel that we have arrived—that all the hard work paid off and now it is time to enjoy what we have earned. Along with that sense of arrival can come a certain resistance to sitting in a class or chasing down more knowledge. The sentiment is understandable, but that feeling of “knowing enough” can be a problem. There is concrete value in ongoing training for the individual, their team, and in the industry as a whole.

Ambition and safety

Is safety in our industry increasing or decreasing? I ask this of almost every group I teach, and the answers are fascinating. Ask a stagehand from a regional theater who is being told to wear a hardhat more often and being shown a risk assessment for each load-in, and they will tell you that they are annoyed by the new requirements though they often feel like we are all working more safely. Ask an arena rigger and you get a very different answer. That person will point out that people do a better job with PPE than in years past. However, the size and scope of the shows coming through their venue are getting larger and larger, and the potential for terrifying incidents keeps rising.

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The truth, as always, probably lies somewhere in the middle. We are certainly doing better industry-wide at promoting a culture of safety and paying more attention to the risks to our workers. At the same time, our ambition continues to grow and riggers in particular encounter new challenges to define and maintain safe practices in the face of larger shows and more dynamic rigs.

The good news is that, much like when speakers went from sitting on the stage to flying above it, there are innovators who are developing new methods, standards, and

tools to address the event horizon of our collective ambition. Staying current with products and practices can keep technicians from making costly or dangerous mistakes. In addition, the exchange of ideas that occurs in training classes can help spawn further ideas to move the industry forward.

Competence and Confidence

Humans are terrible at knowing what we don't know. We are just bad at it. It is in our nature to want to be the person who knows, but that gets in the way of seeing our own deficiencies. This is especially true of early career workers, though no one is immune to it. We all want to be seen as knowledgeable yet we all have blind spots about our own understanding.

“ Many of the people who attend training talk about coming in knowing *how* to do things and going out knowing *why* the things are done.”

This has never been clearer to me than in the last 12 months. Since March 2020, I have taught more than 130 class sessions, all online. It is the greatest density of training I have ever conducted, and it has been tremendously fun. It has also been a nonstop cavalcade of very smart people pointing out every time I said something wrong. People are always nice about it, but it is a constant, remarkable reminder that even trainers do not know everything. We are all much smarter together than we are as individuals.

It can sting a little when a knowledge gap is exposed, especially if you are standing at the head of the class, but it firmly demonstrates there is far more to know about our work than can ever be known by a single person. I am not ashamed of what I don't know; I am fascinated by it.

The ability to set emotion aside when



Ed Leahy explains the care and maintenance of a self-retracting device during an instructional video.

faced with your mistakes is earned through experience. This is why seasoned practitioners come to training. Experience teaches us that there is always more to know, and having a solid grasp on where your knowledge ends is more important than being right. The best compliments I get after a class are when someone who knows more than me tells me they learned something, or heard a concept explained in a way they never considered before. Exposure to the same idea from different perspectives is the best way to find what you don't know and fill in those gaps.

Opportunity like never before

The pandemic has impacted us all, but if there are any bright spots to be found in the darkness, it is that our generation has never seen collaboration and generosity like we have during this past year. In addition to food drives and advocacy for relief, we have seen leading voices of our industry come together like never before to share their knowledge. The forced downtime has inspired session after session of clever people talking about what they know. Online forums have allowed for easy

conversations between leading experts that might otherwise only occur once in a decade at a conference in a faraway place. This year we have learned it is not always necessary to book a flight, pay for a hotel, and talk the boss into letting you go. Now, content is at your fingertips through virtual classes, videos, and podcasts.

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Even better, you don't have to worry about getting stuck sitting in the back where you can't hear or ask questions. Literally everyone has a front row seat. Literally everyone can join in the conversation.

Sill, we can't ignore the one big downside of virtual learning. We are a profession of minds *and* hands, and it can be a challenge to gain practical skills in a virtual environment. We remain hopeful we can all get back to in-person learning soon. In the meantime, there is vast content out there to build up conceptual knowledge.

Many of the people who attend training talk about coming in knowing *how* to

do things and going out knowing *why* the things are done. The theory and the concepts behind our standard practices are not always taught along with the skills. We give students rules, not principles; limits rather than tools to work around the limits. There is nothing wrong with this approach—it is designed to keep new workers safe. But outside of the learning environment, it is important to stretch beyond those “training wheels” to use the base concepts of physics, engineering, and math to understand and overcome rigging challenges.

Filling in this “why” gap is a lifelong pursuit. It happens every day on the job and off the job too. Coming back to training from time to time to hear from someone new, or revisit something you have not thought about in a while is a great idea, and this is a perfect time to do it. Find a conversation and join in. Share what you know and fill in what you don’t.

C’mon! Everybody’s doing it! ■



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