

Integrating Novices

Bridge teaching is essential to the long-term success of a club in ensuring a flow of new members into the club. It is, however, a very big and extremely daunting step for a novice from the sheltered environment of learning and playing in a group with one's peers to competing in the seemingly shark-infested waters of the club duplicate. One of the most difficult problems faced by many clubs is how to integrate novice players into the club's regular sessions. The exact nature of the difficulties will vary from club to club, but we will try to give a few suggestions here.

We have and will repeat this message elsewhere: the most important thing that a club can do is provide a friendly and welcoming environment for its players and stamp out bad behaviour, so that everyone can enjoy their bridge in a pleasant atmosphere. This is doubly important for novices and other newcomers to the club. Just one unkind comment or overly officious action can result in a new player not wishing to set foot in the club ever again.

Special sessions

If a club is big enough and has its own premises or access to a good affordable venue, it may run so-called 'No Fear Sessions' suitable for those who have completed classes and 6-12 months of supervised play, or those who have previously played some bridge but never tried their hand at duplicate. Play may be at a more relaxed pace than in a normal club session. After a period playing in the No Fear sessions, players can then be encouraged to move into the regular duplicates.

If there are not enough players of appropriate standard for a dedicated No Fear session, but the club runs two or three duplicates a week, it could designate one of them as more suitable for beginners. That way the more experienced players have a choice as to whether they come along and "help" the novices or not.

Club grouping

If there are a number of smaller clubs in an area, each with insufficient numbers and resources on its own, they may wish to group together to provide playing opportunities for novices. Each club could run one No Fear session a month, for example. Some counties already provide such initiatives and, if your club finds it impractical to run its own No Fear

sessions, it may be worth enquiring whether anything can be done at county level.

Mentoring

If a teacher thinks that one or more of his bridge students is ready to venture into the murky waters of a regular club duplicate, it may be best to take that student along as a partner, or arrange for a more experienced but sympathetic player to partner the student for the first few sessions at the club. This practice is often known as mentoring – the mentor can help the student get used to the playing conditions and stand up for them if an awkward situation should arise.

Mentoring often works better than allowing a pair of newcomers to fend for themselves since they will not be very familiar with the Laws of Bridge and the customs at the club. This may, however, depend on the individuals. Some beginners may be made more nervous by the thought of playing with ‘teacher’. Mentors certainly need to be selected carefully for their patience and tactfulness. Coaching should not take place during the session itself, but notes can be made to discuss certain points afterwards.

If you do end up with a pair of novices in a regular session, it should be made clear to all present that the novice pair are to be treated with special consideration, looked after and helped through the minefield of bridge laws and etiquette until such a time as they have settled in, which may take several weeks.

Welcome Evenings

If there is a bridge teacher active near the club who is willing to bring students along, the club could periodically arrange a special informal evening when the students are made welcome by the ordinary club members and the pace of play is reduced.

Preparing novices for club bridge

Teachers can help prepare their students for club duplicate bridge by coaching them on rules and etiquette, providing them with notes on these, perhaps introducing one item in each lesson.

Playing alongside the regular club session

A good way of integrating novices so that they get used to the atmosphere and the regular members of the club is to arrange for one or more tables of the novices to play alongside a regular club duplicate in a so-called Student Channel. They play the same boards, but are not expected to keep up the same pace as the main section, i.e. they will play fewer boards during the course of the evening.

If you have three or more tables of novices, it is best for them to have their own separate section (playing the same boards if possible). With fewer tables, there are several possibilities:

- If you only have one table of students and there is a Howell with a relay table, the two novice pairs can remain stationary at the relay table, playing as many boards as time allows. There are normally at least two boards on the relay table not in play elsewhere, and the table above the relay can pass its boards onto the relay as soon as they have finished with them. The novices will just need to ensure missing out a board as and when required for the next table to have at least one board ready to be played. They can score on the bottom line of the traveller. The event is scored overall without taking into account the scores of the novices, but if they wish they can have match points assigned for their results by comparing their scores with those achieved in the main event.
- If the club usually runs a Mitchell with three-board rounds, you can 'attach' a table of novices to one of the tables in the main movement such that they share the boards. Both novice pairs remain stationary and aim to play two of the three boards on each round. For example, you might have the novices playing at table N 'attached' to table 5. Table 5 would start with board 1, while table N would begin with board 2. When 5 finishes board 1, it begins board 3, and when N finishes board 2, it plays board 1. If the novice table finishes board 1 before the move has been called, it can borrow a board forward from the next table (6) to begin that. The TD should ensure that NS at table 5 are an experienced but sympathetic pair who would be prepared to keep an eye on and assist the novices. As before they should score on the bottom line of the traveller and match point comparisons can be made.

- In a Mitchell with two-board rounds it is necessary to place the stationary novice table 'beside' two of the tables in the main movement, say tables 1 and 2. The novices have to wait until table 2 has finished its first board before they can begin. When table 2 has played its first board, it passes that to the novices to play. When the move is called, table 2 passes its second board down to table 1 as normal. When the novices have finished their first board, they pass that down to table 1 and receive their next board from table 2. They will always play at least half of the boards and sometimes manage three out of four. Their scores can again be match pointed if they score on the bottom line of the traveller.

It is also possible to construct other movements where stationary tables of novices are part of the main movement, but these can become quite complicated.

As the novices progress, it will become apparent when they are managing to keep up with the main movement and are ready to be integrated into that. There was a club recently running two separate sections where both the regular club duplicate section and the novice section had a half table. One of the novice pairs was persuaded to play in the full duplicate to make up numbers and promptly won the event.

This gave them the necessary confidence to take part in that regularly. In any case, if you think that the novices are ready, you could make a rule that if they win the novice event, they have to play the next week in the main event. They can come back to the novice section the following week if they want to, but gradually you should be able to move them on into the main duplicate.

Here be Monsters

Please remember that someone new to club bridge will be very nervous. When a newcomer arrives at your table, introduce yourself and your partner by your first names. They won't remember your names, but they will feel more welcome. Smile!

Be tolerant of novices fiddling with their bidding boxes. Allow them to change their bids. Allow them to consult their own convention cards. Allow them to ask about the bidding at any time. Allow them to see the last trick on request. Ignore hesitations. In general, you need to bend over backwards to be tolerant. Comments on bidding and play should not be made unless requested by the novices themselves.

Teachers may wish to warn their students in advance that, sadly, there is the occasional dragon lurking in the bridge club. If they experience any unkindness and they do not feel they can call the director, they should tell you at the next lesson, and then you can try to deal diplomatically with the offender.

Careful guidance

Clubs need to be aware of how their novice groups are developing and guide them carefully and diplomatically to avoid such situations as occurred some years ago at one well-known club when the Committee decided that the players in the novice group were now good enough to move up to the intermediate session, which was held on a different day. The novices promptly left, some because they did not wish to change days, others because the novices had become a club within a club.