

# Training philosophy - the why

Donald Campbell



Donald Campbell is a Consultant T&O surgeon in Ninewells Hospital and Medical School, Dundee. He was TPD for six years in the East of Scotland Deanery until 2019 and is now the UK and Ireland TPD forum Chair. He is also the SAC liaison member for the Military and Northern Ireland.

The George Bernard Shaw quote<sup>1</sup> sometimes thrown at those who teach and train is “*Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach*”. To me, it conjures up the image of a doyen of surgery, whose technical mastery of the craft is so profound that even the most outrageous behaviour is excused. The implication is that to excel in your field you must have a single-minded focus on yourself and your own work and not waste your time teaching.

The flip side of this coin is the disappointing trainer who, while dedicated to teaching, has no clinical credibility. But when inspirational training co-exists with clinical excellence, the combination can be transformative. Some of the greatest minds in history, from Socrates to Hawking, so believed in the primacy of teaching, they made it a core part of their working lives.

To be a good trainer takes hard work, patience and humility. I consider myself fortunate to have had many great trainers in my career and witnessed teachers who could captivate an audience by amusing, entertaining and educating with somehow effortless ease. I now know that none of this talent came without discipline, preparation and practice. We are a composite of parts of trainers we have had, and with reflection, I hope the good bits.

As a trainer in a craft speciality, we have a unique relationship with our trainees. We hand a scalpel to them over our patient’s bodies and say, “Now... it’s your turn”. This is not easy for trainers, as they ultimately own the responsibility for the outcome and complications. However, they must try to remember the very first time they were handed a scalpel or did their first hip replacement. This burden is eased if the trainee is honest, hardworking and humble. It is much more

pleasant to work with a trainee who enthuses “I get to go to clinic” instead of moaning, “I have to go to clinic”. Life is about our choices and how we react to situations, many of which are beyond our control.

We no longer have the hegemonic power of surgeons in the last century. We depend on working in complex team structures and have the ultimate responsibility of creating an educational environment that brings the team on the training journey with us. A healthy team structure is not only better for patient safety and outcomes but also for our own protection and well-being.

Football manager Sir Alex Ferguson would stop his players in the training ground and make them look to the sky if a flock of geese flew overhead. “*That is teamwork*” he would

say. It is one of the most remarkable examples of teamwork in the animal kingdom, which humans would do well to emulate. They fly in strict formation and call out to each other offering encouragement and take turns at leading the flock to fly incredible journeys together, through all kinds of adversity. We have to teach our teams in today’s pressured working environment that it is fundamental the trainee gets to lead the flock too.

It’s important to keep reminding ourselves that we are momentarily passing through our careers as but a small cog in a giant machine. We are not immortal and may not be

here to lead the team next year. Memento mori (death memory) should never be far from our thoughts, particularly when we receive adulation. These words were whispered in the ears of the conquering Roman generals as they returned to victory parades from war<sup>2</sup>. “*Look behind you. Remember that you are a man. Remember that you are mortal.*”

“Humility is not easy for the surgeon to acquire, but a good start is reflecting critically and openly on one’s complications through audit. The ancient wisdom is true: know thyself, be humble.”

We have the great privilege of performing life-changing operations with the societal rewards of praise and gratitude. But hubris is never far away from our success and a fall from grace can be as swift as lighting. Ego and hubris can affect the trainee too, often creeping in after their first successful solo operation. We must be constantly watchful as *Ego* is the greatest enemy of us all. This was understood by the ancient Greek philosophers whose wisdom is carved on the pillars of Delphi “*Surety brings ruin*”, “*Nothing to excess*” and “*Know thyself*”.

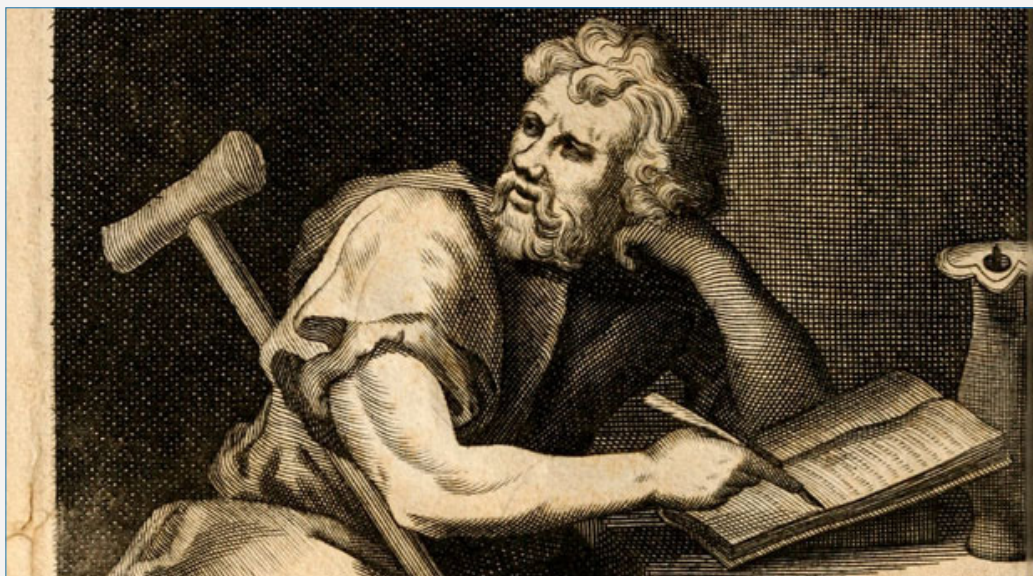
Ego is not just a barrier to training, but to our own development. Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, “*Throw out your conceited opinions, for it is impossible for a person to learn what he thinks he already knows*”<sup>3</sup>. It is incumbent on the trainer to set the ground rule that there are no stupid questions, in fact these are often the best questions that everyone was too afraid to ask. Socrates knew that coming to terms with our own ignorance was fundamental, he said, “*The only thing I know, is that I know nothing*”.

It is one of the great joys of training to have a fresh pair of eyes look at what you teach and question it. It forces you to re-examine what you thought you knew and stay fresh to the constant changing of what is understood. It is true that to teach a subject is to ‘learn it twice’ and as your understanding deepens, so too does your enthusiasm.

During his incarceration in prison, Oscar Wilde wrote on humility, “*It is the last thing left in me, and the best... one cannot acquire it, except by surrendering everything that one has*”<sup>4</sup>.

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Some surgeons prefer to work without a trainee. They see every single one of their patients and perform all of the operations, often as part of a well-oiled familiar team. I guess for some, this can reduce stress by maintaining constancy and control and it may be a good model in your first year as a new consultant, for getting your feet under the table. But to continue this way for the next 30 years without the challenge, stimulus and company of a trainee, for me, would be dull. Every trainee I have had has taught me something.



Stoic philosopher Epictetus.

Emerson said, “*Every man I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn of him*”<sup>5</sup>. There is also a shared responsibility that helps with the ‘loneliness of command’ when making decisions over people’s lives. I look at the trainer-trainee partnership as a journey together. There will be high points and low points, but both always learning. Through these shared experiences comes camaraderie and friendship that can be lifelong. It is one of the greatest rewards to see your past trainees succeed and become better than you. It is the preservation of fire, not the worship of ashes that is important.

The role of the trainer as mentor and advisor is rewarding. As the philosopher (and boxer) Mike Tyson said, “*Everyone has a plan... until they get punched in the face*”. During surgical training, it is not uncommon for some significant personal or work trauma to knock a trainee off their trajectory. Never underestimate the help that can be given from just talking through the problem. It is often the case the trainee has not shared the problem with their peers. Listening is a skill. The philosopher Zeno said, “*The reason we have two ears and only one mouth is so we might listen more, and talk less*”<sup>6</sup>. Unless you and the wider team hear that help is needed, the problem is hard to solve. It’s important that the hierarchal barriers are broken so delicate topics can be approached and discussed privately. Kindness and calmness are contagious. Foster an environment people want to share, learn and work in.

Adapting your training style to the differing needs and personalities of your trainees is an interesting challenge. A foundation built

on principles is vital so we can adapt to the multiple needs and presentations of trainees (and our patients too). Stoic philosopher Epictetus, when asked by a pupil “what to do?” said, “*What advice could I possibly give? No, a far better request is ‘train my mind to adapt to any circumstances’*”<sup>7</sup>. The stoics believed in following the harmony of nature as a model in life, just like Alex Ferguson and his geese. Our role is not just teaching surgery but skills such as working with challenging people and coping with stress. Epictetus, when dealing with difficult people or situations advised, “*Every event has two handles – one by which it can be carried and one by which it can’t. If your brother does you wrong, don’t grab it by his wronging, because this is the handle incapable of lifting it. Instead use the other – that he is your brother, that you were raised together, and then you will have hold of the handle that carries*”<sup>8</sup>.

In the end, our ultimate goal is not to just teach and train, but to inspire the next generation of surgeons as role models. This requires enthusiastic engagement with potential surgeons, particularly medical students, to show what a fascinating and rewarding career we have. It’s like planting trees in a garden we will never see grow.

I think this quote from Aristotle better sums up training: “*Those who know, do. Those who understand, teach.*” ■

## References

References can be found online at [www.boa.ac.uk/publications/JTO](http://www.boa.ac.uk/publications/JTO).