



# Are Some Students More Dangerous Than Others?

Mitigating CFI risk



By Natalie Bingham Hoover



**R**isky Business. When I hear those two words together, I always think of the movie scene of Tom Cruise dancing in his underwear. Now I understand that some of you may not appreciate that image as much as I do, and so for the purposes of this column, I would like to discuss another type of risky business, flight instruction. Statistics show that general aviation has a much higher accident rate than commercial air carriers, about 10 to one, according to the National Transportation Safety Board website. Among general aviation flights, only personal travel ranks higher than flight instruction for the percentage of accidents per flight hour.

In fact for the last several years, flight instruction has been more dangerous than aerial application, banner towing and skydiving. That's right, flight instructors get into more accidents than crop dusters. No offense to my

crop dusting friends, but what you do, flying low and slow around power lines and trees and countless other obstacles requires a level of skill and focus that I am afraid I will never possess. To be fair, flight instruction is still not inherently dangerous, only six in every 100,000 general aviation flights end in an accident. But for those of us who make our living in general aviation, who plan on making 100,000 flights over the course of a lifetime, six accidents is six too many.

How do we, as flight instructors, mitigate that risk and keep ourselves and our students safe? I could preach about risk management, aeronautical decision-making and hazardous attitudes, but then your eyes would glaze over and you would probably fall asleep before you finished reading this. I promise not to do that to you. Instead I would like to suggest that there are different types of students, students who, in my experience, have put me into more heart-pounding,

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hair-raising situations than others.

These students fall into three categories: fearful students, other pilots and students who excel. Am I suggesting that you do not fly with these groups of people to minimize your risk? Not at all. At one point or another, I, myself, have fallen into each of these categories. I am so grateful that I had wise flight instructors who understood the risk I was presenting and helped protect me from myself.

### **Risky Student Number One: Fearful Students**

One of my flight instructor friends told me a terrifying story about the time she took up a fearful flier and let things go a little further than she had planned. It was supposed to be a standard training event, practicing maneuvers, but mid-flight, they saw an inviting grass strip and decided to attempt a landing there. The flight instructor realized they weren't going to be able to make the landing and initiated a go-around. The student was unprepared for this possibility and grabbed the control wheel in fear. Before my instructor friend was able to react, the airplane had reached the critical angle of attack and did a quarter spin into the ground. The instructor ended up with a broken ankle while the student unfortunately died in the accident.

While the flight instructor never could have imagined that outcome, we can, in hindsight, learn some things from her story. First of all, you have to know whom you are flying with. Before the first lesson, spend some time on the ground discussing a student's previous flying experience, if any. I always ask at least two questions: *Are you nervous about flying? Do you get motion sick?* (You will thank me for that bit of advice someday.) You may not always get an honest answer. Some people are embarrassed by their own fear, or they may not know they're scared until they go up for the flight. In this case, you will have to rely on your student's body language to know if you should proceed with caution.

**Remember, the most dangerous combination in the cockpit is two flight instructors. They each have their own way of doing things, and they are afraid to step on each other's toes.**

Tightly gripping the control wheel, an elevated breathing rate, visibly shaking or tapping their legs or being so paralyzed that they only look straight ahead are all signs that your student may be dealing with flight anxiety. There are many ways to help your students overcome their fear, but that's not the focus of this month's column. (For more on that, see *Mentor* July/August 2014 edition, "Pilots Who Are Scared to Fly.") We are simply discussing how to keep yourself safe when you fly with people who may have a tendency to panic. Fear in the cockpit can lead to any number of undesirable behaviors, from jerking back on the yoke to completely freezing on the controls. First of all, always do a thorough preflight brief with fearful students. Let them know exactly what maneuvers you will be working on so there will be no surprises. Especially when doing stalls and slow flight, discuss every detail of the maneuver beforehand. Even though they may still be nervous, knowing what to expect can help keep panic to a minimum. I understand that when you get closer to solo and checkride, surprises in the cockpit are crucial to developing strong pilot decision-making, but you have to get past the fear before you can get to that point. Also pre-brief what will

be said if you need to take the controls when things get out of hand. When the instructor says, "My airplane," students need to immediately take their hands and feet off the controls. Furthermore, *never* allow students to put two hands on the control wheel. If they should freeze, it will be much easier for you to make corrections if they don't have a two-handed death grip on the yoke.

### **Risky Student Number Two: Other Pilots**

From time to time, as a flight instructor, you will fly with people who already have a pilot certificate or may even have more hours and experience than you. This can be a great opportunity to learn from someone who has valuable wisdom to impart. Resist the urge, however, to let them have complete control over the flight decisions. If someone is coming to you for a lesson, it is because he or she needs *flight instruction*. Perhaps they need to knock the rust off their flying skills or have been out of general aviation for a while, flying bigger, faster airplanes. Either way, no matter how much experience they have, it is very unlikely they will be more competent than you in the airplane and environment you fly in, day in and day out. So don't be afraid to speak up when you see things that are not exactly right. That is what you are being paid for.

Remember, the most dangerous combination in the cockpit is two flight instructors. They each have their own way of doing things, and they are afraid to step on each other's toes. But when your safety is at stake, do not worry about being impertinent or offensive. As long as your language is professional, chances are that pilot will respect you for upholding your own high standards.

### **Risky Student Number Three: Students Who Excel**

I hope at some point, you have the pleasure of teaching a student who is a quick study, who takes to flying like a fish to water. These students never cease

to amaze me because they make the flight-training process look so effortless. Surprisingly, these are also the students who do not perform as well on checkride day. It's not their fault; the blame lies squarely with my own complacency as an instructor. The problem is that I assume they already know certain things.


Something I would really emphasize with a weaker student may get glossed over with a student in whom I have complete confidence. Learning that fact the hard way means that I now meticulously prepare every single student the same way. No one gets my checkride endorsement if they cannot explain to me how the battery gets charged in their airplane, or why resetting circuit breakers may not be a good idea. These things may seem elementary but you just never know the limits of a person's knowledge, even when they seem like a super student.

In that same vein, there are certain things I always do in the airplane, no matter how much I trust my student. Even when they tell me the fuel is full, I always take the time to open at least one fuel cap and visually confirm the level. I ask them not to be offended by this practice, that I would do it even if I were flying with Chuck Yeager. I also double-check my students on the pre-takeoff and landing checklists. Even the brightest students can accidentally leave the magnetos in the left or right position instead of both, or think that they see three green gear lights when the sun's reflection is shining on them.

"Trust, but verify" has long been the motto of much wiser people than me and seems like a very good practice for all things aviation.

Remember, when you are conducting the arguably risky business of flight instruction, there are certain things

you can do to avoid becoming a statistic. First of all, know your students, and spend extra time with those who are nervous fliers. Secondly, do not hesitate to speak up when something feels unsafe, even when your student has more flight hours than you. And finally, take certain safety measures every single time you go up, no matter how much you trust the person you are flying with.

With the proper amount of caution, and a little bit of luck, you will enjoy a lifetime of accident-free flying. 

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