How I prepared for "Digital First"

by Joe Wallington-Lardi, Shorebased Navigation Trainer

When I was given the opportunity to trial run a theory course using the new RYA Day Skipper notes book with its Digital First approach, I was unsure of where to begin.

Here's my account on where I started and my thoughts along the way. Hope this helps in some way.

After the updates from the RYA Conferences, and with my first Day Skipper Theory 6-day course of the season looming, it was time for a long overdue update of my teaching materials. A dauting task on the face of it which, if I was being honest, I had probably put off for far too long. Yet, once I started, I was pleasantly surprised how easy it was, and I enjoyed the process.

After a good read through of the new 'preview' Day Skipper Handbook it became apparent very quickly that not much has changed! It's just a change of focus with regards to how we deliver the course with a little new content.

The RYA have taken the time to update the images, ensured the new publication is more accessible and diverse and added the use of QR codes, the actual content remains broadly the same. The new handbook has a much nicer feel and reads very well. It allows the student to build up the concept of navigating, rather than learn individual skill sets, often leaving the classroom with some great maths skills but still confused on how to use these when afloat.

Sat in front of my laptop staring at the screen wondering where to start. I took my inspiration from my safety slides as it suddenly dawned on me that the new 'Digital First' approach wasn't dissimilar to how I had previously updated my safety sessions. Whilst the basic concept and syllabus for safety hasn't changed, I had recently revamped my materials to put the focus on the digital first methods we are now seeing on most vessels, bringing equipment such as DSC, AIS SARTs and EPIRBS to the forefront of my delivery; then backfilling my student's knowledge with the other methods of calling for distress. I think we can agree most boats are not carrying guns or barrels of tar anymore, as such our classroom delivery should reflect this.

Once I had this concept making the changes to the rest of my course materials was very enjoyable and didn't take as long as I expected.

I began by removing my electronic charts and GNSS session from the schedule with the aim of 'washing' this through each remaining session. My GNSS introduction now comes on Day 1 of my course as part of the Introduction to charts session, whilst previously I would focus here on what we see on paper charts. I now start with showing my students a combination of screenshots provided by the RYA and a range of electronic charts (mainly Navionics and Savvy Navvy as they kindly offer

RYA Instructors a free subscription). During my first delivery in the classroom this turned into a great discussion with the group about what we are seeing on our MFD's, and more importantly what we are not seeing. It also allowed me to have a great discussion about sources of information.

Following on from this, I then took the same approach with my Tidal Heights and Streams subjects. Starting by introducing my students to electronic sources of tides and using a combination of the new RYA e-navigation website and Easytide to demo the tidal curve. Again, then backfilling their knowledge with the manual version, but throughout making sure I was not focussing too heavily on the maths side. For me, the overall aim here was to ensure my students understand the concept and the practical application of using tides when we are on the water, rather than focussing on why their answer may have been 0.2m different to me. Screensharing the interactive tidal curves in the RYA Training Almanac e-Book worked fantastically well here.

Thinking about how I deliver my day skipper practical courses really helped here. One of my first tasks I set my students when onboard is to ask them what they think the tide gauge will read as we leave Portsmouth Harbour. After diligently completing the tidal curve at the chart table and coming up with an accurate 'maths' answer, we soon see that it rarely (in fact hardly ever) reads what they come up with. This leads to a great discussion onboard surrounding the factors that affect the tides and instils the reason why we will be adding a clearance of at least 1.0m on our calculations for the remainder of the course. Changing the focus in the classroom course to close some of the gaps between the theory and practical worked well and seems a very logical thing to do.

With Course to Steer and EP, again I started the session with a screenshot of the electronic chart plotter and explained to the students the difference in the vectors, both angles and length, thus introducing the concept of both the EP and Shaping a Course as there are multiple ways to shape a course. E.g; COG vector, plotting it as the traditional Course to Steer or adjusting your course to stay on a transit . Again, relating this to what they will see and use when onboard. Delivering these two concepts this way round actually resulted in my students completing the paper chart exercises with ease, with fewer errors than I usually see along the way. Seeing the actual application first and understanding the basics from the chartplotter meant they had a much better concept of the vectors they were plotting on paper.

This theme continued in all my session plans and became easier as I went. Weather was another one that was well overdue an update. Even small things like my references to 'Met Broadcasts', whilst at some stage in the week onboard we will hear the Coastguard broadcast the weather via the VHF, I ask my students each day to find the weather and fill in the logbook. Something that they all do on their phones. In fact, on day one I used my iPad to show them the Met Office website and discuss the forecast. As such small changes like removing the word broadcast and focusing first on the most used sources of weather in the classroom made great sense.

Along the way I also took the opportunity to rework some of my additional questions I use, whilst also imputing several QR Codes within my course materials to sign post students to further information. This linked very well with the new RYA materials which use QR codes well.

All my students turned up on the course with a tablet or laptop of some description without being specifically asked. With my use of QR codes and the RYA E-Navigation website throughout my sessions they were able to follow with ease. The feedback at the end of the week was very strong and the students commented on the fact they enjoyed using a mixture of paper notes and electronic devices.

Seeing tablets and laptops in the classroom is now the norm and I enjoy the addition of this new teaching aid. It allows the students to work at their own pace, follow my lesson plan and allows them to bookmark websites and complete further reading after the course.

My first delivery of the 'Digital First' Day Skipper Theory went very well; in fact, I found the flow of the week was greatly enhanced. With less stand-alone subjects and a more joined up approach with electronics running throughout as a theme, resulted in my students building up a solid understanding of how we navigate onboard. Hopefully preparing them for their practical course in the best possible way and closing some of the gaps between the theory and practical elements of Day Skipper.

As instructors it can be very easy for us to get a bit stuck in our ways at times. Having delivered hundreds of theory courses in similar formats over the years I was slightly nervous that my new delivery wouldn't be as slick. I had to break the mould and think again about my delivery and what I was saying and how I would ensure my students understood the content. However, once I started the week it was evident that it was easier as I was just delivering what I would do on the water! As we know, the Plan, Do, Review cycle comes in very useful here.

Whilst there are no changes to the Yachtmaster Syllabus on the horizon, having updated my Day Skipper course I am looking forward to doing the same with the Yachtmaster Theory. Again, putting the electronic elements throughout every session, it just makes sense!