

INSPIRATION IN AVIATION: UPWARDS AND ONWARDS

The virtual reality road from Covid lockdown gloom to enthusiasm and boom

Teaching and training online for PPL ground exams – the ‘International School Ballooning’

By Allie Dunnington (BWPA/GAAC/BBAC)

How it all began....

It all begins in a tiny village in Ngapali on the Bay of Bengal in troubled Myanmar. Kids of all ages stream into the Vera Thomson school eager to learn good English. Signs on the walls show a clear sign of encouragement: ‘Success is not final, failure is not fatal’, ‘it is the courage to continue that counts’, ‘if at first you don’t succeed, try, try and try again’, ‘no pain, no gain’!

A sylphlike person with short blonde hair wearing a traditional Burmese longyi chivvies teachers and students to various classrooms. ‘Mummy Sue’ as the over 70-year old British lady is fondly called, is founder of the Vera Thompson English school. An amazing project that has grown over the last 10 years from teaching a handful impoverished Burmese village children to running classes on all levels with over 600 students. Some have gained scholarships to study in the UK.

From here another programme started last year: teaching the violin. One of the most difficult instruments. But never use the word ‘impossible’ and with the help and inspiration of professional rock classic violinist, Aaron Meyer (Portland, Oregon, US), and Mummy Sue’s support 8 violins were donated and Aaron and I started to teach the kids to play the instrument.



Allie with her Burmese violin students in Ngapali, Myanmar January 2020

At the time I was working again in Ngapali as a commercial balloon pilot flying over the beautiful jungle and rivers in the early morning hours every day. I hadn’t touched a violin myself for decades. But then Covid struck and we all had to leave the country. Aaron suggested we should continue teaching online. Really? I couldn’t believe this would ever work. But to my greatest surprise after a year of online instruction, the kids are now playing scales and songs and have made fantastic progress!

Starting online PPL study classes

With this in the back of my mind, I thought that something had to be done for our aviation/ballooning students. Many have been left in limbo and nearly lost hope of ever getting their

licences. This partly due to Covid and all the restrictions but also as a result of the complexity of regulatory change leaving EASA.

I am neither a computer specialist nor had I ever heard of something called 'Zoom' until April 2020! I also didn't have much faith in online teaching. But I believe in one thing: that we can all try and create something positive and that we should always look 'on the bright side of life'!

Having subsequently participated in many exciting Zoom sessions hosted by organizations such as the British Women Pilots' Association (BWPA) whose membership astonishingly even increased during 2020 by 25% with 60 new members, I realised that Zoom also offers a unique and easy tool to reach a wide-spread, diverse and even international audience.

Nobody needs to travel or spend any money (except having access to half-decent internet) and even different time-zones can be taken into account.

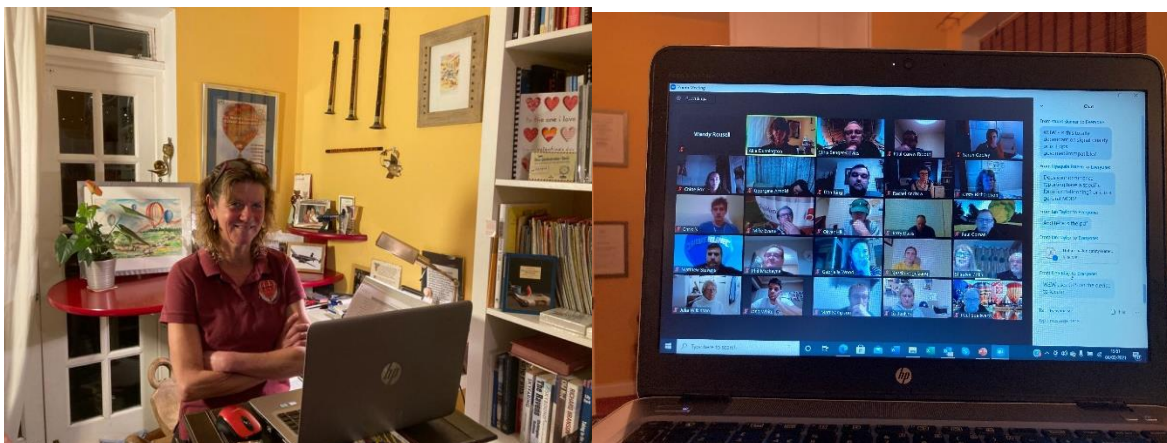
So, what better time than now - when everybody is still confined to sitting at home - for getting those study books out and starting to learn again for the written exams?

After posting an initial invitation to join my free online learning sessions, the emails started to stream in: 'oh great! Just what I needed!', 'I nearly gave up – thank you so much!', 'brilliant idea'!

Encouraged by the overwhelming positive feed-back I hosted a first introduction session on mid January from my desk at home in Bristol. Over 50 students, ranging from far away Canada to Cuba, France, Denmark, the UK onto Vietnam, Malaysia and Laos, joined the talk.

How best to host a meaningful study lesson online?

Firstly, knowing that many PuTs felt isolated and socially deprived, I decided to run short introduction rounds with students telling others where they live, what training level they are at and what they hope to achieve. Through short doodle poll surveys we all learnt that about 15% of all students were aiming for a professional career in ballooning/aviation and that women/girls reached an outstanding 45% of all participants with half of them also aspiring to a commercial pilot's licence.



At the 'headquarter' of the 'International School of Ballooning' in Bristol – online sessions

Being well aware that many of us are 'zoomed' out – especially the younger ones with their online schooling – I am strictly sticking to only teaching for exactly one hour. The more 'serious' PowerPoint lessons are limited to 20 minutes leaving enough time for a variety of different teaching methods to keep students' attention.

“We are all zoomed out” – shorter attention span

Research on the topic has indicated that we lose our focus much more rapidly on screen than when being part of live presentations or meetings (see link). A different voice from mine was needed and I decided to invite guest speakers covering the PPL syllabus from ‘balloon systems’ to Air Law, Met, HPL and Nav. It takes a bit of coordination but students do appreciate the variety in lectures by different speakers.

For the slide show presentations remember that ‘less is more’. Keep it simple, clear and don’t overfill the slides. Add photos and diagrams to keep attention and interest.

The other very important point is ‘interaction’: put out tasks where students can write their comments in the ‘chat box’, let them ask ‘live’ questions (unmuting themselves) and allow time for networking, Q&As and humour! Add short review questions to each lesson or a quiz.

The mixture in this teaching style ‘potpourri’ has paid off: after four sessions the number of regular attendees has even increased to between 50-60 participants on a Thursday evening and to around 10 for the extra ‘Asia’ group on a Friday morning.

Groups range from total beginners or balloon crew, to advanced PuTs nearly ready for check out, to the Education board of Denmark and fixed wing flyers or balloon pilots/instructors who want to brush up their theoretical knowledge.

Personal messages received show that students are enjoying this new form of entertaining but likewise stimulating teaching. Nobody these days has the brain to listen to hours of tedious slides full with figures and numbers. Instead, spice it up, pick out some interesting bits and encourage your students to read the books themselves during the week.

Get sponsorship and offer prizes

To add another incentive for the PuTs, I managed to secure some fantastic prizes for the students such as a brand-new combined GPS/altimeter flight instrument, the ‘Digitool DBI3’, (Sweden) or a variety of the Pilot Training Manual and other items by POOLEYs. And there is more to come from some of the balloon manufacturers.

Thanks to another instructor and BA Captain, we can now also offer online quizzes for after the main Zoom talk enabling students to review their previous lessons whilst having fun and a drink by their side. How many hours from bottle to throttle?

If you want to hear more or if you are interested in ‘zooming’ into one of the sessions, please contact me by email. It would be great to have you ‘on board’!

The lessons are each Thursday evening at 19.00-20.00 UTC and Fridays at 09.30 to 10.30 UTC.

They are free of charge and meant for anybody interested in learning to fly and study for their written PPL exams. They don’t claim to cover the full syllabus or give you a ‘pass’. But remember – as Mummy Sue would say: onwards and upwards!



Phil and Allie's vintage Beech 18 and their ultra-light balloon preparing for their Arctic expedition in 2017 at Gloucester airport – and, a dream come true: flying across Greenland with the balloon on board the aircraft.

'It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you don't stop' - Confucius

'A winner is a dreamer who never gives up' - Nelson Mandela

SUGGESTIONS FOR ZOOM LESSONS

Recommendations:

- Stick to a maximum of one-hour lessons
- Don't overrun time!
- Have a diversity of topics and mix them up
- Delegate tasks and invite speakers of different gender/background/age
- Get interactive: set tasks, leave time to answer, use chat box, unmute everybody
- Create a personal connection and allow time for networking
- Have incentives: prizes, quizzes to win
- Review previous session with short questions
- Use film clips and short videos to relax the attention

Be careful of:

- GDPR: ask permission of everybody before recording or taking screenshots
- Have a 'Bcc' mailing list
- Explain what you are doing

Tips for your tech settings:

- Allow extra time for technological flaps e.g. screensharing not working (always have a spare copy of slide shows or presentation on a second computer by a different person)
- remember on video sharing to click 'allow sound'
- close all files on your PC before screensharing
- link up with your host early and allow plenty of time to check all media is working
- Check your own video and sound
- Get your screen background set up or use a virtual background
- Promote your session via social media, Facebook, twitter etc.

Useful links:

BWPA: British Women Pilot’s Association: [Become a Member – British Women Pilots' Association \(bwpa.co.uk\)](http://www.bwpa.co.uk)

BBAC British Balloon and Airship Club: [Join the BBAC as a New Member! – BBAC Membership Management Site](http://www.bbac.org.uk)

GAAC: General Aviation Council: [General Aviation Awareness Council – News \(gaac.org.uk\)](http://www.gaac.org.uk)

Digitool DBI3: [SALES & AMBASSADORS | dbi3.com](http://www.dbi3.com) (contact Allie Dunnington)

Pooleys flight equipment: [PPL Training Material & Starter Kits | PPL Exam Preparation Books | Pooleys Flying and Navigational Products and Accessories](http://www.pooleys.com)

Vera Thomson English School/Myanmar Aid: [Vera Thomson English School - Welcome \(myanmaraid.org.uk\)](http://www.myanmaraid.org.uk)

Phil and Allie Dunnington: Gone-with-the-wind Ltd: www.gonewiththewind.uk.com

Beech 18 and Balloon expedition Arctic and Central America: www.onthebeech.blogspot.co.uk

Links to attention span research and websites:

Many experts agree that 45 minutes represents the best meeting length.

Research shows that engagement in meetings starts to drop off quite rapidly after about 30 minutes. Attention levels drop quickly the longer the meeting lasts.

Time of meeting	% of people paying attention
0-15 minutes	91%
15-30 minutes	84%
30-45 minutes	73%
45+ minutes	64%

It is safe to assume that after one hour you have lost half of the attendees.

See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/our-attention-span-now-less-goldfish-microsoft-study-finds-10247553.html>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/attention-span-average-british-person-tuned-concentration-mobile-phone-a8131156.html>

<https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>

A few comments by participants and observers

Lau Laursen, Denmark (from the Danish balloon federation)

Dear Allie,

Thanks' for letting me join yesterday's lesson.

I found the lesson interesting in many ways. First of all I liked the concept of having 55 people online, and your way of guiding the session.

I also enjoyed your guest speaker.

I am inspired of your new way of theoretical education.

Gabriella Wood (new PuT)

Allie,

Thanks for the warm welcome and a great session tonight.

I have started reading the manuals and the course books so am all set to get stuck in! It's been my ambition to start this process for a long while but I usually travel so much for work that finding the time has been hard!! Changes due to Covid and recently becoming a new mother have created the space ;)

Rachel Andrews (had started fixed wing flying)

I was partway through a fixed wing PPL a couple of years ago, didn't do the written exams but did a lot of the study so I have some somewhat rusty knowledge of the parts of the ground school syllabus that are common to all modes of flight, and quite a bit of radio experience.

If you could let me know the details of your lessons that would be great.

Sarah Cobley, Ashburton, Devon

Morning Allie

I am really enjoying the online sessions, what a great thing for you to offer and I am sure like me, many people will be getting a lot from it. It's wonderful to be making a start on the theory while we can't fly at the moment.

Oliver Penney

Hi Allie,

really enjoying the sessions so far, thank you! Sorry for the late reply, would be happy to say a few words during the intro round this Thursday though.

Linda Hamblyn (fixed wing PPL pilot)

Allie, that was great! Thank you so much! So professional! Nice to see so many people!