

Teaching Adult Beginners

Sean Marsh

Sean Marsh (2215 rating ECF) is a chess tutor (33 years and counting), blogger and editor for Chessable, Regional Coordinator and Chief Trainer for Chess in Schools and Communities and reviewer for *CHESS Magazine*. His 2014 book *The Batsford Book of Chess: From Beginner to Winner* received excellent reviews.

One of the biggest mistakes made when teaching anyone how to play chess is dumbing down the material. This applies mainly to juniors but can also happen with adults.

Here are some pointers:

A coach may feel uncomfortable when teaching juniors and hides in an over-reliance on the teacher/pupil status. This fails to take into account *the two-way process* of the learning experience.

A coach is unable to convey the message from a position of greater skill and experience.

The desire - on either a conscious or subconscious level - to *prove* to the student the teacher is superior.

These - and other mistakes - build walls and project boundaries that can be difficult to overcome. There are other mistakes just waiting to be made when teaching adults how to play chess.

These include:

Being unable to take the lesson seriously, which can become a scenario of two friends chatting.

Not understanding the skills necessary to successfully convey the message to a pupil who could be of an age equal to - or greater - than the tutor.

Not structuring the ongoing work and lessons as one would do when teaching juniors.

A fault common to teaching both juniors and adults is the use of money as the sole motivation. Without wishing to stray too far into the tautological territory of false gods, I am sure we are all familiar with teachers who are clearly counting up their figures as they simultaneously count down their days to retirement.

Successful teaching requires, as a starting point, a potent desire to enrich the lives of others and a passion for the subject in question.

The dubious art of dumbing down is on the increase. One cannot help but notice the familiar patterns whenever chess is featured on the news. The presenters simply *have* to smirk, sheepishly, while they reveal how bad they are at playing chess. Then it seems obligatory to follow through with, 'Mind you, I'm good at checkers.'

Placed against such a backdrop, the reasons people pitch their lessons incorrectly when teaching adults is understandable. An additional factor can be added: the vast majority of chess tutors are not trained teachers.

This particular obstacle can be overcome as the tutors develop their own style and build up a significant amount of experience.

However, the situation will always be problematic until the almost-universal dumbing down is countered.

Some people want to learn how to play chess merely to enjoy playing the game. Others want to learn the basics and then improve their skills and enter tournaments. No one approach is better than any other in this respect. *There is more than enough room for everyone in the chess world.*

The average person who plays chess will never elevate their ratings to a level that the majority of established players will find impressive. There is a great deal of snobbery in chess and giving the human brain a number is a good way to ensure it continues.

Good tutors will avoid the pitfalls noted above and will treat all students with the greatest of respect - whether they are juniors or adults. They will ensure the lessons have relevant content and are not excuses to show off their own talent or to talk down to 'lesser' players.

Patience is required from both sides. Adults will find some aspects very hard to grasp, just as juniors do.

If a tutor or experienced chess player would like to put themselves in the new student's shoes then all it needs is for the tutor to try doing something new. For instance, try learning how to play a musical instrument. Then think about how long you would keep it up if you had a tutor for music lessons and they were obviously frustrated by your lack of talent or just wanted to show how much better than you they are with the instrument.

There is an *enormous* difference between dumbing something down and making it more accessible. The two are not as interchangeable as people would have you believe.

In the wise words of Anna from the rather appropriate *The King and I*:

*'It's a very ancient saying,
But a true and honest thought,
That if you become a teacher,
By your pupils you'll be taught.'*

Advice for Beginners

Learn the very basics of a small number of openings (one for White; two for Black - to cater for 1 e4 and 1 d4 by the opponents).

Learn how to finish off an opponent when you have a much superior force. Just knowing a few standard checkmates (such as The Lawnmower, <https://chessfox.com/lawnmower-mate/>) will considerably increase your confidence and results.

Practice.

Do not neglect chess books. There is an enormous variety on the market. Take advice from experienced players regarding which books would best suit your current playing strength.

Play through the moves of your games and try to understand where you went wrong and what you need to do to avoid the same mistakes happening next time.

Try solving a small number of tactical chess puzzles, several times a week.

Practice.

Do not be afraid of playing against higher-rated players. You would like to beat them, but you cannot do so without playing them.

Analyse the games yourself *before* you use a computer to do so. This will improve your own analytical powers and when you compare notes with the chess engine you will also see what sort of tactics you are missing.

Practice.

Vary your tournaments. Play in some in which you think you will do well and choose others in which you are aiming to gather experience and gain knowledge.

Set sensible targets for yourself before each tournament.

Practice.

Go to your local chess club (when allowed to do so).

Keep going through the pain-barrier of defeats. Accept that 'you either win, or you learn.' Remember that *every* chess player in the world was once a total novice. The ones who are good players *now* simply had more determination to keep going.

Practice.

Links to Sean's blogs (he is contactable through the blogs)

<https://www.chessable.com/blog/>

<http://cscteesside.blogspot.com>

<http://marshtowers.blogspot.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/CSCTeesside>

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