

CFI to CFI

Periodically Out of My Element

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Good learning opportunities come from occasionally breaking up our routine to try something new. For a student pilot, this may mean practicing landings at an airport away from home base. An out-of-the-ordinary experience such as this will grab our attention and demand our full focus. This could be just what we need to get over normal slumps in learning.

When we feel a little bit nervous about our situation our minds open up to new perceptions. The more perceptions we let in the more we learn. However, to effectively make use of incoming information, our brain needs something to relate it to. This is why students need to begin by flying in a structured environment where they can build up a routine and assemble a solid knowledge foundation on which to build. Then, and only then, is it prudent to start challenging students in new ways.

Where I teach in East Texas, students are accustomed to doing things the same way each lesson. Limitations on the number of airplanes, the airspace, and the availability of practice areas lead us to follow a very particular routine. This is why I spend a great deal of time finding ways to offer new experiences throughout a student's training.

One of the flight lessons I have developed takes a student away from our home airport soon after his or her first solo. We visit a controlled airport for the first time, then make a few touch-and-goes using a nonstandard pattern before returning back home. The total trip distance is less than 50 nautical miles and the students seem to get a sense of accomplishment. I enjoy making the trip because it gives me a chance to introduce radio navigation and pilotage just before we get into cross-country flight planning. As an instructor, I wouldn't put a price tag on such a valuable experience. Unfortunately for the student, the flight school does -- in the form of an hourly rental rate.