My Most Valuable Lesson(s)

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I recently learned the most valuable lesson of my career as a programmer analyst. Or so I thought! Actually, in the process of implementing “my lesson” I learned an even more valuable lesson.

The occasion for these insights was the experience of starting my second job as a programmer analyst, after five years at my first. The computer system and software at my new job were different enough that I needed guidance and assistance from my new co-workers. This put me in the same position of many of the end users I had dealt with over the years. The first thing I noticed was the varying styles of assistance.

The most aggravating style was the overbearing instructor. Instead of telling you the process to accomplish the task for which you requested help, this instructor leans over you, or pushes you aside, and in a flurry of activity produces the desired results. Although you get where you wanted to be, you could never repeat the process yourself. It reminded me of the adage “give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.”

What really made me feel awful was the realization that I had often been this type of instructor at my previous job. With one user, I even had the habit of reaching across the desk and operating the user’s keyboard upside down. I had never realized how insulting this was! Or how little help it was in learning how to use computer software.

I suppose impatience is part of the problem. When you have a busy schedule it’s hard to sit by and wait while a novice user searches the keyboard for the desired key.

Job security may also play a part. When the instructed knows as much as the instructor, the instructor is no longer needed.

Sufficiently humbled, I looked forward to my first interactions with my new users so I could mend my evil ways. And my hunch was correct. My first user took note of my
“hands-off” approach and complimented me on it. She said it made a big difference. Emboldened, I looked forward to employing my new method with other users.

My first session with user number two was a total flop. We did not get along at all and nothing was accomplished. I cannot remember having a more disastrous interaction. Back in my office I relived the session, searching for clues for where things went wrong.

Finally it hit me! Every user is different. I was applying a method that worked well with a “hands-on” type of user but user number two was the “hand-holding” type of user. This user wanted to be shown how to do things and had no interest in being in the driver’s seat during consulting sessions. I made another appointment for the afternoon and this time things went smoothly.

So I learned my lesson (both of them). Many users do learn better if you are patient and let them operate their keyboard while you offer instructions. However, every user is different and I always need to keep that thought in the back of my mind. Now I always make an attempt to determine the type of user I am dealing with before proceeding with a consulting session and adjust my style accordingly.

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While driving a Red Cross Bloodmobile, Kevin Cauble got bored and joined a local university to take history classes. Unable to get the classes he wanted, he took a computer class as a lark. After the first minute of the first class, Kevin knew what he wanted to do. He graduated with a degree in Computer Science and is currently working as a Programmer/Analyst at a small liberal arts college in North Carolina. Kevin can be reached through the editorial staff of developer.*.