

## **Model Muddles**

Dr Chris Haughton EdD MA BA CertEd QTLS Master Mariner FifL FNI

*Following model courses is all too often an easy way out for course assessors – and nobody is served by the result. Time for a rethink?*

In a maritime training school, I recently saw a written assessment for cadets. One question asked them to list three requirements of the ISM Code. That was it. List three requirements. The students had each written a couple of words for each requirement and received full marks. There was no critique, no analysis, no drawing of links between the Code and lived experience, no rationale for the Code in the first place. In short, this was a pastiche of an assessment designed for the least possible pain and highest possible result. There were other examples of this assessment design.

Now, there may be a genuine need to be able to recall such arcane information: a need to show that you can regurgitate someone else's work without further thought. But it's quite a struggle to find it and so justify this lazy approach to education.

Shallow questions are easy - and cheap - to set and assess. They show a measure of knowledge acquisition, are tacitly accepted by students, sponsors and regulators and somehow are thought to add to the learning process and the development of competence. Complex and searching questions (see box for some examples) are the opposite. They require planning and research. They need time and effort to assess – and to teach - and feedback needs to be formative and detailed, which may be expensive.

Perversely, we congratulate ourselves that cadets have been taught well and can prove their knowledge, without asking the most basic questions about why they need this knowledge. Schools and colleges are full of sound and professional mariners who dictate educational policy, but some of them don't seem to have the foggiest idea of what education is really about. The problem is compounded by regulators, flag states and sponsors who condone this kind of assessment and allow such travesties to continue.

### **The Model Course takeover**

How have we reached the stage where students studying in Further and Higher Education towards respected academic qualifications and Certificates of *Competence* can be (partially) judged on their short-term memory?

Perhaps the key lies in the STCW Convention? One of the so-called four pillars of maritime oversight (the others being, of course, SOLAS, MARPOL and MLC), the STCW has been with us for nearly forty years. With the very best of intentions, it offers a framework that administrations, educators and practitioners must use to design education and training schemes to develop competent seafarers. The STCW Code is over-prescriptive in parts and less than adequate in others but, in general, it's not a bad template to work from.

No, it's not actually the Convention itself that's the problem, but rather what the Convention has spawned: the IMO Model Course. Model Courses (and their domestic equivalents in administrations around the world) were intended to amplify the requirements and give guidance to colleges, companies and regulators on how the provisions of the STCW Code should be realised. All too often, the resulting guidelines are regarded as mandatory requirements. In many places the Model Course has become the *only* course. It has replaced course design teams, done away with the need for home-grown assessment strategies and provides a neat one-stop-shop for those wanting to show how compliant they are with the regulations.

Some industry end-users even require that short course certificates state that they have been in accordance with the relevant IMO Model Course. In short, Model Courses are beginning to replace compliance with the STCW Convention as the measure of worth.

It's ironic that in trying to guarantee standards by insisting on model courses, the industry is promoting an instrument that has obsolescence written into its very DNA. The trouble with Model Courses is that they are simply top-down, input-driven syllabi and curriculum lists that focus on the **what** rather than the **why** - and so, inevitably, do the assessments. The Model Courses require specific academic references in a world where new academic references are constantly being produced. Theory, practice, and technology are now developing so fast that overly-prescriptive curricula of this kind are redundant before the ink is dry. This does not matter in places where course teams and colleges work from the STCW Convention and then design their offerings accordingly. In these places, regular and effective curriculum reviews ensure they stay up to date. By contrast, the turgid design process of Model Courses means they cannot possibly respond to curriculum change, new technology, revised practices or industrial need.

This is all the more painful for the author since he was involved in writing IMO Model Course 1.39 (Leadership and Teamwork). Here, the writing team made great efforts to loosen the prescription, open up new ideas and to challenge the way Model Courses are presented. The final result is far from that aspiration and 1.39 is, regrettably, a majorly missed opportunity.

### **Avoiding obsolescence**

There is currently (2014) a review underway into how Model Courses are initiated, developed and monitored, which surely must be a positive move. However, early drafts of the proposals still appear to be missing a major point – the need to keep the curriculum dynamic. This may not be important in all areas of the maritime curriculum, but is certainly so in the area of teamwork and leadership: a couple of examples will suffice to illustrate the point:

- New perspectives in organisational learning and teamwork (Edmondson, 2012) have been identified. These have some bearing not only on the Leadership and Teamwork curriculum but also on management studies generally, and therefore may merit inclusion in any discussion on teamwork. Numerous other examples are being produced all the time. If Model Courses include suggested bibliographies which are

seldom updated, the curriculum becomes stuck in a time warp. We are not benefitting from new learning, and what's more, we run the risk of stifling any possibility of nurturing the enquiring mind.

- The 'train the trainer' Model Course 6.09, published in 2001, is woefully out of date (talking, for example, about overhead projectors and acetates). Ironically, this course is widely used as a benchmark for initial instructor training.

### **What needs to change?**

The conclusion is clear: if Model Courses insist on patronising micro-prescription, then they can never deliver the dynamism needed. The answer is to reduce the level of prescription - not compound it in yet more layers of systems, checklists, review bodies and bureaucracy.

Let us keep the requirements and expected outcomes at a high level. Let local administrations, schools and course teams bear responsibility for interpreting them and creating detail in the light of statute, the STCW, industry need, cultural influence and current research. Above all, let them focus on the needs of the *learners*, currently conspicuous by their absence in these regulations. If we can do these things, all the other factors drop into place.

If the industry insists on pressing ahead with its (usual) legislative approach to the problem Senge (2006) describes the likely outcome. He describes graphically what organisations sometimes do when faced with systems they do not like. They appear to comply while simultaneously inventing sub-systems to subvert the official one. In other words, expect lots of ticked boxes and wordage but not much substantive change. Worse, we'll all still be wringing our hands in ten years' time in bewilderment that there's been no discernible movement.

But all is not gloom and doom. In an initiative to try and identify gaps between STCW requirements and actual practice I took part in a workshop earlier this year in the Philippines. The week was electric in its enthusiasm and energy. Participants were eager to examine the Convention in detail to see where they might meet its philosophy and intent more closely. It was a privilege to work on the project.

It was the Code that defined the delegates' work that week. There wasn't even as much as a sniff of a Model Course. How refreshing was that! Let us give the Code back to the colleges and educators; let them talk closely with the professionals at sea and with the managers ashore; let them design a curriculum which is focussed on outcomes and deliverables; let them keep the work alive and let's, above all, assess more than memory.

### Some ideas for ISM Code Assessment:

Q. Why did the maritime industry perceive the need to introduce a Safety Management Code? Give a brief account and comment on the circumstances that led to the Code's introduction.

- Q. To what extent is the ISM Code relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> shipping? Illustrate your answer with examples from personal experience and/or your research.
- Q. Has the ISM Code been effective in reducing accident rates at sea? Discuss.
- Q. In your own experience, how was safety on your last vessel managed? Discuss against the framework of the ISM Code.
- Q. Working in sets, design and deliver a fifteen minute presentation to your peers on the key aspects of the ISM Code.