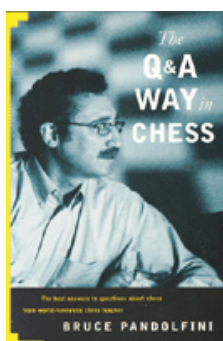




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



CHESSTHEATRE

Play through and download
the games from
ChessCafe.com in the
[DGT Game Viewer](#).

[The Complete
DGT Product Line](#)



Teaching the Teacher

Question I have a ten-year-old son who takes weekly chess lessons, usually at a time when I am working, so I do not always know what transpires. Naturally, I would like to know more about what took place, especially the things he has learned. To my way of thinking, it is a good idea to try to remember at least a few points from every lesson. That is what I learned in school myself, and I have also heard other teachers in my experience say something like that. So I have asked my son to write down what he remembers immediately afterward, but he does not like to write, as I understand most kids do not, and practically nothing ever appears in the notebook on the page set aside for that day. I could try to follow up with the teacher, but I do not want to seem like a pest. Is there something you could suggest that might help? I want to remain more involved so that he sees that I care. Maybe that will motivate him more.
Irwin Meyerson (USA)

Answer You're right. It is a good idea to focus on a number of the more important notions revealed in individual lessons. This is why some teachers summarize each lesson immediately at its end, actually asking students to recall a few of the more critical ideas as a way of emphasizing them. Typically, students wind up saying some of things they already know, or casting new ideas in terms they have gathered from the past. It's not unusual therefore that many lessons wind up sounding the same, with little discrimination. Here's a technique I have used for some students in comparable circumstances that might satisfy your present needs.

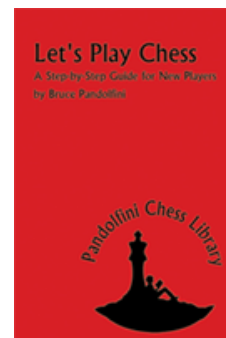
Have your son record or film (with sound) his enumerated thoughts immediately after every lesson. Let's say he tries to formulate a list of at least three to five key ideas upon each lesson's completion. Then you can play over each session's summary as often as you like, and so can your son for reinforcement. Continue with this practice every week, adding each lesson's summarized agenda to the ever-growing record. As your son plays over his developing electronic journal, certain concepts will be driven home better and areas to work on will become more evident by conspicuous absence.

I think the record will speak even more strongly for everyone's benefit if the teacher also adds his comments after your son's. In this way your son (and you) can get a better take on how well his thoughts match up with the teacher's, and you won't have to follow up with the teacher so much because his comments and thinking on the process are already there. Accordingly, and rather naturally, your son will also acquire more accurate terminology to express some of the amorphous thoughts he may not know how to put into words. As a final point, the teacher can benefit from the record as well. He or she can use it to see more readily and easily those sectors needing further effort, hoping to address those problem zones in subsequent lessons. Give this technique a try. You might be surprised.

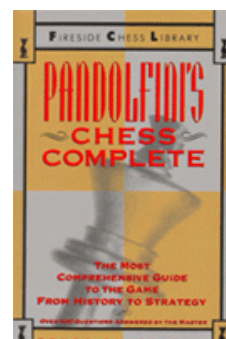
Question For the past two years my son, now in the third grade, has taken chess lessons at his school and privately on weekends from a local master. The private lessons are taken at a club, and there often are many other youngsters and adults around. The teacher is a nice guy, but he has what I feel is a bad approach in that he talks incessantly throughout the lesson. He will pose a problem or a question and then ask do you see the answer. Before any time goes by he'll show the solution or give the answer before waiting for a response. I am not a good player, though I am better than my son, and I never see the answers either. At the end of the lesson I wonder if my son has learned anything. The teacher, as I say, is a strong player, and a truly nice guy, but I do not think he is a very good teacher, though lots of people think he is. He has another bad habit that also bothers me. He talks so loudly, that it seems he is teaching everyone else at the same time, and this can bring a whole crowd to the board to watch the lessons. I feel he is performing to them and I am paying for it through the nose (\$200). I have no doubt that back in Europe he was a great teacher, but I do not believe this is the way to give lessons. What do you think about this? Should I say something about it? These are not private lessons and that is what I am paying for. Should I get another teacher? There is no one that I know about in the Dallas area who is as good a player, so I do not have many options. I would appreciate your advice.
Will Olsen (USA)

Answer I agree with you at least in your basic contention. A private lesson should be given in private. The upshot of everyone standing around can be terribly distracting and debilitating to a young mind, or

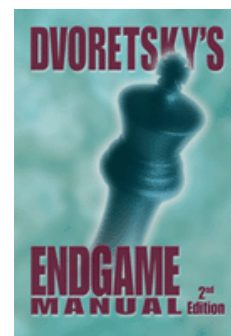
Visit Shop.ChessCafe.com for
the largest selection of chess
books, sets, and clocks in
North America:



[Let's Play Chess](#)
by Bruce Pandolfini



[Pandolfini's
Chess Complete](#)
by Bruce Pandolfini



[Dvoretsky's Endgame
Manual](#)
by Mark Dvoretsky

even to an old mind, for that matter. There's no way a normal person could think freely enough in such an environment to gain from it sufficiently. So indeed I would express my displeasure over it. But you're wrong about your options. There are a ton of chess teachers in and around Dallas. I can't believe you frequent a club, with your son playing in tournaments, and you aren't aware of other possibilities. Not too far away, at UTD, is probably the best academic chess program in the country. Why don't you touch base with someone there and see what alternatives exist.

But to shift our focus somewhat, I've said it before, and I'll say it again, many of us, especially teachers, don't appreciate the importance of silence. By constantly pontificating away, trying to display our special learning, we deprive students of opportunities to think. Students need time to analyze, ask questions, weigh options, and let their minds explore, consider, and evaluate. It's only by attempting to solve problems, whether successfully or not, that youngsters can experience lines of reasoning and paths of possible solution for themselves so that they can solve similar problems on their own in the future.

Students need time, not only to get it right, but to get it wrong. How else can they see why and what to avoid? We don't want to raise a generation of adult infants, who must rely on everyone else for the simplest of tasks. That's not the way to advance civilization, having the answers and everything else presented to us just like that, without a chance to grapple with the material of life. If you care about this teacher, find a way to talk it over with him, with the idea of getting him to shut up a bit. You can also accept the status quo, with all its propensities and attendant, likely, negative consequences, or you might start thinking about getting another teacher fast. I could say more, but it's late enough to be getting early, and I see the sun coming up. So, as I have done before, I will simply cite Wittgenstein in paraphrase, passing over the rest of what I'd like to say in silence.

Question I am a Class C player, which I suppose is about average for the USCF, and I have been playing tournament chess since the Fischer-Spassky match of 1972. I got very excited about it, as did some of my friends, but unlike them I have stayed with the game. I have had a number of different teachers through the years (I even took two or three lessons from you in the 1970s), and I have gotten better with their tutelage (and yours too, which I enjoyed very much but were too expensive for me at the time), and now I am looking for another teacher, probably a strong master who can guide me in new openings and some endgame study, which I do not know very much about. I often hear that once you reach a certain level you need a really strong teacher who knows what he's talking about, who has all the right information so as not to start you down a bad road. How strong a teacher do you think I need to make real improvements, and, frankly, to get my rating up to 1600? In real life, I think it is good to have a stronger player behind you, who knows what he is talking about. **Joe Vaccaro (USA)**

Answer You must have sent me a pseudonym, Joe, because I don't remember your name, not that I recall every student I ever taught. Whatever your name is (and forgive me if you did get it right), I'm happy that you enjoyed those two or three lessons, as expensive as they were. You should see what I charge now. But to get to the gist of your question, there are no accepted rules on how much stronger than you your teacher should be.

In general, to be able to answer and cope with the types of problems you may encounter, I'd recommend getting a teacher at least two or three USCF levels above your present strength. So, if you're about a 1400 player, aim for a teacher of at least A strength, if not Expert or beyond. All things considered, he or she will probably know enough to satisfy your requirements. Regardless how strong your teacher is, and what he or she knows, you'll be on your own in the next tournament, without anyone standing behind you, telling you what to do. The only talking should be your own inner voice, helping you make your own plans and decide upon your next move. You know, like real life.

Question You have obviously had many top students through the years. Do you have a favorite one? If you do, who is it and how long ago did you teach him? **Manuel Garcia (USA)**

Answer I can't say I've loved all my students, though there are quite a number who have meant a great deal to me. If I did have a favorite, and I'm not sure I do, it would be painful to those not mentioned and excessively distorting to the one named. Besides, I can't even think about them that way. I'm just very happy I had the opportunity to share wonderful moments with some of the best and brightest on the planet.

Question I am about 1700, eighteen years old, and would like to become a chess teacher. There are not many chess teachers where I live, and this could be a good living. Plus I really enjoy teaching. I have already taught in my past experience, though I was not paid for it. I usually play king-

pawn openings for white and try for the Sicilian and Kings Indian Defenses with black, though I can play other systems as well. I just have not studied them as deeply. I do not have any favorite players, and I plan to teach using classic games and textbooks. This summer I am also working hard on the endgame, plowing through [Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual](#). Though it is very hard, I feel I am learning and getting stronger. In becoming a teacher, what do you think I should concern myself with the most? Teaching is about knowledge, but what else is it about? Someone I respect, my uncle, a fairly strong chess player, says teaching has nothing to do with knowledge and much more to do with sensitivity, knowing what to say. **Stephen Jones (USA)**

Answer In my opinion, teaching is less about knowledge and more about conveying how to think about knowledge and everything else. In harmony with your uncle, who seems like a very wise man, teaching does indeed have a lot to do with sensitivity, knowing what to say and what not to say, when to say it and when not to say it, how to say it and how not to say it. Teachers try to instill good habits. If you have good habits, you can fall back on them when at a loss. Knowing more does not make you a better teacher. It doesn't matter how much you know if you can't impart it to the student. As I've already said in a previous answer, the teacher isn't standing behind you when you're playing (okay, weird ones might), helping you decide on your next move(s). It seems to me the real job of the teacher is to help the student be self-reliant, able to trust his or her own decisions. Otherwise, the student is plagued with self-doubt, and that's a sure way to fail. So, the teacher's job is not to show you how much he or she knows. Rather, in the end, it's to equip you with faith in yourself, so that you come to realize you don't need the teacher.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

Which chess column, regardless of forum, is the very best?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

We received many responses to the [June](#) question of the month:

In years to come what chess rules, if any, will change?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Jason Bedago (USA) writes: In the future we will turn more to Fischer Random Chess. It has everything chess has and more and it is chess. It expands our opening base and will allow for all kinds of creativity. Let's hear it for Fischer Random.

Sondra Haverson (Sweden) writes: I think the board will be expanded with other dimensions to accommodate computers and playing online. New pieces will also emerge and all of this will transform the game. It has to be that way if chess is to keep up with our times.

The following nice answer was accidentally left out of the previous column and is included now. To the question about the world's best game:

Zalmen Kornin (Brazil) writes: Well, I guessed that comparisons between Chess and Go would be the leitmotiv on this topic – and I could also guess about the main points of the discussion – perhaps my own points can still stir some polemics. Go is a wonderful game, it can be played with any size of board, and the stones are always placed according to the player's will, taste and knowledge. This can of course be regarded already as a series of advantages over Chess, but Chess is unique as a cultural phenomenon – to play a game of Chess is far more transcendental than just move pieces in a board. It establishes a mystical union with generations that played the same game with the same pieces and board for centuries before the great inventions that arrived to our contemporary background – and that amongst that gallery of chessplaying fellow human beings we will find exactly the most significant in many fields, from Shakespeare to Tolstoy, or from Saladin to Bonaparte, or from Da Vinci to Einstein, etc.

Go has also a great and rich history, but until recently restricted to the Far East, where it also shares the space with Chinese Chess (a game as popular as our dear 'Western' form) and with Shogi, the Japanese Chess (maybe regarded as the game of the meek there, as compared to Go, the game of the most educated and sophisticated, but this is a purely national feature.)

Again to Chess: Just finished a game? Submit the opening to the database and you will discover that the same moves appeared in other games, but that at some moment a new move occurred and that this completely changed the sequence. However, now *you* know that *you* played like Capablanca or Kasparov for some moves. Submit the endgame to the Tablebase – you will discover that to play perfectly even with a few pieces is almost an inhuman task. And then let good chess software analyze the game – Now you can see amazing possibilities almost in

every moment, some are very pleasant, others are funny, others frightening. The machine, and the information stored inside, are there for your pleasure, for the main sake of your intellectual enjoyment.

As Go is also a purely mathematical game, it will arrive also sooner or later to be quantified by computers – smaller the board, easier for the machine. In the 9x9 shape, the best machines are already a match for anyone except the leading pros. Without trying to establish parallels, I would just recall also that in the world of Chess there's some magic places, quite similar to Lewis Carroll's or James Barrie's *Lands*, the realm of the Chess Study, that of the Chess Problem, with it's many branches, both forming, so to say, a whole literature of works, made basically placing pieces in an empty board according to a composer's will, taste and knowledge, to present constructions that can be defined as "Art for the Brain" – transmission of a message intended to motivate aesthetic emotion, maybe one of the purest form of brain to brain connection, free from the five senses' functions and capacities. Yes, that's my answer: Chess is more than a game.

The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next **ChessCafe.com** column...

[Yes, I have a question for Bruce!](#)

© 2009 Bruce Pandolfini. All Rights Reserved.

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

© 2009 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.
"ChessCafe.com®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.