

Getting More People Playing Bridge

Background

Bridge is a game played at many levels, from relaxed socials where the rules are more guidelines, to international competition where every letter of the law must be followed, and the workings of the players' minds are a mystery to many.

At the heart of bridge in the UK are the local clubs. These are forums where people get together regularly for a few hours to both play bridge and socialise, the exact balance depending on the club.

Bridge is played mostly by older people, and as such has a regular turnover as players move on in the great Howell movement of life.

During lockdown, we lost 2 years' worth of players, but did not replace them. As a result, clubs are struggling and we need to both get the flow of new players working again, and make up for those two lost years.

Getting "Club Ready"

It takes about 2 years on average for a complete novice to go from learning the game to being able to play at most clubs. Some may do it much quicker, some will never get there.

Why is this?

It's not their low level of ability – that has never been a bar to playing in clubs! Most new players can play bridge (albeit not very well) after about 20 hours tuition.

It's the speed of play. Club players take about 5 to 7 minutes a board, beginners 15 and upwards. This doesn't work in a situation where everyone has to change around at the same time.

Pipeline

So we have a pipeline of players. In one end go the complete beginners, and out the other come players capable of (and willing to) playing at a club.

This pipeline has several stages. They are:

- Basic Tuition
- Supervised Play
- No Fear Bridge

It is only when all three are in place that a club can start to generate new members.

The stages overlap quite a bit, both in terms of definition and temporally. They can be roughly defined as:

Basic Tuition

- The concept of a partnership
- Declarer Dummy and Defenders
- Trick taking
- Physical play of the cards
- Basic Declarer play (e.g. finesses)
- Basic Defender play (e.g. ruffs)
- The concept of the auction
- A simple bidding system
- Scoring

Supervised Play

Where players play bridge with:

- No time pressure (no need to “move”)
- No set number of boards
- The ability to refer to notes
- The ability to ask for (and get) help
- Nice friendly opponents

No Fear Bridge

Very much like a club, except

- Very little time pressure
- Normal movement
- Limited number of boards per session
- Nice friendly opponents

Face 2 Face or Online?

Bridge, at least at first, is primarily a social activity. If at all possible, lessons should be F2F. Not only is it more social, but it builds a sense of belonging and loyalty – both of which are essential to retaining players through their journey. Supervised play and no-fear can be online if necessary.

Ongoing Teaching

Bridge is game where everyone can always learn more. For beginners to get up to club level “standard” will need more and ongoing teaching. This is treated separately to the pipeline as players do not need to be a particular standard to play at a club, and would go on at the same time as supervised play and no fear bridge.

Making it Happen

This is a list of what a club needs to have in place:

- Funding
- Venue
- Day and Time
- Teacher + Helpers
- Equipment (tables, boards etc.)
- Integration Process
- Engagement
- Students!

Funding

Most courses will cover their costs if they get enough students, however a club may need to be prepared to invest in the process if numbers are low, or paid advertising is being used (which carries a risk of not generating enough to run a course).

The DBA is prepared to underwrite a teaching program providing that:

1. A costed plan is in place, covering all the requirements and resources listed above.
2. The club or local section is unable to fund the program
3. The plan meets a “level of realism” criteria

Bear in mind that a plan does not have to break even or show a surplus. Every new player makes an average lifetime contribution to the club of around £500 (based on £2.50 table money).

Venue

This speaks for itself. When looking at a venue, consider the following:

- Parking
- Projectors / Screens
- Bridge tables and other equipment (boards, bidding boxes etc.)
- Distance from target population centres

Day and Time

If at all possible, hold the lessons at the same time as the club session you would want them to join when they become good enough. This will maximise retention.

Teacher + Helpers

You have to have one who is prepared to take this on, and will do so in the knowledge that the whole process is designed to bring players into the club.

Depending on how many students you get, you may need helpers. No more than 2 tables per teacher / helper is recommended.

The DBA is willing to consider funding people to go on the EBED training if they would find it beneficial (providing there is an understanding that they will then teach players with a view to getting them to join the club).

Equipment (tables, boards etc.)

As a bridge club you will already have these, but you may need to arrange transport if your teaching venue is distant from your club session venue.

Integration Process

As your students progress, it is essential that they have the ability to have supervised play and no fear bridge, preferably with (friendly!) members of the club. The DBA intends to offer access to online supervised play and no fear bridge for clubs that cannot do so themselves.

Engagement

This will not happen if the club does not get wholeheartedly behind it – This means not just the committee but the players themselves.

Students

Students are the hardest thing to get, so let's look at that.

Recruitment

There are multiple ways of getting people interested in learning, and our recruitment will most likely be successful if we tackle all of them

- Word of mouth
- Emails: "Do you know anyone who would like to learn to play bridge?"
- Website
- Flyers in village halls, libraries, post offices
- Local newsletters
- What's on (free)
- Social Media
 - Facebook
 - Meetup
- Paid for advertising

All of these take time and effort, will need both a plan and people willing to help.

Social media can be one of the most effective free channels – ask your members to post "my bridge club is starting lessons" to any groups, especially community groups, that they are members of.

Including a link to details would help too.

The DBA is willing to help with advice on marketing and advertising, and customisable materials are available from the EBU website (<https://www.ebu.co.uk/information-resources/promotional-materials>). You may prefer to do your own, though.

It is strongly recommended that your marketing materials do not try to convince people to play bridge, just get them to express an interest. The selling takes place they have made contact. Simpler is better.

First Contact

It is vital that the first contacts an enquirer has are positive, and sell them on bridge. This means:

- Quality Flyers (not printed on a home printer)
- Dedicated Web Page (not lost in the morass of an already busy website)
- Materials explaining what's involved than can be emailed to enquirers (still with the emphasis on "selling" bridge to them)
- Someone on the phone who can sell "bridge" to them.

The Plan!

All this needs to be put together into a plan. It needs all the above, with details of where the resources are coming from. Who's going to teach? Help? Distribute leaflets? Where's it going to take place? How many students are you going to take on? How much will they pay? Will this be weekly or up front (or a combination)? How long will the course be? Where are you going to advertise (paid or unpaid)? Who's going to come and play in no fear sessions? What system are you going to teach? How much will be covered in the first set of lessons?

The plan is usually a working document that will develop over time, although certain things need to be in place before any commitment is made.

Attached are a handy checklist for a plan, along with Exeter Bridge Club's plan for their Feb 2023 teaching offering.

Checklist:

- Price of Lessons
- Payment Options
- Reasonable Assumptions re: Dropout
- Costs included in financials:
 - a. Advertising
 - b. Printing
 - c. Teacher
 - d. Venue Hire
 - e. Transport (if needed)
 - f. Breakeven analysis
- Venue Identified
- Venue Facilities
- Day and Time
- Teacher (and backup)
- Helpers
- Equipment

- Supervised and No Fear – where, when and who
- Committee sign off
- Club Engagement
- Recruitment Channels and Resources (money, people)
- Recruitment channels tracked: “Where did you hear about us?”
- Advertising timeline ties in with lessons start date
- Web Page – address and suitability
- “Further Details” materials
- Course Details:
 - Number of lessons
 - Length of lesson
 - System being taught
- Syllabus

JMC DBA 7/12/22

Enc:

Exeter Bridge Club Tuition Plan

Exeter Bridge Club Tuition Advert