



# How Do You Know if your Instructor is COMPETENT?

When I started diving I joined a couple of dive clubs and revelled in discussions of where to go, who went where, what to do, who caught what, what was new in gear development, and what now. We were addicted amateurs gobbling up information and lusting for that next underwater 'fix'.

One recurring argument at those club meetings was 'Why doesn't someone make a set of dive tables for recreational divers?' Articles were written, insults hurled but no one appeared to be doing anything about it.

Then PADI produced their Recreational Dive Planner (RDP). A table and a device called a wheel. Prior to production I, and many of my instructor friends, to our surprise, received a copy of the research data and units to review. A fairly reasonable peer review exercise considering the number worldwide who must have been given the opportunity to critique.

Obviously there wasn't too much negative feedback and it went into production. Now the insults came thicker and faster. It was heralded as a more precise method

of decompression time limits by PADI members but by many others as a useless product destined to bend divers. It didn't.

Today we now have computers that enable decompression sickness avoidance with far greater accuracy and assist in relegating dive tables to their best function – a beer mat.

Technology has turned a lot of things on their heads and today's use of computers has made many things much easier.

This also relates to the way people learn, and in our terms of reference, how non-divers learn to dive, and divers graduate to become diving instructors. Much can be performed on-line and is of great benefit in reducing unwanted attendance at lectures given by some who just like the sound of their own voice.

But just like the dive table arguments, I hear criticism far too often of how dive training has become worse: too easy to become certified and inadequate compared to what it used to be or should be.

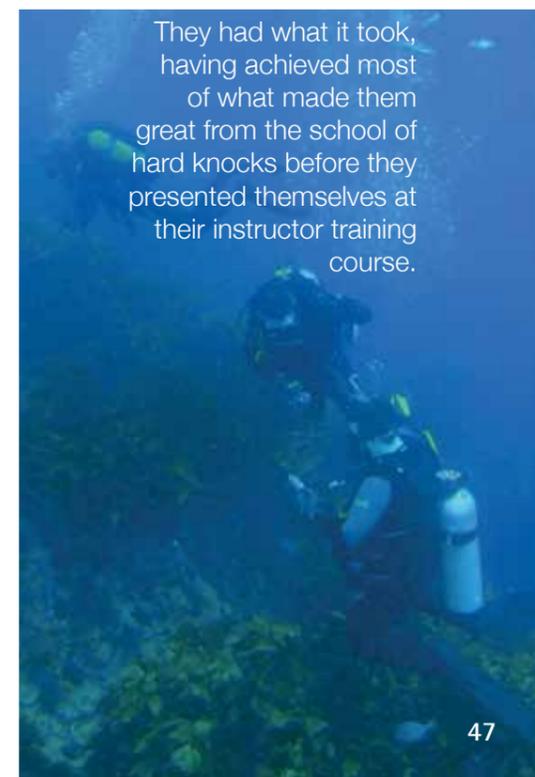
## So how has diver training evolved? Has it really become worse?

The original system of training in New Zealand was replaced by the PADI system for a range of reasons, one of which was the difficulty in providing instructor training to cope with the burgeoning demand for basic dive courses.

At the start of the era of PADI in New Zealand, all appeared well with the majority of those presenting themselves for instructor training having many hundreds of dives; in a variety of locations, with a variety of types of diving – wreck, drift, deep, cold, colder, cray catching. Many had been 'waiting in the wings' to become instructors but finding problems with realising their dream.

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But then things changed. We soon saw many new instructor candidates enrolling with less diving experience than their predecessors.

More and more divers who were now sold the promise of a wonderful lifestyle and, ambitious to become instructors, were attending instructor training programmes with bare minimum dive experience and time as divers.

The apparent deficiency of trainers, together with the relevant ease it now appeared to achieve instructor certification did not go unnoticed by entrepreneurs. The 'zero to hero' programmes emerged creating a swelling industry of diploma peddlers, many of whom saw private training establishments (PTEs) and their respective subject funding by the government too good a financial opportunity to miss out on.

Other training agencies evolved also at this time, making competitive statements of how they can do better and how they, in particular, will show greater benefits to the dive operators. According to their sales pitch, they would create a situation where organisations would put more dollars in the till and create more industry aware instructors.

This resounded well with the critics who recognised the changes in instructor candidate intake and was a stimulus for some to both change training agency and feed the need for further complaint.

But what really was wrong with dive instructor training?

Did anything really change that much and was a simple agency switch the answer?

Regardless of change in training agency or training provider, those wishing to become a diving instructor, still had/have to go through a structured process of initial training to provide the industry with more potential employees.

Other agencies evolving only offered mutations of the now established system of training without any significant change.

These mutations, including changes to the original system as initially established by PADI for dive instructor training (the instructor development course - IDC) have little, if any effect on improving the competences of instructors produced.

The reason is quite clear.

Nearly all of instructor and skill development comes after this initial instructor training - and not through any direct or formal involvement with any training agency.

### Appearance, actuality and improvements to make

It is too easy to complain about how things appear to have declined in integrity or substance compared to what things were and the way in which they have developed. It almost follows the adage of 'the older I get, the better I was' or how we could do with less than we do now to get the same/

better results. The present appearance of quick fixes (like a plastic but nevertheless robust item) to solve a problem doesn't sit well with someone trained in the past to accept nothing less than the original cast-iron part.

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Really?

Today a large number of instructors are still required to meet the demand of an increasing number of trainees. We can't just make initial instructor development courses (IDCs), or equivalent training harder to improve instructor quality, thus making them produce better divers. That is an unproven argument and a plain pipe dream.

A case in point hinting at the volume of people wanting to experience diving and the commensurate need for instructional staff: One dive operation in China performs over one million introductory dives a year. One dive operation! (M. Holmes, PADI Director, Training & Quality Management, 2012, personal communication). Making IDCs or their equivalent harder will be counterproductive in dealing with the tide of demand for diving experience.

in most cases always have been, largely incompetent and need/needed experience to become industry competent. It is highly unlikely that a training agency examiner will be any part of this transformational process, but on the other hand, highly likely that skilled, industry recognised dive professionals (who are actually doing the job and overseeing recently qualified instructors) will, and can finally endorse that instructor's credential as competent. Perhaps there could be two tiers of instructor certification: the first permitting a recently certified instructor to train but requiring greater scrutiny than is presently employed, and the second, an industry endorsed qualification indicating a fully competent instructor.

- Reduction in face-to-face lecturing by Instructor Trainers/Course Directors,

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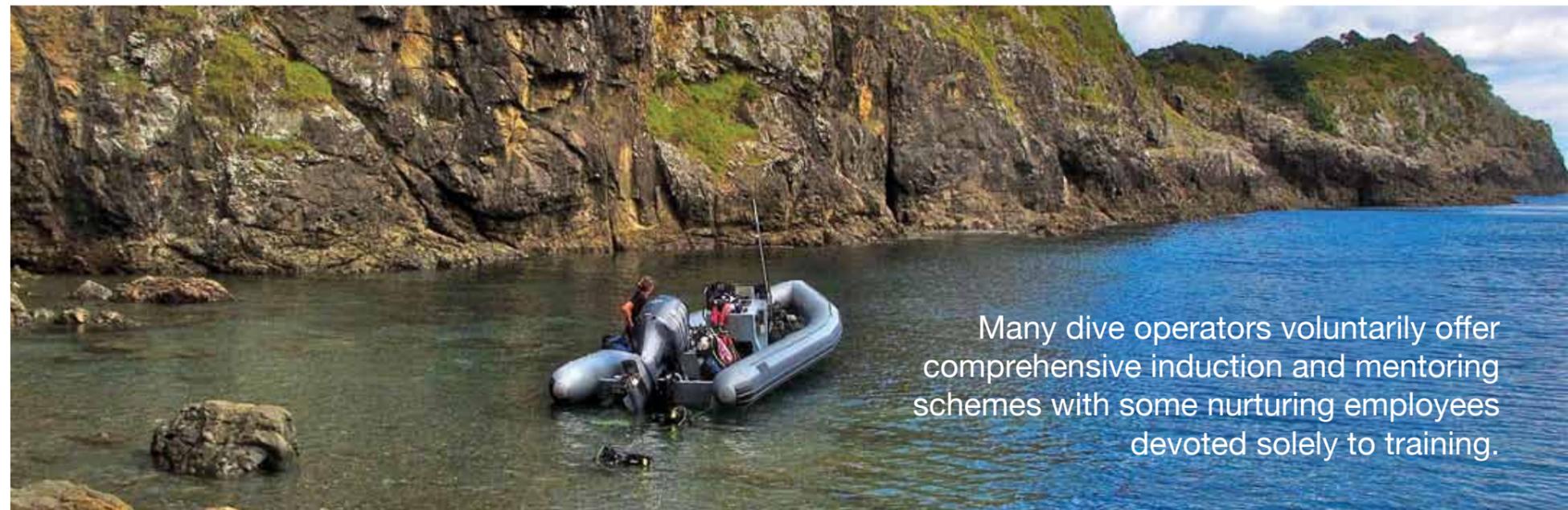
It is my observation that present dive instructor training processes perform more than adequately to a level where divers can commence learning to be industrially competent dive instructors. I admit there are many improvements that could be made to present processes; improvements to almost anything can be made. But alterations to the basic 'line in the sand' drawn by all agencies regarding prerequisite skills and knowledge prior to commencement of basic IDC (or equivalent) training is petty bickering over trivia. The greatest issue is what happens afterwards, not during.

A few suggestions I offer for consideration are:

- Training agencies should not be the final arbiters of an instructor's competencies. Instructors exiting an examination are, and

substituting the time saved with more realistic, practical exercises - examples could be: observing and evaluating performance where no certified assistant such as a Divemaster or Dive Controller is available to assist with open water training; developing more explicit organisational abilities for both knowledge development and open water activities; using different dive sites and overcoming real-life challenges. This will require some training agencies to modify their training protocols.

- Improvement of formal on-line training by additional information on lifestyle choice regarding such vital issues as inter-personal communication, the environment, currently acceptable (by a dwindling number) drug use, cigarette smoking and consumption of alcohol.



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- Promote further education in training management and development.

I could go on but it would be good to hear/read more constructive suggestions that can be addressed to those who are capable of making positive change.

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devoted solely to training. These protocols work well and are a credit to them. This is reflected in their business success and could indicate some steps we can take towards overall improvement of our training industry. Training agencies aren't the sole trainers of diving instructors. They actually represent only a fraction of the work required for an instructor to become fully competent.

I would suggest that where deficiencies in instructor competencies are identified in practicing instructors, it is the post IDC

(or equivalent) experience that has perhaps been shallow and inadequate, not the training agency that is at fault.

Like my early experience listening to the incessant critique of dive tables – the need for better ones, and the ultimate and equally incessant criticism of those produced, I find no relish in listening to, or reading arguments (particularly from

training agency figureheads) about why diver training has lost its way, who's responsible and why, and with nothing explicitly constructive to offer other than a subtle implication that what we have is a crippled system, and that perhaps adherence to another training agency will offer a panacea.

That just won't do it.

There are many improvements to basic training that can be made but it is the dive operators themselves, external to training

agency involvement, that hold the key to improving instructional competence.

Further reference to how things used to be:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe1a1wHxTyo>

*About the author: Keith Cardwell has been in the dive industry for 35 years, won countless awards including the PADI 'Platinum' Course Director, trained more than 2,000 instructors, established several 5-Star Instructor Development Centres and lived and worked as a Course Director in Australia, New Zealand, Republic of Maldives, and USA.*



*Originally qualified and worked for 10 years as a production and pneumatics engineer, Keith holds a PhD in Education (focusing on a study of workplace competence for recreational diving instructors), a Masters Degree in Education majoring in Lifelong Learning with Postgraduate Diplomas in Business and Industrial Administration & Sport and Recreation.*