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Maths@Sea course is calculated to help

Wednesday 21 September 2011, 17:36 by Michael Grey

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Learning maths can be easy if it is made relevant to maritime world. Picture: Shutterstock

The Marine Society has found the perfect formula for ratings aiming at first officer of the watch certificates

AS SOMEBODY who failed his maths o'level first time around, I have a certain sympathy for those who struggle with algebra, trigonometry and geometry, all very necessary if one is to be a competent watchkeeping officer. Funnily enough, once the maths became "applied" and relevant to the maritime world I was intent on inhabiting, it was never any trouble.

Clearly what I could have done with, all those years ago, was the Marine

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Society's Maths@Sea initiative, a new "upskilling" programme that has been specifically designed to assist ratings who seek advancement to their first officer of the watch certificates. The programme covers the basics of maths, which is often not well taught in our schools and thus considered "too hard" by those who lose confidence, and uses examples and language to which seafarers can relate.

The programme, so the Marine Society's Brian Thomas tells me, has been designed by specialists in nautical education, the charity

working with South Tyneside Marine College to identify common areas of weakness, while the eLearning provider CoracleOnline.com assists to create the content and manage the registration and assessment. Funding has come from the JW Slater Fund, the excellent scheme administered by Nautilus International which offers scholarships of up to £16,000 to help ratings study for first certificates of competency.

It is a timely initiative, as it might be recalled that in June this year ratings apprenticeships programmes were launched and it might be expected that there will be an increasing number of UK ratings seeking advancement. There are about 50 ratings awarded scholarships each year at present, with about 170 on programmes at any given time. It is a thoroughly worthwhile measure that aims to tackle the fears that many people have about tackling maths. Nobody can be surprised that the colleges have noted that there is an increasing number of people who are practically innumerate while bearing formal maths qualifications. There are also knowledge gaps caused by the fact that the kind of maths nautical students need is not part of many GCSE syllabuses. What a mess the educational establishment has got us into!

Those who have "road-tested" the programme are, says Mr Thomas, "overwhelmingly positive". Alan Campbell, who left school 25 years ago to become a fisherman, found the course very worthwhile, enabling him to refresh his grasp of maths. It is even being used by officer trainees.

The Marine Society, still the oldest maritime charity, still continues to ring the right bells. Large numbers of us owe it a tremendous debt for the help and encouragement it gave us, and continues to give people either looking for a sea career, advice, and a better education, once afloat. Like many of my contemporaries, I met the society through the libraries it put aboard ship, and was encouraged to write through the competitions it used to run. The society has adapted to the needs of the modern shipping industry, but still makes available more than 120,000 books annually, supplying to suit the requirements and tastes of those aboard. I was interested to learn that the service will supply books to help those whose first language is not English, which is the case, I guess on most ships that fly the Red Ensign these days.

Libraries used to consist of hardback volumes, packed in nice cases, that we would exchange in foreign ports with other ships we met. In my company it was the Junior Third Officer's job to administer the library and I still recall the problems of tracking down half a dozen books that seemed to have gone missing, with a library exchange due. The "preferred model" today is for non-returnable paperbacks, all supplied with up-to-date titles,

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but no commitment to return the books to the society. The "library officer" post is thus much easier and could well be redundant, as books can be freely dispersed among the ship's company.

It is a service which extraordinarily has not had a price increase for more than a decade and thus represents real value for ship operators who ought to be concerned at the welfare of their crews. But you can bet your boots that there will be some slate-eyed beancounter who thinks that ships are run by robots, who, even now, will be thinking of saving a small amount from the budget by striking out the crew library as the recession bites. The libraries have been put aboard and enjoyed by seafarers for the past 92 years, a period that has encompassed (if your maths are up to scratch) a good few shipping booms and slumps, the odd world war and more localised conflagrations. Long may they flourish.

One doesn't want to be too legalistic but if you are a student of the Maritime Labour Convention hopefully coming into force in the nearish future, you will be aware that what the International Labour Organisation considers "decent working conditions" for seafarers includes a recommendation (B3.1.11 if you don't believe me) that employers ensure that their ships are equipped with a regularly refreshed supply of quality books for the benefit of sea staff. There's more to sea life than safety manuals.

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