TEACHING GO

This document provides some advice and thoughts on how to teach Go to complete beginners, and represents the distilled wisdom and experience of a number of people with experience of teaching Go. It is NOT intended to be a prescriptive manual – the best way to teach people will depend on the individual circumstances.

When teaching Go to the complete beginner, it is important not to overload the students. Go involves some concepts which will be unusual to the typical UK student – playing on the intersections, stones do not move, etc – and it is important not to try to teach too many concepts at once.

The following ideas can be identified:

- Mechanics of Go (game for two players who play alternately, stones played on intersections, stones do not move)
- How stones are captured
  - Suicide – when is it allowed
  - The concept of 2 eyes
- How the game ends. Counting.
- Ko
- Miscellaneous issues (komi, seki, AGA rules, etc).

And it is suggested that a teacher ensures that one concept is understood before the next is introduced.

Board Size

It is strongly recommended that all tuition is done, initially, on a 9x9 board. This enables the concepts to be grasped without taking too long over a game. (It is suggested that players are not allowed to play on a larger board unless they can beat the teacher on a 9x9 board, taking 4 stones.)

Ko

It is strongly suggested that Ko is taught late on in the course. Indeed, the best solution is for players to learn the other rules, then discover ko for themselves (but this is, frankly, unlikely).

Further advice is given in Appendices 1 and 2. Appendix 1 was written by Edwin Brady, and is aimed at adults (specifically University students) being taught on a one-to-one basis; Appendix 2 by Toby Manning, and is aimed at young teenagers (typically aged 13) in a classroom structure.

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Toby Manning
16 March 2010
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Teaching Adult Beginners   by   Edwin Brady.

(This article was first published in BGJ # 144, and has been edited by Toby Manning.)

People can feel that teaching beginners can be hard work, requiring a long term commitment on the part of the teacher. My experience has been that this is not the case, and that teaching new players can be very rewarding. Obviously, if you are a relatively experienced player, it will be some time before they can play you with a reasonable handicap on a 19x19 board. Nevertheless, if you can explain the basics well and convey enough enthusiasm, you may find within a few weeks they are learning more about the game for themselves, by browsing the huge amount of information online or playing on a Go server.

In the rest of this article, I will describe my own approach to teaching beginners. I have found it to work well in practice in my experience with university students. You may not agree with all of the details, and you may find a different approach works better for you --- nevertheless it is important to have some kind of structured but flexible plan for teaching, and I believe this is a good starting point. Above all the beginner must be made to feel welcome, and not like an interloper amongst serious strong players. Some will say something like, ``Don't worry, I'll just watch,'' but it is no fun for a complete beginner to watch two shodans battling for an hour!

Absolutely anyone can teach a beginner, providing of course that they know the rules and some basic strategy themselves. It is much more important in any case for the teacher to be helpful and enthusiastic than absolutely right --- as amateurs we can never be sure we are absolutely right anyway.

When I am teaching a single beginner, a typical introductory session might go like this: I introduce myself, and maybe we will have a quick chat about who we are and what we do. This has nothing to do with Go of course, but it is part of making the beginner feel welcome. Before starting to play, I explain that the point of the first few games is to get comfortable with the rules. It is much easier to understand the rules in the context of a game, rather than by abstract explanation, so I cover only the absolute basics before starting, i.e. the aim of the game, that stones go on the intersections, capturing, and how the game ends. I explain the terms 'liberty' and 'atari', but otherwise avoid technical terms.

In particular, I leave out such details as ko, throw-ins, life and death, seki, dame, etc. None of these will make sense out of context, and most will come up within the first couple of games. I explain the handicapping system, and set up a five stone handicap on a 9x9 board. I usually say before we start that there are a couple more rules but I will explain them as they come up, so that they do not think I am making the rules up as I go! I like to encourage fairly fast play for the first few games. Some beginners think very carefully then make the wrong move anyway, and some can freeze completely, and need encouraging to make a move. Obviously thinking about moves is a good idea but it is hard to do so sensibly without some experience. In these games it can be tempting to capture all of black's stones given an opportunity, but it is good to resist. The point of these introductory games is to make things comprehensible, not to win or lose, so I try to play accordingly. Aiming to win by a small margin, rather than by killing everything, makes it easier to show how territory is formed and how the game ends.

The end of the game is almost always a problem --- most people have difficulty knowing when the game is over, and spend several minutes examining the board not knowing what to do. I generally ask what they are thinking and point out where the clearly defined territories and borders are and where there are still moves left to play. The end of the game should not drag on too long; it is entirely possible otherwise that the last few moves could take as long as the rest of the game!

Usually, at least one black group dies in the first couple of games. The beginner as a result is very keen to know how to prevent this. I leave the explanation of eyes until after a game or two because then it is much easier for the beginner to understand why I am explaining them and what they are for. The simplest way is to set up a three space big eye in the corner, and show the sequences when each side plays first. I often find it helps at this stage to set up a couple of simple life and death problems with various big eye shapes.

By now, I am usually being soundly beaten giving black five stones, and sometimes giving black four. I find it is a good time to explain some basic strategy: ``If you connect all your stones, you will win.'' This whole process, from introduction to playing a few games, generally takes half an hour to an hour. By this point, if there are two beginners, or some other relatively new players, it is good to have them play amongst themselves as well as against stronger players. In any case, it is good to find other opponents, and now they have a good enough understanding of rules and basic strategy to call themselves 30 kyu at least.

If you have never thought about how to approach teaching beginners, I hope that this article has given a useful starting point. The BGA website includes lots of further information for organisers and teachers.

APPENDIX 2

Teaching Children by Toby Manning

Given below is a sample lecture script for teaching a class of 13 year olds. It has been developed by Toby Manning for introducing Go to a class of 13 year olds during a 1 hour class. It is assumed that there is:-
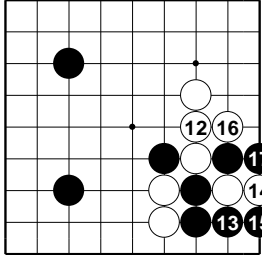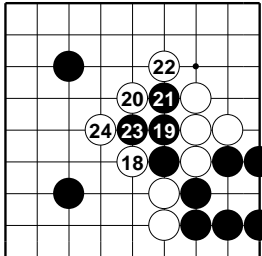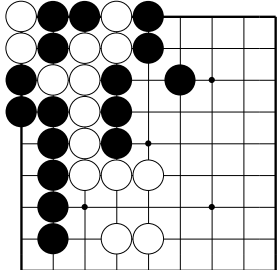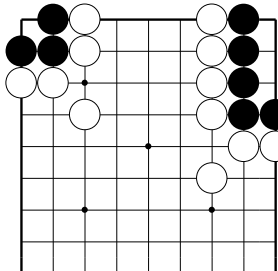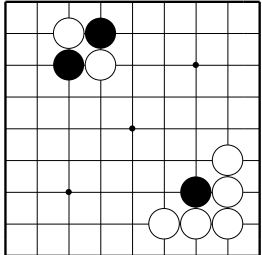
- A 9x9 demonstration board
- Sufficient 9x9 go sets for all players to play.

If there are more than (about) 16 people then an assistant will be valuable.

The timings are approximate and will need to be varied according to circumstances.

Timing (Minutes)	Lecture Script	Demonstration Board
1-5	Hello. My name is Toby Manning and I am [personal details]……. Go is a board game for two people that originated in the orient….[why am I teaching you?[1]]	
	Here is a Go Board [demonstrate a 9x9 demo. Board] and players play alternately. The Board starts empty. There are two ideas; to surround territory and to capture stones. We will start with capturing stones. (as you are talking, play out the sequence shown in the figure).	
	In this position [after W8] white is threatening to capture a stone. Can someone show how this is done? [Get student to come up and place a white stone to capture the black one]. Good. So how does B prevent his stone being captured? [Get student to demonstrate extending from stone onto 3-2 point, i.e. at 9.] Good. [Play 10, 11]. Now, are any stones being threatened with capture? [Ask students]. Digress slightly to show that stones are captured by surrounding horizontally and vertically, but not diagonally. Also show how stones on the edge and corner are captured.	

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[1] I find this the hardest part!!

	B is threatening to capture a white stone. White defends, B threatens another stone, descends to the edge but resistance is futile and now B has captured 2 stones in the corner[2].	
	Now, whites stones are split into 2 separate groups or armies. Can someone show me how this is? How can we link these two groups together? Yes, we try to capture the cutting stone. How do we do that? [ask students for ideas. They are unlikely to come up with the answer. Demonstrate the geta].	
5-15 minutes	So black has captured some stones, and so has white. Now it is your turn: I want you to divide into pairs, and play between yourself. I want you to try to capture a stone, and put your hand up when you have captured the first stone. [You will find some students have grasped the concepts, others have not – some boards will end up with many interlocking groups with no liberties that have not been removed from the board – see diagram for an example.] You will wander around the classroom, looking at games, checking if they have really captured a stone, and explaining when stones have/have not been captured..	
16-25	Get the students' attention. Discuss the two positions shown. In the top left demonstrate that suicide is OK if it captures stones, in the top right show the 1 eye/2 eye issue. Get student participation, particularly in the discussion of the upper right position.	
26 -35	Get the students to play some more amongst themselves.	
36 - 45	Show these problems – or something similar. In the top left it is "W to play and capture a stone"; in the bottom right "W to play and capture a stone". Ensure student participation.	

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[2] We all know that white's descent to the edge (thereby losing 2 stones) is not a good move. DO NOT POINT THIS OUT – it is not relevant to this first lesson and will be confusing to the students. But if one of them ASKS if it is a good/bad move, then answer the question.

46 - 55	More play between the students.	
56 - 60	In classroom style using the demonstration board, play a game out to the end. Show how to count the game – and show who wins.	

We note that this session has NOT explained Ko – it is assumed that this can be done at a follow-up session. However, if some students have discovered ko, then explain it to them.