



The truth about home inspection education

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CARSON DUNLOP
SCHOOL OF HOME INSPECTION

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A WORD ABOUT HOME INSPECTION

As most of you know, home inspection is a rewarding Professional consulting practice similar to other professions. While focused on homes, the work is similar to that of accountants, lawyers and doctors. While many engineers and architects focus on design work, some are consultants, much like home inspectors.

Home inspection requires a broad knowledge of several house systems. It would be fair to describe home inspectors as generalists rather than specialists, just as a family doctor is a generalist, and a heart surgeon is a specialist. Good home inspectors are also good one-on-one communicators.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD HOME INSPECTOR

Some people are naturally wired for success in home inspection. Personality traits are as important as technical skills. While conventional wisdom is that a construction background helps people become good home inspectors more quickly, we have found that many people without a construction background can acquire the technical skills through a good education program and apprenticeship. Even those with a construction background do not typically have the full technical skill set required of a professional home inspector.

The technical skills of home inspection can be taught, but personalities are difficult to change. Here are some of the characteristics that make a good home inspector:

- A technical mind with natural curiosity – someone who likes to figure things out
- Enjoys meeting people – a comfortable one-on-one communicator with good listening skills
- Enjoys helping people – making a difference in people's lives
- Organized and logical – a clear thinker who sees things through to completion
- Committed to continuous learning – no one knows everything!
- Enjoys working outside of an office – not chained to a desk, yet with no heavy labor required

Good home inspectors have equal parts technical skills and communication skills. The communication side includes both verbal and written skills.

WHAT HOME INSPECTORS NEED TO KNOW

We have learned over 40 years that there are a number of things home inspectors need to know. When building our 10-course training program, our education design consultants forced us to determine exactly what a competent home inspector needs to know. We were assisted in refining this by role delineation studies and national occupational standards. Here is a heating system example:

- Scope of work
 - What things are to be inspected
- What it is - component name (need to be able to recognize components)
 - Furnace
 - Fuel – natural gas, propane, oil, or electric?
 - Mid-efficiency or high-efficiency furnace?
- What it does - Function
 - Keep the house warm
- How it works
 - Ignite natural gas, transfer heat indirectly to air that circulates through home, expel combustion products, etc.
- What can go wrong
 - Will not start, improper operation, inadequate heat distribution, gas leaks, venting problems, etc.
- The implications of problems
 - What it means to clients. There may be no heat for the home.
 - Why does this matter? People can't live in the home, pipes freeze, etc.
 - Some problems are life threatening – fire, gas explosion or carbon monoxide poisoning for example
- Identifying problems
 - Inspection and testing procedures
 - Recognize inappropriate venting materials, configuration, termination points, etc.
- Recommended action
 - Repair, replace, provide, clean, service, further evaluation, etc.
- Report writing
 - Descriptions, observations and recommendations, limitations and inspection methods
 - Clear, simple communication with illustrations and photos

FROM CRUDE BEGINNINGS

When we started our home inspection business in the 1970s, there was no nationwide industry, no market, no demand, no training, and no mentoring. We read a few books and rode along with a few home inspectors in the Washington DC area who were making it up as they went along. We came back home, applied what we knew and embarked on a journey of discovery.

The more we did, the more we learned and the more we realized we did not know enough. There were no defined competency levels. The Standards of Practice did not, and still do not, define how inspections should be performed. We continue to learn and develop our knowledge through extensive research and field experience.

We saw the need to teach others. For several years in the 1990s we taught two-week programs. We recognized the limitations of a short course, and described these as intensive introduction sessions. Those who completed these programs were clearly not ready to perform professionally.

BUILDING AN EDUCATION PROGRAM

I was able to step away from our home inspection business for three years to create the program in the late 1990s. Thanks to Bob Dunlop for making that possible and operating our business during that time!

We worked with a Toronto-based education design consultant and distance education specialists from Memorial University. We knew home inspection, but we were not professional educators, although we already had considerable experience training many home inspectors both inside and outside of our firm.

With expert help, we designed a distance education program first, because that is the most difficult. Distance education can be translated readily into the classroom. We concentrated on applying the best teaching practices and focused on clear communication and effective learning. We learned about Bloom's taxonomy, learning outcomes, creating fair examinations, etc. We came to understand that learning is not memorizing. We had a clear picture that our target was mature learners, and we worked hard to avoid "textbook talk", staying away from academic theory and formulas.

We created a 10-course program focused on adult learning. The study was self-paced since we knew learners would have varying skill and comfort levels with different parts of the program. We also understood that some learners would have limited time to devote since many would be working while they learned. We needed a system that people could start anytime, work on their own schedule and learn at a pace that was right for them.

We knew home inspection is a visual profession so we created 1,700 illustrations. We were very lucky to work with Peter Yeates, a Carson Dunlop home inspection engineer and a graphic artist. We included videos of in-field situations to provide learners some real-life experience. (This has since been augmented by live webinars and Insight, our accelerated apprenticeship program.)

The program was immediately adopted by Seneca College and the American Society of Home Inspectors in the United States. It is currently offered by colleges across the country.



THE BENEFITS OF SELF-STUDY

Given the cost of travel, the time constraints on people, and the learning styles of adult learners, a self-study program makes perfect sense. The benefits include -

- Start whenever you are ready. You do not have to wait for a September or January semester to begin, for example.
- The ability to learn at your own speed. You can study on your schedule. Move as quickly or slowly as you like - 2 hours a week or 40 hours a week.
- No travel or accommodation costs. You can learn from the comfort of your own home.
- Help is at hand. Instructors are available by telephone and email.
- Self-testing helps you insure that you are learning what you need to know, without having to worry about marks or grades. This prepares you very well for the electronic testing which is private and prompt. You receive your results immediately. The goal is to help you succeed, not to judge you. You get the opportunity and encouragement to review and improve any weak areas.

- Interactive exercises and case studies help you apply what you have learned.
- Our accelerated apprenticeship program, available through **Insight**, brings the learning to life, and condenses months of difficult-to-achieve ride-along experience into hours of rich experience. Best of all, **Insight** is available as an app on your phone or tablet. It's like having a mentor in your pocket!

The program has evolved and has recently been through a significant content update. The only constant is change!

Home inspection is a growing and evolving profession. Home inspection did not exist until the 1970s. Now roughly 75% of resale homes are inspected. Pre-listing inspections are becoming very popular and we predict that over the next few years, home inspection will move completely from a buyer's service to a seller's service. The logic is compelling. This creates a significant opportunity for new inspectors.

A LITTLE MORE ON APPRENTICESHIP

We have recognized for years the challenges that new inspectors have in trying to get field experience. Home inspection is an industry where the majority of practitioners are sole proprietors. Apprenticeship models do not work very well because most sole practitioners do not want to train their competition. Nonetheless, this young profession has a serious problem. The first generation of home inspectors is winding down. This group of self-taught pioneers has accumulated considerable knowledge, much of which remains undocumented and inaccessible to the next generation.

As I make presentations to groups of home inspectors across North America, I am consistently speaking to a room full of people with an average age of well over 50 years. There are rarely more than two or three people under the age of 30.

We are in danger of having the first generation retire or pass away without preparing the next generation and ensuring the growth of the profession. Consumers need the significant benefits provided by competent home inspectors.

We finally have education programs available through colleges and schools. (By the way, Carson Dunlop is not only a consulting engineering company and a home inspection company; we are also a registered career college under the Private Career College Act, 2005.) However, almost all trades and professions have apprenticeship, placement, internship, articling or some sort of real-world experiential training. Home inspection is an exception. This is a significant problem for the next generation of inspectors.

We have developed an apprenticeship tool called **Insight** to help fill the void. Like many things these days, it is a mobile app, suitable for use on an Apple or Android phone or tablet.

It provides an accelerated apprenticeship experience offering over 13,500 photos and illustrations. The system is elegantly simple. The user can select any house component, and see a list of typical defects to watch for. For each defect, there are a series of photos and illustrations the learner can

look at to see what the defects look like in real life. Each photo is accompanied by a suggested report wording to show the learner what they should tell their client.

The learning curve to use the tool is short, typically less than 60 seconds. Progress bars track learners' progress, so they can see what material they have covered.

This approach provides an incredible level of experience in a very short time. New inspectors can see and learn in hours what would take months of ride-alongs to accomplish.

A WORD ABOUT RIDE-ALONGS

We have been involved in a great many ride-alongs over the last 40 years. On the upside, they do provide real-world experience. On the downside, it is hard for an individual learner to get an experienced inspector to agree to allow them to ride along. With an industry substantially populated by sole proprietors, we understand why people may not want to train their competition.

There are other challenges to ride-alongs as well. Clearly, the inspector needs to focus on the client who is making a big lifestyle and financial commitment. The real estate agent and seller may also be there, adding complexity for the inspector. The home inspector cannot focus on the learning experience. In most cases, the learner is not permitted to ask questions during the inspection process. Learning is entirely passive.

Another challenge comes after the inspection. While learners may have many questions, the inspector typically needs to write the inspection report promptly and get it to the client. There is often limited opportunity and incentive for the inspector to provide a learning experience after the inspection.

Another disadvantage to ride-alongs is that they do not automatically and inherently present a good cross-section of components and conditions one might encounter. Riding along with an inspector who works predominantly in a suburban community with houses built after 1970 will not expose a learner to things like knob-and-tube wiring, galvanized steel supply plumbing, lead and cast-iron waste plumbing, solid masonry construction, etc.

ANOTHER USE FOR INSIGHT

No home inspector has a crystal-clear understanding of every item they will ever see as they inspect thousands of homes. The **Insight** app can be an instant resource on the inspector's phone, reminding them what to look for, confirming suspicions and helping them know what to advise clients. It's like having a trusted advisor looking over your shoulder. Some inspectors also use the photos and illustrations in **Insight** to help clients understand their homes better.

EDUCATION – BECAUSE KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Home inspection is a rewarding career and is more appealing now than it has ever been. Finally, there is high quality education available, combined with practical learning tools. The need for home inspection is well recognized, the opportunity is significant, and the timing is right.

To learn more and discuss whether home inspection is right for you, contact one of our career consultants at Carson Dunlop – **866-586-6855** or **training@CarsonDunlop.com**.

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