

## Waving or drowning?

In 1957 poet Stevie Smith published a poem called 'Not waving but drowning' it was about a man who having spent his life 'larking about' drowned off the coast – his frantic waving was not recognised as a distress signal. Stevie Smith's poem is quite moving and uses the drowning man as a metaphor for life; I don't wish to trivialise the sentiment by comparing it to a driving situation - but then driving situations are about often life and death.

An example of 'too much waving' might be found in the driver who gives a right turn signal to pass every parked car on the street – this is likely to lead to the following driver ignoring a signal when the first driver wishes to turn right. Not expecting the driver to slow down this could easily result in a rear end shunt pushing the car into oncoming traffic - a life and death situation.

But not all signals are as clear cut as the example above - and nor are the messages (signals) that some instructors might unconsciously be giving to their pupils...

A year or so ago I received a message from an instructor who was wondering whether or not to complain to the DSA about an incident in which his pupil had demonstrated courtesy to another driver during his driving test.

"John, I recently had a candidate who failed his driving test for incorrect use of signals. During the debrief the examiner explained that the candidate had waved another driver out who was waiting to emerge from a service station forecourt. Surely he shouldn't fail for showing consideration to others?"

Given that there are so many variables in modern traffic it's difficult to comment on driving test outcomes without sitting in the back of the car. I used to recommend that instructors sat in on at least five tests a year - my current thinking is that you should be sitting in on most of your tests. (DSA figures show that the 'sit in rate' has risen dramatically since the 'new' examiners' wording was introduced.)

Sitting in on tests is probably the cheapest sort of CPD available - it's free and it uses 'dead time' that would often just be spent drinking tea and chatting. By sitting in the back you learn how your pupils really behave on test and how your local examiners interpret the rules. If you are a new instructor, you will also learn how to conduct 'mock tests'.

Getting back to the waving incident... Perhaps my first thought on the 'waving issue' above is that if I were an examiner I would instantly fail anyone who waved or flashed to give way to another driver regardless of the situation - simply because it demonstrates a dangerous driving 'habit' that is contrary to the advice given in the Highway Code. Likewise, in all but a few circumstances I would downgrade an ADI if he 'directed traffic' by beckoning to other road users during a lesson.

The whole thrust of modern thinking about driving, road user behaviour and driver training is to encourage people to take responsibility for their own actions - as soon as you wave or flash someone out you are taking a degree of responsibility from them.

Signalling in this way is dangerous because many people tend to interpret the signal as an 'instruction to act' and will sometimes respond without first checking for themselves that it is safe to do so - their attention will often be on the driver, or driving instructor, who is waving and not the child on the bicycle who might also be responding to the signal.

It might be argued that there are some circumstances where an instructor needs to 'wave on' another driver, but these should be very rare – over the years, my experience in helping countless numbers of instructors to develop their skills suggests that in most cases the need to wave arises because of a problem with either route or lesson planning. For example, if you teach the turn-in-the-road before around 15 hours of training you are far more likely to have to intervene with either instruction to the pupil or other road users.

The problems with instructors signalling to other road users are threefold:

1. The risks associated with 'unofficial' signals
2. By taking control the instructor removes responsibility from the driver and potentially undermines confidence.
3. The instructor gives a clear message that it's OK to use unofficial signals such as waving and flashing (despite the fact that he/she might be saying "Do as I say, not as I do!").

I'm not convinced by arguments that waving does no harm. I agree that there are probably 1000's of incidents every day where drivers flash lights or beckon to others and there is no problem whatsoever, but it only takes one error...

If we take the example from the instructor (above) where the test candidate beckoned to the driver who was exiting a service station, I wonder if either of the drivers checked:

- For motorcycles or other vehicles that may have been about to pass on the offside?
- For cyclists coming up on the nearside?
- For motorcycles that might have been about to exit the service station (possibly passing the emerging car)?
- For pedestrians on the nearside footpath?
- For pedestrians on the offside footpath who might be crossing?
- The body language of the following driver for signs of frustration (being stuck in traffic)?
- For anyone who might misinterpret the signal – perhaps a vehicle turning into the service station or pedestrian waiting to cross the road?

Possibly all these things were checked, but I doubt it. And even if these things were checked the guy on test would still be taking responsibility away from the other driver. The fact that

this test candidate chose to give way might have been a good thing, demonstrating a courteous attitude and social responsibility - but giving way and waving are separate issues.

Ultimately, the driving test is not simply about the drive on the day - it's also about driving trends and habits that might cause problems after passing and in other situations. It seems that no one was adversely affected on this occasion, and it's possible that this driver might be lucky enough to never have a problem in similar situations - but in another set of circumstances the same action could (and does) have dire consequences.

I didn't ask, but I wonder if the instructor who sent me the question about the service station incident had been in the habit of taking control by waving to other road users during his pupil's lessons?

A wave from you now could lead to your pupils drowning in the future...

Just in case you aren't convinced about the dangers of giving instructions to other road users take a look my information about flashing headlamps in the Drivers Area at [www.smartdriving.co.uk](http://www.smartdriving.co.uk) - it tells the story of how I was lucky enough to survive a bad smash some years before becoming an instructor - some others have not been so fortunate.