

## **Learning to drive with bikes: insights and lessons about how learner drivers are taught to share the road with cyclists in the ACT**

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### **Abstract**

Learning to drive a car is a critical time to learn safe driving skills including how to safely share the road with other road users, including cyclists. In this study we investigated the learner driver process in the Australian Capital Territory to identify the content about sharing the road with cyclists including: *Road Ready* program resources and classroom course, and; on-road driving lessons with professional instructors. We found minimal content about cyclists in the entire driver training process. Findings discuss the current gaps and opportunities for teaching new drivers safe driving skills when sharing the road with cyclists.

### **Background**

The majority of serious cyclist crashes, that result in death or serious injury, involve a motor vehicle (AIHW, 2012). What is not well known is how Australian drivers are taught to interact safely with cyclists on the road. The learner driver process is the most intensive period of instruction and monitoring across a person's driving life (Mitchell et al, 2015; Senserrick & Williams, 2015). Knowledge learned and skills and habits developed during this stage are likely to influence a lifetime of driving and widespread efforts with Graduated Driver Licensing Schemes (GDLS) have been made in Australia to create safe drivers and minimise crash involvement (Bates et al, 2014; Begg et al, 2014; Buckis et al, 2015; Senserrick & Williams, 2015). However, little research has investigated the emphasis in the learner driver process on how to safely drive with cyclists. The aim of this study is to understand how learner drivers are taught to share the road safely with cyclists.

### **Method**

The study was undertaken in two stages. The first stage was a qualitative content analysis informed by the social constructionist view that individuals do not make up their own meanings about the world but the cultural context in which individuals are located shapes how they can understand their world including activities such as driving a car, walking or cycling. Six documents were analysed, namely: Road Rules Handbook, Preparing your Pre-learner for driving, Towards your P's in the ACT, Learning through Practice, Supervising your learner driver and, Student Workbook, Teacher Resource.

The second stage was a series of observational studies. The first of the observations was a two-day Road Ready classroom course, followed by nine one-hour learner driver lessons with professional driving instructors. Student drivers with various levels of experience were observed, from the first lesson to skill development (hill starts) to the final assessment. Participants were not informed that the focus of the study was specifically about cyclists. The silent observer (MJ) sat in the rear seat, discussions between the driving instructor/learner driver were recorded and notes were taken.

## Results

### *Road Ready program*

Cyclists are mentioned six times across all four of the *Road Ready* education and training documents. These mentions include: linking cyclists to pedestrians ('Where can we expect pedestrians or cyclists to appear from?'), gendering cyclists as male ('...it's a good idea to give *him* a bit more space.' (emphasis added)), identifying cyclists as disobedient/illegal road users ('...observe and comment on drivers or cyclists disobeying traffic signals and speed limit signs'), or use of the car horn to 'alert' driver, cyclists or pedestrians.

In the classroom, cyclists were mentioned as other road users that might be encountered. No content specifically referred to how to interact with cyclists on the road. In response to a query about new minimum overtaking distance road rules in the ACT, the course instructor said, 'they have beautiful lanes for themselves and they don't pay registration. That's seriously annoying to me'.

### *Driving lesson observations*

Nine one-hour learner driver lessons were observed with student drivers at varying stages. Cyclists were infrequently encountered (17 individual cyclists, a group of 6 cyclists). Only one instructor drew attention to the cyclists (group). Safe behaviour when sharing the road with cyclists was mentioned twice, no mention was made of safe/legal behaviour and cycling infrastructure.

## Conclusions

The formal representation of cyclists in the learn-to-drive documents is problematic (hazards, error spotting). From the observations, it is evidence that cyclist-specific training content is needed for course instructors, driving instructors and as part of the driving licence assessment process (including testing) to ensure cyclists are included in the training process and to minimise personal anti-cyclist sentiment. All road users including cyclists, pedestrians, small wheeled vehicle users, motor cyclists etc. need to be included as driving skills competencies and included as examples in written, in-class and on-road activities. Inclusion of cyclists as compulsory, standardised content for all learner driver will help to normalise cyclists to new drivers and contribute to safer driving behaviour around cyclists.

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