

A Teaching Essay From A Different Perspective

Teaching can be an exhausting task, both physically but mentally. Like many people have said, teaching however can also be one of the most rewarding challenges to have been involved in. The topic of teaching however, has been the topic of many black belt essays. That is why I have chosen to write from a different perspective of teaching, identifying mistakes I have made and as a result what I have learnt interacting with a variety of students.

People say first impressions are important, and they say that for a reason. When you first meet a prospective student ask you to join your class, from my perspective one of the most important things you need to understand from them is what they want to get out of the class. This does sound obvious and in many cases the student (or their parent) tells you why they are joining anyway. If you however, are an assistant instructor who is taking the class or just basically letting someone else take care of the paperwork, you never really get the opportunity to understand this. Once you understand the student's motivation for joining, you have the ability to cater to the student's needs. By doing this the student is able to feel like have been heard and are more likely join and stay as a club member. As an instructor, it is easier to design classes once they know what the student want to get out of each lesson. Naturally different students want to get different things when they start Taekwon-Do, for example discipline, confidence, fitness and self-defence skills. As an instructor you have to be able to help all your students fulfil their goals. What you come to learn however is that many of these goals students have are in common therefore helping students achieve these goals is a manageable.

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If you are someone like me, you teach because you enjoy it and not have to worry about the admin involved. Understanding and being familiar with the paperwork however is important as if assistant instructors, are approached by prospective students enquiring about the classes, it looks bad if the person running a class did not know the admin of joining a class. This piece of advice unfortunately comes from experience. It is particularly worse when it is a parent enrolling their child in the class as they question everything, including the fine print. Understanding processes allows you to look professional and knowledgeable about the work you do and both parents and students gain assurance that they are in capable hands.

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Once you understand what the student wants to achieve from the class, the teaching begins and unsurprisingly no two students are the same. Each has their own characteristics which makes them unique. As a result, the students learn things differently. As an instructor, you have to be able to teach everyone in a way that takes into account the different learning styles as well as keeping in mind your own teaching style. Most students fall under three different teaching categories – visual, audio and kinaesthetic. Visual learning is all about watching someone do the movement multiple times and breaking it down. Audio learning is all about listening to the description of the movement and applications of the technique. Kinaesthetic learning is about physically doing the movement and adjusting the student to the correct position so they get a feel for the movement. Naturally, as an instructor you will also have your own preferred learning method, and many times this is reflected in your teaching style. Understanding your own teaching style is important, especially when you have a student who struggles to understand your instructions. This could be due to a variety of things including but not limited to disabilities. Exploring a different learning style or even a combination of learning styles to make a new unique method to teach an individual is exciting and but hard work however when it is successful, feels very rewarding as an instructor.

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Experimentation is I feel one of the most essential ways to develop as an instructor. It allows you to explore the boundaries of both the abilities of your students and yourself. If you are fortunate enough to have access to props such as pads or chairs, then your ability to trial new things increases (sitting stance punch using chairs as a base, turning kicks over chairs to students to lift their knee early). The things I enjoy the most about experimenting are the reactions of the students. It will be very obvious if something worked well or not. Games, teaching methods, even class structure I've experimented with, producing mixed results. Some things will be a stroke of genius and you'll continue doing those on a regular basis. For children in the mini-kids syllabus, this could be as simple making them start doing their required push up and plank requirements from white belt rather than making them start when they reach their first red. Others will be thrown into a dark corner, the chaos it produced never to be seen again until another idea as bad as that is tried. If you do happen to stumble across one of these terrible ideas, don't let it dishearten you. Failure is far more beneficial in the long run than a successful idea from an instructing point of view. This is because you'll find out that all of these bad ideas usually (for me at least) are spontaneous ideas which have a lack of thought behind them (the occasional spontaneous idea works really well). Recently, the number of my unsuccessful ideas has decreased. A lot of that is due to the support I receive from Master McPhail.

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On the note of Master McPhail helping, if you have the opportunity to, have an assistant instructor with you. This person will help you more than you can even imagine. One such way is that it allows you to assume the "Good Cop, Bad Cop" strategy. This is where one of the instructors is primarily in charge of the negative aspects e.g. Poor Discipline, Sound Levels etc. and the other instructor just does what they normally do. The "Bad Cop" could also be in charge of a reward like a game at the end of class so the students don't dislike them. This routine works well for me, but it can also have its downsides if done incorrectly. I was once in a position where I had to take the class on my own for a couple of weeks. As I was 80% of the time the "Good Cop," the students decided to take advantage of the "Bad Cop" being away. They had the respect for the "Bad Cop" but felt they could get away with poor discipline while he was gone. One way to avoid such a problem arising is by alternating the roles of the cops. This way, the students learn that both instructors should be respected and listened to. The assistant instructor can also help you in times when you require support and need time to gather thoughts or when you need to split the class so multiple syllabus requirements can be taught at once.

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As an instructor, you have the responsibility of teaching people skills that they want to acquire and also the iTKD syllabus. However, at times you may feel like doing something else. That's great! It shows that as an instructor you are a human being and if you feel like that sometimes then it is possible that your students also at times may want to do something else to break out of the usual routine. This is a great opportunity to show the student's what awaits them as they go up the ranks or exposing the student's to another part of Taekwon-Do such as tournaments. With children this is particularly important as on average, their attention spans are slightly short than adults. If something works well, the class will be enjoying themselves and with adults many tend to be curious about the details of task. It also allows you to see if the students have a speciality in something (e.g. breaking) and gives you the chance to nurture that talent.

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Just as individuals are all unique, injuries also come in all shapes and sizes. They also vary in severity and treatment depending on the student and perhaps more importantly their age. The types of injuries I have been exposed to can be crudely classified into two different categories – pre-existing and new injuries. Pre-existing injuries are those injuries that someone has had for a long time and is training through them and naturally occurs more often in adults. The goal would be to train without aggravating the injury. Sometimes it is possible for the person to train through without aggravating which is great. But what happens if someone does aggravate the injury while training? If this happens, what I find works best is to change the movement of the techniques ever so slightly so the person is able to perform the technique with as little stress as possible. This could be like adding a small step in between step turns to reduce the stress on a student's knee. From a technical point of view this isn't ideal, but this allows the student to demonstrate the technique at the best of their ability. New injuries are more often than not short term injuries and are those injuries that are obtained during the course of training and can usually be 'walked off'. This can happen to anyone and but usually seen more commonly in children as they over-exaggerate the smallest of injuries such as a sore toe. One way is to use the student's strength and courage to make them realise that the injury is nothing. This could involve saying things such as "I know it might be sore, but I think you're really strong boy/girl. Let me see your muscles, wow you're really strong ...". By saying something like this you are getting the student's mind off the problem and psyching them up, a combination which tends to get the student back up on their feet. If you haven't already tried this, you'll be amazed to see how often this works.

Finally, as primarily a mini-kids instructor, I teach children up to about 8TH gup before they graduate and join the adult class. Even though they are no longer in your class, you can still interact with them and help them out. It ends up being beneficial for the student because you've known them and taught them for them at least two years. You understand the way that they learn, something that the new instructor will need to understand. That being said, don't be disappointed if the student doesn't come to you and ask you for help. You will feel pride in that student as they grow through the ranks and you will still be able to keep that friendly student-instructor bond as time goes on. If you also feel that the student is beyond the difficulty of your class (e.g. mini-kid doing so well that they might be getting bored or older student that may want to become competition orientated) don't be afraid to recommend them another club that may cater better for their goals. It is great to see club rivalries in our organisation, but at the end of the day it comes back to helping the student reach their goals and not get bored. If the student gets bored, the fire in their heart would extinguish and with it his time training in Taekwon-Do.

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I know most of what I have written may be obvious to some, but to me, I found I had to learn these things the hard way. As these are all very simple points, it is very easy to overlook them and pay no attention to them. You may have a different perspective on teaching if you consider these small points and find that teaching students are lot easier. You'll find that you can keep on top of the class when preparing them for events such as a grading or even a tournament far easier and the whole teaching experience will be that much greater for both yourself and your students.