

“Methods of Teaching Karate”

V4

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This paper attempts to illuminate the difference between “**delivering instructions**” and “**effective teaching**” as it applies to karate.

A sculptor was once asked how he is able to create such masterpieces out of a block of rock and his answer was “The masterpiece already exists, I merely chip away the obstacles in its way.”



Man Carving his own destiny –Albin Polasek

*There are few compliments greater than
being granted the privilege to influence another person’s mind.*

The role of a teacher is an amazing opportunity to help individuals reveal the hidden gifts and capabilities they already have. This doesn’t happen by merely standing in front of a class and “delivering instructions.” It may get “Karate instructor” checked off the bucket-list, but it has very little to do with helping individuals break through their seemingly impenetrable physical, mental or behavioral barriers.

This paper focuses on being an “effective” teacher which involves a life-long journey of self-discovery and growth and then applies a balance of passion, knowledge, patience, acceptance and creativity to facilitate learning to individuals with varied abilities, desires and barriers. Being an effective teacher first requires instructors to commit to solving their own limitations and barriers which Grandmaster Nagamine equates to the painstaking task of “recasting our metal.” Effective teaching requires instructors to be open minded and work to eliminate their own self-doubts and then work to eliminate preconceived notions they may have about others. It requires instructors to learn the “whys” of what they teach. And finally, this type of teaching requires incredible patience, tolerance and the understanding that credibility, integrity and trust are the cornerstones of all effective teaching\learning relationships.

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“Teaching is a skill acquired through time, experience and the ability to communicate. There is no set way to teach. When working with an individual you have to find a way for that person to understand.”

Kyoshi Gaudoin
“Methods of Teaching” 1990

I coined the term “Racoon Energy” based on the great lengths a racoon will go through to get into my garbage cans. This started when I moved into my first home and found racoons dragged my garbage all over the yard every evening. I first attempted to keep them out by tightening the lid and then I tried bungee cords and various other techniques. After that, I purchased new cans with better locking lids which didn’t help. Finally, I bolted the cans to my wall and built an impenetrable fortress which was successful. The racoons were incredibly creative, tenacious and unwavering in their focus to solve the “can puzzle.” Effective teachers must tap into racoon energy in order to help students grow past their own personal barriers.

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear”

Unknown

Be patient. Sometimes our mission is to “clear the land”, sometimes it’s to “hoe the fields” or plant seeds – it can’t be harvest time all the time. Students are all going through different stages of life and have different personal agendas – some don’t even know what their agenda is at the moment. Effective instructors can throttle-up for the ones who are ready for harvest and down for the others. This doesn’t imply that disinterested students should get an easy ride. The fact of the matter is that everyone should be pushed to varying degrees, but applying a one-size-fits-all formula to every student just means a portion of the room is always guaranteed to feel left out.

If nothing else, each instructor has a responsibility to help students grow in a way that makes it more likely “a teacher will appear” for them someday.

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“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”

William Arthur Ward

This resonates with karate instruction. It's not too difficult for anyone to recite certified karate facts and describe karate techniques – we can really just repeat what we've heard our instructors say and it won't be questioned... but is that really effective in helping students “recast their metal?” What investment must we make in ourselves in order to effectively demonstrate good karate?

“Example isn't another way to teach, it is the only way to teach.”

Albert Einstein

Discussion should be limited to delving deeper into the finer details of a topic like the dangers of a side sweep. For the most part, Karate instruction should be 90% example and drills and 10% or less voice. This is partially due to the physical nature of Karate and partially due to the skewed ratio of visual\tactual learners to auditory learners in general.

“I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times”

Bruce Lee

Muscle memory is absolutely critical in the karate world. Our brains might actually be considered more of a burden than anything in learning Karate. To be successful in any aspect of karate – basic techniques, kata, kumite, kobodo – we need to dissect complex moves into rudimentary pieces and repetitively practice the pieces until our brain is no longer needed; then we can progressively include the other components of the moves and inevitably perform the technique or kata without our brain getting in our way. Highly disciplined individuals with a high tolerance for mundane are ideally suited for this but it's otherwise an excruciating pattern for most people. So the big question - how do we teach students when the fundamental key to success is so difficult for students to relate to? This is without a doubt one of the biggest challenges in effectively teaching Karate.

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“Practice does not make perfect - Perfect practice makes perfect!”

Unknown

As mentioned above, repetition plays an extremely important role in learning Karate, but it also bores students and leads to practicing flawed technique which results in **bad muscle memory**!

Now the real question is how do we use repetition to **effectively** teach **good muscle memory**?

The answer is that instructors must be extremely creative and constantly seek new ways for students to perform repetitive tasks without ever being aware of that fact.

I personally have found a couple helpful options:

- **Involve the students**
 - **Select different students to count.** Having any spotlight shine on a student often helps clean up their technique and tends to stick even when another student is selected.
 - **Let the students take turns driving.** When students are stuck in a line doing the same thing endlessly, they naturally lose focus. Placing a student in front of the pack and letting them “drive the drill” helps shake them into proper technique for that moment and it tends to stick when they get back in line.
 - **Let the students identify the drill-technique.** This isn’t always appropriate but if we’re going to run through every technique, then selecting different students to pick the technique makes them more personally invested in the drill. Also, students tend to perform better to win the selection privilege.
- **Compete**
 - Splitting the room and having the sides compete helps distract students and encourages top performance for longer periods.
- **Break up the drill**
 - If the focus of the class is mainly kata, have students do a reasonable number of kata and then a diversion and then more katas and a diversion, etc. The diversion should be extremely short and feel a little like a reward. This can be used to ensure kata performance quality is upheld throughout the class.

A main premise of this document is that there is a huge difference between standing in front of a class **delivering instruction** and **effectively teaching**. Instructors can research learning styles and teaching methods but to truly be effective they must first clear their mind of prejudice and judgement, lead with their hearts and commit to helping each and every student chip away the obstacles hiding their true capabilities.