**Teaching Aikido in the 21st Century**

**by**

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Learning is a science and the process of finding effective ways of imparting information is constantly under revision by educational psychologists. We can see this evolution happening in both our schools and colleges on an ongoing basis. You only need to think about the way children were educated in the Victorian age and then compare that to your own educational experience. Then, if like me you are of a certain age, you can take the process one step further and compare that to the education of your children. Schools these days are far more vibrant, offer far more opportunities and have resources at their disposal, which in days of old, hadn’t even been dreamed of, let alone invented.

This process is entirely natural and logical and so we have to ask ourselves why to a very great degree in the aikido world we are stuck with an educational model that is archaic, based on ancient Japanese culture.

By way of example, whilst on my travels recently, I was lucky enough to attend a class of a very long standing Japanese teacher, who had spent a lot of time training directly with O Sensei. I was very excited to be allowed to attend the class as an honorary guest and as usual found my training partners to be very pleasant. However, I have to say that the teaching was a huge disappointment. The teacher demonstrated a technique no more than 3 times. He rarely said anything about what he was doing, and then let us get on with trying to replicate what he had done for the next 15 to 20 minutes. Unless called upon, he did not often intervene, so if you were making mistakes these were not being corrected. The class had a good number of what I might term more elderly students and it was a humid night in a room that had no windows and no air conditioning. I was younger than a good few and consider myself reasonably fit, but this was one of those very rare occasions, where the intensity of the training reduced me to a puddle, and I was absolutely drained off all energy. In summary, the only things I learnt that night were:

* My own levels of endurance.
* How tolerant aikido students are, (*well at least the ones that stick with it*).
* How not to teach.

Here was a man with almost unrivalled experience, who undoubtedly had wonderful technical skills and who on the little taste I got was kind and generous, but who on my brief visit simply wasn’t effectively passing this on.

Over the years, I have visited many clubs and attended many courses and whilst my experience above is perhaps extreme, (*a bit sad, as it’s fairly recent*), the model above is largely mimicked to a greater or lesser degree.

This traditional method mostly concentrates on how to do a technique in terms of how you use your body. All too frequently absolutely nothing is said about how you use your mind and to get a teacher to talk about the fundamental principles that they are employing to make the technique effective, safe and powerful is a as rare as rocking horse poo.

Added to this, when I attend courses, or visit other clubs or talk to other people about their experiences of aikido, all too often I see/hear the following common practises.

* Teachers throw their students, but rarely take ukemi in class.
* Students questioning their teacher are thought to be rude and anyone daring to do so is often punished or belittled in some way.
* Teachers demand that students address them as ‘Sensei’, off the mat as well as on it, which suggests that they are not only better on the mat, but better human beings off it. (*Really...................!*).
* Too many clubs foster a culture of the macho, which normally means that they have very few female members and inevitably lose a lot of students along the way.
* Teachers positively discourage students from looking at what other sensei have to offer on the grounds that their students will become confused. (*This is* c*ompletely at odds with my own personal experience and is totally disrespectful of a student’s critical faculty)*.
* Clubs rarely offer opportunities for cultural exchange by practising with clubs that have a different aikido lineage. In fact the very idea is frowned upon.
* Many dojos allow a kind of pecking order to exist, fostered by the traditional hierarchical nature that aikido and most other martial arts are based on.
* Teachers hold back knowledge so that they have the edge on their students.
* Too much learning is done by simple repetition and that’s just boring and rarely gives the student any insight into why they are doing what they are doing.
* Good technique is seen as the goal rather than the medium for demonstrating great principles that help as much, if not more, off the mat as well as on it.
* Teachers teach what their teachers taught them with no significant variation to the teaching methodology and a bit like Chinese Whispers, the further you go down the line, the worse the copy becomes.

It really is time that we began to start taking a more professional stance on the process of teaching aikido and that as a group we started to benefit from the very real progress that has been made in relation to the science of learning. If we do, we just might see our students make much more progress and we may find that more students stick with the programme rather than giving up as so many do. (*Imagine how you would feel if you suddenly found yourself being schooled in the Victorian age. Would you want to stay?*).

I am not an educational psychologist, but I would suggest that the following practises create a more positive learning environment for both teachers and students alike and are more likely to tick the boxes for the professional educator:

* Make the learning fun and be imaginative in how you get you message across.
* Be prepared to do things differently and constantly search for new ways to get a message across, because different students learn in different ways. Some find it easy to learn when shown something, some concentrate on what the teacher says and others need to feel what the teacher is doing.
* Where possible, teachers should take ukemi from their students. This is simply one of the most effective ways to learn what is truly going on with your students and is an amazing tool for getting great insights into how and why a technique works.
* Treat the dojo as a laboratory, where everyone involved has a chance to learn from each other including the teacher. Everyone is a student and whilst the teacher might lead the learning, by encouraging others to offer their thoughts and experience you will be amazed at what can come out.
* Start teaching principles instead of technique, bearing in mind the old motto that if you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day, but teach him how to fish and he will eat for life. (*Of course technique provides an ideal medium to demonstrate the principles*).
* Make sure your dojo is genuinely safe for all students to train in and that all students treat each other with deep respect. When we give our bodies to take ukemi, it is a precious gift and it’s important that the receiver treats that body appropriately.
* Give respect as a teacher to all your students equally and then you have the best chance to get respect back from them.
* Foster an environment where students are encouraged to ask questions. Don’t worry if you don’t know the answers, as that just helps you pinpoint an area where you need to learn more and don’t worry if your student doesn’t agree with your answer. It’s okay to have a different viewpoint and again it may just signal a possible area of learning for one or both parties.
* Celebrate the day your student knows something that you don’t, it means that you have done your job well.

Whilst I accept that some of the charm of our art is found within the historic ritual that most of us adopt to a greater or lesser degree, it is necessary to change the teaching methodology if we want our art to flourish. It is entirely possible to change the way we do things, but still maintain the core values that aikido promotes.

I think that most readers will accept the basic point of this article, which is that within aikido, we have become trapped within a system that is selling students short. It will take courage and vision to break the mould, but surely the purpose of training is to create strong, independent, courageous human beings who know right from wrong and act accordingly.

If you are interested in exploring these ideas further then please contact me as in the New Year, I will be arranging an event that will explore these issues in more depth.