

Skills and Roles of a Good Instructor

What are the skills and roles of a good instructor? What does it take to be a good martial arts instructor compared to other type of instructors? Often people believe “that a person who is an expert in a subject is automatically able to teach it. The belief that knowledge of subject matter is the primary requisite for good teaching is still widely held. Unfortunately, mere knowledge of content and technique provides no guarantee that a practitioner will be an effective instructor.”¹ Teaching effectively and being a good instructor are very different from being able to having good technique and being able to regurgitate the materials. Many skills are involved in being a good instructor because instructors have to play many different roles. Those skills or roles can not be easily ranked in order of importance as each is equally important in its own way. I will attempt to discuss some of what I believe are the skills and roles needed to be a good instructor.

Knowledge and technique of the subject are not a guarantee to being a good instructor, but they are necessary skills. The instructor needs to know the subject well enough to explain it to the students and in a way they can understand. When a professor, teacher, or instructor

¹ Combs, Arthur W., A Personal Approach to Teaching: Beliefs that Make a Difference,

Published by: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts, 1986, p. 1.

lectures or discusses a topic, they often sound very knowledgeable about the subject. However, “sounding knowledgeable” does not necessarily mean they know everything about the subject. Areas of study and practice change and evolve with time. For example, let us look at the medical field of the past

compared to the present state of knowledge. In the United States in the mid-1800's (the "the old west"), the town doctors have limited knowledge of infectious diseases and injuries. Most times, surgery was as deadly as the disease or injury it was intended to cure. These physicians did not have even what we now consider to be the most rudimentary medical equipment and tests. Most people did not die of cancer, heart disease, or of old age because they had died of disease that may be almost unheard of in the 1990's or infections that are now easily treated. Today, there are new diseases and treatments which allows physicians to effectuate an improvement, a cure, or life extension. There is now a better understanding of infection and disease. There has been and continues to be step-change improvements in medical equipment, tests, and medications. We now have diagnostic medical equipment such as ultrasound imaging, computerized axial tomography (CAT), and nuclear magnetic resonance scanners. We now have therapy equipment such as the linear accelerator (for the treatment of cancer), and extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy device (for the treatment of kidney stones). Infection is usually not a cause of death.

These medical improvements have not been without a negative consequence. As medical problems, equipment, tests, and medications have become more complex, medical doctors have had difficulty in staying current with all the knowledge that is available to them. In an attempt to address the complexities of modern medicine, medical doctors are practicing in areas of specialty. Specializing allow physicians to be an expert in one area of medicine and to know the medications, tests, and treatments for their area of specialty.

Instructors, like medical doctors, need to stay current with the knowledge and skills of their subject. Martial arts instructors/masters are somewhat similar to medical

doctors. There are many different styles of martial arts and it is difficult, if not impossible, for a martial arts instructors to be master of all martial art styles. Most martial arts instructors hold rank in three or more different styles. For example, Dr. Ken Min of the University of California Martial Arts Program holds black belt rank in Taekwondo, Hapkido, Judo, and Kumdo.

An instructor's ability to present materials is as important as knowing the material. Presentation skills are not one that an instructor is born with. Presentation skills are learned by practice. According to Elmon E. Yoder of National Seminars, there are many different presentation elements. They are:

1. accessibility (maintained a style of regal aloofness),
2. speed (rapid speaking rate, convey a sense of urgency),
3. word selection (style for flamboyant expression),
4. humility (extreme modesty and humility).

And according to Ellie Schindelman of the UC Berkeley Campus Personnel Office, there are four different styles of learning. These are:

1. doers (people oriented, feelings/values),
2. thinkers (logic/structure, uses manuals),
3. tryers (risk taker, practical),
4. watchers (reflective, observing).

The instructor's presentation style needs to be one that can reach students who have different styles of learning/interpretation. The way the instructor speaks plays a large part in the way the instructor presents material. According to Elmon E. Yoder of National Seminars, there are different style of speaking. They are:

1. enduring ideas ("Your style should be the way you can do the most."²),
2. sincerity ("Effective speech must come from one's convictions."³),
3. enthusiasm ("Become genuinely interested in what you talk about."⁴), be yourself ("You are free to use any style, provided it is natural, sincere, and effective."⁵), and
4. improve yourself ("Don't remain the same person tomorrow as you are today. Discover where your short comings are. Continually repair them."⁶).

Martial arts instructors need the same presentation skills as other instructors.

If chemistry instructors teach by lecture only (no experiments involved), students will not learn the safety skills needed to work safely in the lab with chemicals. Although martial arts instructors demonstrate their technique and do not normally write on a chalk board, they still need to be able to reach their students. The martial arts instructor needs to explain techniques as well as demonstrate them. The explanation of the martial arts instructor needs to give the students guideline to work by and then allow the students to practice the technique. It is sometimes difficult for an instructor to assess whether the students understand what was presented. However, the Martial arts instructor has one advantage over other instructors is that they get direct and immediate feedback, because the martial arts students are allowed time to

² Yoder, Elmon E., Powerful Presentation Skills, Published by: National Seminars Publications, Shawnee Mission, Kansas, 1988, p. 48-49.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

try out their techniques and the instructor can correct errors or suggest improvements.

Motivating students to improve is an essential part of the instructor's role. The skill to motivate comes from learning as well as from within the instructor. The part that comes from within the instructor is their belief in the student's abilities, and their willingness to help the student to learn and to improve.

There are many ways to motivate a student to learn. No one way works for all students, and there is no right or wrong way. According to the author Arthur W. Combs, ". . . the differences between good and poor teachers . . . good teachers perceive students as essentially able, while poor one have grave doubts about student ability. Good teachers also perceive students as trustworthy, while poor students regard them as untrustworthy."⁷ That is, if your instructor decides he or she has spent ("wasted") too much time trying to teach you further and they decide that you are beyond the point of help, would you still try your best to understand the subject? -- Probably not. On the other hand if the instructor believes in you and pins his/her hope on your making it, you would more than likely be motivated to try your best.

Another facet of motivating students is the ability some instructors have to rearrange the materials so that it keeps the student interested. I have seen an instructor try to explain a difficult area to a class of professionals. The students asked questions over and over again, but the instructor never varied his explanation. In the end, most of the students expressed that

⁷ Combs, Arthur W., A Personal Approach to Teaching: Beliefs that Make a Difference,

Published by: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts, 1986, p. 1.

they did not wish to continue taking classes from him. According to the author Kurt Hanks, "The failure to perceive what people really need is the biggest motivational problem there is."⁸

⁸ Hanks, Kurt, Motivating People, Published by: Crisp Publications Inc., Los Altos, California, 1991,

p. 91.

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As pertains to formal education, there is a special incentive to remain, the education is often the stepping stone to a needed skills for the students chosen career. As for martial arts, whether the students remains or leaves depends on the instructor's ability to motivate them, keep their interest, and keep their motivation. Many, if not most, non-martial artists seem to view the martial arts as an “extra curricular activity” that has no direct relationship of impact on the students career or future. Most martial artists would view the same situation as one that provides the students a way to improve their inner-self and that the instruction and techniques do, at least indirectly, influence the students careers and life.

There is an extra incentive for those who practice the Taekwondo and Judo styles of martial arts; the possibility of participating in the Olympic. A small possibility, but a hope that many you students may secretly hold and never share.

The instructor needs motivation as much, or more, than the student. When an instructor is not motivated, it reflects in their teaching and in the attitude the instructor presents.

As I stated before, knowledge is not static, it evolves with time. In the past, the only pain killer available was alcohol. With the discovery of anesthetics, doctors no longer have to deal with an intoxicated patient afterward or one who suddenly moves during surgery. However, if

medical school instructors had not improved their teaching by learning about the use of anesthetics, doctors would have been using an ineffective methods for many more years than needed and to the detriment of their patients. The basic martial arts techniques are still taught as well recognized as effective

series, but combinations of those basic techniques have been created. If the martial arts instructor decides that they can no longer learn new techniques, then their methods will not be current, will become repetitious to the students, and if the students feel they can no longer learn from the instructor, one will find an instructor who can. No matter if one is a college professor or a martial arts instructor, they need to be innovative, observant, and have a self-motivated interest in one's subject. Therefore, I believe that it is important for an instructor to keep up-to-date in their field as well as maintain their teaching materials up-to-date.

Listening is a skill necessary to our everyday life. To listen one must first be willing to listen. Listening is not a skill for the ears alone. Listening involves ear, mind, heart, and the eye. Mind is needed because if the instructor does not keep an open mind, he/she will not be able to hear and understand what the students needs. Heart because the instructor needs to imagine being in the students place and to understand the student's feeling. Eye because sometimes what students vocalize is contrary to what their body is saying. For example, a deaf person listens with their mind, heart and eye. They rely mainly on sight and hand signals. However, a person who is not deaf needs to watch as well as to listen. According to instructor Carkhuff of Interpersonal Skills, an instructor needs to observe contexts environment, appearance, and behavior. In his course, Carkhuff gives examples (Figure 1 below) of what to observe in each category. Even though Martial arts instructors give instructions in a strict and set environment, they still need to observe students behavior. Since the martial arts training environment is set it is harder for the instructor to observe all areas of context, appearance, and

behavior. The Martial arts instructor needs to be more attentive than other instructors if they are to find the goals and needs of their students.

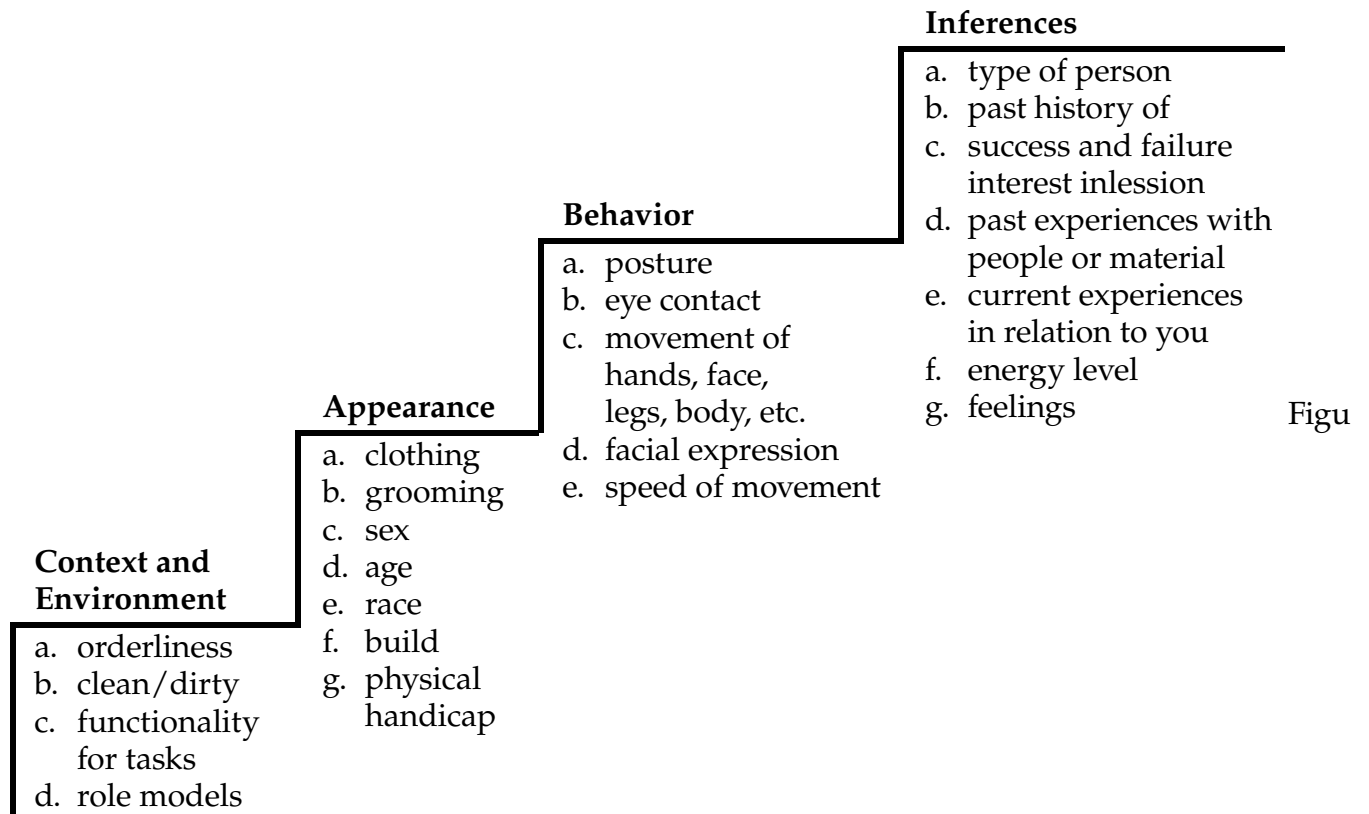


Figure 1: Examples of what to observe for.⁹

Morals and ethics play an important role in how effective an instructor is. Webster's dictionary defines ethics as "a system of moral standards or values."¹⁰ Morals are "principles, standards, or habits with respect to right or wrong in conduct; ethics; sometimes, specifically;

⁹ Carkhuff, Robert R., The Skills of Teaching: Interpersonal Skills, Published by: Human Resource Development Press, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts, 1977, p. 26.

¹⁰ Neufeldt, Victoria, editor, Webster's New World Dictionary of American English, 3rd Ed., Published by: Prentice Hall, New York New York, 1991, p. 466.

standards of sexual behavior.”¹¹

¹¹ Ibid., p. 882.

Each of us has different standards with respect to right or wrong. Our standards are based on how we were raised, the environment, and the culture in which we are raised, and our life experiences.

Mary McBee says that:

“Education has two great goals: to help people become smart and to help people become good intellect and character. . . . Morality as a goal of public education means respect for persons – for their rights, their needs, and their dignity as individual human beings. . . . Morality involves thinking, feeling, and behavior. Reasoning alone does not a moral person make. Moral maturity requires understanding the right, caring enough to do it, and knowing how to do it. . . . Moral judgment builds on social understanding. To be fair to someone, I must know how that person thinks and feels, what his viewpoint and needs are.”¹²

James Gustafson says that:

[The instructor’s moral] “... plan must involve justice. All other principles, like impartiality and respect for others, and all other human qualities, like self-giving and commitment, relate to justice. It is the ‘absolute’ standard toward which we might all, despite our many varying values, strive.”¹³

In American culture respect is given to those who one considers to have earned respect.

¹² McBee, Mary L., ed., Rethinking College Responsibilities for Values, Published by: Jossey-Bass, Inc., San Francisco, California, 1980, pp 57-58.

¹³ Gustafson, James M., Moral Education, Published by: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970, p5.

Additionally, it is not a discourtesy to question your elders. In Asian culture, all youths are taught to respect their elders and not to question them. In the martial arts arena, students are taught to give respect to elders and higher ranks -- whether they are black belts or not. Upper ranks and the master instructor demonstrates respect by

showing lower ranks that the higher ranks should not abuse the respect given them by the lower ranks.

When an instructor or higher rank black belt abuses the respect of a lower rank, it is duty of the master instructor to discipline the black belt. For example, a first degree black belt comment that one of the second degree black belt was treating him as a child. The first degree black belt does not wish to take this incident to the master instructor because he/she does not want to deal with the second degree black belt's attitude later. The first degree black belt say he/she will only have to deal with the second degree black belt for a couple of more months, than he/she will be leaving the program.

Honesty and sincerity are also part of moral standards. In most cultures, and environments, it is agreed that honesty and sincerity are a must in one's dealing with others. When people feel that they are not being treated with honesty and sincerity they close both their ears and their minds.

Standards of sexual behavior often vary greatly from culture to culture. In American culture, it is acceptable to kiss and hug in public -- to display affection. In most Asian cultures, kissing in public is not accepted or practiced and youths are taught not to display affection in public. In any professions that involve touching (e.g. medicine, physical therapy, massage therapy, clothier, sports instructor), there is a professional responsibility on the person to

touch their clients or students only in an appropriate fashion. It is similar to King Arthur's Court Knight of the Round Table, where there is a code of conduct that each knight must follow. This provides a safe environment which allows clients to receive medical treatment, and students to learn. It helps build mutual respects between clients and the professional, and students and their

instructors. Any professional touches their clients/students in an inappropriate manner and in a manner that the clients/students did not consent to, the clients/students can bring this inappropriate behavior to a court of law. It can cost that professional respects of their clients/students, respects of the peer, and can cause them their profession because the public will view them as breaking the unspoken rule.

Webster's dictionary defines values as "the social principles, goals, or standards held or accepted by an individual, class, society, etc."¹⁴ The definition is easy to understand but the actual practice is very different. Instructors are raised in different cultures and different environments. Those differences influence their belief system. An example of the cultural values is clearly seen in spatial differences. In Asian culture, it is impolite to be in close proximity to the person one is speaking with. Asians prefer to be at a little more than arms' length away. However, in Italian and French cultures, they like to be very close. Another example is in the past, blacks were slaves. Now they have as much rights as another person in the legal system. In practice, some blacks feel they are not being treated as equal. "With today's emphasis on value clarification for students, teachers are portrayed as well-adjusted, unprejudiced individuals who calmly and objectively help clarify student's values."¹⁵ The concept is easy to understand but the practices are hard to apply.

¹⁴ Neufeldt, Victoria, editor, Webster's New World Dictionary of American English, 3rd Ed., Published by: Prentice Hall, New York New York, 1991, p. 1474.

¹⁵ Stiles, Lindley J., Morality Examined: Guidelines for Teachers, Published by: Princeton Book Company, Princeton, New Jersey, 1977, p. 141.

Instructor's beliefs, and values also play an important role in the way they teach. These areas are intertwined with one another and it is very hard to separate them during discussions. The instructor's are expected to set their own values or prejudices

aside, to keep value or prejudices to a minimum, to demonstrate that people with different values or ideals can work with one another. The students watch the instructors reaction and behavior and see them "as models of life."¹⁶ If the instructor displays sexism or racism (in class or out), the students may consider it acceptable to display those same behaviors. For example, if a male instructor refers to a female student using terms such as "baby" or "sweet heart", the students may come to consider it acceptable to refer to female students by using the same terms -- whether they understand the implied meaning or not.

It is important for instructors to assist students to clarify their values. According to Paul Timm "once our value system is clarified, it will provide focus for our lives."¹⁷ The instructors are helping the students to find their lives focus. This is true for martial arts and non martial arts instructors.

Instructor's ability to manage student's behavior is a needed skill. According to the authors Mallary M. Collins, "The key to success in managing student behaviors is rather simple and very basic – "SAY WHAT YOU MEAN AND MEAN WHAT YOU SAY." In other words, be consistent and follow through with the expectations you have defined and the consequences you have stated."¹⁸ Collins make it sound as if managing student's behavior is easy but it is not.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 122.

¹⁷ Timms, Paul R., Successful Self-Management: A Psychologically Sound Approach to Personal Effectiveness, Published by: Crisp Publications Inc., Los Altos, California, 1987, p. 13.

¹⁸ Collins, Mallary M., Changing Student Behaviors: A Positive Approach, Published by: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, p. 10.

Combs stated, "people's belief systems are the determiners of behavior. They provide the guidelines by which each of us selects

appropriate behavior for the situation in which we find ourselves."¹⁹ Comb's statement clearly indicates the environment and the culture in which the students were raised in also has a great influence on the students behavior.

A student does not have only one instructor. They have many instructors and not all instructors teach the same way. The disciplinary action of the instructors also vary with the instructors. When a class is being taught by two different instructors, there will almost always be some conflicts in how the materials are presented, what should be presented, and the disciplinary action that should be used. This is true whether the instructor is teaching martial arts or not. I attended a professional course that had two instructors. Their style of teaching was quite different. One instructor's teaching style was fly by the seat of his pant (teaching from the what ever pop into his head on that particular topic or from questions generated by students). The other instructor's teaching style was very methodical and very thorough.

Patience is a skill needed for all types of teaching. Not everyone has the patience to teach. Even good instructors will, at times, become frustrated. Instructor frustration may have its source as: from mistakes students make and are unable to correct, from students who are slow, or from the instructor's personal life. An instructor should never overreact and "blow up" at a student because it can have a negative effects on the students motivation to learn, self-esteem, and self-concepts. Additionally, it does not show the respect that all in martial arts are

¹⁹ Combs, Arthur W., A Personal Approach to Teaching: Beliefs that Make a Difference,

Published by: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts, 1986, p. 2.

expected to be given to both masters and students. "Children with negative self-concepts and lack of confidence in their abilities often feel as though other children are better than they are. They tend to give up easily,

become quickly frustrated and have their feelings easily hurt."²⁰ Students who have been hurt may nurse that emotional wound for a long time before they are willing to try again.

The role of an instructor is to be a model to the student and when personal feelings become involved, a conflict of interest usually arises. The reason is that "personal entanglement often destroys objectivity, which is essential if the teacher is to have insight into the student's behavior to help him find a solution to his problems."²¹ It is not easy to keep personal feelings out of the instructor-student relationship. Instructors are not robots, they are human beings with human feelings. That is why "the teacher should never forget that he is a professional person, and he should strive constantly to approach the goals of scientific objectivity which professional competence implies, not only in his use of subject matter and methods, but in his personal relationships with his pupils. His relationship with his pupil is first and last a professional one."²² In martial arts, the instructor often needs to demonstrate techniques that involve intimate physical contact. It is important that the martial arts instructor be very objective about their technique demonstrations and only touch student in an appropriate professional manner. Today's social climate is not as accepting of sexual harassment as it was in the past. Even the appearance of impropriety must be avoided. I have heard of a student who has filed sexual harassment charges against an instructor in order to

²⁰ Collins, Mallery M., Changing Student Behaviors: A Positive Approach, Published by: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, p. 113.

²¹ Bush, Robert N., The Teacher-Pupil Relationships, Published by: Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York, New York, 1954, p. 87.

²² Ibid., p. 89.

boost his/her grade. In a situation

of an instructor who was known as being a “toucher” this case would be hard to defend.

Students, and others, expect instructor to be perfect, but like any human being they are not. They make mistake like anyone else. Often people do not like to admit to mistake or failure. The ability to admit to a mistake comes from courage. I believe that an instructor who can admit to mistakes should be admired not criticized. After all even the greatest of us is still a student.

A sense of humor is a skill that no instructor should leave home without. Students are pranksters. Students treat school and the martial arts dojo the same, they try to see how far they can go without being punished. Some students go as far as to see what kind of punishment they do get. This is where a sense of humor comes in. The students should be dealt with firmly and fairly, but with compassion. Not all mistakes should be punished. Instructors need to deal with all situations with an open mind and sense of humor.

It take a lot to be a good instructor. This paper only touches the surface to discuss some of the skills and roles of a good martial arts instructor. Both techniques and skills are ever changing. I am happy that we have good instructors who are willing to devote their time to working to improve themselves as well as their students.

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