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# Working Towards a Coherent and Cohesive Teaching Approach

**Introduction:** Many good teachers are able to plan on the spot and pull together whatever is at hand to make their lessons work, sometimes ‘picking and mixing’ seemingly disparate approaches, methods, techniques and activities to aid learning. However, for this ‘eclectic fusion’ to be effective, rather than it being unplanned, random and confused, it needs to be underpinned by a clear and sound understanding of the fundamental principles behind various teaching practices. Unfortunately, most people who find themselves in the position of being a teacher of *Iaido* or indeed any type of *Budo*; regardless of their nationality be it Japanese, British, North American or other, are untrained as teachers and have a questionable grasp of the methodology involved in effective pedagogy. As a result this can lead to dull, confused, repetitive and unplanned lessons that are often lacking coherence or

cohesion.

Recent research into classroom teaching practice (for example by Baynham et al, 2007) confirms that it is the most experienced and effective teachers who use what might be called a 'principled eclecticism', based upon their own critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of different established approaches. In my own field of psycholinguistic and academic language teaching, established professionals usually draw on a wealth of different frameworks, approaches, methods, procedures and techniques. These have been developed throughout the history of teaching and continue to evolve to this day. Practitioners' perceptions of the value of these models, approaches and methods – and indeed, of the very concept of method – have also evolved, in line with paradigm shifts in generic teacher education and in the social sciences. However, it is not within the remit of this short paper to define and discuss differences between the various approaches, methods, procedures and techniques, or indeed the vast cultural differences often found between Japanese and non-Japanese pedagogical approaches, or the arguably antiquated methods of instruction used in *Budo*.

Nevertheless, what can be clearly stated is that rarely in any *dojo* context does a teacher (*sensei*) have the chance to instruct a group of learners with the same skill sets and knowledge base as each other, as every learner is unique in their personal needs based obviously on individual grade and level. So how can a teacher effectively cater to a group of learners all with different needs and wants in a timely, efficient and cohesive manner? With this question in mind, I would like to share a basic 3 Levels framework I use to teach *Iaido* and briefly discuss how it fits in well with the fundamental needs of all level of learners in a clear and consistent manner. *\*\* However, all ideas relating to the following 3 Level approach in this essay are my own, and therefore are still very much work in progress. Thus, all mistakes or misunderstanding at this point of my own learning and development are mine.*

**Terminology:** Within the *dojo* I regularly use the terms Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 techniques, to describe and explain different points being taught in *Iaido*. In short, these 3 levels can be summarised as being:

**Level 1:** Are points relating to the highly prescriptive sword work found in areas of study such as Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei (ZNKR) *Seitei Gata* (or arguably *Shoden* level *koryu*) and how the body essentially fits around the

sword. This is a fair start since during the early study of *Iaido* many beginners and lower grades focus solely on the sword, thus focusing on prescribed sword and body positions and movements is key to building fundamentally sound foundation and technique to build from.

**Level 2:** Are points relating too more effective bodywork being used thereby meaning that the sword now starts to fit around or more in sync with the practitioner's body. This level of input is required when the learner has internalised a decent amount of basic *Iaido* knowledge and the instructor tries to move the focus away from the sword controlling the person to the new desired level of the person and body controlling the sword. As an instructor, this requires a deeper understanding of how the body is supposed to work to achieve effective technique and investigation into how different body types need to interact with the sword. Despite what many think, one size does not fit all and sometimes adjustments need to be made for differing body types, just like some of the technique may vary slightly for both male and female practitioners.

**Level 3:** Are higher- level points relating to the mental and spiritual development of the practitioner. This is where the focus changes from solely what is happening outside the body, with all things being equal and hopefully done effectively, to dealing with what is happening inside the body and head. These Level 3 points enhance the physical technique and add flavour to it, turning it from a two-dimensional empty movement or sword dance, into a three dimensional (or dare I even say 4 dimensional) effective technique. However, even higher-level practitioners constantly have to review the basic Level 1 and 2 points, so as to check accuracy, especially when the ZNKR *Seitei Gata* are revised by the AJKF.

Thus, these 3 Levels tie neatly into my aims of making my own technique effective as I remember the mantra I was taught as a beginner:

*Dai* – Make the technique (technically) BIG

*Kyou* – Make the technique (technically) STRONG

*Soku* – Make the technique (technically and appropriately) FAST

*Kei* – Make the technique (technically) SMOOTH

**LEVEL 1:** The term Level 1 can be used to define and teach the highly prescriptive techniques of the sword and body required by all practitioners of *Iaido*, and especially, but not exclusively, those of beginners. Experience has

taught me that in the early days of *laido* training most beginners are usually focused entirely on their sword and what that is supposed to be doing, so their bodies generally fit around that. Thus, it seems key to inculcate first the correct knowledge and muscle memory for where the sword and body are supposed to be. This ties into the first mantra point *Dai*, as lower grades often have trouble not only understanding what the katana or the body is supposed to be doing or where the correct finishing positions are supposed to be, they often have trouble freeing and building up their muscles enough to do these prescribed movements effectively. Thus, emphasizing BIG correct movements with the sword and body not only helps develop the essential *laido* muscles needed to endure practice but also helps create a strong foundation to work from.

**Example 1:** From a ZNKR *Seitei Gata* point of view, Level 1 can be thought of as those points written down in the ZNKR *Seitei* manual and shown constantly at any regional or national seminar. These highly prescriptive points which are required to be understood and inculcated by all ZNKR *laido-ka*. Using the very basic example of the opening sword movement in the first technique called *Mae*, Level 1 could refer to points such as the correct drawing technique of the sword and how both hands work, where *thetsuka-kashira* should aim during the draw and at what point the sword starts to turn onto its side. Then moving on to the shape of the first cut, where the two hands should be after completion of the cut, how the left hand creates effective *sayabiki*, the angle and position of the blade during and after the cut, the shoulder and hip positions after the cut has been made and the *kissaki* and right hand finishing position after *nukitsuke*... to name but a few points. These of course seem very obvious to experienced *laido-ka*; however, in retrospect how many can claim to do these correctly all the time?

Because many beginners in *laido* are focusing only on the sword at this point of their learning, it is useful and important to make as much of this prescriptive knowledge as clear to them as possible and make it easy for them to identify what is relevant to them at their level. From that initial starting point, which deals with only the sword and what is happening with the top part of the body, other Level 1 points for the lower half of the body should also be focused on. Simple points such as the squeezing of the knees to help put the toes under in the correct way and at the correct position directly behind the hips, the correct foot placement on first cut, and the correct left knee, hip and left shoulder

alignment after the first cut etc. Thus, even in this opening part of the first technique we can describe it in very prescriptive terms.

**Example 2:** Level 1 input should also include areas such as something as fundamentally important as the correct *ashi-sabaki* in any of the standing forms. This can be something as simple (but apparently difficult to do) as trying to get the learner to just take three steps forward in an absolute straight line. Remarkably, this is something that many find difficult, and despite having walked almost all of our lives, we still tend to walk with splayed open feet and often on our heels, thus, not exactly straight or using the lower body the way that we need to for effective *Budo*. Although there may be some slight variation in understanding and application of techniques based on different *ryu-ha* or lineage, there should be more similarities than differences within these Level 1 applications. Needless to say, many will scream that the application of footwork in the ZNKR *Seitei Gata* standing forms varies form to form. This of course is true and there are many subtle *ashi-sabaki* differences that must be shown in the various standing techniques; however, it is up to the individual instructor to decide whether they want to have their students walking correctly in a straight line, on the balls of the feet with the hips and body being used more effectively than on civilian street, or running into the form attempting *Jo-Ha-Kyu* acceleration but at the cost of sword and body control, AKA: correct form.

**LEVEL 2:** At this level of instruction the focus shifts to the way the body interacts more effectively with the sword. This might usually begin in earnest once the practitioner has reached perhaps a good 2nd or 3rd *Dan* level. The marco-goals as given by the ZNKR for 1st to 5th *Dan* are given below; however, as stated above, it is up to the individual instructor to decide at what point to start focusing on Level 2. My own understanding of this, based on many years of living and training in Japan, would be that Level 1 input is suitable for new beginners to a good 2 *Dan* level, because it takes considerable time and practice to internalise even to a basic level many of these points. However, even the most experienced *laido-ka* need to be reminded of these fundamentals sometimes. The macro goals as set out by the ZNKR are:

ZNKR – *Seitei Gata*: 1st to 3rd *Dan* the *laido-ka* must show knowledge of:

- a) Correct wearing of uniform (*chakuso*)
- b) Correct etiquette (*saho*)

- c) Correct horizontal cut (*nikitsuke*)
- d) Correct vertical cut (*kiritsuke*)
- e) Correct blood wiping action (*chiburi*) and correct angles
- f) Correct returning of the sword (*noto*)

ZNKR – *Seitei Gata*: 4th and 5th *Dan* the *laido-ka* must show knowledge of and including:

- a) The previous points for 1st to 3rd *Dan*
- b) A tranquility of heart and mind when performing (*kokoro no ochitsuki*)
- c) Correct use of eyes (*metsuke*)
- d) A sense of vigor, energy, spirit and drive in the *performance* (*kihaku*)
- e) The body and sword being used as one in unison (*kikentai no ichi*)

**Example 3:** Following on from the above example of the initial draw in *Mae*, the Level 1 *nukitsuke* can be further developed from the simple prescriptive positioning of the sword in relation to basic body movements, and further developed into Level 2 with the aim of using the body more effectively with the sword for *laido* purposes. For example, this could include elements of how to achieve better *saya-binari* considering hand and arm positioning of whether the left hand was used to turn the *saya* or if the right was used thereby locking/straightening out the right elbow, correct *saya-biki* and whether the hand and wrist position of *saya-biki* are correct and the elbow is being used, that the application of the *tenouchi* in the cut is effective so that the *kissaki* is alive and not dipping and the angle the cut moves through the intended target is correct, that the hips are solid and the shoulders are correctly extended forward so that the target is indeed hit in the correct way so as to check that the practitioner is not doing a *hiki-giri*, that the left hand, sword and right foot act as one when the sword is released from the *saya*, and that a continuous acceleration of *jo-ha-kyu* is used. This would equate to an improved understanding of some of the *nukitsuke* technical issues, and lead to a better application of *Kikentai no ichi* and *kihaku*. In Japanese terminology this can be referred to as *Dokan*; or the revisiting the same technique but at higher levels of understanding. A useful image for this is that of an upward spiral staircase, where you revisit items over and over, but always at a higher level of understanding and execution.

**Example 4:** Another example of Level 2 input could be that once the learner is able to walk correctly in a straight line using correct foot and bodywork, that

can be added to by building in specific movements such as of small, medium and large steps to develop back foot *suri-ashi*. Footwork such as this is found and needed in techniques such as the *nukitsuke* in the technique ZNKR No. 6 *Morote Tsuki*. At higher levels, many of the ZNKR *Seitei Gata* standing technique have different types of footwork that should be used, so the instructor needs to be able to explain those elements more deeply. Another example of Level 2 development could be to then introduce elements of *jo-ha-kyu* into the different size of the steps, so as to build better and more explosive timing. Thus, again adding an improved element of *kihaku* into the forms.

**Level 3:** Are arguably the mental and spiritual technical elements of *Iaido*. Perhaps this can be developed from around 4th *Dan* onwards; however, in my own experience in Japan it is more likely to be deliberately and increasingly focused on at a 5th *Dan* level and beyond. By the time the practitioner has mastered (to a suitable degree) the Level 1 and 2 elements of the various techniques, they will have also by imitation, but not necessarily because of explicit instruction, tried to implement some of these higher-level elements of *Iaido*. The higher level points are described below:

ZNKR – *Seitei Gata*: 6th and 8th *Dan* the *Iaido-ka* must show mastery of and including:

- a) The points covered for 1st – 5th *Dan* (considered the basics)
- b) Logic and understanding of all the elements of the form within the forms (*riai*)
- c) Developed presence, style, gusto; character and personality in their execution (*fukaku*)
- d) Be able to perform with elegance, dignity and grace (*hin-i*)

**Example 5:** At Level 3, the aim of tuition is to help bring all of the practitioner's skills together and polish them into a formidable thing of power, beauty and presence. Continuing on from the previous *nukitsuke* example, once Levels 1&2 have been achieved, the Level 3 elements such as *ma* and *ma-ai* should be focused on more deeply as this will not only have an improved impact on the execution and shape of the cut but also aid in proper depth perception which also improves *metsuke* and *zanshin*. These are also elements of *riai*, or understanding the true meaning of the technique and ultimately where the opponent is. *Metsuke* in this case should not only mean a calm *enzan no metsuke*, but also a type of *ganriki*, which shows the difference

between looking with the heart and looking with the eyes, or put another way, the difference between a 2 dimensional technique with no real opponent and a 3 dimensional one when you know exactly where your opponent is. At this level, elements such as *meri-hari* are also required so that the technique has a balance of strong and soft, and fast and smooth use of the body and sword. This shows that the technique is not just one tempo or strength and that it has appropriate pressure (*seme*), thus displaying *fukaku* and *hin-i*, which show *skokorogamae*, or in other words the depth of practice of the *laido-ka* and thereby showing sufficiently high levels of *Dai, Kyo, Soku, Kei*.

Level 3 requires an in-depth study of the fundamental mechanics of the various techniques. It is also important to develop the ability to discern when someone is not doing Levels 1&2 effectively but doing what seems fast, effective and spirited *laido*. On several occasions we have all encountered new students or other *laido-ka* who display the most spirited and sometime ferocious *laido*. Nevertheless, a hard or aggressive spirit without effective control of the sword and body is not effective technique and arguably not the true purpose of *laido*.

**Conclusion:** The approach of using Levels 1, 2 and 3 to describe techniques and application works well for the way I teach *laido*, as it allows me to consider a persons level or grade and quickly decide what is appropriate input for them. This of course can be adjusted up or down as necessary. It also allows me to explain to large mixed level groups at the same time, while emphasizing what is relevant at that time to the different grades present and what might be the next suitable points to consider adding on, thus being able to show what the current goal is and also what the next level up is. For those willing to learn to walk before they run this can be very motivational, providing clear and definable current, short and long-term goals. Another of the benefits of this approach is that it allows information to be disseminated in deliberate manageable chunks of input. By being able to clearly define targets in a lesson I can also employ different teaching and learning techniques that allow varied and interesting ways of engaging these learning targets. These can include approaches such as (but not limited to):

- Test-Teach-Test: where we can check for specific knowledge, understanding or performance; then show, build and improve on that knowledge; give time to practice and internalize the new input; then test to see what has been retained. This technique works well with individuals or groups.



- Collaborative Learning: Where groups or pairs can work together to ask and/or answer questions on technique. This also leads us on to:
- Peer Assessment: where learning targets can be given and practitioners work in pairs or groups to check each other's understanding and performance. Thus, helping them to notice the gaps in application in both others and ultimately themselves.

However, regardless of which approach is used it is important to remember that different people learn in different ways, so a variety of methods should be employed so that audio, visual and kinesthetic learning takes place, thus hopefully reaching all learning types preferred input methods.

Needless to say, the ideas presented in this paper may seem unclear to the reader, but those who have participated in any classes or seminars where I have taught, have commented positively about the way points are explained and the sequential clarity and cohesion of this approach. This I believe is much to do with the simplicity of using a 3 Levels approach of focusing initially on sword-work and basic bodywork, then improved sword and bodywork and finally on to higher level elements such as timing, and spirit. For many who practice *laido* as a hobby rather than an in-depth lifestyle, this makes the awareness of these various learning targets easier to understand as they are presented in manageable chunks of input. Sadly, it does not make the actual doing and mastering of them any easier. That still requires the hard work! For anyone wishing to contact me about this paper or the ideas in it, I can be reached on through the Tokyo Adachi Roshukai website.

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