

What Makes a Good Martial Arts Instructor?

by Michael McLaughlin

To be a great instructor, you must firmly understand the characteristics of learning. Learning can be defined as a change in behavior resulting from experience. Behavioral changes can be physical and overt (a beautiful seoi-nage {shoulder throw}, for instance) or psychological and attitudinal (better motivation, more acute perception and insight). The learning process may include any (or all) of the following elements: verbal, conceptual, perceptual, motor skills, emotional, and problem solving. While learning the subject at hand, a student may be learning other useful things as well. This incidental learning can significantly impact on the student's total development.

Everything that I have learned to do well I have strived to teach. I learned about the six laws of learning while studying to become a Certified Flight Instructor. While these laws are not absolute, they do offer important insights into effective teaching.

The **law of readiness** states that if a student is ready to learn and has strong purpose, clear objective, and well-fixed reason for learning, he or she will make more progress than if lacking motivation. Readiness implies single-mindedness.

The **law of exercise** states that a person best remembers or performs those things most often repeated. The basis of this law is to provide opportunities for a student to practice and then direct this process towards a goal, such as mastering judo.

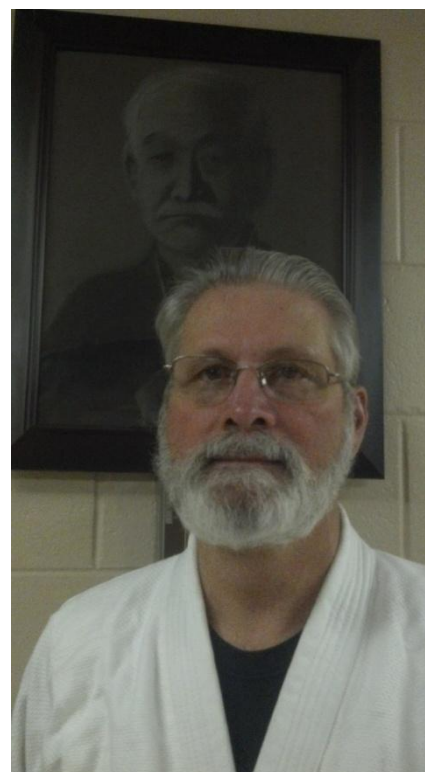
The **law of effect** relates to the student's emotional reaction. Learning strengthens when accompanied by a pleasant or satisfying feeling. Learning weakens when associated with an unpleasant feeling.

The **law of primacy** states that things a student learns first often create a strong, almost unshakable impression. This means that the instructor must teach and demonstrate things correctly the first time, because bad habits learned early are hard to break. Instructors thus must insist on correct performance from the outset of each task.

The **law of intensity** states that a vivid, dramatic, or exciting experience teaches more than a routine or boring experience. The law of intensity implies that a student will learn more from the real thing than from a substitute.

The **law of recency** states a person best remembers things most recently learned. Instructors recognize this law when they determine the relative position of lectures within a course syllabus.

Instructors need to understand students' perception and insight. Perceiving involves more than the reception of stimuli from the five senses. Perceptions result when a person gives a meaning to sensations being experienced. Thus, perceptions are the basis of all learning. A person's basic need to maintain, enhance, preserve, and perpetuate the organized self (*his/her self-concept*) greatly influences the total perceptual process. Fear, the elements of threat and the resulting anxiety narrow a student's perceptual field and may limit the ability to learn. Insight occurs when a person groups associated perceptions into meaningful wholes, i.e., when one "gets the whole picture." Instructors can speed the learning process and promote the student's



development of insights by teaching the relationship of perceptions as they occur. An instructor can help develop student insights by providing a safe learning environment.

Forgetting and retention are parts of being human. The **theory of disuse** states that a person forgets those things that are not used. The **theory of interference** holds that people forget because new experiences overshadow the original learning experience. In other words, new or similar subsequent events can displace previously learned facts. The **theory of repression** states that submerging ideas or thoughts into the subconscious causes some forgetting. Forgetting what is unpleasant or anxiety-producing is a subconscious and protective response. In contrast, **praise** stimulates remembering because people tend to repeat responses that give them a pleasurable return. It is very important that the instructor praise only what is earned. Overuse of praise diminishes its value.

Things learned previously may either be an aid or hindrance. This process is called **transfer of learning**. Positive transfer occurs when learning one judo technique aids in learning another. An example is learning uki-goshi (floating hip) and applying that knowledge to tsurikomi-goshi (lift-pull hip). Negative transfer occurs when performing a judo technique interferes with the learning of another technique. An example of this is trying to use the same technique for okuri-ashi-harai (sliding foot sweep) with a sasae-tsuriikomi-ashi (stop lift-pull foot throw). Negative transfer hence agrees with the interference theory of forgetting. By making certain that the student understands that what he or she has learned can be applied to other situations, the instructor helps facilitate positive transfer of learning. This is the basic reason for the building block technique of instruction, in which a student acceptably and correctly performs each simple learning task before the instructor introduces the next. Introducing instruction in more advanced and complex operations before the student masters initial instruction leads to development of poor habit patterns in the elements of performance.

It is very important that the instructor understand the **levels of learning**. Learning occurs at any of four levels. The lowest, **rote learning**, is the ability to repeat what one has been taught without necessarily understanding or being able to apply what has been learned. At the **understanding level**, the student not only can repeat what has been taught but also comprehends the principles and theory behind the knowledge. Being able to explain (not demonstrate) is the understanding level. At the **application level**, the student not only understands the theory but also can apply what has been learned to actually perform the task. This is the level of learning at which most instructors stop teaching. At the **correlation level**, the student is able to associate various learned elements with other segments or blocks of learning or accomplishments. The instructor should continue to teach and guide the student to this level.

The best way to prepare a student to perform a task is to provide a clear, step-by-step example. Students need a clear picture of what they are to do and how they are to do it. It is the instructor's job to paint that clear picture with words that are in the student's frame of reference. Learning typically follows a pattern that, if shown on a graph, would be called the learning curve. The first part of the curve indicates rapid early improvement. Then the curve levels off. This normal and temporary leveling-off of an individual's learning rate is called a learning plateau. When a student reaches this plateau, the instructor should explain its meaning to reduce anxiety.

It is the instructor's job to quickly evaluate how the student learns, whether the student thinking or learning processes are random, abstract, concrete, or sequential or any combination of these. With experience it is not difficult to determine how a student learns. Typically students exhibit a combination of either random abstract or concrete sequential. Once the instructor has determined this, it is easy to modify the teaching technique to each individual's needs.