

Thoughts on Teaching Judo by Bill Myers

Writing Lesson Plans Sucks, but a Boring Class Is Worse

I admit it, I'm stubborn. Sometimes you have to beat me over the head (or throw me to the mat repeatedly) to get me to understand. Eventually, however, I get the point. It took me a long time to get the point of lesson plans. When I first started using them, I often found that when I did write one for class, the very people that they were supposed to focus on didn't show up that night. Now, I've learned to be a little more flexible, and the aforementioned problem is only an occasional annoyance.

Many years ago I resolved to show my students as much as I could about how judo worked. You may believe that you already do this, and you may be right, but you may be wrong. I don't think that just doing static uchikomi is really doing judo. Is it helpful in perfecting technique? Sure, it can be. But if it's all that you do, then you're only showing part of judo. As soon as your students do randori and try a throw against someone who's not standing still, their judo foundation is useless. Yelling "attack, attack" isn't really helping them – they don't have a clue what to do. I've been to many dojos (and mine used to be one, too) where this was the norm – stretch, uchikomi, randori.

If this is how you were brought up in judo, then this might be your class, too. I don't want to do that anymore. I want to teach my students how to set up a throw, how to make it work in randori and competition. I want to teach useful combinations and throw variations that work against people who actively resist and move. I don't have an encyclopedia of drills in my head to pull out instantly on the mat. So, I take the things that I want to work on (out of my overall plan for my students) and I create exercises and drills to work on them. The same thing applies to matwork skills.

Every night that I forget to make a plan, class runs slowly, but when I do make a plan and force myself to make things interesting, my students work harder, have more fun, and learn more judo. If you don't make lesson plans, give them a try. They don't have to be enormously complicated and written down to each minute of activity. A simple outline will suffice, but the mental exercise will encourage you to think about what you're doing rather than just doing what you normally do. Of course, if your classes are always awesome and you have a boatload of great drills that you use, I hope you'll share them so we can try them, too.

Beginner Class

For fifteen years, twice a year, I have had the privilege and challenge of teaching judo to a class full of beginners. In 1994, I taught the same way that I was taught. My students started by beating the mats until they cried uncle. Then they contorted their bodies into a poor facsimile of ogoshi. Finally, they learned a hold down. There wasn't a connection between any of the techniques at all. After a couple of weeks, I thought that my students were ready to try walking together, then doing some moving techniques. I seriously underestimated my student's abilities. Then I attended a



coaching clinic and, although I was skeptical at first, I slowly changed the way that I teach. Here are a few things I do now in my class, thanks to my friends Bill Montgomery and Sid Kelly.

I don't start my first class with a lengthy description of judo and its origins. My students want to start *doing* judo. In later classes, I incorporate some of the history and rules into warm-ups or other parts of the class. I do start class now with rolls. We do somersaults (some of my students have never done these), then turtle rolls (start on hands and knees, roll over sideways onto your back, then continue to hands and knees), and finally shoulder rolls from a sitting position. I start them rolling backwards over a shoulder, then forward over the same shoulder. After about three weeks of this, teaching zenpo kaiten is much easier.

- I start throw work with osoto gari. For breakfalls, I teach them to start from standing and gently roll down to the mat. After some static practice on both sides, we go to "chasing osoto."



- Then, we add avoidance and "Bull and Matador" from Kelly's Capers, so the students can try to catch each other's legs while they move.
- We move on to a transition: osoto gari with a rolling fall and moving into a hold.
- Tai otoshi comes next. We do a rolling fall from that throw, and Kelly's Capers avoidance and "Bull and Matador".
- If I still have time, we add ippon seoi nage (a much easier throw than ogoshi to start working on big forward throws – much less body contortion.)

I do all of this in one hour on the first night. The students sweat, laugh, and have a great time. I didn't invent the techniques or exercises, but I did integrate Bill and Sid's techniques into my class.

Key things to keep in mind are: the sooner you teach your students to apply techniques realistically, the better. Connecting throws to breakfalls makes learning ukemi more interesting. Connecting throws to matwork teaches transitions. Teaching matwork techniques in a sequence (maybe there's another article coming...) can make techniques easier to remember and puts them in context. These same things apply to teaching advanced students as well.

The questions for you coaches in the audience are: Why do you do what you do? Is it because it's the way you were taught or because you think it's the best way for your students to learn judo? There's more than one correct answer, but if you don't ask the question then you'll never even think about it. I encourage you to attend a coaching clinic or Kelly's Capers clinic, do some reading and find some ways to change and energize your classes. You may, like I did, become more excited about teaching again.