Some Thoughts on Teaching New Students in 2009

Beginning 2009, with our large group of new students, it seems important to establish some guidelines for instructing beginners. Goal Maximize flow of beginners into long-term karateka. Keep them interested, involved in the program, until they get “over the hump” which may take 3-6 months.

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- There is a delicate balance between teaching correct techniques and not overloading new people with learning. Especially the kids, who have shorter attention spans.
- When you explain a technique or principle, demonstrating the purpose helps the student understand and gives them a feeling of accomplishment and progress.
- Don’t slur over instructions that new students have probably never heard before. E.g., the “c-step” — show it, explain the “c”, tell them what to do, then have them do it, and make corrections.
- Best is to combine the different modes of teaching / learning: visual, hearing, doing. Specific
- Prior to showing someone how to punch, explain how to make a fist. While teaching seiken zuki describe the push-pull nature of strikes. If they are receptive, explain the straight wrist, squared chest.
- Warmup. Don’t rush through as we would do for more experienced students. Go slowly, explain things. Emphasize breathing through each stretch. Explain that people not push themselves if they are not used to the workout – we are in it for the long haul.
- Segment length: make each piece reasonably short, don’t try to get it perfect.
- Example first class: start with sanchin dachi, teach seiken zuki, first very slowly, get them to understand push-pull, basic mechanics. Then speed up, culminating in full speed with kiai. Next, teach sanchin c-step, first with hands on hips, then combining punch with movement: kihon ido.
- Show how to transition from musubi dachi to sanchin dachi
- One of the objectives is to have a first-time student walk away from the class feeling he / she has learned something. One option: at the end of the first class go through a partner exercise where the instructor is the attacker and the student has to block a punch and counterattack with a mae geri at slow speed.
- Left and right. When you are in front and facing class, use “left” and “right” correctly for the students, backwards for you. Alternative: may substitute “towards the door” for right, “towards the window” for left.
- Follow up class: review first class techniques. Then may move to different stances, zenkutsu dachi; a block, a kick.
- May start with these basics: sanchin dachi, zenkutsu dachi, age uke, seiken zuki jodan. Then, when they have at least an idea of these techniques, begin taikyoku jodan kata.
- Attention span: kids have short ones, so tell them they may rest whenever they feel tired. When it looks like they are information-full, have them run at and pound the pads, with kiai.
- Let the students know about our promotional system early on and that success and learning will be recognized (with stripes). Interpersonal, relational How we relate to the students interpersonally is probably at least as important as technical instruction, in terms of keeping them coming. Here are some things to keep in mind:
- Be gracious, kind, respectful, considerate.
- Be patient, especially with the newest students. It may take extra time and energy to really connect with them.
- Let them know the basic parts of dojo etiquette – respect, bowing, etc.
- Try to make a personal connection with each new student, adults and kids. Find out their names and use names.
- Ask them about their goals in karate and how our program addresses the goals. If you know why they're here, you have a better chance of meeting their expectations. Helping students set reasonable expectations is also a way to keep them from being discouraged quickly and quitting. Mention most beginners feel awkward about their movements in class for several months, and all of the senior students and instructors were beginners once. Anyone can do this, all they have to do is stay with it.
- For the younger new students, their goal may be simply to have fun. Be aware of this and be sure to make class fun i.e. using pads to punch / kick, joke around…whatever it takes.
- For the older new students, their goal may be more about exercise or self defense, or both. Be aware of each student’s reasons for being in class.
- When they ask (reasonable) questions, pay attention and be responsive.
- Each class lead instructor should have copies of the 2008 article and translation sheet. After first class, give both of these to new students – one set to each family. For people who are just inquiring about the class, give them the article.
- Tell them about the Dojo Yahoo Group and invite them to join.