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DEVELOPER'S DIARY

Kung Fu and the Art of Teaching

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The fall semester is in full swing. Students rush from class to class, from the library to the campus center, from work to the gym. Some are focused on what they are doing, what they want, and where they are going in their lives. Others manage to look busy but are actually moving from space to space with no awareness of who they are and what they want out of life. It takes only a few visits to local college classrooms to see the difference. Some students sit up front, ask questions, answer questions, do their homework and come to class prepared. Others sit in the back, write letters, read the paper, or snooze. One of the most surprising results of this difference in diligence is that if we follow the attentive students and the dilatory ones to the end of their four year assignment as undergraduates, it's highly likely that both will receive a bachelor's degree and go off merrily as graduates of the institution. It is also safe to presume that the difference in their level of skill will be remarkable.

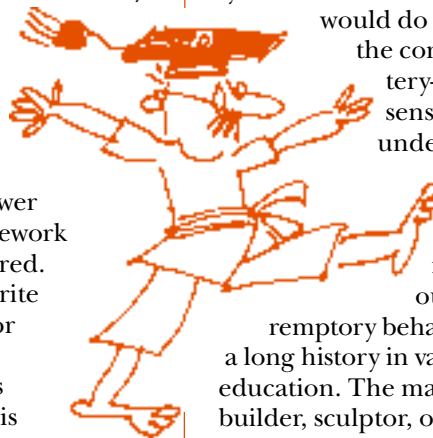
Where Credit Is Due

Nevertheless, the credit system ensures that students who barely make

the grade graduate right alongside those who have excelled. Rather than accumulating evident skills and knowledge, they have both accumulated a certain number of credits. This issue about the credit system worries me a bit because Europe is about to embrace this very American form of schooling. I submit that the varied European systems and the American system

would do well to reconsider the concept of mastery—mastery in the sense of thorough understanding and consummate skill, not in the sense of domination, imperiousness, or pe-

remptory behavior. Mastery has a long history in various forms of education. The master painter, builder, sculptor, or writer could show extraordinary skill or supreme intellectual or artistic achievement. If "mastery" sounds too old-world, call it "personal achievement." Personal achievement can only occur if an individual understands who he or she is, what he or she would like to attain, and consciously pursues the acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills to reach a chosen goal. It's more than a university degree, and it's what I



think should be the result of post-secondary education.

In the US we have two cultural archetypes that militate against the concept of mastery or personal achievement. One is the image of the do-it-yourselfer; the other is of the self-made man. Both, of course, have their good points, but an unconscious reliance on either can lead to a certain belief in anti-intellectualism or anti-mastery. Rather than taking the time and effort to become a master, the do-it-yourselfer gets the job done. But I think these archetypes have a negative influence on students' behaviors in American classrooms. They are wed with the notion of degrees seen as certificates and grades as commodities, and confound the ideals of education with the often laudable American emphasis on "getting the job done." Thus, they lead to a devaluing of the concept of mastery and reduce "personal achievement" to a collection of external markers instead of the measure of internal growth.

Grasshoppers or Locusts

All this became especially clear to me when I joined a Kung Fu class recently. Suddenly I was in a learning environment where each student was attentive, engaged, personally empowered, and quite frankly working to achieve personal mastery. It was so invigorating and exciting I have gone back many times. The difference between many courses on campus and my Kung Fu class is quite astounding. As a longtime observer of teachers and students, I have been delighted to find at last a classroom that seems to match my learning style perfectly.

Imagine a classroom in which the teacher knows the precise level of each student and arranges them accordingly. Because each student is wearing a belt that indicates precisely each one's level of experience or lack thereof, students know exactly where they stand in the class. Testing is done individually and students must prove

themselves worthy of moving up to the next rank. Learning and testing is not focused on physical skill or mental prowess alone, but on both. The teacher is an enthusiastic coach, a playful questioner, a well-organized presenter who understands and communicates theory and practice clearly, and cares passionately about the topic, the students, and the results of the class as a whole. And, even more interestingly, classes are long—up to two and a half or three hours, alternating physical activity with history and theory, spirituality with physical technique. The course program states that course times are approximate in order to be able to devote the proper amount of time to each learning session.

The classroom is a long empty carpeted rectangle able to accommodate various sized groups effectively. During classes, students may sit on the floor, stand, or move about. There is no attendance problem, rather the class is brimming with students eagerly bumping into each other to find a spot. No one leaves early and students linger to chat with each other on their way out.

Masters, Novices, and Teaching Assistants

Teaching assistants are plentiful. In fact, for about one-half of the class time, various levels of students work in small groups under their guidance. Beginning students don't complain. They are quite content to have individual and energetic attention lavished upon them. No one complains about teaching assistants at all because even the beginners know that learning to teach is an integral part of advanced training. They have already read about this in their course book, which states that through teaching others, one truly gains mastery and understanding of one's art and practice. In fact, the beginning students actually enjoy the teaching assistants because each one has a

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Editor's Note:

This edition of the Forum contains the second **Carnegie Chronicle**, a special section reporting on new lines of inquiry into teaching and learning issues being pursued by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. This edition takes up an aspect of assessment, looks at an audit of the current discourse about teaching, previews a decade-long study of professional education, and considers the work of local campuses in the scholarship of teaching.

Coincidentally, Carnegie Scholar **Larry Michaelsen's** article on working with small groups begins this edition of the *Forum*. Michaelsen believes many pieces of conventional wisdom about working with groups miss the mark. He offers positive alternatives.

Years of work with honors programs have taught **Jane Fiori Lawrence** much about bright students. Faculty tend to think they're superhuman, but there is no special pedagogy for teaching them. The best of the innovative teaching practices for most students are also the best for honors. **Ellen Weber** reminds us that since the beginning of teaching, the most powerful tool has been the question. Fortunately, it comes in all shapes and sizes, one suitable to every teaching need.

Subscribers and site license holders will find a special article for them posted (with other **supplemental materials**) at www.ntlf.com. The article, by **Dennis and Melanie Middlemist** (previewed on page 12) shows how to use the Web to report grades quickly and privately to hundreds of students. Macros, procedures and other software enhancements to make the job easier are available for download via the article.

Two "diaries" and an AD REM . . . round out this edition of the *Forum*. **Eula Ewing Monroe's** LEARNING DIARY reflects on how interaction with a single student can change one's teaching philosophy forever. **Laura Border's** popular DEVELOPER'S DIARY ponders parallels between students of Kung Fu seeking mastery and ordinary students seeking a grade. Finally, another of **Linc. Fisch's** windows on practical teaching give us a look at when breaking eye contact can unleash a flood of general discussion.

Judging from the sudden increase in visits to www.ntlf.com after I announced the unveiling of its Library's new FAQ section, it appears there's interest in the increasing number of useful resources being created for the *Forum's* readers. Look for other enhancements and additional resources as the year progresses.

And remember that this publication is a forum. You are invited to participate. Happily the number of good manuscripts we receive has increased steadily over the years, but there's always room for more good work. Have you considered reflecting on and writing about your teaching? Your experience, your reflection on effective teaching has a place in the conversation. Faculty of all kinds now understand the importance of thinking more concretely about their teaching and writing about it.

Submissions should not exceed 1500 words (six ordinary typed pages), and should be shorter whenever possible. Submissions in electronic form are highly encouraged. Indeed, submissions through E-mail are welcome.

Remember, too, that with the synergy we have between the printed newsletter and its Web site, we have room for more elaborate presentations, a repository for detailed supplementary material to expand the compact presentations printed here.

Share what you've learned in teaching. Send your manuscripts to the *Forum*.

—James Rhem

If "mastery" sounds too old-world, call it "personal achievement."

slightly different approach, notices certain points, gives unique examples, and shares personal perceptions of the art. Each one has a personal physical and mental approach, allowing beginners to experiment and explore a broader range of motion and technique. Naturally, the students also appreciate it when the master steps in and clarifies a motion or technique or tells a personal anecdote.

A Pedagogically Wide World

It has fascinated me to experience the different metaphors, examples, and terms various instructors used to communicate the form. One might talk about how you will injure your muscles or joints by using the wrong form. Another might demonstrate the application of the form to a real contact situation, while yet another might use a metaphor such as "let your arms move like the wings of a crane."

The content is not watered down or doled out slowly. Students are challenged to learn five to ten clusters of forms or techniques at a time. They are expected to mirror, question, try out and practice each set until they can perform them smoothly alone, relying only on physical and mental memory. They are also required to learn the history and mythologies that pertain to the art, the definitions and use of Chinese terms, and an abundance of forms and techniques.

The teacher's approach is a nice melding of abstract conceptualization, concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation. Each class has a format that begins with an introduction, a warm-up exercise, a demonstration,

a teacher-modeled group practice session, followed by individual work with the teaching assistants, and ends with a teacher discussion and question session, followed by a homework assignment and cool-down exercise.

Humor is an important element of the class. Humor that challenges students to be stronger and more adept. Humor that encourages students to tolerate some discomfort for the good of their achievement.

Learning: The Endless Test

Within this congenial, focused, and attentive environment, testing is a constant reality, yet it is not feared. One takes each test when one is ready and has been deemed so by the masters and the teaching assistants. Testing is also cumulative so that students at higher levels are also tested on information and forms from lower levels, requiring constant review and renewed practice. The test becomes an avenue to demonstrate to oneself and others how one is doing physically, mentally, emotionally, and as a member of the group. Success is rewarded concretely and immediately with feedback from a panel, a numerical score that assesses performance, and before a week has elapsed, with the awarding of a certificate and belt.

The entire system is designed to *motivate* students to succeed. Students are aware of the length of time it took each level of students to master consecutive levels. The teachers offer reminders about pretest possibilities and about knowledge, form, and content. Everyone knows there is no short cut, each student must achieve the requirements for each level in physical and intellectual skill.

The multicultural aspect allows for a unique blend of American and Chinese values, stories, and comparisons. Cultural comparisons create poignant learning moments, stimulate questions, and stir the imagination (i.e., diversity is good pedagogy). Stories amuse and

instruct (knowledge in context). The histories of heroes inspire (ethics, ideals, values formation).

As I have watched these very successful teachers who have their disciples literally sitting at their feet, I have wondered whatever happened to the real concept of the university. And the words of our Latin forefathers have echoed in my brain, *mens sana in corpore sano*—a sound mind in a sound body.

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