

Redefining Classroom Management through Tai Chi: It's All About Fluidity and Balance

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Abstract

The field of education provides many obstacles and possibilities in and outside of the classroom. The crisis found in daily life can sometimes take away from the task at hand but more often than not it can add to the dynamics of the classroom. In the Japanese language the word "crisis" means both danger and opportunity and is reflected in the meditative principles of Tai Chi.

This article presents pragmatic opportunities to educators who are willing to "flow" within their environment and surroundings of their students. Education is constantly evolving which provides educators many opportunities to adapt to these changing times. Most instructors within the field refer to these times as "teachable moments." These times can produce enormous fortuity or those, which are lost forever. As discussed in this article one method of trying to infuse greater flow in the classroom is through the Martial Art's techniques of Tai Chi. This does not imply that educators must become experts in Tai Chi to become effective educators but does present pragmatic solutions in becoming more effective in learning course of Tai Chi and utilizing this in the classroom.

Introduction

A principal walks down a quiet hallway to observe the Family Studies teacher. She recalls how pleased she was with her last visit to this teacher's classroom: all the students were fervently taking notes as the instructor lectured. The class was full, which was surprising since this school had such a problem with cuts and absences.

Today, however, was a different story. As she approached the door she heard laughing and talking; desks were pushed into clusters all over the room. Students were moving around the room and the teacher was nowhere in sight.

The angry principal flung open the door and demanded that the kids settle down. "Khadejia," she asked, "where is Mr. Mowgli?" Khadejia didn't answer. Before the principal could order a response Mr. Mowgli stood up from one of the student's chairs he had been sitting in.

When we look at this type of scenario in and of itself we are inclined to think that Mr. Mowgli might not have been in control over his classroom. We know

that his students were formerly very productive and quiet. Are these *different* students or did Mr. Mowgli simply lose his touch? The answer is neither. He is simply practicing an authoritative style of management that balances several styles of teaching.

How much easier would teaching be if all we had to do was walk into the classroom and dispel our wealth of knowledge onto eager young ears who would rather do nothing else but learn from us? Imagine a classroom with no side chatter, students ready to begin when you are, and homework handed in on time. Can a teacher really encourage active vocal participation while still expecting respectful silence? This can be your reality.

A balance of Authoritarian and Laissez-faire attitudes can effectively unite the rapport of the class with the teacher. This is accomplished when several factors are incorporated into the rituals of a teacher. Sang Kim, an experienced instructor of the martial arts, recommends these steps:

- Students know what they are expected to do and are generally successful at it.
- Students are busy in teacher led activities.

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- There is minimal waste of time, confusion or disruption.
- A no-nonsense, work oriented tone prevails but there is a relaxed pleasant atmosphere. (Kim, [online] 1999.)

When this is done a mutual respect is established and classroom management is not a problem, but rather a method.

Martial Arts is a discipline that fosters preparedness, control, and symmetry. At the risk of sounding militant, it seems logical that these ideals should be incorporated into the classroom. When examining closer the discipline focused in Martial Arts -and its relationship to classroom management- Tai Chi is found to be an ideal model of comparison.

“The Tai Chi person strives toward having a positive spirit and toward letting go of negativity. The Tai Chi attitude chooses care and mindfulness, not speed and insensitivity” (Omwake, [online]). Tai Chi as an art form emphasizes slow fluid stretches focused on balance, practice and expandability. It is a gentle, relaxed, meditative series of exercises grounded in soft strength, relaxed concentration, and an engaged heart. When all these attributes are merged and Tai Chi becomes a natural practice the physical, mental and psychological effects are astonishing; it provides a sense of release, relief, and reflection. Some mental benefits are reduced stress; increased relaxation; increased concentration and focus; improved memory; and a greater ability to “be in the moment”, to remove yourself from the chaos we call life.

With these principles and benefits in mind why not take a lesson from experts of Tai Chi in how we look at classroom management? Tony Murphy, a high school teacher from Dublin, Ireland, identified the top ten stressors of teaching, and identified ways to avoid it. When these issues are correlated with the beliefs of Tai Chi we can see how having a fundamental understanding of one lends to developing the other.

The first step to effective classroom management encourages thorough lesson preparation. In preparing your lesson clear goals should be defined with specific behavioral outcomes (i.e.- “students will be able to demonstrate knowledge of material by...”). Time parameters should be projected for each activity. Remember it is important to have too much instead of too little (the natives get restless when they are not

occupied). Keep in mind Murphy’s Law in respect to “what you never expect to happen usually will” when guiding your lesson plans for the day. Flexibility of the sequence and span of the lesson lends itself to interesting discussions and an array of teachable moments.

The educator is presented with many opportunities because of the complexity and constant modification within the field. These changing times, however, provide teachable moments for those willing to flow with these events rather than resisting the discourse. For example, on April 20, 1999, 14 children and one teacher were killed in a tragic act of violence. Without question, any individual in his/her right mind would agree that this is a catastrophe. As an effective educator it would be irresponsible to leave it at just that- a catastrophe. Instead this can be used to discuss anger management and conflict resolution. Sure it may not fit into the contraceptive use lesson that was planned for today, but students learn from life and ignoring current events is losing priceless lessons. As these situations can produce positive change if the teacher is willing to accept these “teachable moments” and go with the flow.

When drawing real life situations into the curriculum instructors create cohesion to the material and validity to its purpose. To give a cursory lesson on the effects of chemical reactions may slip into one ear and out of the other. To discuss how a layman could construct a homemade explosive in his basement (i.e.- the Littleton Tragedy) may solicit interest and therefore would have a more grounded impact. Would a lesson on family life settle in your students minds if you simply preached morality and infidelity or if you brought up President Clinton’s liaison? Use the media and the news to bring relevance to your lessons.

This is not to say, however, that educators need to be omnipotent in all areas of their discipline. We seem to be expected to be the absolute authority on conflict resolution, anger management, self-esteem not to mention an intense focus on our area of expertise. We are counted upon to be a professor, a counselor, a parent, and a psychologist all rolled up into one neat little package. This type of thinking puts an overburden on us to live up to these expectations. No one can match these unrealistic hopes. Would we expect every English professor to be fluent in all

genres of literature ranging from nineteenth century French Poetry to the literary devices used in Modern Canonical Fiction? Of course we wouldn't that is why, as educators, it is important for us to focus on the day or the unit, but not the entire field.

To ease the mind, however, be prepared with meticulous knowledge of the material to be discussed for that day. This alleviates the pressures of ad libbing inaccurate information. Also, being seen in command of your subject area increases your confidence as an effective educator in addition to the esteem of the students who look up to you as their instructional leader. When you are prepared and aware you are more relaxed, now you can spend less time worrying about the content and field of the lesson, and more time concentrating on the context and flow.

Here we can use a lesson from the basic philosophy behind Tai Chi: balance. The dual meaning the context of the word holds explains both the physical and mental symmetry needed for effective movements. One of the Eight Silk Movements of chi is the upward Hand stretch. You lift both arms above your head and stretch, but do not strain! Performed effectively this improves balance, stimulates circulation, releases tension and relaxes the body. First we must balance ourselves physically; do not be over weighed by one facet of your life that it overshadows all others. This can be done in conjunction with the second level of balance: a mental stasis.

To be effective at any task we need to establish equilibrium between relaxation and concentration. By being too much of either we can become too Laissez-Faire or too Authoritarian, the Yin and Yang of teaching. When the Yin and Yang are balanced we can manage efficiently. Establishing reasonable limits (while simultaneously encouraging independence) an Authoritative, or balanced teacher, exhibits a warm, nurturing attitude toward the students and still maintains a high level of expectation in the classroom. This teacher will *guide* instead of lead, *understand* as opposed to reprimand, and most importantly will achieve a high level of mutual trust and respect in the class. This teacher's heart is engaged in her students.

When a heart is accepting then it is easy to deal with mistakes and problems. All of us make mistakes; whether it is in regard to your own or your students',

keep in mind that it *is* a learning experience and should be treated as one. Do not spend long hours worrying how things "might have been...if only..." and other such nonsense, instead decide how to handle it differently in the future and forgive yourself (or them as the case may be). Reduced stress levels and lowered anxiety can have a noticeable effect on classroom productivity.

How do you know when to strike and when to hug? When to reason and when to command? We have all done something that felt right. It is unmistakable- what's more, others feel it too. There is a "rightness" when actions are simple and correct. This is accomplished through relaxed concentration and an engaged heart (Farmer, 1999). These principles of training are the heart of Tai Chi Chaun, and are also at the base of classroom management.

Within the walls of the classroom it is necessary to focus on the learning process and methods for effectively achieving positive results. This is hard to do when our minds wander off to other tasks at hand. One way to combat this is to make lists of the things that you hope to get through in a day, or throughout the week. Your brain should be free from any clutter, this allows it time to think. When lesson plans are thought out and activities are organized, there is space for your brain to contemplate, reflect, and grow. Our minds should be nurtured to expand, to help do this we need to release it from the pressures of being our daily planner or notebook. Albert Einstein once said that he didn't have his own phone number memorized, he didn't want to muddle up his brain with information that he could just as easily look up.

Avoid the notion that all objectives on your list are pertinent, this will present a never ending battle between you and your list that will perpetually hang over your head. It is a reference, an outline- not a contract. There are enough pressures faced in life outside of our control, let's not overburden ourselves with things within it.

By looking at some maxims related to performing Tai Chi effectively it is obvious to see the correlation to the classroom. The foundation of Tai Chi is in focusing. Before you start a movement take a minute to center on yourself. This can be achieved by taking a deep breath, relaxing, and "sinking into yourself". As you finish each position, you should feel solid on

both feet, *it is important not to lose your focus because then you will fall!* With this point of convergence greater support will be accomplished and you will be comfortable with your stance.

This can be carried over to the focus necessary in the classroom. Take a deep breath, relax, and focus. You are in the spotlight. Prior to beginning a lesson be sure you have the attention of everyone in your classroom *before* you start your lesson. Do not attempt to teach over the chatter of students who are not paying attention. They will get the idea that you accept their inattention and that it is permissible to talk while you are presenting a lesson. (Churchwood, [online]) When the class is organized and concentrates on the task at hand the center of the activity (whether it is a lecture or group work) runs smoothly.

You, as the educator, must have control of the room. It is like a lawyer working the courtroom: pull in your audience's interest so they *want* to hear more, so they crave the knowledge that you are about to dispense. Children are like sponges- they absorb everything and can become saturated with knowledge if we have enough faith to let it overflow. If a small level of genuine interest is spawned and maintained than the class will naturally interact with enthusiasm, better yet they may even retain the information being taught! Regardless of your methods of conveying the information, you are the guide- it is to you that the students rely on for a foundation in the class. Taking on this responsibility means that the class must be focused as a group, and the teacher must be relaxed and steadily standing on both feet!

Discipline becomes such a nuisance when we are trying to educate. To take valuable class time away from a lesson (notably of priceless importance) to give attention to those who are craving it (albeit inappropriately) distracts from the flow of our instruction and our train of thought. The domino effect kicks into play and now we are faced with the inevitable predicament of losing the attention of other students *and* having some of the less motivated learners jump onto the deviated bandwagon.

To attack this problem let's look at the Taoist tradition of, "Embrace Tiger return to Mountain." In this metaphor for life the Tiger represents the problem, in this case an off tasked student, and the Mountain symbolizes peace, tranquility, and a sense of balance.

What we usually do is attack the tiger or run from it. To approach this problem in the right way, however, it is important to remove ourselves from the position of disciplinarian and see the circumstances as if you were the Tiger. Can you think of a time when you were "attacked"? It probably made you fight to justify yourself. But suppose you were honored, listened to, and heard out? The tiger in you would relax and be more open. It changes from a battle with winners and losers into a partnership in which the possibility of compassion and compromise is introduced. (Farmer, [online] 1994).

Let me put it another way: did you ever receive a compliment you might not fully have deserved? For example, say your friend commended you for always listening when someone needed a shoulder to cry on. Even if this is not a characteristic you would normally have attributed to yourself, you may find yourself making more time to be a sympathetic ear. Human nature dictates that we want to be revered, when we are complimented whether it is consciously or not, we make an effort to live up to those expectations.

The same is true for our students. Catch them doing something right, then commend it publicly. When this is done they will want to live up to the expectations put forth on them and they will foster an attribute you drew out. Have you ever met someone who always found the good in someone? *You can be that person.*

Conclusion

Make a commitment to yourself and your students. To begin the class with a clear head try this exercise: when the bell rings all students should be sitting in their seats with a scrap of loose-leaf paper in front of them and a writing implement in their hand. Assign the first 2-3 minutes of class to "throwing away your problems." Ask the students to write down one problem they are struggling with right now. You should write one as well, it models sincerity in the activity and the fact that- oh yes, teachers are people too. While many of us may easily fill up a whole sheet of paper with what is plaguing our minds limit it to one problem. By doing this we can prioritize in our minds what is really significant so we can eliminate smaller problems, we wouldn't want to *sweat the small stuff.*

When everyone has finished writing one problem, triumphantly crumple the paper into a ball and throw the problem into the recycling bin. While it is important to recognize that this does not abolish the obstacle it gives some sense of relief. On occasion (let's say Friday afternoons) include an extra segment to this "release;" after the problem has been written write whether or not this issue will still be prominent in your life five years from now. Will it really matter? With this added clarity we can start off our weekends with a little more perspective of what is really pressing and shed some authenticity to the dilemma.

Some things are easier said than done, this is true. Making lemonade out of lemons is not a simple task; neither is maintaining a mental focus in the classroom. It does not come naturally and *will* need practice! We are educators, but we are people too, as are our students. Outside problems will arise; discipline will remain an issue. Dealing with these situations with a level mind and an employed spirit takes a remarkable amount of patience and understanding. How easy would it be to just leave the baggage of our daily lives outside the door when we step into the classroom? It's a nice concept but it's tough.

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