

Martial Arts and Creativity – A Review

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Dec 1, 2001

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Martial Arts... Creative or Not?

Introduction

Martial Arts is a multi-dimensional activity that services many kids of various talent areas and talent levels. People of all ages are participating in martial arts – children as young as 3 years old – for the benefits of self-discipline, self-defense, self-concept and physical fitness. While there are numerous styles of martial arts, they can be generally defined as any structured system of fighting. Because of this structure and the specific goals of the activity, this paper will review and discuss the question of how creativity is or is not involved in martial arts. *Should* it be (or is it different based on the students goals and age)? Why or why not? *Is* creativity part of the martial arts students' experience? To look at this issue, we will briefly review the background of martial arts, review literature on creativity and its benefits (i.e. does creativity provide the four benefits we would like to get out of martial arts listed above), review how creativity can be involved in a structured martial arts teaching experience, and finally conclude with recommended actions (or inaction).

Background on Martial Arts

Systems of martial arts have been around for thousands of years. While there is no exact time known, the earliest martial art is believed to have begun 3000 years ago in China. The difficulty in determining when and where martial arts began, is due to the sparse historical

records available in Asia. Though originally there were only a few systems, over time a large number of martial arts styles was practiced. Some of the ones taught today include T'ai Chi, Kung Fu, Karate, Judo, and Taekwondo. Even within these styles of martial arts there are many variants and within these systems there are many variants. Some are based on the unique characteristics of the founder of the style, others are focused on a particular fighting method (Urban, 1993). Often these styles are difficult for children because they are either too militant, require too much fighting contact, are not presented in a way that children can understand (low level of teaching training for instructors), or the curriculum is not structured for children.

Reasons to Do Martial Arts

Students choose this activity for a variety of reasons and they all have different goals. The main four reasons can, however, usually be broken down into four different areas: self-discipline, self-concept, physical fitness and self-defense (Clark, 2000).

Self-Discipline refers to the students ability to regulate themselves in the environment around them. Also presented as *self-control*, this can be different for different groups:

- ☐ Pre-School: simply being able to listen, follow simple rules or stand in one place.
- ☐ Elementary: becoming more self-regulating. Turning in homework, waking up by themselves, practicing on their own.
- ☐ Teens: getting to school on time, doing their homework, performing at a job.
- ☐ Adults: exercising regularly, eating right, making plans for their future.

This can be manifested in many ways other than listed above. Martial arts intends to help with this by xxxxx

Self-Concept refers to how the student sees themselves. Also presented as *self-esteem*, or even *self-confidence* this can show in many ways for each individual. Some examples are:

- ☐ Pre-School: being able to leave parents side (high S/C), excessive shyness (can indicate low S/C).
- ☐ Elementary: Speaking up, answering questions (high), afraid to try new things (low).
- ☐ Adults and Teens: being confident enough to set significant goals and plan to reach them (from a martial arts perspective).

Martial arts intends to help with this by xxxxxx

Self-Defense is the way in which we protect ourselves from physical and mental attack.

Some examples are:

- ☐ Pre-School: recognizing threats, knowing what to do if somebody threatens them.
- ☐ Elementary: what to do when somebody mentally threatens them, defense against physical attacks.
- ☐ Adults and Teens: de-escalating and resolution of conflict.

Its fairly obvious how martial arts helps with this by role playing the attacks and how these can be resolved. For example:

1. Somebody attacks you with a punch
2. Yell, Run/Disengage (if possible)
3. Block and Disengage (if possible)
4. Counterattack (till threat is removed)
5. Disengage.

Could be a lesson in a basic martial arts class.

Physical fitness in martial arts is developed through many methods with aerobic and an-aerobic conditioning. Aerobic activities can include running, calisthenics, free-sparring, kicking drills, punching drills or any of hundreds of activities. An-aerobic activities will include isometrics, push-ups, extreme stretching, slow kick drills. A good martial arts class will use the concept of “No Down Time” – meaning that the students will always be doing something (even rest breaks will involve a discussion while stretching for example).

Use of Martial Arts

To illustrate use of martial arts, Morris (1996) created a model called the Martial Artist’s Defensive Theory (figure 1).

Figure 1 - MADT STUFF

This illustrates strategies of defense in a hierarchical way. For example, the way to defend against a physical (most invasive) attack is with a defensive technique, the way to defend against hostility (moderately invasive) is with courtesy and the way to defend against imbalance (the least invasive “attack”) is with developing harmony.

Creativity

What is creativity? This question has many different answers – because this is by very definition an abstract subject, pinning it down results in abstractness. Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance. There is also confusion about distinguishing talent, giftedness, ability

and creativity as characteristics of an individual (Cramond, 2001). Spiritual, psychological, social, system theory and luck are stated as causes for creative results in people.

Differentiating Creativity

There are many types of creativity and as many different ways to describe it. A hierarchical view was given by Taylor (1959) as

- ☐ Emergenative Creativity – entirely new principles or assumptions around which new schools, movements and the like can flourish.
- ☐ Innovative Creativity – improvement through modification involving conceptualizing skills.
- ☐ Inventive Creativity – ingenuity is displayed with materials, methods and techniques.
- ☐ Productive Creativity – Artistic and scientific products within restrictions.
- ☐ Expressive Creativity – spontaneous drawings of children.

This distinguishes types of creativity and includes artistic and non-artistic types of creativity.

Note that it (and other definitions or categorizations) is *results* based.

Characteristics or descriptions of creative people are:

Cognitive	Personality
☐ Relatively High Intelligence	☐ Willingness to confront hostility and take intellectual risks
☐ Originality	☐ Perseverance
☐ Articulateness and verbal fluency	☐ Curiosity

☐ Metaphorical Thinking	☐ Openness to new experience
☐ Flexibility	☐ Driving absorption
☐ Independence of Judgment	☐ Discipline and commitment to one's work
☐ Ability to cope well with novelty	☐ High intrinsic motivation
☐ Internal visualization	☐ Tolerance for ambiguity
☐ Ability to escape perceptual sets	☐ A broad range of interests
☐ Ability to find order in chaos	☐ Tendency to play with ideas
☐ Questioning	☐ Unconventionality in behavior
☐ Alert to novelty and gaps in knowledge	☐ Tendency to experience deep emotions
☐ Ability to use existing knowledge as a base for new ideas	☐ Intuitiveness
☐ Aesthetic ability that allows recognition of good problems in the field	☐ Seeking interesting situations
	☐ Opportunism
	☐ Conflict between self-criticism and self-confidence

Figure 2. Characteristics of Creative Individuals (Tardiff & Sternberg, 1988) pg 6 –

Green Book

This is not an exhaustive list and it is not to say that all creative people have all of these characteristics.

Look at page 005 – and the web pages

Causes of Creativity

Spirituality has long been stated as the cause of the creative person's inspiration. Creative though is a "Gift from the gods". This view is loosely held in modern times - it is often thought of as a "radical thought" (Cameron, 1992, p. 1). This is because in modern day society we must measure everything scientifically to declare its truthfulness. Since it is hard to "measure" spirituality empirically, it is not an accepted explanation for creativity. However many of the most effective methods for enhancing creativity have a spiritual basis (Cameron, 1992).

Psychological basis for creativity includes the idea that ...

Some believe that creativity is a result is a result in the right balance of multiple factors. Cikszenmihalyi (1XXX),...

Discussion

While there are differing concepts defining creativity, as well as its cause, none of these are mutually exclusive. For different situations and points of view they may *all* be correct! Understanding the theories about creativity and dissecting the concept itself allows us to help others and ourselves be more creative, helps us prevent stifling creativity and, hopefully, lets us be tolerant of people's ideas – when people are creative, they bring change and change brings stress. For us to enjoy the benefits of creative people as a society, they must be allowed to create.

To the individual the benefits of being creative are ...

Fostering Creativity – What's Its Place?

Now that we have discussed martial arts, and reviewed theories about creativity, we need to discuss whether there is some common ground. Does creativity has a place in a martial arts environment? The martial arts environment is so structured that it might appear to disrupt too much of it to emphasize creative aspects. For example, one of the jobs of the instructor is to teach a “form” or a specific, pre-defined, set of techniques. This can be compared to teaching the elementary student spelling words for example – the English language is basically a set of pre-defined, letters that have an assigned meaning. Teaching these are basically arbitrary (a move could be in a different order, just as we could teach how to spell “dog” before we teach “cat”). Instructors teach (and student’s learn) in this pre-defined order. A students’ progress is measured by whether they have memorized it and how well they do the techniques. Martial arts curriculum also includes many other rules: how to address instructors, or when to bow, ways to wear your uniform, what to call a move, when to use a technique, etc. This seems to leave no room for creativity.

Worse, one of the primary benefits we seek to develop in martial arts - *self-discipline* - could seem contrary to supporting creative efforts of a student. Take for example, a child, whose goal (or their parents goal) is to “behave” or “listen” or “stay on task” in school. What martial arts can provide is a structured environment where the student gets rewarded for following the structure (and not rewarded for contrary behavior). The results of this would hopefully be (and usually are) better behavior in school and at home. Does this stifle creative output?

While these aspects of martial arts tend to direct us one way (no creativity involved). This is really a narrow viewpoint. The structure in martial arts is really for training students toward a

result. In the case of martial arts this result is being able to defend against an attack. A real attack certainly is going to be 1) a surprise, 2) with an attack method (punch, kick, knife, gun, etc.) that wasn't communicated "hey I am going to kick you in the stomach now so get ready". Therefore a martial artist must be able to think fast and "create" a response out of the variety of techniques they have learned. Like learning A B C's to the writer, or learning calculus to the engineer, the techniques, learned in the structured environment should provide the framework for creativity. Therefore a good martial arts program should foster creativity.

Further opportunities for creativity exist in martial arts from the most basic move to the most advanced level of training. Firstly, any system of fighting was "created" in the first place by the *Master* or *Grand Master* of the art (hence the word "art"). At the lowest level, even in a basic form, there is constant development and refinement. While a system of fighting is done in a specific way, each student (and instructor) will adjust the techniques for their own body type and ability. Training in sparring is more accurately called *free* sparring. The sparring partners are allowed to do whatever moves they want against each other. This is really the basic training method for self defense. Each student finds out what will work the best for them (based on personal preference, body type, age, weight, flexibility, speed, and the partner they face). This method provides positive reinforcement for success (hitting the partner) and negative reinforcement for poor performance (getting hit). In free sparring, the primary focus is on safety over fighting, creating a comfortable environment. The most advanced level of training is for a student to become an instructor. Here the instructor must be creative even within the framework of the curriculum they need to teach. A creative instructor keeps the class exciting and motivating. Creating an environment that stimulates beginning instructors should be a major focus of their training.

While it is true, the basis for a martial art is to follow a “system” and it is not as creative an endeavor as painting or poetry, we can still see that creativity is involved “full circle” in martial arts. Initially, in *inventing* the particular system of fighting for an inherently abstract and creative result (being able to defend against an unexpected attack). Then, in developing the individual students skills we must be flexible about how they are developed based on that person. Finally instructors are required to be creative, adjusting their teaching methods and skills to accommodate many students, ages, ability levels and also to provide variety and enthusiasm in a class.

Tao of Jeet Kune Do

Fostering Creativity – How Do We Do It?

Examining the potential causes of creativity, and understanding how people learn, can help us determine some ways to stimulate creativity in a martial arts environment.

The Student as the Unit of Intervention

At first glance this seems like a high-minded concept, but impractical in a classroom situation. If a teacher has 30 kids and no assistants, how can they possibly be expected to individualize all parts of a child's experience? In martial arts this could even be worse since we typically see the students only 2 to 3 times a week for 45 minutes or so and we have hundreds of students to instruct (it is probable that a full time Karate for Kids[□] instructor may instruct more students in a week than the average elementary teachers deals with in their entire career). However, the martial arts environment does lend itself to personal instruction in many ways. In addition, there are some additional ways to personalize instruction for the students.

The Karate for Kids[□] and American Taekwondo Association[□] focus allows instructors to be able to individually connect with students. It is important to understand how this works so instructors can continue to pay attention to these factors in the school. One, the students (and their parents) *choose* to be there so they are motivated and enthusiastic about the instructors and the subject – it is *not a mandated* activity. Two, there are regular goals that the instructors all support (i.e. every 2 months the students “graduate” and get their next belt). This is a kind of celebration so the instructor gets an opportunity to connect with the students more regularly (in this fashion) than an elementary school teacher (they don't even “graduate” from grade to grade really – graduations are at 8th grade, and 12th grade). Third, students who may be falling behind, or who just are very motivated may do private lessons. Fourth, the instructor's job is not just to develop some specific skill - though they are tested on knowledge - learning skills and values are a larger focus. This values orientation allows us to also connect with the individual students. All of the points here are important as a start for instructors to follow through with. The next step is developing tactics and strategies for individualizing within the context presented.

In the next section we will present tactics that can be employed, but our overall strategy needs to include a framework for implementation of these ideas. While we have stated that our activity lends itself to personal “connection” how can we make sure each student gets their needs met. Particularly when we are talking about 600 students (and growing) in Scottsdale alone. One way is by improving tracking systems. Since students may not have the same instructor for each class, the instructors need to know special needs and plans. Some possibilities include using their existing tracking card system (each student turns in a “tracking card” before class to the instructor). This can be coded or notated to include actions that the instructor ought to take or the special characteristics of the child. In addition, a training system needs to be developed for the instructors to educate them on the system and the actions that are suggested. Instructors also need to be trained how to identify children and also to communicate this back to the overall system. Though this is in a martial arts context, it is not much different than what elementary teachers should go through when kids move up a grade and into another classroom setting at the end of the school year.

Applying Multi-Dimensional Intelligence Models

The concept of multi-dimensional intelligence is not new. The current popular model is Gardner's (1983) model which has 8 dimensions:

- ☐ Linguistic intelligence ("word smart"):
- ☐ Logical-mathematical intelligence ("number/reasoning smart")
- ☐ Spatial intelligence ("picture smart")
- ☐ Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence ("body smart")
- ☐ Musical intelligence ("music smart")
- ☐ Interpersonal intelligence ("people smart")
- ☐ Intrapersonal intelligence ("self smart")
- ☐ Naturalist intelligence ("nature smart")

Based on Gardner, Kerr listed five areas: Mathematical, Spatial-Visual, Verbal, Musical and Interpersonal (Leadership) and expanded on the definitions to provide a model to identify and intervene with gifted children when advising. For example, a verbal talent may be identified by observing a “gift with languages”, and a suggested intervention might be “seek a mentor in local community or at a college or university”. This is a model for us to format the actions we should take based on the students talents.

To apply this to martial arts we can correlate the model here to specific identification and applications in a classroom (martial arts classroom) situation. In martial arts, this needs to be simple enough to allow it to work with a variety of instructors, a variety of personality types, and with only the aforementioned time to work with the kids (2 to 3, forty five minute sessions a week). The actions suggested here are only a guide. The actual actions taken with the child

depends on where their other strengths lie and his/her personality. (Note: for clarity, “forms” are referred to often. In martial arts, forms refer to a series of techniques that are performed in a specific order and direction).

Application of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences to Martial Arts Instruction

Intelligence (Gardner)	How it Might Be Discovered (Martial Arts Context)	Examples of Possible Action
Linguistic	May not be readily applicable.	Write out the moves of a form. Creatively describe who they are defending themselves against.
Logical-mathematical	Always knows how many moves are in the forms, knows exactly how many steps to take between move A and B.	Have them count the moves of their form or calculate angles of attack.
Spatial	Able to do technique combination in multiple directions, understands distancing,	Provide many different varieties of ways to perform moves. Let them draw the forms as a special project.
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Coordination is exceptional, can easily perform moves forms.	Give them challenges regarding more complex moves. "Special projects". Demonstration team. Do their form backwards.
Musical	Has good rhythm – combinations and forms "flow" well.	Let them be part of demonstration team that does forms to music.
Interpersonal	Is a great example of respect and courtesy. Is a great communicator.	Have them be part of leadership training program for kids.
Intrapersonal	Is a great example of honesty and integrity.	Point out these values in class – use them as a positive example.
Naturalist	May not be readily applicable.	Special projects – how we show values (respect) to the world around us.

The above is only a starting point for further development. We need to be able to adapt this initial model to be able to service a variety of students with a variety of instructors and improve their ability to meet individual needs.

Two additional benefit of developing this model are firstly, that we can help gifted kids who may be weak in some areas by identifying them and suggesting alternate actions. Also, we may be able to use this model to identify children who may be closer to “average” and come up with individualized interventions (instruction actions). In other words, we can view these as continuums which, based on the student, we can draw a variety of possible activities they can do.

Conclusion

Though the scope of this paper limits this discussion to envisioning a framework for application of the theories of this course, rather than developing a full training system, it suggests some exciting concepts for dramatically improving the ability of our instructors to meet specific students needs. There are still difficulties with the time we will be able to spend with each student, but with further development of the model, development of training programs for instructors and creating systems to help the instructors manage these interventions, we can get closer to our goal of helping create independent people. We want to make a significant difference in children’s (and adult’s) lives. This knowledge can serve as a beginning.

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