

On Taekwon-Do in New Zealand and Community Service

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It occurred to me in preparation for my test for third Dan that fulfilling the contribution credit requirement was a difficult task. The main way for most students to gain contribution credits is through tournaments, of which there are only so many in any given year. Missing one of these due to a work or family commitment can put a student's preparation for grading behind fairly easily. With the growing number of Dan students in Wellington and in ITFNZ, we must increasingly look to other ways of fulfilling this requirement.

There are several ways to fulfil this requirement. For those that are instructors and assistant instructors at clubs, instruction duties can fill this requirement. Contributing to TKD talk is one way to gain contribution credits, organising events is another. An example is the outdoor summer Taekwon-Do combined training programme, run by Mr Dennis Burns over the period where normal trainings are not running. Mr Burns can claim contribution credits for the instruction/organisation of these extra trainings.

I chose to look into community service to make up the extra contribution credits I needed to grade. In the months leading up to my grading, I found an opportunity to tutor children from refugee backgrounds to help them pass their NCEA exams. I have found it to be a very rewarding experience in many respects.

I decided to investigate the opportunities and possibilities of more Taekwon-Do students filling their requirements in this way.

I will first examine how doing community service displays the tenets of Taekwon-Do, and therefore the behaviour of a model Taekwon-Do student.

A student displays courtesy in performing tasks for those in need and giving the gift of their time and experience to members of our community. Community service acts that exemplify courtesy include helping out at retirement homes or hospices, showing respect and courtesy for our elderly and sick.

A student displays perseverance in working toward goals that are difficult to achieve, and goals which take a long time to realise. For example, my own personal experience has been in tutoring students for whom English is not their first language. I have continued to work with the students to help them pass their exams, though the task of interpreting the exam questions can be a daunting one to these students. With each exercise however, their grasp of the language improves somewhat and I am confident that each of the children will eventually be a competent English speaker.

A student displays self-control in working without expectation of personal reward or reimbursement for the good of others in their societies. One with lesser self-control would instead the time to work to earn money or other rewards for themselves, or simply spend the time on

leisure activities. This is particularly the case in community service that requires hard physical work, such as planting native trees in public places.

A student displays indomitable spirit by working in tasks that seem to be never ending, such as working in a community soup kitchen or night shelter. As long as mankind has lived in cities, there have been impoverished, homeless people living in these cities. It may seem to be a futile task to go out every day, or even every week to feed, clothe and shelter these people, causing one without indomitable spirit to abandon hope. Finding no purpose in this activity, they would soon stop.

Finally, we come to integrity. More so than the other tenets, integrity can have different meanings to different people, and as such is harder to define. This makes it hard to link this tenet to community service, and I will draw on the writings of General Choi Hong Hi to demonstrate this link.

A student displays integrity by performing community service by realising that we would be unable to practice Taekwon-Do without the support of the community and the society that supports us.

The student must then also acknowledge that the same society that supports us causes imbalances between wealthy and poor, between weak and strong, and thus that it is in some sense our responsibility to care for and donate our time to those left most in need by the mechanics of our society. It is partially on their backs that we support our training of Taekwon-Do.

After all, General Choi Hong Hi states in his encyclopaedia of Taekwon-Do, "The utmost purpose of Taekwon-Do is to eliminate fighting by discouraging the stronger's oppression of the weaker with a power that must be based on humanity, justice, morality, wisdom and faith, thus helping to build a better and more peaceful world.¹"

Although the creation of poverty is not always directly related to physical fighting, it is nevertheless always a situation in which the strong oppress the weak. I believe that in following this purpose that General Choi has given for Taekwon-Do, support of the most needy in our societies must become one of the responsibilities of Taekwon-Do schools and organisations everywhere in the world.

The argument could be raised that ideally students would be working to prevent these divisions from occurring in the first place rather than making life easier for those left behind. I agree that it would be a fine thing to see Taekwon-Do supporting a fairer society – "A better and more peaceful world²" perhaps - but to ignore caring for those already hurt by the oppression is, I feel, an irresponsible act - one lacking in integrity. We must also be cautious, if Taekwon-Do were to support work towards a better and more peaceful world, that we are not to misuse the art for political purposes. General Choi has expressed great opposition for Taekwon-Do to be used as a political tool

The rewards of community service for the individual are well documented in society. Apart from the good it does to people in need, we can all benefit from the virtuous feeling that comes from charity. The positive mental effect of contributing to the community eases pressure on the mind and on the body, leading to the fact that people who contribute their time for community causes have statistically better health than those who don't. So it can be seen that even when one

ignores the benefit to the community, there are several advantages to the individual in performing community service.

ITFNZ as an organisation could also stand to benefit from its students undertaking community service. If properly organised, it will serve to raise the profile of ITF Taekwon-Do in New Zealand. It could serve as a source of new students, through the people that current students meet doing the community service. Finally, it will influence people's opinion of ITF Taekwon-Do by showing us to be a positive force in the wider community.

In order for the ITFNZ to realise these benefits to the organisation, however, it will be necessary to ensure that its students are visibly Taekwon-Do members when performing the community service. The Condensed encyclopaedia shows a photograph of Taekwon-Do students performing community service in dobok, but this might not be appropriate in all circumstances.

Possibly the easiest way to achieve this is to encourage students to wear a club jacket, or other items of clothing that show affiliation with ITFNZ or its subsidiary regions and clubs. This way, members of the public can see that the volunteers are members of Taekwon-Do, and relate the virtue of their service to their martial art. In addition, if the members of the public are interested in joining a martial art, they can talk to the volunteers.

In the situation that a group of Taekwon-Do students are working together, I highly recommend some degree of uniformity, as this will amplify the effect of seeing a single ITF member doing community service. The ideal uniform would be a t-shirt or similar with the ITF logo and a message like 'Taekwon-Do community service team' written on them. A website address or phone number printed on the t-shirts might also be advisable, so that interested members of the public know immediately where to go to find out more about our organisation.

Some kind of advertising t-shirt or similar, and working together in groups might also be important to show that the students are not simply performing compulsory community service as civic punishment! That image is not one that ITF would wish to promote.

What kinds of community service would be appropriate for Taekwon-Do students to perform? The condensed encyclopaedia of Taekwon-Do suggests that the tasks should build "charity, humility, comradeship, tolerance and a sense of generosity."³

Most community service tasks will, I feel, build all of these traits. In particular, to build tolerance, emphasis could be placed on working with people of different cultural, political and religious backgrounds. This could be achieved either by caring for people in these categories, or by working together with other people in these categories on larger projects.

In order to realise the benefits to ITFNZ, it would be preferable to have its members working in publicly visible tasks - For example, gardening or cleaning in public places.

It is also worth considering that members of ITFNZ come from many varied walks of life, and between them have a wide variety of skills and knowledge that can be applied to public service. I have discovered through my experience with community service that all sorts of skills are in demand for community tasks, from labourers to teachers to managers. Students of Taekwon-Do might therefore gain more satisfaction in their community work by applying their skills, being challenged. At the same time, the community will get more out of their work given that it is something the student enjoys.

Examining the list of different benefits from different kinds of community service, it becomes apparent that any system put into place for assisting ITFNZ students to participate in community service must be a flexible one, able to cater for specifically skilled individual students and for a group of students to work together visibly. While it might sometimes be possible to combine these goals in community service projects – for example, designing and building a small public garden – at most times it seems likely that it will be easier for students to work towards these goals one at a time.

There are already several well set out volunteer organisations around the country who are set up to help volunteers find community service opportunities that suit their particular skills and interests, and my experience with the Wellington branch has been one of a well organised and useful service. (Their website and contact details can be found at www.volunteernow.org.nz) I believe that the best way to encourage Taekwon-Do students to participate in community service is to get them to use these already existing channels to help them find appropriate work. I also believe that these organisations would also be helpful in finding appropriate jobs for the volunteer teams that would publicly display ITFNZ's logo.

A simple model of the community service team would involve one person responsible for maintaining contact with the local volunteer organisation – a volunteer liaison. Whenever an appropriate community service job comes up, the volunteer organisation will contact that person to let them know. The volunteer liaison will send out word on a region-wide mailing list of all those who would like to be part of the team. They can then get an indication of numbers, perhaps schedule a briefing session and then all who can make it would turn up on the day to do the public service as a team.

At the discretion of the regional directors, uniform t-shirts could be supplied or subsidised in order to promote Taekwon-Do and ITFNZ while the work takes place.

In conclusion, doing community service is an excellent display of the tenets of Taekwon-Do outside the do-jang. Doing community service has several health and well-being benefits for the volunteer personally. Community service could be used as a channel through which ITFNZ can raise awareness of our art form, and demonstrate some of the benefits of Taekwon-Do to the public. Therefore, I believe that it is well worthwhile to encourage students of Taekwon-Do to participate in community service, particularly at Dan level.

As a closing note, I also believe that now is an excellent time to create community service teams and networks for ITFNZ. If we start now, then by the time the 2011 World Championships come to New Zealand, the teams will hopefully be well established and successful. The teams we establish now could be a great example to the other Taekwon-Do organisations worldwide, and win ITFNZ international respect.

1 – General Choi Hong Hi “Condensed Encyclopaedia of Taekwon-do” pg 47

2 – General Choi Hong Hi “Condensed Encyclopaedia of Taekwon-do” pg 47

3 – General Choi Hong Hi “Condensed Encyclopaedia of Taekwon-do” pg 35

See also: Volunteering New Zealand - www.volunteernow.org.nz