

The Life of an Instructor

By Matt Davey

If your actions inspire others to dream more,
learn more, do more and become more,
you are a leader.

(John Quincy Adams)

I began instructing at the Jungshin Glenfield Taekwon-Do club in early 2007. I was asked by my instructor, Mr Vince Pygott, to help out as the club was left without an instructor. At the time I was training for the New Zealand team to be selected for the Canada World Championships. This by itself was a huge commitment which combined with instructing two nights a week was quite tough on me. I have learnt, over the past 3 years, to have a successful balance between my training and my other commitments.

We all start out instructing for different reasons. It might be at our original club helping our instructor by working with some white belts or similar, and we build up from there until one day we decide to open our own club. It could be because of our love of the art and we feel that we need to share it, or our instructor might suggest that we should start a club of our own. Maybe we plan to make money from instructing at a club, sometimes it's a requirement to grade, or in my case, because an existing club needed an instructor.

As an instructor you will fill many roles in your student's lives –a teacher, mentor, carer, first aider, psychologist, financial assistant, future planner, an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on, sometimes the bad guy, sometimes the good guy, a point of reference, advisor, but most of all you'll become a friend who they can rely on.

I believe the greatest thing about becoming an instructor is seeing someone else achieve and knowing it was because of your encouragement and helping them to develop that got them there. This can be shown in many ways - for the small children it could be when they finally get a crossing round the right way, or through to a student beating you at a tournament and being humble about it because you got them to that point, or watching a student grow from being a shy, withdrawn youngster into someone who is confident and proud, because of the support that they had from you and your club.

When you become an instructor, this is the point where your perspective on a club changes - from 'me' and 'I' to 'us' and 'we'. Your goals change from what can I do for my own training, to what can I do to help my students, and what things can our whole club achieve?

Like everything in life I believe that instructing has 2 main important factors to consider, balance and consistency. If you don't have the right balance between Taekwon-Do and your home life and career, or between instructing and getting your own training then it can make life hard for everyone involved.

I believe that the only way to avoid a lack of balance in your life from becoming a problem for an instructor, or to get past it if it does exist, is to have clear ideas and goals for what you want, for all aspects of life. These could be plans for having children, travelling, health/ fitness, when you will grade next, if and when you will compete at tournaments, how fit and able you want to be in your own Taekwon-Do abilities, as well as goals you have for your club such as your students grading and tournament results, a minimum standard in etiquette, fundraising, community service, and various other things.

You also need to be a consistent instructor, you must be consistent because for example punishing bad etiquette sometimes and not at other times; showing favouritism to only some students; expecting peoples best and helping them towards it, then letting them slack off next time etc, always leads to confusion. If you are an inconsistent instructor it is likely to cause division in your club and you will likely lose a number of members.

If you manage to find the right balance between it all then you will have a long and prosperous career as an instructor.

Instructing vs. your own training

We all love Taekwon-Do – that's why we do it. However what happens when you become an instructor and all of a sudden you realise that you spend all of your time teaching other people this great art and not actually working on your own skills?

I had this happen a while ago - I would show up to my class and teach the students a session full of things that I love to do and they would really enjoy the lessons, while I watched and corrected them but didn't get to do any of it myself. Then as time goes on you find that all of your students skills are improving and they are all having a great time while your own skill set gets smaller and less capable due to not working on your own techniques and fitness.

At this point you need to be careful as you might end up feeling like giving up as you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, because your life is wholly devoted to this art while you don't actually get to practise it. You may even start to resent those who do get to train in the sessions that you plan, with all of the activities that you like to do.

In a worst case scenario you may even burn out completely and potentially be left wondering why you do this at all. You may end up not caring anymore so you don't plan sessions or think about how to improve your student's skills. You may think that you don't need to practise anymore because all you do is teach others and use someone else to demonstrate techniques. Or lastly you may quit altogether because it's become too much for you.

Another thing to consider about your own training and skill level is that your students will end up with the same idiosyncrasies as you, good or bad - 'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery' (Charles Caleb Colton). This is why I believe it is so important to keep up your own training. Your students will pick up any habits that you have simply because they watch, and copy, everything that you do. This is why you can often tell which instructor a student has simply by the good or bad habits that the student portrays. It could be their drive to succeed, attention to detail or

etiquette, or even a particular technique the instructor does (you will find that most of the students in that club will do the same thing).

The best way that I have found so far to get over a slump in energy and physical skills is to do your own training outside of the classes that you teach. This way you don't take away time from helping your students in your search for the perfection of your own technique. Generally the best way to do this is by going along to other clubs training sessions if you have time available to do this. If other training sessions don't work in with your schedule you could also go to a gym, or simply practice in front of a mirror, with a camera, or have another person watch to make sure you are doing things correctly and not forming lazy, bad habits. It is also then a good idea for you to make sure that you don't start to over train and end up missing out on spending time with your family, or have it start affecting your career because you are always training or teaching classes. It is important to find that balance.

Favouritism of Students

We all have a 'favourite' student for various reasons and often these people get special treatment - whether it's extra attention to their training, or letting the rules slide for them a little. Sometimes it's obvious to everyone else but you don't even realise that you are doing it. Is this a good thing?

Reasons why it is not a good thing are:

- It shows inconsistency where students and people watching are not sure what's expected because the same action can provide two different outcomes depending on who performs it.
- It questions people's integrity, as to what they are willing to do to be the 'favourite student' - whether they push the rules to get the required result
- It creates 'us' and 'them' feelings which fractures groups and creates disharmony
- Often it will cause people to not try as hard or at all because the 'favourite' will always do better, even if they aren't better

Reasons why it is a good thing are:

- It shows that there are benefits to working hard or being naturally talented
- It makes some people work harder to be the 'favourite' or to remove the 'favourite' from that position
- It can give people something to work towards and someone to look up to.

So whether or not it is a good thing there will always be the favouritism issue, but as long as you regularly take an honest look at the way you treat your students and keep your opinions as consistent as possible then you shouldn't have any major issues with favouritism.

Conflict Resolution

Another thing that you will need to be prepared for being an instructor at any level is conflict resolution. It can be from something simple such as a student complaining about having to work with a particular other student, through to complaints of inappropriate contact or someone misusing their Taekwon-Do, or many other things. Whatever the conflict might be you need to treat every issue as a problem and be impartial in the resolution of it, even if you feel that you disagree on the subject.

In my experience most of the issues you will have to deal with are based on conflict of personality. Some of the most popular conflicts I have come across include 'student 1' doesn't want to work with 'student 2' because 'student 2' is not as focused, smells funny, isn't cool, doesn't kick high enough or a million other reasons. When this happens it is a great time to teach them some of the art/Do of Taekwon-Do. To remind them that they probably do things that annoy others as well and a true test of character is in the way we show courtesy to those who we would prefer not to deal with. A saying that springs to mind is 'Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves' (Carl Jung)

No instructor ever wants anything more serious to happen in their club but if, or when, a bigger issue arises, it is important to deal with it immediately, so that it doesn't get any worse. Make sure with this that you follow up on all issues big or small and make sure that even if a resolution has not been reached that you have at least followed the correct procedures. This can stop some of the small issues blowing out of proportion.

In the past 3 1/2 years, since becoming an instructor, I have learnt a lot about myself and the workings of other people. I pride myself on being strict enough to have a successful club but fair enough to maintain good terms with all of my students. I am proud that my students have set out and achieved dreams, including being best overall belt competitors at both regional and national level, and students who have A passed to 1st dan black belt. I am also fortunate enough to have been nominated as Instructor of the Year for the past 3 years, and have my club nominated as club of the year twice. I believe that this proves that my theories are working.

I will close this essay with my favourite quote from General Choi, "Training hard, grading easy. Training easy, grading hard".