

Creative Conformity

At the risk of oversimplifying and unfairly compartmentalizing academicians (notably college professors teaching under the publish-or-perish paradigm), said teachers tend to be very liberal in one way and very conformist in another. Before you put a political hue on my broad-brush painting, let me clarify a bit. Professors tend to be supportive of freethinking. They want a “marketplace of ideas” even if they may vote for limiting the economic marketplace now and again. Then, once a standard of truth has been attained, whether it is Newton’s mechanistic physics or Einstein relativity, it becomes an unassailable “truth” to which one must conform if one is to be tolerated within the community of “freethinkers”—this is their conformist side. I remember when Continental Drift, for example, was soundly trashed in academic circles. Does anyone doubt it now?

Why do we have academic orthodoxy in a freethinking academia? Professors are pressed to publish and publishers are not interested in the same old same-old, therefore professors are pressed to be original in their published thought. The easiest way to be original is to fly in the face of orthodoxy. Lack of orthodoxy may get one published, but it does not necessarily result in wide popular acceptance. In fact, only in academia can a theory be proven blatantly wrong in reality without the author of the theory paying any price of credibility. In fact, a disproved theory can even persist, finding cult acceptance. A vocal cult buys enough books to get one a favorable review by critics who themselves lean toward the unorthodox. A couple of favorably reviews later, the professor is either on *John Stewart* or on a lecture tour at universities other than his own.

Luckily, these things can’t happen in the traditional martial arts. Martial artists seldom form cults supporting one theory or another, and when they do, they support that theory because it has met the tough test of either street application or in-dojō simulation. Martial artists are open to the idea of a marketplace of ideas and never trash anyone’s unorthodox point of view. When a standard of truth has been attained, the martial artist never stubbornly adheres to traditional orthodoxy; rather, he openly embraces new experimentation to determine what works best for him or his students in the reality they will face outside the dojō.

If you are not chuckling now, you should be.

The solution to the problem of becoming orthodox while advocating a marketplace of ideas is something I call Creative Conformity. It won’t take long to explain the steps one should go through to attain creative conformity: (1) study a martial art from any tradition so that you understand it thoroughly, (2) test the techniques and philosophies it advocates if not on the street then in dojō simulations, (3) adjust those things that do not seem to work for you or place them on a list for further research, study, or training. The result is your version of a traditional art that has, by and large, conformed to the same ideas and techniques over the years; but your version has added a creative element—a few minor modifications, if you will, that round its jagged edges.

What? You say that it is difficult to take these steps in a dojō in which orthodoxy rules? True, but in a marketplace where anything is for sale, in which creativity is more valuable than conformity, you’d have to try

everything and challenge everything to arrive at martial methods you trust. Certainly, it would be easier to assume that an accepted orthodoxy, good enough for your teachers, is good enough for you and should be good enough for everyone else, as well. At the risk of oversimplifying and unfairly compartmentalizing traditional martial artists, that's how we got to a place where we both respect each other and, ironically, trash each other.

'Tain't easy to apply creative conformity. It is much easier to simply accept conformity or come up with some new-and-different training ideas, just so you can call them your own, in hopes of attaining a cult following. Don't worry; you won't lose credibility because no one will bother proving wrong either your orthodox or unorthodox theories. These are, after all, the martial arts.