

Memorization vs. Learning and Learning vs. Understanding

You remember what it was like when you were in school, don't you? You would cram all night to memorize the material for a test only to find that, 10 minutes after the test was over, you had forgotten half of what you "learned". The next day, had you taken the test over again, you would not have passed. This is the distinction between Memorization and Learning. Of course, Memorization can lead to Learning; and, of course, Learning can also be ephemeral. Nevertheless, a learned person goes beyond a person who memorizes. Not only does the learner retain the material longer, but she also seems to *understand* how the material integrates and how it relates to other material.

In the martial arts, each school has its curriculum for rank advancement. That curriculum has to be learned — not just memorized for a rank exam — but learned sufficiently so that it can be demonstrated physically, both for the exam and for practical application, should that ever be needed. Assumedly, one should retain it at least as long as one is active in the school. But is it *understood*?

Every school has something to "teach," but few schools teach so that the student *understands* — that is, so that she understands more than what it takes to advance her rank. Every teacher teaches from a curriculum, but few teachers instruct in a way that helps students garner an understanding of both the art and its goals. Few teachers instruct both the curriculum and what the curriculum itself reveals.

People who learn the martial arts are, forgivably, concrete-bound — they take things literally. If the instructor says step to your left with your left foot, the student steps directly to his left with his left foot. If the instructor actually meant to say "Step to your left front corner with your left foot, the toes remaining directly forward, putting 70% of your weight on that leg while pushing off the rear leg and keeping it straight," he should say those words precisely, yet this instruction might be too complicated for the student to respond with accurate action. This is why, in most schools, techniques are not verbalized but demonstrated.

As soon as they are demonstrated, about 2/3 of the student population "gets it" and can render a rough imitation, even if they have not perceived the small but important details the teacher is trying to convey. The 1/3 that learns best from auditory instruction or from kinesthetic instruction (actually trying the movement physically) is left out.

Imitation is a sort of *physical memorization*, but it is not *understanding*. The majority of martial arts schools do not teach so that student understands in depth because it is difficult and, frankly, even many seasoned instructors are not up to it. The default solution in the martial arts reflects the solution to a similar problem in the larger society: since teaching so students *understand* is difficult, just teach so that they can pass.

Instructors, who may not be able to hand down their art in the same depth their masters could, will drill their students to perform a limited set of techniques excellently and automatically. The reasoning goes

something like this: if I can't get them to understand this material in depth, at least they will memorize it until their form looks accurate and their retention is dependable. Not a bad temporary fallback position, but not *understanding*.

Only seasoned instructors know how to convey understanding to the students. Seasoned instructors are called masters. But be aware that those with the title Master are not always seasoned instructors nor do all of them have the capability of instructing on a higher level.

The English poet Lord Grenville once said, "It is not enough that you form and even follow the most excellent rules...; one must also know when to deviate from them...." This is the essence of understanding. Rules, forms, drills, and rank requirements are just teaching tools. They are not understanding. Without those tools, we could not transfer knowledge, but they are not the knowledge itself. Too much adherence to the tools is like trying to micro-manage your child's teenage years with one course in child psychology. Ultimately, you cannot control a child's behavior after a certain age, but you can have influenced their values and their beliefs. Ultimately, a martial arts master cannot micro-manage each mini-movement of a student, but he/she can attempt to teach with enough depth, with enough explanation, with enough detail that the concrete becomes the conceptual, and so that learning folds over into understanding.