

Promotion on Principle

Having been promoted to nidan several years earlier while training at Shihan Church's hombu dojo in Charleston, I was surprised to receive a sandan promotion from hombu in the mail. It was well before live-feed or video exams were available, and I had not taken a physical exam for this rank. I knew that Shihan Church used the military concept of promoting lower ranks to see if they would rise to the responsibilities of higher rank, but I preferred the old-fashioned, in-person, stylistically standardized exam method.

Because I phoned Shihan Church almost every week, both to keep in touch and to garner as much knowledge as I could through this limited modality, I bucked up my courage told him that I felt somewhat uncomfortable not having taken a sandan exam. He said something like, "Son, I know you have been working on the material you learned down here, and I am sure you were ready for this rank."

Many decades later, operating my own federation with video pre-exams quite accessible (final exams always had to be done in person) and traveling being much more affordable, I realized that member instructors were nevertheless struggling to adhere to our standards, perhaps because the curriculum was difficult and because it was challenging to receive video corrections instead of personal instruction. After a few years of efforts, many instructors did not renew, opting to join federations in which the requirements were not so demanding. I did not respond by changing ranking methods to Shihan Church's military style "promoting because you are ready", rather I felt that if students could not hack our standards, they were better off—and so were we—if they studied somewhere else.

I understood and accepted that head honchos could promote students without an exam, but I had never done this, feeling that it was inappropriate for ranks below fifth dan. Still, although it may not have been the norm, it was certainly not unusual for instructors to promote students based on time-in-grade and other factors. My Shotokan instructor had used a mixed approach: he kept a log to remind him when each student had fulfilled a minimum time-in-grade requirement and then observed them more closely than normal that week. In essence, he was giving an in-class, surreptitious exam, but only after a minimal time period had passed.

I have also seen federation heads propel their member instructors to higher rank or title and then immediately demand more of them, not in terms of technique or knowledge, but in terms of sponsoring seminars, attending classes at hombu, or preparing their own students for promotion. In this case, the rank came first and the "exam" afterwards, a modification of the military method. These higher expectations were intended to result in the promoted students applying themselves more assiduously, thus increasing their skills.

In my opinion, students who were also instructors were adult enough to know what was good for their own development and resourceful enough to plan their own training, seminar attendance, and trips to hombu without it being demanded of them because they received a new rank. I felt that their own rational, long-term self-interest would make them want to achieve in a federation that demanded high standards and did not offer rank on any other terms. In other words, I proudly stood on a principle that, although it is still valid in some cases, had proven to be faulty in most cases. In other words, I had been wrong.

More on this next time.