

A Teacher's Dilemma

The eminent physicist Neils Bohr reportedly stated a principle, something he was not uncertain about, to the equally eminent Werner Heisenberg, founder of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle: “You can be clear or you can be accurate. If you are clear, you cannot be completely accurate, and if you are accurate you cannot be completely clear.”

Although these men were discussing very complex subatomic physics, Bohr's statement holds true for teachers of many subjects, including budo. In a seminar or a class, I try to make clear that which students either have not considered or have consider only superficially. Often that superficial understanding is because a former teacher passed on his own superficial knowledge or because, even though he possessed substantive knowledge, he had to make his lesson simple in order to make it clear. I am then faced with the same problem at a higher level. Now the student is more experienced and has had some success in applying that which her instructor has taught her, but she doesn't get the whole picture. I have to parse out what will benefit her and improve her application without setting up yet another incomplete (and thus inaccurate) understanding.

Since our understanding of anything can seldom really be complete, teachers are faced with being clear at the risk of being inaccurate. Consider how you learned American history: (1) in 1492, Columbus discovered America, (2) in 1776 Americans founded a new country after having fought a revolutionary war, and (3) in 1861 the North and South fought the Civil War over slavery. This outline seemed to suffice for early elementary school, but it is clearly incomplete, and thus wildly inaccurate; for example: (1) Columbus was not the first to sail to North America and thus did not “discover” it, (2) although the American colonies declared independence in 1776, a new political entity was far from fully established, (3) the American Civil War is more properly called The War Between The States and was fought as much over states' rights as over slavery. Still, the more elemental outline managed to capture the high points of a country's history such that the student had an approximately correct, if specifically inaccurate, framework from which to seek additional knowledge.

A good teacher hates to teach that which is inaccurate, but he also hates to teach in an unclear manner, so he tiptoes the narrow walkway between two chasms.

As I was instructing a student in Kanku-dai, she mentioned that the federation she was a part of insisted that she pivot on her heels while her first teacher insisted she pivot on the balls of her feet. “Which way is correct, Sensei?” Since I prefer the balls of the feet, I explained why, but also explained that there are kata in which one must pivot on one's heels and that there are some minor advantages too doing so. I was being clear, I thought, but I left the student without *her* being clear. In other words, when she was in my dojo, she was expected to pivot one way, but in her home dojo, she would be expected to pivot another.

Another student was taught to perform basic 180° kata turns with her hands ceremoniously at her hips while I preferred that she push her hands into a preparatory position, not just to prepare for the next block, but also to cover her body. “Which way is correct, Sensei?” Well, that depends on what the teacher is trying to accomplish. Too often we teach students without explaining our rationale. In other words, we try to be clear by being doctrinaire and the student accepts the doctrine as accuracy.

Now let me be as accurate and clear about this as I can be in a short essay: there is no right or wrong way. There are several functional ways and thousands of non-functional ways, but to judge them, one must understand not only the teacher’s purpose, but also the mindset of the student who is performing. If she is aware of *why* she is doing A or B, she has a much better chance of merging clarity and accuracy.