

# SENSEI'S JOURNAL

Dojo Challenges from Both Student and Teacher's Point of View  
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## *The Student Decides*

Although the student is responsible for choosing under whom to train, the teacher has the final say on how the training proceeds. I am a big advocate of the teacher having a whole system and method of study planned in advance from novice to master. The teacher has been there and knows the way. He or she may not know how each student learns best but he/she can know how most students are most likely to progress best through a specific art.

I am also an advocate of a teacher teaching what he thinks appropriate rather than what the student wants to learn. Despite this advocacy, the student body has a sort of unconscious control of what and even how a teacher teaches. We call this marketplace pressure. It is not as simple as Adam Smith's invisible guiding hand, however. This sort of pressure happens in two ways, direct and indirect.

Direct market pressure is rather obvious. To keep the enrollment up and the bills paid, schools decide to pander to the latest martial arts craze. Remember the days when every other karate school said they offered kung fu (in the 70s) and then ninjutsu (in the 80s) because Shaolin monks or ninja were cool? Remember when every kids' budo program became a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle program and then later converted to a Power Ranger program? How many schools added a karate-robics division when Tae-bo became popular (in the 90s)?

Indirect market pressure is a little different. Let's say, as I have suggested in a previous article, that Esteban Instructor recognizes the need for rote learning for his lower ranked students, but rational investigation for his upper ranked students. In a small school, even such a wise teacher as Esteban is forced to mix intermediates with advanced students. As a result, he takes the chance of watering down the more advanced instruction. If, on a given evening, ten white belts and two brown belts show up, something has got to give. Esteban will tend to teach toward the majority. The student, indirectly, has controlled the curriculum.

In a large school with a large staff, Sensei Esteban could more easily break down classes by general ability level. In the largest schools, Esteban can offer separate classes for each separate rank-level. Ah, problem solved, one thinks: the large school can teach rote learning to elementary students and gradually introduce variations and even rational investigation as they move on to higher level classes. Theoretically, it sounds good. However, what usually happens is that Master Esteban, who really understands how the art is put together, is able to teach only the highest levels. The assistant instructors, having been products of a cut-and-dried

curriculum-oriented method, teach only the rank requirements even if that rank is beyond black belt. The upper level detail tends to be lost. Here, students control the curriculum not by their preferences but by their numbers. The sheer mass of the student body has made it so that Esteban cannot control the curriculum either. He cannot easily inject more advanced concepts into the lower classes to prepare his/her students for a more rational and masterful viewpoint without simultaneously overextending himself by teaching too many classes. The students, therefore, unconsciously control the curriculum because of their very numbers.

These problems are difficult but not insurmountable. It is up to the experienced instructor to understand when classes are getting away from his/her intended flow toward mastery and why. Esteban must create (i.e. exercise his rationality) systems and practices that keep control of his curriculum while gradually freeing his students from rote learning.

For an instructor to allow his students this freedom, he must trust his students' level of skill, their ability to learn and their maturity. For "maturity," read "rationality." Too often, even the most sincere instructor will not give up a sort of "parental control" of a student because the student lacks one of the three above traits. There have been a few (thankfully, very few) people in the history of my dojo who, since they had good skill levels and were superb learners, petitioned me for more advanced instruction. I am not the type of teacher who teaches advanced material only to those who have meticulously mastered everything that has gone before, rather I introduce advanced concepts early so that students of all ranks can see how the requirements of their specific ranks prepare for more advanced skills; but certain good students are hungry for even more. This is not wrong in itself. Their lack of patience and their feeling that I want to keep them from achieving, however, is. That sort of artificial self-aggrandizement and negative perception of their instructor suggests immaturity — an immaturity that immediately disqualifies them from special advanced instruction. They are students who are trying to directly decide what they need for their own self-development in the martial arts. What they never seem to think they need is patience and maturity.

After one year of judo, I asked Charlie Chaves, award-winning instructor of Tohoku Judo Club, if I could test for brown belt. I had learned nearly all the techniques that I had needed for black belt and felt over-prepared for brown belt. Charlie (who refused to be called Sensei) did not believe that I could have learned so much in such a short time. He asked me to perform *kata-guruma* (shoulder wheel), an especially difficult technique. I did it with confidence — perhaps not with the finesse of an experienced senior, but with confidence. He was duly impressed, but still denied my petition. "Not enough seasoning," is all he said. I was quietly angry with him for years after that. He was holding me back! Why, even some of his black belts did not know as many throws as I! No one could explain to me then that the number of techniques does not equal experience. No one thought to tell me that my very impatience was a sign of inexperience.

Now, decades later, I see his point. As a first-year student, I was immaturely trying to influence the experienced decision of a veteran. I did not always agree with all my teacher's decisions — honest disagreement is part of the process of learning and maturing into rationality — but in this case he was right. Too often the student decides against his own self-interest. Decades later, there were a few occasions when I denied advanced instruction to a student who had independently decided he was ready for it. Each of those students quit the dojo. It was their way of having the student decide.