



Training - Focus Areas

Neil Mould, Staines Dojo, writes:

If I may I would like to present my views of general focus areas for individual student's training in Aikido.

First, about myself, my name is Neil Mould. I am 3rd Dan and recently became Fukushidojin through Ren Shin Kan house. I have my own dojo in Staines which has been running since February 2004.

This article is aimed at those who wish to study the art to its fullest and gain the benefits from training. Training is about conditioning of the mind and conditioning of the body.

Mind Conditioning

I would like to start by talking about the mental attitude towards training. The mind is a very powerful tool. It can work for us or against us. For the majority of people the mind works against us for the simple reason that it is easy to put things off or find an easier alternative. The aim is to turn that way of thinking around and push yourself to attend courses and classes in your spare moments from work and family life. That's not to say that you should work yourself to a state of exhaustion. Positive thinking creates a positive mentality improving confidence which is vital for good technique.

Unfortunately, having strong confidence can border on arrogance: so long as you know in your self that you are not arrogant, that's what matters.

When training with people, do not feel intimidated by them. They are there to train as much as you are. If you feel intimidated by someone training with you in a controlled environment how will you react to a real confrontation?

Constantly have in your mind "self improvement". Your training is about you.

Body Conditioning

This is where repetition is the key. However, repetition should be from a correct beginning. You should constantly check your posture and your position in relation to your attacking partner. There is no need to fire through a technique at 100mph. If you do this, what have you achieved?! Your speed depends on how quickly your opponent reacts. If you move too quickly it's possible that your partner will be left behind which then destroys the essence of technique. Once you feel you have those elements you've worked on in place then you can attempt to do the technique at a more practical speed to see what happens then work on weak points stemming from that.

The body should be strong from the waist down and flexible from the waist up. Your back should be in a natural position however you should have a mental extension from the floor through the heel of your back leg, through your spine, straight up through the top of your head.

When performing technique, your arms and hands should ideally be kept within the centre line of your body. They should not go past your shoulder line. You should not be reaching out or over extending your arms from your body however you should use your legs and body within the confines of a comfortable stretch.

Your chin should be comfortably tucked in to your throat / neck.

Your vision should be kept free and not focused on one area of your attacking partner.

Technical Considerations

Ideally, you should be in a position where you are safe yet within reach of the attacking part of your partner. You should try to remain close to your attacking partner's centre. Your body movement should be positive in its direction and your number of steps should be minimised as much as possible.

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Your body movements should be circular to receive power but straight to use power. Your cut with your arms should be arced with imagination of "heavy hand".

You should visualise the lines your hands and body are to take when performing technique. Those visual lines should never cross one another at an angle of 90 degrees or less.

Ukemi

Ukemi is so important and defines the type of Aikido you will do. Ukemi is hard work and a lot of effort needs to be put in to taking ukemi. If you fear taking ukemi you tighten up, this in turn will work its way in to

your performing of techniques.

When taking ukemi you should try to stay relaxed, move with your centre and keep constant contact with tori. To do this your body needs to be relaxed and flexible. You should only really move if tori moves you and you should follow the direction of that movement. Do not move unnecessarily yet do not try to be fixed & awkward.

The improvement of ukemi is vital as this is the basis for learning to receive force and technique. Aikido is about learning to receive force and technique then transfer and use of that force against your attacking partner.

I trust the above proves useful to your development of Aikido. It would be nice to see people with this in mind on the mat at future courses. I would thrive at the chance of training with those people who have incorporated the above in their training.



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How do we learn Aikido?

One of my first memories when I started Aikido having seen several techniques preformed in a lesson was "I'll never be able to learn all that". A few years on, even though I have got to grips with the basics I know I am still learning.

Over the last few years as a secondary school teacher I have witnessed some good and bad teaching in schools and been exposed to a variety of teaching styles and methods. During my training year, and even now, I am constantly reminded that pupils can learn in a variety of ways. This I see can be reflected and compared to the teaching and learning of Aikido.

Learning and memory

The main aim of learning is to transfer knowledge from the short-term memory into the long-term memory so that the information stored internally can be recalled by the learner at any one point. Learning can involve all of the senses and our ability to think about the subject that we are studying. In aikido this element of study would of course be the practice of technique or weapons form and its application. However, transfer of knowledge from our short-term to long-term memory can be difficult and depending on the individual learner may take a considerable amount of time. As everyone is individual and has their own learning style it is important to consider the

methods and techniques of teaching and learning that are available.

Schools of learning

In this essay I will focus on four schools of learning that can be applied to leaning aikido. Each one has its own perception of how people learn and will be briefly examined.

i. the cognitive school

The cognitive school of learning can be categorised as "learning by doing". Within the practice of aikido there is a huge amount of cognitive learning. Though someone may be able to pick up basic elements from watching, the main learning is by doing and repeating the process





again and again in the form of practice. This enforces the transformation of information from the short-term to the long-term memory.

ii. the behaviourist school

This method focuses on motivating and rewarding students for their efforts. As human beings we all like to be congratulated on doing a good job. As aikidoka we all have our own individual motivations for practicing aikido be it fitness or to gain a black belt. Rewarding students within aikido can mean a student successfully gaining a grade, or being given permission to teach or wear hakama, or simply being congratulated on training well within a session.

iii. Reinforcement School

The reinforcement theory is similar to cognitive learning. Reinforcement learning is a step by step process and recognises that learning does not happen all at once. Success for this learning technique is through repetition and focuses on taking advantage of the learner remembering experiences that have occurred frequently and recently. Simple examples of

this can be a beginner learning taisabaki, and learning a warm-up from performing it week after week. Reinforcement techniques in aikido can also include using weapons to clarify techniques or other teaching aids. Please refer to summer school lessons with Philip Smith and Keith Hayward!

iv. Humanistic School

The Humanistic School of thought focuses on meeting the emotional needs of learners. Students take responsibility for their own learning through self-assessment rather than formal assessment. This learning is most effective in non threatening situations. Today, aikidoka have access to massive amounts of information on aikido in the forms of books, DVDs and web sites. Humanistic learning can also take place during practice when talking



to each other about the "effectiveness" of each other's technique and how it could be improved.

Reflection on teaching

From the above information it is clear that there are a variety of ways that people learn. Of course, each person will have their own preferred method of learning, but for the instructor it is

important to combine the main points from each "school" when teaching.

Firstly **explanation** of the technique or principal is vital to learning. This explanation should not be given too quickly as it will not reside in the learner's memory, yet a full blown explanation of every detail of the technique should be avoided. **Doing-detail**, the physical practice of the technique is vital. How else can we learn a physical martial art? The practice of the technique should allow the students to "learn" and remember the specific points that the instructor has focused on and **evaluate** their own practice. Also, practice time should be sufficient for the instructor to **check and correct** their students practice. When teaching, instructors can also use **aide-memoire**. This could be a principle or catch phrase that relate to a technique or principle. Sensei Hayward uses the TP-MTP a lot within his classes and it works! Instructors should **review** key parts of the lesson to ensure that they make the move from the learner's short-term memory to long-term memory. This can be achieved via quickly demonstrating the previous techniques that have been taught within the lesson. Finally **questions** should be encouraged. I know that from personal experience when you ask if there are any questions very few aikidoka actually ask, still questions should always be allowed.

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Conclusions

Aikido is not an easy martial art to learn. For an instructor there are not just the difficulties of teaching, but also a variety of teaching methods and styles to choose from and try to incorporate into a lesson. There are a variety of tools available to instructors including that on learning styles of people. To learn more about different teaching and learning styles and methods put extra challenges onto an instructor. It is up to the individual instructor to discover how their students like to learn. I have seen classes taught in the style that they were taught some 50 years ago. In the last 20 years alone advancements have been made in pedagogy

(teaching and learning) so clinging onto historical teaching methods may not be the most effective way to transfer current knowledge on to modern students.

Running a club and classes can at times be enough for any instructor, but it is important to consider how you transfer information you to your students and how efficient your method of delivery is. So, using some more methods and imagination let's all aim to make teaching aikido more engaging and interesting!

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