

## Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Issue 4 Fall 2011

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# Fostering a Pedagogy of Mutual Engagement Through a Shared Practice of Aikido

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### Recommended Citation

Selover, Greg and Miller-Lane, Jonathan "Fostering a Pedagogy of Mutual Engagement Through a Shared Practice of Aikido," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 4 (2011), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss4/3>

## **FOSTERING A PEDAGOGY OF MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH A SHARED PRACTICE OF AIKIDO**

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### **Introduction**

We first encountered each other as student and professor in a First Year Seminar entitled, “The Liberal Arts and the Martial Art of Aikido.” Since that fall of ‘06, we have collaborated on four academic papers and, in the process, have continually re-examined what it means to enact effective teaching between a student and a professor. Our shared “classroom” has been a regular college classroom as well as a not-so-regular martial arts dojo (training hall). We had never used the term “a pedagogy of mutual engagement” to describe what we were doing. However, when we read Thiessen’s (2010) description of the phrase in the inaugural issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* it was as if a tuning fork had sounded, “Oh, so this is what we have been doing.”

Thiessen (2010) describes a pedagogy of mutual engagement as a process in which, “students are seen less as neophytes who benefit from the wisdom passed on to them by a knowledgeable teacher, and more as capable and active agents in their own development and in the development of classrooms they co-habit and co-construct with faculty members.” Through this process, a possibility emerges for professors to see their students as whole human beings and for students to see professors as more than talking heads behind a lectern. However, for this to happen, a new kind of listening is needed in which faculty are able to imagine students as “co-protagonists” in curriculum production. A pedagogy of mutual engagement is characterized by reflection and sustained dialogue, inquiry and collaboration.

The essential insight that we seek to share is that our experience of a pedagogy of mutual engagement was actually made possible because we were both practicing the martial art of Aikido while we sought to collaborate on academic work. The intellectual connection was sustained and nurtured because of the unique way that practitioners of Aikido must interact during training. The rigid hierarchy that generally characterizes professor-student relationships was challenged over and over again in the months and years that we trained together. But, how, exactly, did this happen? What was it about the physical practice of Aikido that made a “mutual engagement” possible? After much consideration, we have determined that the best way to explain is through alternating narratives structured in chronological order.

## **A Story of Mutual Engagement**

### **Fall semester 2006.**

**Greg Selover (GS):** When selecting my First Year Seminar the summer before I arrived at Middlebury, one in particular caught my eye. It was titled “The Liberal Arts and the Martial Art of Aikido,” and while I didn’t know much about the art, a favorite English teacher in high school had practiced Aikido and so I was intrigued. I had practiced some martial arts as a kid, as well, and I was curious to explore them further. As it turns out, this class would be the only formal course that I would ever take with Professor Miller-Lane, but it feels like we have been in a seminar together for five years, continuously exploring the philosophy and practice of Aikido together.

**Jonathan Miller-Lane (JML):** For me, the course in which Greg enrolled was a decade in the making. I had been a social studies teacher since 1986 and stumbled upon Aikido ten years later in 1996. From the very first Aikido class that I took, it was clear that Aikido principles and practice embodied the goals of democratic education. This insight led to a PhD (2003) focused on Aikido and the facilitation of disagreement in discussion. I began teaching at Middlebury College in the fall of 2003 in a term position and was moved to a tenure line position in the fall of 2006 — exactly ten years after my first Aikido class. Early on in the fall semester, Greg emerged as someone who both understood what I was trying to do conceptually in the First Year Seminar and who was interested in the actual practice of Aikido. I certainly had hopes that students would continue to practice Aikido beyond the fall semester, but I had no expectations that I would still be working with one of the students from the seminar five years later.

So, what is Aikido? The martial art of Aikido (Eye-key-dough) was developed by the Japanese martial artist, Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969), in the twentieth century and is generally referred to as “the way of harmony” or “the art of peace.” Ai-Ki-Do 合気道 encompasses three concepts: Ai or harmony; Ki meaning energy or life force; and Do which means a path, or way. The three Japanese characters that make up Aikido can be translated as, “the way of meeting/uniting ki” or, more simply, as “The Way of Harmony.” Unlike the world of Mixed Martial Arts, in which the ability to make another person submit defines a practitioner’s ability, an Aikido practitioner’s skill and effectiveness is determined by his or her ability to join with and defuse the attack itself.

The prohibition against any forms of sparring or competition in Aikido makes it clear that if one is interested in learning how to win martial arts competitions, Aikido is the wrong martial art to practice. Through its rejection of violence and embrace of creative tension, Aikido stresses a fundamental commitment to the ongoing development of human beings who are capable of imagining and fostering the resolution of conflict. Over many years of practice, one learns effective self-defense skills, but this is the by-product of learning how to connect more deeply and somatically (from the Greek word, “soma” meaning, “of the body”) with other human beings. One cannot “win” anything in Aikido. The only battle that can be “won” is the internal one regarding how to overcome the habitual fight or flight response to conflict.

During Aikido practice, training partners take turns being the attacker (uke) and defender (nage). The word uke means “to receive” in Japanese and its kanji, or pictographic symbol, originally depicted “two hands, one reaching down, the other stretching up, and between them is placed the character for ‘boat’” (Lowry, 1995, p. 80-81). In other words, the concept of being an uke involves receiving an exchange between two people. In the dojo, the exchange is an energetic one. It may seem counter-intuitive to think of the attacker as the “receiver.” However, once an uke gives a good attack, he or she then receives the defensive response of nage. Thus, the attacker must blend with the response from the defender just as the defender must blend with the initial force and direction of the attacker in order to redirect the attack to a safe conclusion. Many people who watch Aikido and see this constant reversing of roles suggest that Aikido only “works” when partners cooperate. John Stevens (1995), a long time practitioner of Aikido and professor of Eastern Philosophy at Tohoku Fukushi University in Japan responds, “That is exactly the point. Rinjiro Shirata Sensei used to explain the principle of aiki thus: ‘Living in harmony, let us join hands and reach the finish line together’ (p. 5). In a single Aikido training session every practitioner both executes techniques upon others and receives other’s throws. Aikido, therefore, is inherently a cooperative art.

### **Spring semester 2007.**

GS: This second semester was different for me in that my relationship with Professor Miller-Lane changed from being framed as a professor-student relationship in a classroom, to sensei-student in the dojo. I was no longer in a college course with him so I was not worried about grades or deadlines. The idea that Aikido is a life long practice and that techniques take years to master was a common refrain in the dojo and had finally stuck in my head. My Aikido training felt much more like a genuine learning experience in that I was there for the sake of learning and not for the sake of getting grades and worrying about my transcript. I could be more honest, or less guarded, in my interactions with Miller-Lane. With other professors, my relationships were somewhat stilted because of fear or worry of behaving in a manner that might affect the professor’s assessment of me. Yes, I cared what sensei thought, but it was more out of a personal desire to meet his expectations as I valued his opinion — I wasn’t trying to get a good grade in the dojo.

When we trained together, I was frequently called upon to execute techniques that naturally led to my partner, in this case my professor, ending up on the ground. Under the guidelines of Aikido, this “throw” was not mean-spirited or vindictive, nor did it have as its purpose injury or harm, but rather was an expression of Aikido technique. Still, it was not the way I interacted with my other professors. It felt awkward at first, but I was beginning to practice Aikido for my own growth, rather than simply as a requirement for a course. Thus, the throwing of a professor in the dojo felt less and less strange as I accepted that we were not in a college course anymore. I was actually doing Aikido and Professor Miller-Lane was both a sensei and a training partner. This experience began to break down some of the distance and formality that had existed between us in the classroom, and that tended to characterize my relationship with other professors.

JML: During this spring semester Greg and one other student from the fall seminar, Will Cunningham, continued to train on a regular basis. A number of other students from the course dropped in from time to time, but only Greg and Will continued to train regularly. They both

tested for their first rank in April. During this spring semester, I also organized a three day symposium on the Liberal Arts-Martial Arts which included Donald Levine, the former Dean of the Undergraduate College at the University of Chicago and a 4th degree black belt in Aikido, whose course entitled “Conflict Theory and Aikido” had served as the inspiration for my First Year Seminar. The symposium also involved my own teacher from Seattle, Kimberly Richardson. Both Donald Levine and Kimberly Richardson gave public presentations in which I served as their uke. I made the point to express publicly at each of the demonstrations that the reason that I was assuming this role was to demonstrate to my own students at Middlebury, both in my college courses and in the dojo, my respect to my own teachers. I was presenting myself as a student of those people who had shaped my own teaching — something professors seem to rarely do. I was not always Sensei or Professor, I had been a beginner not too long ago and these individuals were my teachers.

In the dojo, I also assumed the role of uke with my students—this had functional as well as philosophical purposes. The functional purpose was to assess the abilities of my students — could they take my balance? Could they execute a technique effectively? Philosophically, by putting myself in the role of receiver of the technique from students who had been enrolled in my courses, I was consciously upsetting the normal balance of power. As described above, the roles of attacker and defender change repeatedly in an Aikido class. Thus, I was constantly playing with what it meant to be “in control” of an interaction with my students. The role of “Sensei” in a dojo often confers an immediate and unquestioned level of authority. In a traditional, Japanese dojo it is rare for a sensei to take the role of uke and be thrown by his or her students. As an American professor, who was not restricted by the cultural expectations of how a sensei was supposed to behave, I could use the dynamic give and take of uke and nage as a means to shake-up the standard, hierarchical nature of the student-professor relationship.

### **Sophomore year 2007-2008**

GS: Professor Miller-Lane, Will, and I wrote a paper together that we presented at the National Social Studies Conference. We then worked on it further and got it published in an online journal called Social Studies Research and Practice. While it was a new experience to write a paper or do any sort of work with a professor, it also felt natural — like it grew out of our time together in the dojo. I was not enrolled in any classes with Miller-Lane, but he asked Will and me whether we would be interested in working on the paper with him — and of course we agreed. I was beginning to think about majoring in Japanese at this point, and although the topic of the paper was not connected to my Japanese studies, the fact that it was challenging me to learn more about the philosophy of Aikido was motivating. I was excited to be involved with a professor’s academic endeavors. While I was working for Jonathan, the previous year of Aikido training, for me, had shifted our relationship from professor-student to sensei-student to teacher-research assistant. I was definitely receiving his guidance in my research, but he treated me like an equal partner. In Aikido, when we switched back and forth between uke and nage, Professor Miller-Lane had to “listen to” and respond to my techniques. In my first year of training I was simply getting used to the idea of throwing my professor down, but now it was clear that he was blending with/listening to/receiving my techniques. For the first time, because we constantly switched roles during Aikido training, I could imagine that our relationship could be reciprocal, rather than a one-way transmission of research data from student to professor.

JML: As Will, Greg and I worked together on the paper, it was becoming increasingly clear to me that our physical practice of Aikido was an important part of our ability to collaborate effectively. The changing role of uke and nage, of “attacker” and “defender,” during Aikido practice challenges practitioners to learn both how to give a good, clean, honest attack (to disagree) as well as to learn how to respond with powerful compassion, i.e. to listen with sensitivity but without simply capitulating. As Will, Greg and I worked on the paper together, I was still the professor and sensei, but I was consciously trying to embody an Aikido ideal in which “listening” to a partner’s movements is essential in order to respond effectively. I sought to challenge them to consider the implications of the research we were doing and I frequently disagreed and encouraged them to do the same with me. In other words, our physical listening in the dojo was informing our aural listening in the classroom.

Aikido training is actually a great deal of fun. In our dojo, we laugh quite a bit during training. This experience of laughing together with Will and Greg on the mat, while we tried to perform these exquisitely difficult techniques, gave us a shared experience in which a seriousness of purpose was combined with a lightness of humor and an embrace of real joy. Thus, when we were sitting at a table, analyzing texts, we could bring this same attitude to the task. Without the time we had spent training in the dojo, I am doubtful whether we could have generated that unique mixture in the formal setting of a professor’s office.

### **Academic Year 2008-2009.**

GS: I spent my junior year studying abroad in Japan. But, as it turned out, I trained in Aikido only twice. Although the instructor was friendly and encouraging, I felt intrusive being there, as some of the students clearly were not pleased with my presence, and stopped attending class soon after I had begun. I was slightly uncomfortable with being the “foreigner” in the dojo, and feared I would never be able to prove my dedication to Aikido at a level sufficient to win over the others in a single year. I was actually still uncertain about my own level of commitment. I didn’t want to take away from other’s training if I couldn’t even convince myself I wanted to be there.

In the absence of Aikido, I took up pottery to fill my free time after school and it turned out to be something I stayed committed to throughout my year in Japan. In the process of writing this paper and reflecting upon my experiences, it seems that pottery had assumed the role that Aikido had previously played for me in providing a stimulating environment in which I could grow both personally and emotionally. Aikido, however, was on my mind all the while, and I could not wait to return to the Middlebury dojo and train again with Professor Miller-Lane and my fellow students. It seems, in retrospect, that being away from Aikido taught me to appreciate it much more than I had, and upon returning from Japan one of the first things I did was drive to Vermont and train at the dojo.

JML: The year that Greg was in Japan was a year when my scholarly focus shifted to other areas in teacher education. Also, due to health reasons, Will was not able to train. He remained part of the dojo and would occasionally come to observe classes. But, as his training time declined so did our collaboration on scholarly work in Aikido. When Greg returned, and we began the next

phase of our collaboration, Will was not part of that project. He was always a part of the dojo community, but he focused his academic attention on neuroscience.

### **Academic Year 2009-2010.**

GS: My senior year, I continued my Aikido training with renewed vigor, and planned to write a senior thesis about Aikido. I had imagined writing about the cultural transmission of Aikido from Japan to the United States and exploring what was lost or gained in that translation. However, neither I nor my professors in the Japanese department could figure out a way to fit this topic into the requirements of a formal senior thesis in Japanese. Eventually, I decided to do a senior project, rather than a thesis, which gave me more freedom in choosing a topic. Aikido, for the first time, became the focus of my intellectual work at college. The first paper Jonathan and I completed with Will, during my sophomore year, was important and interesting, but it never supplanted my coursework.

The more informal structure of a senior project allowed me the intellectual and logistical space to explore an aspect of Aikido without having to worry about the constrictions of a formal thesis. Aikido, for the first time, provided the focus of my academic life. In my paper, I compared the nonviolent philosophies of Ueshiba to those of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Jonathan had recommended the topic to me, and though he had no formal ties to my work at that point, I often consulted with him for help and guidance. Our hope was that my research would lay the groundwork for a future paper we could develop and publish together. This opened up the possibility of the extension of our collaboration beyond my graduation. During my senior year, I felt as if I was getting to explore Aikido in an academic setting mostly on my own. My sophomore writing experiences with Jonathan prepared me for the task, and I produced a paper that I am still proud of. Although Jonathan was only involved in my project as a source of guidance, I felt a bit of a role reversal in that he was assisting me, instead of the other way around. Since Jonathan was not my advisor, I was not writing to please him, but I welcomed his advice as he understood better than anyone what I was trying to accomplish.

As a result of my research on the philosophical foundations of Aikido, my physical practice took on new meaning. Most of my interaction with Jonathan during this period was in the dojo, especially because Jonathan was on sabbatical and usually quite busy. Our training together remained essential for and integral to the continuation of our relationship. In his teaching, Jonathan frequently spoke about the principles and philosophy of Aikido and how we should be trying to embody them in our practice, and this connection between my intellectual work and physical practice was new and mutually reinforcing in a rich and exciting way.

JML: Like many professors on their first sabbatical, I had a long list of projects that I wanted to complete. While I was working on several papers that did not include Aikido, Greg was working on a senior project in which he compared Aikido with other philosophies of nonviolence. This was a topic I wanted to explore and had suggested to him. During the year, Greg and I met several times to discuss his progress. I imagined his paper to be the first draft of something that we would continue to work on after he graduated. Greg presented his paper during the spring semester of his senior year and we were able to ensure that his presentation was a highlight of an intense weekend of Aikido training and formal discussions that involved a return visit from my

own Aikido teacher, Kimberly Richardson. At Greg's graduation, it was clear that we still had work to do.

### **Academic Year 2010-2011.**

During the summer and fall we corresponded and began to imagine how Greg's senior paper would and could be developed. Our first face-to-face meeting after Greg's graduation in May, was in January 2011. The next month, Greg moved back to Middlebury to train at the dojo and our collaboration resumed in earnest. The real challenge, as always, was figuring out what exactly we wanted to say — in this case, about the similarities between the philosophy of Aikido and the philosophy of nonviolence as developed by Gandhi and King. By drawing upon our experience with being uke and nage for each other during training, we were able to listen and respond to one another's ideas without the traditionally constrictive framework of student-professor interactions that can lead professors to listen without a willingness to absorb and students to defer to the professor's authority. This uke-nage listening led to three key decisions that transformed the paper from a broad survey to a more focused analysis of a single historical event.

First, it was Jonathan's conclusion that we could not sufficiently discuss all three people in a single paper. Hence, we decided to focus on King and Ueshiba. We had both developed the idea that Ueshiba's realization of the true meaning and purpose of Aikido was a four-step process that could be used as an example of the manifestation of an ideal Aikido interaction. However, it was Greg who made the critical insight, through his research on the Civil Rights Movement that King's 1963 Birmingham Campaign could be understood as an Aikido technique on a macro scale. This was the essential insight around which we shaped the paper. In other words, what had started as a question by Jonathan eighteen months earlier regarding whether there was something interesting to say about the connections between Gandhi, King and Ueshiba was picked up by Greg and turned into a senior paper, that was then given a limited and more narrowly focused assignment by Jonathan and then given a final and essential focus by Greg. This back and forth in our 18-month collaboration on what is now a formal, academic paper under review by a peer-reviewed journal can be understood as an embodiment of both Aikido and a pedagogy of mutual engagement.

Yet, at the same time, the issue of power was always present in our interactions. Who had it and why? In our collaboration, the question of which one of us should receive lead author was an example of where differences in power were clearly delineated. In the hierarchy of higher education, Jonathan had it and Greg did not. Thus, it gave us a chance to explore the tension.

JML: I thought about the issue of lead author with each publication. For the first conference paper, it was clear that I was the primary instigator and author. By traditional standards, the fact that I gave Greg and Will co-authorship was generous. Yet, their work was really important and their presence inspired me to do the work. Based on the feedback we received, I revised the conference paper and submitted it for publication. Will's research and writing was not a part of the published paper. As a result, Will was not listed as co-author. The paper on King and Ueshiba, currently under review, which Greg and I worked on for many months, became an entirely different paper from Greg's senior paper and it was based on an idea I initially



generated. The paper would not have been completed if I had not taken the initiative to push it further, organize all our meetings, and complete the final edits. Thus, I placed myself in the lead author role.

However, in this paper, about our collaboration, Greg receives first author listing. I am well aware that Greg is truly kind enough and sufficiently egoless not to care. But, it was important to recognize and honor the ongoing development of our work together by giving him the lead author role. The phrase “giving him the lead author role” is used intentionally to recognize that there is a power differential in this process and, like the roles of uke and nage, it takes a conscious effort to listen collaboratively and with a deliberate effort to quiet the ego. Just as my own teacher, Kimberly Richardson, will always be my sensei, so I will always be Greg’s sensei, but that does not mean that teaching only ever flows in one direction.

GS: In fact, the issue of lead authorship had never occurred to me. I was honored to have my name mentioned at all in our first publication, as I had never imagined I would be a published author by my sophomore year of college. When Jonathan and I began to build off the themes of my senior work for our paper currently under review, I felt proud that my research could be an influence, but our collaborative work eventually moved so far away from my original material that it truly became another, separate work entirely. Whereas my senior paper was my first chance to do extensive research on my own, its main purpose, in retrospect, seems to have been to provide a talking point to get us started together on the next project. The paper we eventually came up with required much research and effort from both of us, but could never have happened without Jonathan’s initiative and dedication. The work we did was collaborative, but Jonathan’s experience with publications and knowledge as a professor was essential to my chance to be a part of another publication.

### **Final thoughts: So what?**

The normal structure of undergraduate life for students and professors does not necessarily encourage the level of intellectual collaboration that we have been able to enjoy. Our basic argument and insight is that a shared commitment to the practice of Aikido made this intellectual collaboration possible. It was not simply that we were spending time doing the same thing outside of the classroom — we weren’t playing dodge ball. We are suggesting that the shifting roles that are such a basic part of Aikido practice were extremely important in helping both of us overcome the rigid hierarchy that typifies professor-student relationships in higher education. We believe that a pedagogy of mutual engagement was made more possible by the fact that, in the dojo, we were taking turns attacking, and receiving attacks from, each other. The idea of receiving in Aikido demands that practitioners learn to both challenge, and blend with, one another. The practice of receiving in Aikido fostered our ability to listen to one another as we wrote together.

To be clear, our point is not that Aikido practice necessarily leads to publications, or that Aikido practice in the dojo always leads to harmonious relationships outside the dojo, or that a dojo is better than a classroom for fostering intellectual collaboration. However, we are trying to say that because of the kind of listening that is required in Aikido receiving/practice, an Aikido dojo may be a place where a pedagogy of mutual engagement can be enacted, with marvelous results.

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