

Transforming Traditions

A Martial-Arts-Based Research Approach to Art Education

Dr. Tiina Pusa, university lecturer, *Marja Rastas*, lecturer, *Mikko Sallinen*, doctoral candidate, *Heikka Valja*, doctoral candidate and *Henrika Ylirisku*, doctoral candidate
Aalto University, Finland

Abstract

This article was created through an experimental, collaborative process of five writers sharing and reflecting on their diverse experiences as visual arts educators and Eastern martial arts practitioners. In the article, martial arts are described as practices that merge the embodied and cognitive aspects of knowledge and social interaction and carry the interplay of tradition and the present moment. The article consists of five separate but thematically intertwined parts based on each writer's unique experience as a martial arts practitioner. These personal narratives demonstrate how martial arts communities offer sites for reflecting one's abilities and skills as well as one's socially constructed roles and identities and thus create spaces for potential personal transformation. The notions of learning and teaching in martial arts communities are reflected further in the context of visual arts education. The same ethical ideals that are articulated in martial arts traditions are identified, guiding the writers' art educational thinking and their research process.

Keywords: martial arts, embodied knowledge, transformative practice, learning, co-writing

Bios

Dr. Tiina Pusa works as a university lecturer in the Department of Art at the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Helsinki, Finland. Her tasks include teaching, developing curriculum, and conducting research. Pusa's doctoral thesis (2012) was situated within the discourse of phenomenological-based research in art education. Her present research interests consider art, gender, sports, and urban art.

Marja Rastas works as a lecturer in art pedagogy in the Department of Art at the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Helsinki, Finland. She began her career as an art teacher in liberal adult education and currently teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in art education. Her academic areas of interest are transformative artistic methods and issues of dialogue in art education and teacher development. ▶

Mikko Sallinen works as a lecturer of game design at Helsinki Vocational College. He holds a MA in art education and is currently a doctoral candidate at Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture in Helsinki, Finland. His research interest focuses in professional identity formation and collaborative learning in vocational art and design education.

Heikka Valja is a part-time lecturer and a doctoral candidate at Aalto University School of Art, Design and Architecture in Helsinki, Finland. He teaches a variety of classes, including digital art, game education and online learning. His doctoral research focuses on games and game design in art education.

Henrika Ylirisku is a doctoral student in the Department of Art at Aalto University, in Helsinki, Finland. In her ongoing doctoral research, she is exploring art pedagogies for change in the context of learning for socio-ecological sustainability. Her background is a combination of visual art education (MA), geography and martial arts. Her research interests include eco-critical and posthumanistic philosophies, transformative art pedagogies, embodiment in learning and arts-based research methods.

Introduction

This article opens the early stages of a research process, which started from sharing and reflecting on our experiences as practitioners of Eastern martial arts. Our group of five art educators was joined by the realization that there are strikingly many martial art practitioners working in our academic community in the program of Art Education at Aalto University. The arts we practice (taiji, taidō, jūjutsu, kendō, and jūdō) are heterogeneous, and the lengths of our practice histories range from a few years to 30 years. We also have varying personal interests and perspectives on art education.

As a diverse group, we consider martial arts as practices that merge the embodied and cognitive aspects of knowledge, social interaction and daily life in a way that carries the interplay of tradition and the present moment. We

use ourselves as instruments in the research, which is a unique quality in arts-based research (Kallio-Tavin & Suominen, 2016; Valkeapää, 2012). Our approach to arts-based research is based on the dialogue and reflection between our singular and shared experiences of practicing both martial arts and visual arts. This transdisciplinary arts-based research approach opens a possibility for us to study further the learning processes that relate to embodied knowledge.

The article consists of five separate but thematically intertwined parts based on each writer's unique experience as a martial arts practitioner. In the first three sections, Marja Rastas, Henrika Ylirisku and Mikko Sallinen address the different stages of the learning process, offering three views to a practitioner's relationship to tradition. The following two sections explore the practice of martial arts through specific social and cultural lenses. Heikka Valja studies a match of kendō as play, applying views of ludology as his theoretical framework. Tiina Pusa focuses on the construction of gender roles as they have appeared in her experience as a jūdō practitioner. These texts, accompanied by a visual illustration provided by each writer, can be read as five views on how the reflection of martial art experiences offers us possibilities to rethink learning and teaching in the context of visual arts education.

A Beginner's Experience



Figure 1. How to capture visually the sense of the continuous, flowing movement of the "internal discipline" of taiji? Image by Marja Rastas.

My everyday life has been connected to teaching, learning, and practicing visual art since the late 1980s. That's the field for which I have my concepts, discourses, and manners. With my three years of experience, I am still taking my first steps into the skill and art of the ancient Chinese combat tradition of taiji. Unlike other members of our research group, I'm a beginner with no experience competing or instructing and assessing others' performances.

Recording and listening to my own breathing while doing the Yang-style taiji 24 form exercise takes me to the moment of practice, as it appears to me as a lived experience. I listen to the deep, rhythmical movement of inhaling and exhaling. My anonymous, clumsy body among the other bodies slowly repeats the same movements as they do under the teacher's eyes. Everything is highly controlled. There is no room for experimenting something individual. "Even pace!" says my teacher, who reminds us to breathe. If I arrived with some expectations, it seems it would be necessary to give them up. I don't know what is happening to me or what I am going to learn. I have resisted the idea of having a master-teacher. Now I have a master who expects my absolute obedience yet teaches me to oppose. This is puzzling.

The last three years have taught me that practicing taiji involves adopting the culture and learning one's role in a community. Practicing taiji involves becoming part of something that existed a long time before me. It is the teacher – *Shifu* – who represents the tradition, carrying it in his body. As a beginner, I'm in front of something new and unknown. The ideas of self, learning, understanding, skill, time, age, self-expression, and connection to others belong to my daily pedagogical work as a teacher educator. Now they seem to be slowly turning around and revealing new meanings. During some heuristic moments, I can recognize that my body has understood something far before I'm able to conceptualize it.

From *shu* to *ha*



Figure 2. Responsively following the movements of the opponent is significant in a taidō match. Image by Henrika Ylirisku.

Learning a skill in Japanese martial arts is traditionally described as consisting of three stages: *shu*, *ha*, and *ri* (Chiba, 1989; Klemola, 2004). The previous section discussed the experience of a beginner, *shu*. I will address my journey to the level of the advanced student, *ha*.

I have a history with the Japanese martial art of taidō that has spanned over 20 years. During the first 10 years, the training mostly meant a *project of winning* for me, which Klemola (1989) describes as one of the possible projects of physical exercise. I quickly learned to master the basic techniques. I was devoted and resilient in my practice, but at some point, my motivation started to fade. I was indecisive and afraid of getting injured in competition. I longed for a teacher to help me away from the dead end. I tried once to ask for advice from a Japanese sensei, but he answered only, “You practice taidō, you’ll find out!”

The second stage of learning, *ha*, is translated as follows: to tear up, break, destroy, open (Chiba, 1989). In my taidō path, through a crisis and a period of aimlessness, I grew to take responsibility for my own practice. After realizing that the practice itself was a source of health, play, joy, and pleasure with a sense of embodied vitality, I was released from the fear and insecurity. It was

an experience of living down the need to advance to achieve results. This shift in perspective made me view my taidō practice itself as a goal.

I became attached to training movement forms, *hokeis*. After countless repetitions, I started to recognize that, when I perform the *hokei*, a stage grows from adapting the given series of movements to my personal expression. The *hokei* becomes meditation in movement, a mind and a body moving together. The project of winning turned into a *project of transforming self*. The practice guided me toward an existential lesson: how to act with the world while being also receptive.

At first, I understood teaching taidō as conducting rehearsals for juniors in rank, which is a responsibility of everyone wearing a darker belt. I wished for someone to teach me in taidō rehearsals since I was teaching visual arts to others on a daily basis. However, my perspective slowly changed. The traditional idea of “paying back” what I had been taught to the taidō community started to make sense. I was no longer only teaching physical techniques but also starting to recognize long-term processes in learning and gaining new insights while articulating my embodied experience to others.

Mediating a tradition in a community of practice



Figure 3. The ceremony of transmission still exists in traditional martial arts even when the skills are learned in the long-term daily practice. Image by Mikko Sallinen.

I have been a practitioner of traditional Japanese jūjutsu for almost three decades. My current stage is probably somewhere approaching *ri*, the level

at which one has mastered the skill – which occurs when it has become a second nature and one can naturally create one's own adaptations of the skill, interpret and extend it toward one's own style.

The values of tradition and continuity are very highly appreciated in Japanese arts, both in martial arts and other forms of arts. One of the main purposes for the several hundreds of styles of *budō*, martial arts, still existing in Japan is the transmitting of the tradition to the next generation of practitioners. This transmission is made possible in a social context by the community of practice (Singleton, 1998). Learning is understood as a process of becoming a full member of the community. When entering a tradition, a beginner starts from the outermost area of the community. By presenting a devoted attitude and character, the member is allowed to move deeper into the community and receive the esoteric knowledge of the school. The community is structured hierarchically, and the hierarchy is usually based on the time of being a member of the community and not necessarily the current rank or level of skills. All senior students are responsible for the transmission of the tradition to their juniors in the everyday practice.

The Japanese word for teacher or master, *sensei*, literally means “a person who has lived before.” In other words, the teacher has followed the same path and has a similar and even shared experience with the student. The teacher is *mediating* the tradition rather than *transferring* it to the student. The teacher can show the movement and illustrate a reason for it, but it is the student who needs to find the truth in it through practice. (Martial) arts are living traditions. Each generation of practitioners creates the art again through the practice of it.

In the end, learning relies entirely on the practitioner's dedication to the art. In my experience as an art educator, this also applies to visual art's practice. The role of the teacher is not to “teach” but to enable learning. The learning experience involves realizing the knowledge within oneself: something one already has acquired by bodily practice but has not yet found out from oneself.

The magic circle in competitive martial arts



Figure 4. The competitors and the referees form a magic circle of play during a kendō match.
Image by Heikka Valja.

Competing in a match is one way of practicing and learning martial arts. My martial art, kendō, is a modern version of ancient Japanese sword fighting. I have done competitive kendō for ten years and participated in European and world championships.

I consider playfulness and games as essential elements of the tradition of visual arts and art education. I see a kendō match as an experiential game with many playful elements. From the perspective of constructionist ludology – the field of study with a focus on approaching games in their own contexts (Frasca, 1999; Stenros, 2015) – I see a kendō match as a good example of using the “magic circle of play” (Huizinga, 1938).

The match starts when the competitors enter the arena where the referees are waiting and the magic circle – a “temporary world within the ordinary world” (Huizinga, 1938, p. 10) – emerges. The goal is to strike the opponent in certain armored areas with a specific technique (FIK, 2006). The strike is judged by three referees. Some of the features of a valid point have performative qualities: the competitor needs to show a vigorous spirit when attacking and finalize the strike in a proper manner. Scoring a point is a negotiated result of all of the five actors in the magic circle, and it is strongly experiential and embodied, even aesthetically loaded (Rolling, 2010). The valid point is a complex cultural

structure based on a long tradition, but it is not static; it is ever-changing in the community of kendō practitioners.

Learning in the magic circle of a kendō match appears as an intensive, playful, communicative, and embodied event, but the learner is also conscious of the tradition of the discipline and the community. In my art class, I try to introduce some of the same features. When striving for artistic goals, an image-maker needs to overcome physical, social, and cultural challenges. Physical challenges can rise from the skills acquired and the artistic media chosen, social challenges can arise from the expectations of an audience or a teacher and cultural challenges can arise from art history and other conventions of visual cultures. Working in this context creates a magic circle of art making: a play in which the image-maker needs to navigate in a creative, intuitive, and playful manner.

Two spirits through a combat zone

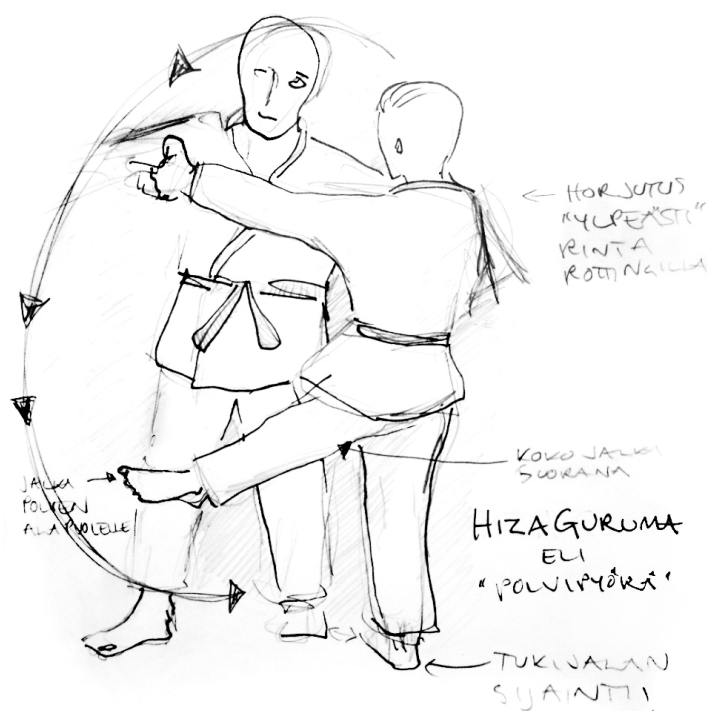


Figure 5. Visual notes from a jūdō learning diary on embodied knowledge and practicing. Image by Tiina Pusa.

I can name the moment when I chose my gender role. During the summer before going to the seventh grade, I decided: “Ok, I won’t fight anymore; I won’t

express my power. I'll be *like a girl*." *Like a girl* was the best role available in the social menu I found in the 1980s in a Southern Finland suburban community.

More than 20 years later, I went to a jūdō practice for the very first time. I immediately found the enjoyable feeling of not being physically underestimated. Soon I found myself committed to the group and practicing. Although martial arts are usually practiced in mixed groups, the group I joined was for girls and women only. The idea behind this specific group was to enable, for example, girls and women with various cultural backgrounds to join a jūdō club.

Later on, I also practiced jūdō in mixed groups. I agree with Channon's (2014) recommendations that it is important to have both female and male opponents when practicing martial arts and that clubs should have an instructor of each gender. However, to be a good martial artist is neither a question of gender nor a question of the male–female binary (King, 2008). *Both* genders and *all* of the genders are different gender constructions. Among the martial arts community, I have released my previous limited gender role. To respect other practitioners and the place of practice, a practitioner of jūdō is expected to practice with pure attitude as well as a pure, clean body. No makeup or hair chemicals are allowed. Purity makes sense, also, for undoing gender roles. A gender role is not just a question of one's outfit but also a state of mind. It's no longer contradicting for me to find myself as a combating warrior in jūdō and as a caring mother at home. Both ways of being are a part of me. I found myself as a person with *two spirits*. The two spirits-concept, adopted from Native Americans and applied to gender research (Medicine, 2002), ignores the binary gender frame and thus makes room for thinking, behaving and being in multiple ways.

I claim that the martial arts community has given me a forum to face diversity in gender. Practicing and teaching jūdō gives me a hint as to how to create and enable an atmosphere for two spirits in educational contexts.

Conclusions

Exploring our varying experiences as martial arts practitioners has turned our attention to the significance of communities and traditions in a learning process. The previous personal narratives – created through a communal, reflective dialogue – introduce different variations concerning the meaning of the community for an individual practitioner. The narratives demonstrate

how martial arts communities can create sites for reflecting one's abilities and skills, one's relation to others and one's socially constructed roles and identities. The title of this text, *Transforming Traditions*, includes a double meaning. On the one hand, martial arts traditions offer potential sites for personal transformation. On the other hand, it is the community that keeps the tradition alive. As living traditions, martial arts are in a constant state of transformation. Each member of the community brings a small part of one's own self into this transformation.

In the process of learning in martial arts, adopting the skills and forms of a specific tradition through a long-term disciplined exercise is considered an essential base for further learning. In the context of visual arts education, this kind of approach to learning might be interpreted as a meaningless relic of the hierarchical pedagogies of the past with no relevance in contemporary societies. However, in the context of Eastern martial arts, learning through imitation and repetition must be understood not only as the bare training of technical performance but also as a continuous negotiation of one's position in a community and one's relation to tradition. Besides the external appearances of martial arts, the philosophical tradition emphasizing the inseparability of the body and mind (Klemola, 2004; Varto, 2011; Yuasa, 1993) is transmitted through the community. The practitioner encounters this idea through the communal practice itself, even though the idea wouldn't be explicitly articulated. These aspects are present in our personal narratives, each writer's interpretation depending on his or her personal experiences and academic interests.

Our emerging research process started by asking whether our experiences among martial arts had evoked any common ideas concerning visual arts education. It continued through our interpretation of our experiences through shifting the perspectives between these two fields of practice. Cowriting as an experimental research method challenged each of us to verbalize our tacit bodily knowledges on martial arts and to formulate their connections to our pedagogical thinking as visual arts educators. The diversity of our experiences brought fruitful friction to the writing process. We have tested, tasted, dared, and negotiated each other's ideas, conceptions and interpretations with respectful, trustful and persistent attitudes. As a result of this research process, we have been able to identify similar ethical ideals articulated both in our martial arts experiences and in our art educational thinking. This

encourages us to continue our explorations on transformative traditions to develop meaningful pedagogical practices in the context of contemporary visual arts education.

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