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No-Contact Teaching

Like a Conversation

By Andrew Hudson

I stand and let my shoulders relax. My worries about jobs and internships and grades and friends and family and the whole of the planet—I let them relax too, and quiet to a murmur, and to silence. My gaze softens and steadies on the the wall behind Alex, and I wait. When the instruction comes I bow to my friend, and we both step back into a fighting stance, arms up, eyes darting, ready to spar. I am Alex's senior in the organization by a few months, so I let him attack first. His sidekick comes in strong, but I shuffle backward and sweep his leg away with my forearm. Then I hear a soft *fwip* as the white fabric of my pant legs flaps against my skin. I am moving. Before I even think about it, I am moving, counterattacking. The sidekick is a complicated maneuver, hips twisting, back heel turning. But after throwing thousands of kicks over three years, it is instinctive, all chiseled into my muscle memory as a precise but ephemeral act. My kick comes up and out, and I stop it just shy of Alex's loose white t-shirt, an inch and a half from his ribs.

We practice no-contact sparring. We can touch and even be forceful with our defensive blocks, but our kicks and strikes should never hit. Freestyle sparring looks like a flurry of clashing limbs, but there is something rhythmic about it. As useful as speed and strength are in the martial arts, a "freestyle" requires more: timing, control, body language. In many important ways, no-contact sparring is less like physical combat and more like a conversation. The goal is not

to defeat an enemy, but to make the freestyle flow so that each practitioner may express himself fully. This can happen only by practicing no-contact, as only then can martial artists kick and punch with full force without injuring or even killing their partner. For this reason no-contact has become an essential part of my Tae Kwon Do club's philosophy of teaching, and in this we are unusual. But in my seven years of martial arts practice, only in this organization have I seen such ferocity and such goodwill displayed so close together.

With graduation in May creeping closer, I've been thinking about becoming a teacher, and I have wondered if I could apply the no-contact philosophy to the classroom. To some extent, I have seen this done already. My instructor, Pat, spends his afternoons teaching Tae Kwon Do to children as young as four or five. When working with kids, Pat extends the no-contact rule beyond just kicking and punching to harming others with words, gestures or invasions of personal space. Pat believes that elements of no-contact philosophy can be used to teach any martial art, even styles like judo or jujitsu, which involve mostly grabs and grappling. Could I take that philosophy into an academic classroom and find a way to make it flow, to have every student intellectually fully express him- or herself?

The key to accomplishing this, I suspect, is to treat more areas of life not as competition or confrontation or even cooperation, but as conversation. The classroom, being a place where discussion and expression



should be encouraged, already has a leg up in this respect. In the years that I have spent in the classroom on the student side of the desk or lectern, however, I have become convinced that there is still more to be done, and not just by teachers but by students as well. Looking back over my college career, I can recall too many occasions in which I treated academics as a task, rather than an opportunity for learning and self-expression. I stressed and complained in ways that I would never think of doing during a Tae Kwon Do practice. I did not stand and let my worries relax into silence. Like a sidekick, learning is a complicated maneuver, and teaching, like teaching a beginner to sidekick, is even more complicated. I'm still working out the details, but I hope if I am ever a teacher that I will teach no-contact, that I will teach like a conversation. ■

Andrew Hudson writes for the Observer, the student paper for the Fordham University Lincoln Center campus.