

# Learning the hard way – Reflections on the translation of insights from the pedagogy of martial arts to social science

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I elaborate and reflect shortly on the particularities of martial arts pedagogy, and the lessons we might bring over to teachings in social science. This idea stems from the meeting between my own experiences with practicing the martial arts of Taekwon-Do and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu on the one hand, and my role as a university teacher on the other. The idea is developed further in an interplay between the initial idea, the literature on the pedagogies of martial arts, student perspectives, and perspectives from colleagues.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I work as an associate professor of political science, and senior researcher. Obviously though, my work is both to acquire and develop theoretical knowledge myself, and to contribute to the development of academic knowledge and skills among students. The pedagogic aspects of my profession have not always been my main interest though. I have been more interested in the content of my discipline than how to teach it. However, some years ago, I started to reflect more on the way I learned and acquired knowledge myself, and on the pedagogic practices I used in my teaching of others. These new reflections didn't start in academia though. It started on the mats. In martial arts.

This paper is a report on a project developed as a part of “NTNUs program for pedagogical basis competence” for teaching/academic staff (Pilot spring 2019). My project was to develop the idea to *elaborate and reflect on the particularities of martial arts pedagogy, and the lessons we might bring over to the teaching of social science.* This idea stems from reflections I have made during my own experiences with practicing the martial arts of Taekwon-Do and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

Martial arts and the academic disciplines of social science are very different social activities. Yet, there may be room for cross-learning. Others have also experienced that fruitful reflections may be made in the interface between the two worlds. Noy (2015), for instance, both a social science professor and an Aikido practitioner, put it this way:

*Teaching qualitative research methods on the one hand, and Martial Arts, on the other, seem to have only little in common: one is academic, and one is not; one is essentially somatic and kinesthetic, and the one is not. Yet during two decades of teaching and practicing both I repeatedly noticed a fruitful interaction between these ‘arts’, which I experienced as exciting embodied insights that shed light on both spheres. (Noy 2015)*

Another figure with an in-depth understanding of both the pedagogy of martial arts and university teaching is John Danaher. He is arguably one of the most influential instructors in contemporary martial arts as Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). Before he devoted his professional life to learning and teaching BJJ, he earned a master in philosophy, and started on a PhD in epistemology at Columbia University. It is therefore not without merit when he points out that:

*Learning, no matter what area you are learning in has similar aspects to it, and probably, the quintessential example of professional learning in the western world – or the world in general – comes from university systems. These people have been teaching and relaying information to young minds in generations and they are damn good at it. And there are certain elements which you pick up from the formal university education which make you a good learner across the board, and jiu jitsu is no exception to that... (Danaher 2015)*

As teaching martial arts may benefit from an understanding of the learning philosophies of universities, there might also be lessons to be learned in universities from martial arts (see also Stephens and Delamont 2009). And this is what I want to reflect upon in this paper. The aim of the project – and the paper – is therefore to elaborate and reflect on the lessons we might bring over from the pedagogy of martial arts to the pedagogy of social science.

The report presents an idea and the early phases of its development, with the logic presented in figure 1 as a guideline. Accordingly, inputs to the reflections comes from 1) theory and pedagogic literature on student active learning, inductive learning and other perspectives, as well as literature on the pedagogic practices of martial arts in general, and Taekwon-Do (TKD) and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) in particular; 2) my own experiences with, and thoughts on, the pedagogy of martial arts; 3) inputs and reflections from colleagues. All these inputs will be seen with 4) the student perspective in mind. Before I turn to concepts and ideas stemming from these perspectives, I will shortly present the martial arts of Taekwon-Do and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

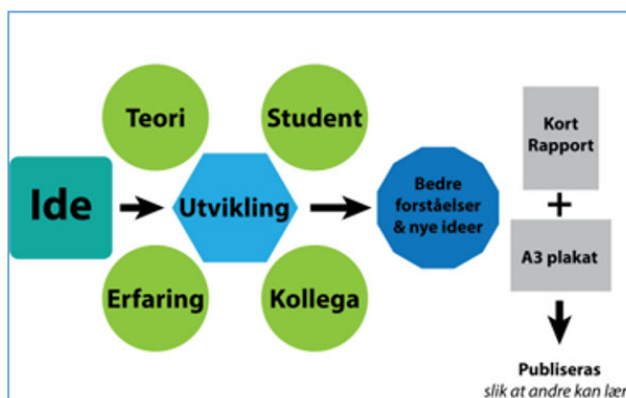


Fig. 1. Model of project work

## 2. TWO MARTIAL ARTS

This paper focus on the pedagogical practices in Taekwon-Do and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. There are some key differences between the two, both in terms of practices and pedagogic traditions. Taekwon-do (TKD) is a Korean martial art focusing mainly on striking and kicking techniques. Although politicized and contested (Park and Kim 2016, Forrest and Forrest-Blincoe 2018) it seems clear that TKDs origin to a large degree is a particular style of Japanese karate - Funakoshi Gichin's Shotokan karate. Several of the early developers of TKD had been students under Funakoshi (Moenig, Cho et al. 2014). Taekwon-Do is a martial art with a strong emphasis on pedagogy (Johnson 2017), which is also shown in the role the TKD mythology puts on the teacher in Koreas nation building process. However, my focus on TKD pedagogy will be on the practices and norms developed in the Norwegian TKD association (<http://www.ntkd.no/>).

BJJ is a martial art that developed from the form of Japanese judo that was brought to Brazil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cairus 2011). BJJ – in contrast to TKD – is a grappling martial art. Striking and kicking is not allowed. Thus, it has been labelled ‘the gentle art’. It can be described in many ways. It has similarities with both judo and wrestling, but it is different in that each match stops only when one of the combatants give up (submit) due to e.g. a joint lock – that threaten to brake a joint – or become unconscious – due to restriction of the blood stream to the brain (a “choke”). However, according to John Danaher, “The essential character of jiu-jitsu is the science and art of control that leads to submission.”<sup>1</sup> As such, it may also be described as “problem solving under stress”.<sup>2</sup> BJJ has experienced a substantial spread across the word since the 1990s. There are less of a standardized mode of working and thinking in the word of BJJ, so here I will build on the way things look from my association – Team Trondheim BJJ (<http://trondheim-bjj.no/>).

## 3. FOUR PERSPECTIVES

The starting point of this project is the above presented idea. The model for the project work (figure 1) prescribes that four types of perspectives should be taken into consideration when elaborating on the idea: The authors own experiences; relevant theory and literature; inputs and perspectives from colleagues; and student perspectives.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPyp7uVmiA>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w4wrindR7Q> (0,15 sek),

### 3.1. Student perspective

It has not been my purpose to involve the students in the work with the paper. Yet the whole idea of the paper is to reflect on how the insights embedded in martial arts practices and learning may be fruitful for students in learning social sciences. The student perspective will therefore be the core underlying theme throughout the project.

### 3.2. Colleague perspective

During the last workshop of the introduction part of the program, all participants presented a poster with ideas for their project. I presented my poster and received positive feedback and several useful ideas. Figure 2 shows a picture of the poster with added remarks based on ideas and inputs I got during the workshop. Further reflections on these inputs are included below, both in this section and the sections describing own experiences and theoretical considerations.

i) A fellow participant in the program, teaching medicine and anatomy, suggested to include the concept of ‘formation’ (danning). He held that this is an under emphasized element in higher education, at the same time as he saw this as a central part of martial arts training – especially for kids. This was a very useful comment and it resonates well with my approach as well as basic ideas in martial arts. In martial arts, the concept of ‘Do’, which can be translated to ‘way’ represent some of the same insights. The Norwegian word for supervision ‘veiledning’ reflect the need to help students find *the way*. Thus, the concept of formation – or Do – may be an interesting route ahead(!)

ii) Another idea that came from the discussions with my colleagues was to emphasize the differences between the martial arts I have chosen. Where TKD is more rigid and traditional, and focused on a stable set of frames around the learning process, the BJJ practices is more lively and organic in terms of learning environment. The importance of frames and structure vs room for creativity for the creation of a good learning environment may be a part of further elaborations on the subject.

iii) For many, a typical aspect of martial arts is the emphasize on respect, and the hierarchical environment. The Confucian heritage of many martial arts is a part of this picture. In TKD this is particularly visible. Before every class, students have to line up, bow to the instructor etc. This can be contrasted to the more unformal, but still quite hierarchical structure within BJJ. Besides, respect is not a one-way concept. It is expected that students pay respect to their instructors, but my experience has been that it all starts the other way around. The instructor/teacher should respect their students and the starting point they have. Respect means etymologically ‘seeing back’. As a teacher, I must have respect for my students—I must see them and recognize them. This also include professionalism and involves simple things like being prepared,

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“Learning, no matter what area you are learning in has similar aspects to it, and probably, the quintessential example of professional learning in the western world – or the world in general – comes from university systems. These people have been teaching and mixing information to young minds in generations and they are damn good at it. And there are certain elements which you pick up from the formal university education which make you a good learner across the board, and Jiu-Jitsu is no exception to that” (Danaher 2013).

**Purpose/Idea**  
 In this paper I will elaborate and reflect on the particularities of martial arts pedagogy, and the lessons we might bring over to the teaching of social science. The basis for this is literature on pedagogic practices in general and in the martial arts of TKD and BJJ. I will also use my own experiences with, and thoughts on, the pedagogy of martial arts.

**Theory - aspects of a pedagogy of martial arts:**  
 Inductive learning – Problem based approach  
 Developing tacit knowledge – embodiment  
 Sense of community – learning together  
 Hard work, long term perspective  
 Progression in terms of complexity  
 Inher motivation + Grading, tests, ranks  
 Variation – activity  
 Active use of internet (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram etc.)

**Relevant experience**  
 Associate professor in Political science,  
 BJJ Taekwon-Do black belt, 3rd dan, Certified instructor  
 Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu blue belt

**Selected literature**  
 W. J. (2013). “General reflections about the philosophy of martial arts.” *Journal of Martial Arts Research* 1(3): 1-6.  
 W. J. and J. Lee-Baron (2014). “Philosophies of martial arts and their pedagogical consequences.” *Journal of Martial Arts Research* 1(4): 11-19.  
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 Light, R. L. (2014). “Martial and learning in and beyond Judo.” *Journal of Martial Arts Research* 1(4): 42-48.  
 Vik, J. C. (2015). “An embodied contribution to the teaching of qualitative inquiry.” *Qualitative Research* 15(1): 4-21.  
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Fig.2 Poster with input

watching the time, doing your best even when you don't have your best day. If I respect my students, chances are they will return my respect.

iv) The social element is important and during discussions with the colleagues, it became even more obvious that the social aspects of martial arts, and the sense of community, should be elaborated further. How to involve students in research and teaching is therefore imperative and something I will return to below.

### 3.3. Own experiences

In 2010, approximately 10 years ago, I started learning martial arts. At first, I started with ITF Taekwon-Do.<sup>3</sup> I got my black belt in TKD in 2014, and my 2<sup>nd</sup> degree (dan) black belt in 2016. Since then I gradually shifted towards training BJJ, and this has been my martial art the last four and a half years. Doing the martial arts of TKD and BJJ, I have had a series of very good instructors and I have experienced pedagogic practices associated with these two rather different styles of martial arts. These experiences sparked an interest in the type of deep learning that takes place during the process of practicing martial arts – the pedagogy of martial arts. Some of the lessons and experiences I have had have already influenced my own pedagogic position and practices, but I think there might be more to gain.

However, I need to make a few reservations: Even though I am a devoted martial arts person, I am not a martial art expert, and although I am an associate professor, I am not an expert in pedagogy. I am mediocre of both. Therefore, there are plenty of room for doing mistakes. On a related issue, Cynarski and Lee-Barron (2014:13) pointed out that “Martial arts experts who do not possess any philosophical knowledge usually treat the underpinning philosophy of their martial arts very superficially.” Taking their warning seriously, it is necessary to point out that this paper is a personal reflection and should be seen as such. Yet, a pedagogic point of relevance here is that being mediocre, or even being really bad at something, is not wrong. Mastery of any skill is relative. No one knows it all. There are always more to learn. In BJJ it typically takes around 10 years of very diligent work and training to get a black belt. Still, a proverb in the BJJ community is that the definition of a black belt is “a white belt that never quit”, indicating that persistency and endurance is the key to mastery, not some inherent skillset or athleticism. Thus, mediocracy is a phase with no definite end. We should embrace it.

Proverbs and sayings are important pedagogical elements in the BJJ community. They are used to transfer pieces of knowledge. Some of them address the learning process itself. The saying; “you either win or you learn”, also indicate that not doing so well, experiencing the numerous failures a novice do on the mats trying to defeat ones partners, constitute vital learning points. A pedagogical point is that we as teachers must see, recognize and support the failing students just as much as the students that get good grades on a regular basis.

### 3.4. Reflections and connections to the literature

Martial arts have developed over time and they are practiced in various cultures around the globe. Thus, it is difficult to identify a general martial arts philosophy (Cynarski 2013) or pedagogy. Even though we may not find a set of practices and ideas shared by all martial arts, it may be possible to identify elements that make up some kind of family resemblance (Wittgenstein 2010), and some of these may shed light on the pedagogic practices of social science education.

Most obviously, martial arts require the development of skills. Martial arts training relates heavily on repetitive training. The same movements, and drills are done over and over again. A saying is that you should train till your head forget and your body remembers. Learning is sometimes about automatization and embodiment of knowledge. This is not fundamentally different in academic and in physical learning. Trninic (2018) for instance, argues that mathematics should be thought like swimming.

A core element in martial arts is the concept of mushin. Light (Light 2014) describe the search for mushin as a central element of eastern martial arts. Mushin is a *state of mind* were the body and mind dualism is transcended, and it is “a key cultural concept in the Japanese martial arts with traditional regimes of training

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<sup>3</sup> Taekwon-Do is, as many martial arts, split in several styles and organizations. The two main types of TKDE is 1) World Taekwondo Federation (WTF), which have a very heavy emphasis on kicking, and 2) International Taekwon-Do federation (ITF) Taekwon-Do which emphasis both kicking and striking techniques and is somewhat closer to its karate roots.

aimed at having the budoka (martial artist) achieve mind-body unity in action.” (Light 2014: 44). This is a state of mind where the action becomes pure and efficient and is a core point in the pedagogy of martial arts – at least of an eastern origin (Chinese, Okinawan, Japanese, Korean) (see e.g. Graham 2012). However, the concept of flow, associated with the psychologist Csikszentmihályi (2014), is closely related to *mushin*. Flow is a state of mind one is able to reach when the student – or researcher – is working with an issue that is not too easy – then it becomes boring – and not too difficult – then it becomes frustrating. Flow is a deeply satisfying feeling in itself, but also has pedagogical implications. Reflections on how to allow for flow in the teaching processes of the social sciences should maybe be given some extra consideration.

Another related point here is the step-by-step approach most martial arts have to learning (Cahill and Bloch-Schulman 2012). This is an approach that is embedded in the simple philosophy of the belt systems that came in to many Japanese based martial arts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Cairns 2011). The belt systems themselves are motivational tools, but also symbols of how far the student has reached on the step-wise learning of skills and understanding. The system also contributes to a gradual exposure to challenges. In the TKD learning curriculum there are very specific techniques and concepts to be learned on each belt grade that the student goes through. The knowledge and skills required are developed step by step. The practitioner is not meant to be exposed to challenges above his/her belt level. This is not the case in most BJJ communities. In BJJ, the beginner are typically learned a few basics and fundamentals within an introductory course, and thereafter he/she trains with the rest, uses time to learn more – often in a somewhat random sequence. Over time s/he learns to execute things better and more efficiently. The idea of teaching the insights, theories, concepts, and methods of social science in terms of basics, fundamentals, and advanced has long been practiced in universities, but I think explicit considerations along these lines still may be useful.

Studying and practicing martial arts is the learning of a discipline, of techniques, of ways of doing things, of patterns of motions, of physical abilities, of embodiment of skills (Samudra 2008), but it is also the learning of norms, of codes, of ways of being on the mat and outside. The martial arts include an element of becoming - becoming a martial artist. This is typically also seen as the development of a strong character. We may say that the same goes for social science education. University education and the learning of an academic discipline, as e.g. political science, is of course the learning of a discipline, of facts, of theories, of models and methods, but it is also the acquisition of skills: skills in reasoning, skills in writing, skills in discussions, skills in looking behind a political argument. And finally, studying political science means studying to become something – becoming a political scientist. Which includes having internalized some basic ideas of responsibility and ethical awareness. In both martial arts and social science, education and learning is about transforming from one state of being to another state of being – of becoming (*danning/bildung/formation*). We may speak of formation (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011, Green 2011), or maybe *habitus* (García and Spencer 2012). Imperative for this process is the building of a sense of belonging – of community. I think that in the social science parts of the university systems more can be done in this respect.

Yet, another key point in the martial art pedagogy is the embracement of the process, and of the endless path it is to become a martial artist. We can use the words of the famous martial artist Bruce Lee, who is ascribed the following quote: “Learning is definitely not mere imitation, nor is it the ability to accumulate and regurgitate fixed knowledge, learning is a constant process of discovery, a process without an end” (Bruce Lee, undated).

Finally, the use of internet in dissemination of BJJ knowledge warrants a special comment. Over the years, the spread of instructional videos on diverse social media channels (Youtube, Facebook, Instagram and more) has exploded. The content may range from short instructional videos of isolated techniques to series of instructional presenting series of techniques. Some of them focus on techniques, other on concepts. Some are commercial while others are free of charge. This is of course valuable resources for students of BJJ. More fundamentally however, this has contributed to a gradual transformation of BJJ. Concepts and techniques from wrestling, judo, sambo etc. are presented for a global BJJ audience that take them into use. The ones that work remain and become a part of the BJJ repertoire of techniques. Some of them may be seen as good additions to the practice, while others have changed the game in more fundamental ways (e.g. the introduction of leglocks). I believe that the use of youtube, tedtalks and other internet resources has the potential to change also the way we see and teach social science. How to best incorporate these types of

resources in the social science courses is still open. I do believe though that we have to find ways to facilitate better the use of internet resources in our teaching also in the social sciences. Variation is key to development.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND WAYS AHEAD

In this paper I have reported on both the process and the content of a developing idea related to cross-learning between pedagogies of martial arts and social science. For me, elaborating and making the reflections explicit has been a goal in itself. The reflections suggest that there are merits in cross-learning between the two domains. Yet, finding out, if, how and when these ideas should be incorporated in my own teaching activities is a next step. Needless to say, this is an endeavor that does not end with this paper.

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