

Leadership Development Through Experiential Learning: The Impact on Student Retention

Introduction

“Experiential” is one word you probably don’t encounter or use every day, but your actions and those of your students demonstrate what that word means perfectly. For experiential simply means that one learns through the action of experience, as compared to a book or an academic classroom.

Few learning experiences are as “experiential” as martial arts. The more reality-based, self-defense situations you can simulate for your students in the classroom, the more likely they will use those techniques, if necessary, and use them effectively. Teaching anti-abduction or bully-avoidance methods in a role-playing scenario is typically more effective than lecturing to students, although subjects such as anti-abduction require some listening, reading and observing by your students to understand those subjects fully.

Experiential learning can be expressed graphically with the Triangle of Experience and Learning. It illustrates how people retain information. Research reveals that we retain more information by what we do as opposed to what we read, hear or observe. As the Triangle shows, an action-learning approach that simulates real experiences results in as much as 90% retention of learning.

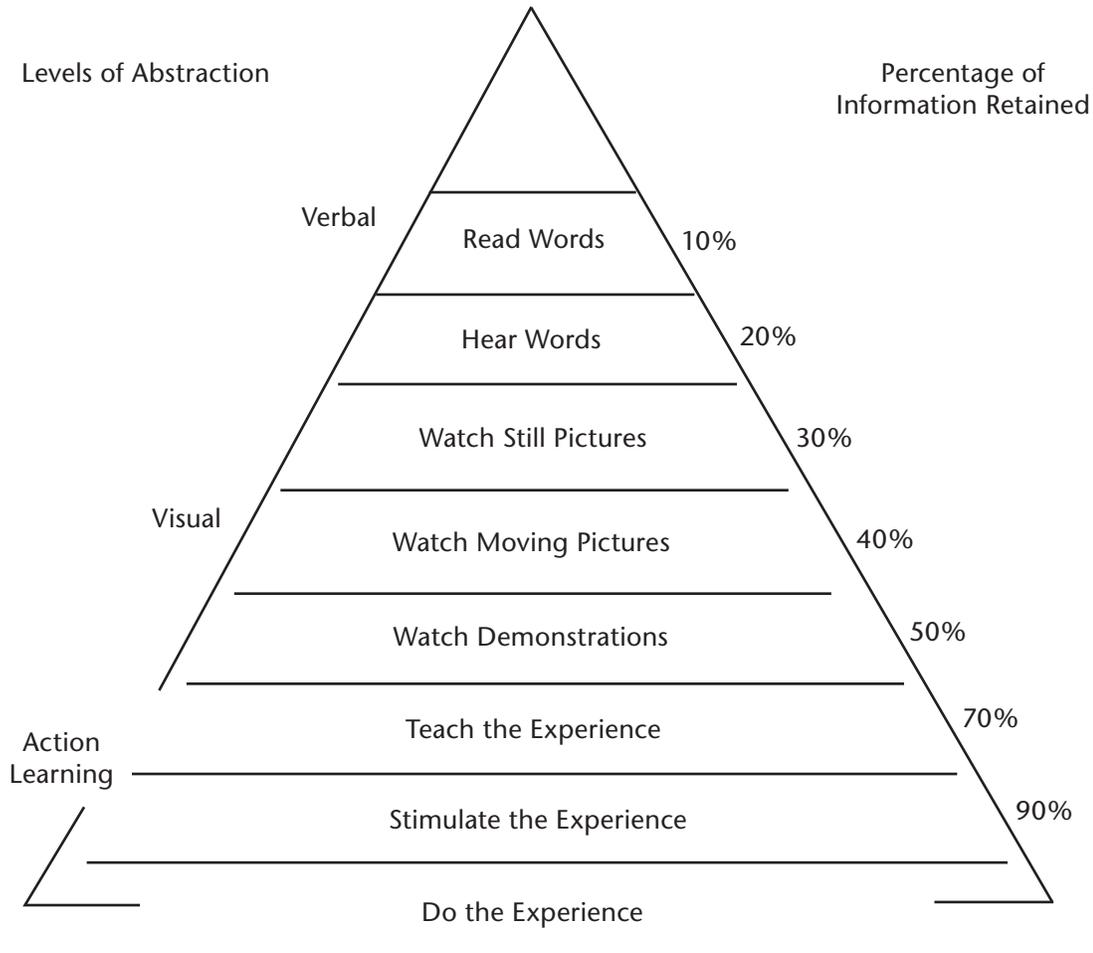
Although there are many occasions when your students will learn some martial arts topics through your verbal instruction (Hear Words), you want to keep as much of the learning experience for your students at the base of the Triangle. Fortunately, that is where most martial arts is taught and learned.

The equivalent of “Do the Experience” in martial arts would be actually defending yourself during an attack. All instructors would prefer that students not have that experience, but because most of martial arts training is Action Learning, you and your students will be more confident that they could defend themselves, if necessary.

To learn many subjects, such as history, requires more Verbal and Visual than Action Learning since it is impossible for anyone to “experience” the American Civil War, for example. There are, however, groups or clubs one can join to participate in simulations of Civil War battles, but those learning opportunities are limited.

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The Triangle of Experience and Learning



The primary benefit of the experiential learning experience for you, as a school owner, is that it often becomes a more important reason why students continue martial arts (which is retention), instead of the original reasons they enrolled.

Common reasons why people join a martial arts class are exercise, weight loss, self-defense and greater confidence. The evidence suggests, however, that the relationships they develop at your school are why they continue to train. That provides every school owner with an opportunity to increase retention.

Develop and nurture an atmosphere in your school that promotes relationships, a shared vision and

mutual support and respect, and your students will be attracted to and thrive within that environment. In fact, in many cases, they will find the experience of your teaching and your classroom environment one of the best in their entire lives, and one they need to feel whole and to accomplish their goals successfully.

How To Promote Relationships In Your School

Every group or organization of people (which we assume has some common or shared goals) requires two basic characteristics or ingredients to develop positive relationships, which leads to an optimal

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experiential learning experience, which results in goals being accomplished. Those characteristics are trust and leadership.

Once again, the martial arts would seem to lead the way, since very little can occur in a martial arts classroom, and be accomplished, without trust and leadership. Most martial arts classes reach the level of trust and leadership found on an athletic team, and some even start to emulate the trust one soldier must have in another during a combat situation.

1. Trust

It is virtually an absolute: When a martial arts school owner is able to retain a high percentage of students, then his school and training must be based on an equally high level of trust. How could a student possibly learn martial arts techniques without a great amount of trust for his or her instructor? Students learn to trust themselves to perform moves and actions that they may not have thought they could do by first trusting you, the instructor, that what you are asking them to do is correct and doable. In a sense, they transfer their trust in you to a trust in themselves—and that is a lesson in building confidence.

Trust then extends to the group of students, instead of each learning to trust the others: protecting each other from injury during sparring, knowing how to throw punches and kicks during drills that don't actually hit another student, supporting each other during competitions and testing, etc.

Trust within the group is an old human trait that has had much to do with the survival of the human species for hundreds of thousands of years; and the relationships that develop from that mutual trust provide individuals with the opportunities to reach their goals—and not by themselves, but with the help of the entire group (or classroom).

When a student in your school experiences that level of trust, receives that kind of support, develops relationships that could last a lifetime and enjoys the camaraderie such relationships create, then he recognizes your martial arts class as a place he wants to be, and with the other students

and the instructor. Why would he want to be anywhere else? Now, that's retention!

An Exercise in Trust

Developing instructional trust between you and your students is a function of your teaching style and curriculum; however, developing trust between the students in your class requires a more proactive approach, almost lessons in trust building as a character trait.

Trust between students starts with the simple opportunity to know each other better as individuals. Set aside time in your classes, especially a class of new students, for each student to introduce himself to the class. Encourage students to share their thoughts about their beliefs, values, talents, strengths, weaknesses, expectations, goals and fears. Do this regularly, even with your most advanced students. There is always more a person can reveal about himself that will strengthen trust and the group dynamic.

As they begin to reveal more about themselves, and feel more confident so doing, each will be able to recognize more of the whole person, hiding within just another student in a gi. People can't trust those they don't know. This translates into understanding each other's learning styles and student personalities, enabling your students to work and train together effectively.

2. Leadership

Leadership is the other primary characteristic that is required for relationship building. The leadership lessons begin with you and the other instructors. It is one of the greatest concepts to teach by example. If you are a positive, supportive leader, then many students naturally begin to emulate your example; others may need structured leadership lessons or role-playing to understand what it means to be a leader.

Encouraging and developing leadership behaviors in your students is the surest way to develop the qualities students need to reach their goals. Students must feel invested in and have a sense of ownership of their training to maximize their potential. Building a sense of leadership—an understanding that each student impacts the

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whole school and every student—connects your students to the school, the instructors and other students.

This is leadership as responsibility. An instructor doesn't just stand in front of the class and teach, and students don't just learn. All are responsible for all. Your teaching abilities directly affect students' opportunities to excel and succeed, and each student is responsible for more than his or her learning goals; they are also responsible for the learning and success of the other students—and even responsible for your success as an instructor. This is the kind of leadership that often occurs one-on-one, where one student does not dominate as a classic leader, but both students take responsibility for being a leadership model for the other.

This is also leadership as a relationship-building tool. As students learn how to lead and to be responsible for each other's success, strong relationships are established that, once again, compel students to want to be in your class; and, once again, that's retention.

There are many models and methods to improve your leadership skills as well as those of your students. The following five-step approach can be easily adapted to the martial arts school and be developed into classroom lessons.

1) Developing common goals.

A team is defined by its common goals. To be committed and perform at the highest level, the individual members of a team must be focused on common goals. Otherwise, individuals will work to cross-purposes and be counterproductive.

During a group discussion, ask your students to name some common goals of their class. Have them vote for the three that most of them share. Create a poster with those common goals, display it in the classroom and refer to it often. During future group discussion, ask each student for an example of how he has helped the group worked toward their common goals.

2) Building relationships.

Much of this report has presented ideas for building stronger relationships in your classes,

which should result in better retention; however, you can make the relationships even stronger (and your retention) if you promote those relationships beyond the classroom.

Involve each classroom of students in activities and events outside the school that provide even more opportunities to strengthen personal relationships between students that will also benefit the classroom environment.

Assign each class a community project. Invite students in a class and their families to a regular picnic or other family-oriented event that builds relationships between students' families.

3) Open communication.

Students process information and learn in a variety of different ways. An effective leader understands this and helps members of the group to learn each other's language.

During group discussions, note how students express themselves. Are some more verbal, while others are more physically expressive? Do some use different words to define the same concepts and ideas? When you recognize these differences, share them with the other students. Discuss those differences, so there are fewer misunderstandings, and students learn that diversity is strength.

Do a similar exercise, based on how your students learn. Note those that tend to understand with a single verbal command compared to those who require a physical demonstration. Discuss those differences, also, and how one can help the other to learn easier and more successfully.

These kinds of open-communication exercises and discussions will help to "open" your students' eyes and minds to what they didn't know about their fellow students, and why it is so important to know each other better.

4) Individual competencies.

Certain basic skills are necessary to be an effective leader. These include, but are not limited to, self-knowledge, awareness of others, integrity and respect.

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Try this self-knowledge exercise. Ask one student to express in a short phrase his “knowledge of himself.” In other words, how does the student see himself? Write that on a board. Ask each of the other students for a short phrase that expresses their knowledge of the first student. Discuss the differences and explain that our self-knowledge is often wrong or limited, and we can learn much about ourselves through our relationships with others.

You can teach awareness of others with a simple observation game. Ask one student to stand in front of the class for 10 seconds. That student then leaves the room. Ask each of the other students a question, such as “What color is Tommy’s hair?” “What color are his eyes?” “What is Tommy’s favorite drill?” “What are Tommy’s goals?” etc. You want to test both your students’ powers of observation as well as how well they know Tommy as a person. Use this simple game to teach how important it is to know the whole person.

5) Team competencies.

To be a more effective leader, you must understand group dynamics, decision-making and problem-solving skills, and conflict management.

Develop group tasks or projects that you assign a class of students without much input from you. Provide them with only the briefest description of a team goal they must work together to achieve. This could be in the classroom or outside the school. You want them to be challenged to organize themselves as a team; select leaders, if necessary; make decisions and take actions independent of you or other adults, and use their individual strengths effectively and efficiently to succeed.

Building a strong and thriving martial arts school requires that you develop the skills and qualities of your students to trust, be responsible leaders and establish strong interpersonal relationships. This process, while critical, is not complicated. Use more of the experiential learning approach to grow your martial arts school and retain more of that growth.