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Powerful Learning Experience
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My most powerful learning experience began five years ago and is ongoing. Two or three times each week I attend a one hour class at Holden Martial Arts in Holden. My three sons are also in the program and have been attending for six years. We practice often together and this has brought us closer in many ways. Within the school itself, in reviewing the instruction, I see different aspects of Lev Vgotsky's cognitive development theory often termed "sociocultural theory." I can also find many examples in Mr. Perrone's list of what constitutes a "powerful learning experience" occurring during class.

Lev Vgotsky, a Russian psychologist, said cognitive development was both social and cultural. Two of his most important ideas were "scaffolding" and the "zone of proximal development." The "zone" basically refers to the "gap" between what you can do on your own verses what you can do while guided by a teacher. Scaffolding refers to the instruction given in this "zone." Essentially, in the beginning of learning a particular task or subject, the instruction is heavy and as competence grows the instruction is "scaled back." (Arnett, 2004) And this is exactly what I see going on at HMA. As a particular technique is presented, there is detailed instruction including but not limited to the placement of hands and feet, strike zones, and cross outs. The instruction is at times one on one and at others between class members. I consider the learning social because of the involvement of the group (as many as thirty) and cultural because being capable of defending yourself is culturally sanctioned.

In Mr. Perrone's book, in chapter eight, he has listed ten different aspects of powerful learning. Virtually every one of them is occurring at HMA and here I will compare the instruction to that list. Students do have a role in "defining content" as we are allowed to "stray" from a particular technique or form. There is certainly time to "wonder" and "work around the edges" of this subject matter, as depth of understanding is perceived through prolonged practice and experience. The combination of visualizing the technique in your mind along with practicing it physically is intellectually stimulating and leads to finding a "particular direction" and "developing a personal commitment." Various forms of expression are absolutely permitted and encouraged. Although, I have to distinguish between the word "form" here. A "form" in the study of kenpo karate is a series of movements designed to teach proper posture and movement with the inclusion of technique. Technique, as distinct from form, is the particular defensive move you would use in any given situation. You can combine techniques or technique and form if it leads to greater understanding and defense. For example, I've seen my sons combine techniques into powerful and interesting "hybrid" techniques.

Furthermore, student's views are respected by teachers, and the teachers do learn from the students. The whole school is built on the idea of respect for yourself and others. And the learning is definitely transactional. As for the "original product,

something public,” we have regular tests and promotions where students are expected to demonstrate their forms and technique in front of parents and other students. During “black belt promotions,” students are expected to create a “performance” involving parents and or other students demonstrating what they’ve learned.

Students at HMA also “do something.” It may not be working with the homeless or writing a letter to your congressman, but they’re learning how to be better people, how to respect themselves and others. This can only contribute to a better society. Also, “making a personal connection to the content” is absolutely present. Who among us has not been bullied as a child or threatened as an adult? While practicing, we are called on to “place ourselves in the setting,” because we are actually practicing defending ourselves from being attacked. We also practice being the attacker, which means that we have to anticipate the response...meaning we have to move out of the way for the strike to be delivered. This is a “living experience.” Maybe, someday it will also keep us from dying.

The content is related to my “previous interests” and desire to be in better shape physically and to possess the ability to successfully defend myself. Additionally, as the class is optional, it is an interest to everyone in the class by virtue of their very presence. The teachers are passionate as the issue of self-defense is so pertinent to our every day lives. And the experiences are rich and “invented” by the teachers as an ever-increasing complexity of attack and defense are demonstrated. Finally, there is more than a “sense that not everything is firm and predetermined.” Part of learning self-defense is learning how to adjust to the changing situation. We learn this in “position recognition.” And the results are definitely not “fully predictable.” I can’t think of anything about a physical attack or the consequent defense as predictable. You can’t anticipate being attacked or how you will respond to it.

In conclusion, I have found the study of karate to be “bottomless” with many “points of entry.” In the instruction at HMA, you have a central generative topic (self-defense), understanding goals (particular technique or forms to be learned), performances of understanding (practicing of form and technique), and ongoing assessment (promotions and reviews along with class by class suggestions for improvement). Here, at this school, I have found my “learning larger” and my “understanding deeper.” I find myself more “intellectually engaged” with the study of kenpo karate than I ever was across the four years of my college education. In contrast to the college lecture where you are listening and note taking (essentially engaged mentally), in the learning environment of HMA, you are also engaged physically and socially. The combination makes for a powerful learning experience.