

Learning About Teaching From Learning

Not only can't I dance, I have never been good at any sport which involved skill or coordination. Yet although—or perhaps because—I am a clumsy, out of shape, 40-year old geek, I recently started taking Gracie Jiu-Jitsu (@RyronGracie).

I am slowly learning the techniques I signed on for, so if you happen to knock me down in the parking lot and try to smash my face, I will do my best to put you into my guard and survive until help arrives. But as a pedagogy nerd, I have been at least as interested in observing my own process as I have been in becoming a skilled practitioner.

As most of us remember from days when our brains were more plastic, new learning doesn't just stay in its little compartment. Training for a marathon changes the way you take out the trash; learning Chinese changes the way you think in English. Learning jiu-jitsu has changed the way I roll out of bed, the way I stand up, even the way I carry my kids.

But it's hard to commit to learning something new and difficult as an adult, especially when it's something for which you have little aptitude. And here have been some of my most interesting thoughts:

- Sometimes in class, I start thinking about what just happened or what will happen next, and I completely miss what the teacher is showing right now. Then when I snap out of my trance, I am embarrassed to ask a question, because I don't know whether the teacher just answered it.
- Sometimes the teacher has to explain something to me six times, and I think I understand it, but then when I try to apply it in a realistic context, I get everything all wrong.
- Sometimes I am doing pretty well on a new movement, but when the teacher walks close by to observe, I get nervous and can't execute.
- Sometimes I struggle along for a few weeks and can't feel myself making progress. Then I want to quit.
- For a while I was the slowest learner among the guys who started at the same time as I did. This was discouraging. Then some new guys started a few months later, and before long, they were better than me too. This was even more frustrating. Then I really wanted to quit.
- I have kids and a job. Sometimes life gets in the way and I miss class, or come late, or come distracted, hungry, tired and grouchy.
- The skill that the teachers have is so far beyond mine, and I am moving so slowly along their path, that instead of seeing their ability as a goal to which I can aspire, I tend to see it as an unattainable height.

Basically, I am a terrible student. As a teacher, of course I always understood that many of my students had those things going on in their heads, but I find that experience the student's perspective freshly as an adult—and in particular, to experience the below-average student's perspective, kindles in me a warmer empathy for students in school than I would otherwise feel. I have of course participated in professional-development seminars. But those are about refining expertise; it feels very different to be a primary student again.

I also notice keenly what the teacher does that works for me, and also what doesn't work for me; for pacing that is too fast, for pacing that is too slow, for lack of differentiation, and so on. Altogether, by being on the humble-learner side of the game, I am inspired and challenged to be more patient and more reflective about my own professional practice.

So for 2015, here's to starting piano, or tennis, or swimming, or Chinese as a grown-up! It doesn't have to be expensive: using YouTube to master the guitar will teach you the pros and cons of online learning better than any PD seminar you could ever take.

You will be a better teacher if you are reminded how it feels to be a learner.

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