

Watch and Learn

Mental Practice and Vicarious Rehearsal in Your Training.

Hillary Kaplowitz

Most sensei would agree that the best way for students to improve in Jujitsu is to get on the mat and work out. That is the primary method of transferring knowledge in our martial art. In other words, we learn by doing. And beyond that, we learn by doing and then assimilating our experiences. Information is not transmitted to us passively. Instead we are active participants in both the actions of the art and the formation of knowledge. This method of transmission, the “Den” of Kodokan, is a traditional form of teaching and learning in the martial arts and ways. It implies that knowledge is attained by direct experience versus learning about other people’s experiences.

In the Mokuroku, Professor Okazaki states that, “Like a drawing in India ink of the whispering of wind in the pines, the secrets of Judo can only be suggested. Only through personal experience can one comprehend the mystic ecstasy of such secrets.” A similar idea comes from the Chinese martial arts. Many people think the term Gong Fu is the name for a Chinese martial art but it is actually about the practitioner’s accomplishments in any endeavor, not just martial arts. The term Gong Fu refers to the time and effort one invests in their training and the high level of achievement that yields

My sensei, Prof Robert Hudson conveys the importance of this concept by telling us the secret to Jujitsu is to put your gi by the door and a few minutes before class, pick up your gi, get in your car and drive to the dojo. Prof William Randle of the Westside YMCA expresses the idea by saying that Jujitsu is not learned in 10 easy lessons. Clearly, Jujitsu is something that you actively do and that practice involves a sensei to guide you and fellow students to train with you. The techniques need to be practiced over and over. Prof Lamar Fisher said that practice makes permanent, so the quality of your practice is crucial to your success.

This focused practice leads to deep learning and to what is commonly referred to as “muscle memory.” Training is just that – training. We are working toward a sort of “automaticity” in our actions. When the punch comes, we block it. We do not

want to stop and think, “uh oh, incoming punch, time to act” and then decide to block it. By then it is too late.

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The Jujitsu notebook is another way to extend your training outside the dojo. This forces us to visualize and then articulate each technique in a written description. For most students, the task of writing out a technique for their notebook involves picturing the technique in their mind and even acting out portions of it in the air. The act of then trying to verbally describe the motions not only solidifies the actions, but also helps clarify and

identify motions that might not have been apparent before taking the time to analyze the technique.

A recent study looked at the relationship between performing a physical action to watching that same action by comparing brain activity between lay people, ballet dancers, and practitioners of the martial art capoeira. Each group watched videos of ballet and capoeira and it was found that when they viewed their own art their brain was strongly activated and that it was less active when viewing something they did not know how to do. An interesting finding was that, even among the dancers and martial artists, though they had less brain activity when watching the other art they had more activity than a “lay person” did when watching either art.

In the same way watching a Jujitsu video can encourage a type of “vicarious rehearsal” where you are able to mentally review what you are seeing. While it is probably not a good idea to learn brand new material through video, it might be a useful tool for reinforcing what you already know. This form of mental practice has been used for instruction in many fields and can

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be beneficial as an effective form of improving motor skills. Most mobile devices can record videos, which makes it easy to film techniques on the mat without any extra equipment. There are even applications that allow you to play back footage at different speeds and annotate them by drawing directly on the video.

No amount of vicarious rehearsal can ever replace the time and effort on the mat that is required to master our art. But it can be a useful augmentation to our training. It can assist us in learning the technique names, a difficult task for many students. In addition, it can be a useful training tool for injured students who might be restricted in what they can do during their recovery

period. And it can help students who have limited time on the mat because of work and family commitments in their ability.

Clearly, there is more to Danzan Ryu training than writing descriptions in your notebook and watching videos while visualizing yourself doing techniques. But Prof Okazaki instructed us to emphasize the literary and military arts equally. Tools and technologies that extend our training outside the dojo can help us achieve that goal.

Hillary Kaplowitz is Sensei of Pacific Jujitsu Kai in Santa Monica, CA and holds the rank of Godan in Danzan Ryu Jujitsu under Professor Robert Hudson, Shihan. In addition, she has a Masters of Science in Instructional Design and Technology. ✨