

The Mind's Eye: Teaching Tai Chi to People without Sight

By Holly Sweeney-Hillman ©2010

Introduction

Researchers have developed statistical methods to measure every conceivable variable that could contribute to the success or failure of students. The mountain of data that has been produced in the last decade has shown there was only one significant factor that will significantly and consistently impact student performance: the teacher to whom the student is assigned. (1)

For those who study martial arts, there has never been any doubt the teacher makes the difference between mediocrity and mastery. DVDs and the Wi can be useful aids but good teachers are absolutely essential to develop the full potential of a student.

Looking at things from a slightly different perspective, what prepares a teacher to be successful? I would describe success for a Tai Chi teacher as feeling prepared and comfortable in a variety of teaching venues, confident with students, fulfilled by the experience of teaching, financially supported by opportunities to teach and regarded by society as having a "profession" rather than a "job". I was wondering how many Tai Chi teachers felt successful when my cell phone buzzed, it was David Feinhals calling, Program director at the New Jersey Foundation For The Blind, NJFFB.

David was searching for someone to implement a Tai Chi program at the Foundation. Having studied Tai Chi himself, he was well aware that he was presenting quite a teaching challenge. I liked talking with him; he conveyed dedication to his job and genuine interest in having Tai Chi as an offering for his students at NJFFB. I agreed to meet with him.

In the meantime, I decided that this could be an opportunity to test a model for teacher training that I had been developing. The overall goal of the training was to create something that helped Tai Chi teachers be successful. The rationale of the model was to help teachers anticipate and prepare for difficulties presented by unfamiliar teaching circumstances. I felt it was important for contemporary teachers and teachers in training to have a systematic approach that could help them adapt to and be successful in the widely divergent situations in which Tai Chi is being promoted. The New Jersey Foundation for The Blind interest in having Tai Chi classes was a perfect example of this trend.

A Teacher Training Model

The first component is The Frame (Figure 1). Every teaching situation has a unique frame that has to be considered before anything else because The Frame provides the basis of all subsequent decisions about content and methods. The more information the teacher can fill into The Frame before class begins, the better prepared he will be.

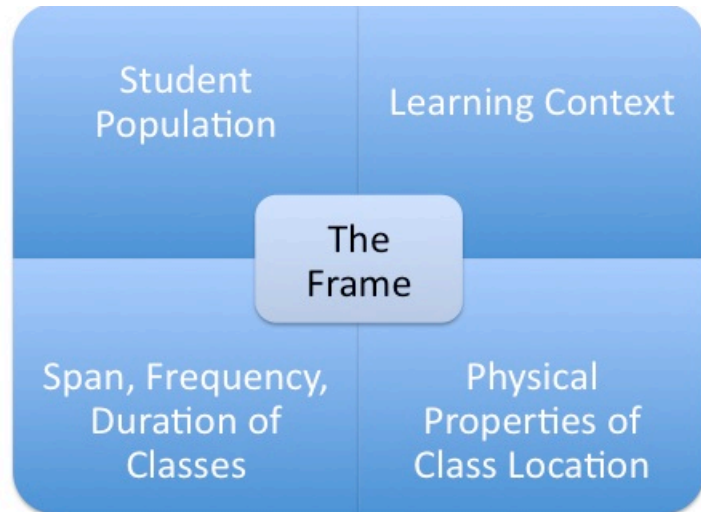


Figure 1: Every Teaching Situation Has a Unique Frame

I used my first meeting with David, the director of NJFFB, to fill in **The Frame** for the proposed classes at the Foundation:

Student Population: Adults with little or no visual capabilities. All were voluntary day students at the Foundation. They ranged in age from 30's to 80's. Some were physically frail, some had average level of fitness and some had high level of fitness. Tai Chi had not been offered previously at the Foundation.

Learning Context: New Jersey Foundation for the Blind is a non-profit organization founded in 1943 with a mission to empower adults who are blind or visually impaired to lead independent and productive lives. It offers individual and group classes on a wide variety of topics including orientation and mobility, home management, assistive technologies, healthy cooking, guitar, chorus, aerobics, studio art, African drumming, and horticulture. Students may study at the Foundation for as long as they want and many attend for years.

Span, Frequency, Duration of Classes: David wanted to have three 8 week class sessions. Spring, Summer, and Fall. Each class would meet one hour a week but he wanted to offer class on two different week days, in case a student who wanted to take Tai Chi had a conflict on one of the days the class was offered.

Physical Properties of Class Location: The Tai Chi classes would be held in a large room that had indoor outdoor carpeting, a low ceiling, overhead fluorescent lights, small windows near the ceiling on one side, and large double glass doors used to enter and exit onto a long hallway. There were folding chairs and a CD player.

The second component of my model is the **Teacher's Knowledge Foundation**, (Figure 2). This is something that is difficult to capture in a simple graphic because it refers to *everything* a teacher knows. Central within the foundation for a Tai Chi teacher would obviously be physical and intellectual knowledge of Tai Chi forms. Although much attention is given to training teachers to have standard forms, how well a teacher himself can do Tai Chi forms is not necessarily an indicator of his teaching success. A strong knowledge foundation will help a teacher but it does not necessarily make him a teacher.

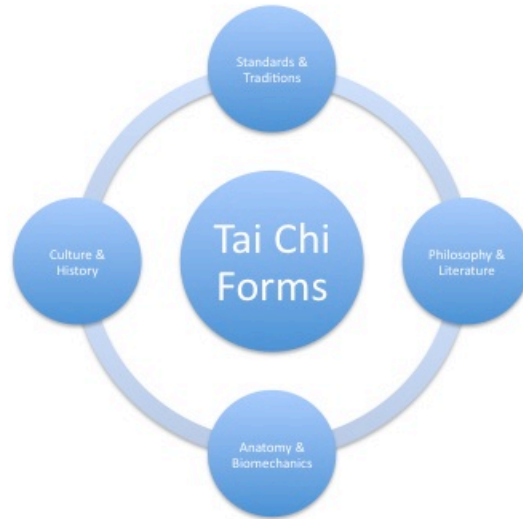


Figure 2: Teacher's Knowledge Foundation

After I spoke with David the first time, I decided to ask two students at my center who are working toward certification if they wanted to do this project with me: JoAnne Sellars and Kate Van Frank. I knew their Tai Chi knowledge foundation was quite adequate plus both of them had a strong background in dance which I thought would prove to be a valuable asset in this learning frame because they were familiar with the technique of teaching mirrored movements. I knew both had experience with challenging teaching situations: JoAnne teaches weekly walk-in classes for Seniors at the Montclair Library and Kate teaches Tai Chi for Kids. I also knew they cared deeply about perfecting their teaching, worked from their hearts, and always gave their all. When JoAnne and Kate said they'd give it a go, we moved into the third part of the teacher training model: **The Teacher's Skill Base**, (Figure 3).

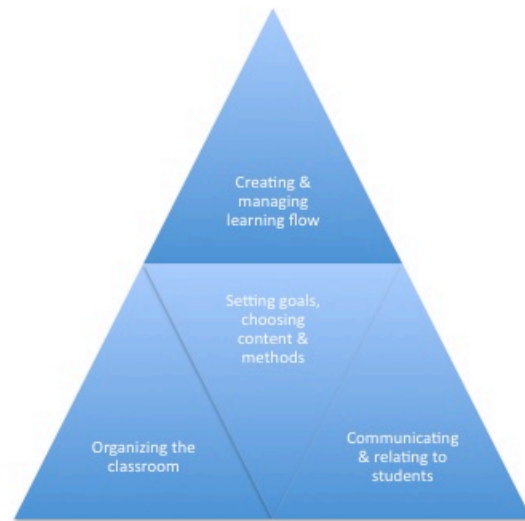


Figure 3: Teacher's Skill Base

The Teacher's Skill Base is critical to success in the classroom. As can be seen in the Figure 3 diagram, the base of the pyramid is formed by two skills: the ability to organize the classroom and communicate/relate effectively with students.

Communicating and relating with students are obviously essential skills, “classroom organization” may not be as clear a concept. However, it is extremely important to the overall success of the class. It refers to things that can easily be overlooked: such as having materials ready that will enhance the class (handouts, props, music, DVD’s); making sure all the students can see, hear and have room to move; starting and ending on time and managing class time to fit in the right amount of new content and review; working to minimize distractions or hazards in the environment such as noise or slippery flooring. Lack of classroom organization can have considerable negative impact on the student’s experience in class and his attitude toward the teacher.

In the situation JoAnne, Kate, and I were entering, these two skill areas were so critical to the overall success of the Tai Chi classes, we did special training at the NJFFB to develop them.

Communicating and Relating to Students

David, the program director at NJFFB, and Linda Groszew, head of student services offered us orientation materials and tools to help us understand the world of their students.

Blindfolded, we practiced the human guide technique (Figure 4) being led or leading one another throughout the Foundation’s complex so we became oriented to the physical lay-out of the buildings as well as the sensations we experienced when we were blindfolded. We were learning how to guide students with the proper etiquette, offering our arms so the student could hold us rather than us holding onto them and keeping about a half step in front to lead. We noticed the impact of touch was considerably magnified when we were blindfolded and we experienced how jarring it was to be touched unexpectedly. We knew we would sometimes want to use touch to explain movements in class, so we practiced and drilled this sequence: 1. Ask if it is OK to touch. 2. Say where the student will feel the touch, (e.g.: “I’m going to touch your elbows”) 3. *Then*, touch with a guiding quality. We learned this was not so easy to do because we were all in the habit of talking and touching at the same time with our sighted students. However, we knew we were developing a better teaching habit by sticking with this protocol with all our students: Ask permission, explain location and purpose of touch; then, touch.



Figure 4: Practicing human guide technique

We noticed how voice volume seemed louder and voice tone had more significance when we couldn't see. It was easy to sound loud or harsh when we thought we were speaking normally. We became aware of the importance of slowing down and toning down our voices. We also noticed how disorienting and distracting it was to listen to someone who was moving around us while they talked. We needed to develop a practice of being stationary when we spoke to the class or individuals. Interestingly, I later read that one of the characteristics that had been identified in successful teachers was that they stood still while giving directions to their students. (2) Again, we realized the NJFFB project was helping us develop better teaching habits in general.

David and Linda then loaned us special goggles to wear to better understand the visual capabilities of students who had some sight. The different pairs of goggles simulated how people would see if they suffered from some of the more common visual impairments such as macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and central scotoma. (Figure 5) David and Linda continually emphasized to us that even though some students had some vision, we needed to plan to teach and interact as if none of the students could see us.



Figure 5: Visual impairment goggles

Organizing the Classroom

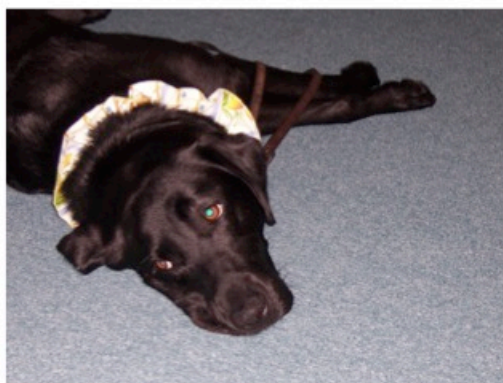
While we were practicing the human guide technique, we noticed drafts and temperature changes moving from one area to another, differences in acoustics between tiled and carpeted areas, and noise. Wow, did we notice noise when we did not have sight! Just the sound of a door opening at the other end of a room or people talking as they passed by in the hallway was so enlarged in our perception, we were amazed by how distracting background noises were that we didn't even notice when we were using vision to orient. We realized sound management would be a critical part of classroom organization.

Figure 6: Classroom organization

Lauri came to class with her guide dog, Fallon.



Fallon didn't mind being apart from Lauri if she could watch her.



However, the single most important aspect of classroom organization was spatial: keeping pathways of movement clear of chairs, guide dogs, canes, and other personal belongings; arranging seating so that the students had enough space between them to move around their chairs without bumping into anything or anyone, and choosing our placement in the room so we would be as equidistant as possible to all the students. In addition to anticipating student needs, we also needed to consider the needs of the guide dogs. (Figure 6)

We were relieved to find out that we would usually have an aide volunteer in the classroom to help us with things like getting everyone into class safely and arranged optimally but we had to make the decisions about the best way to set up the class.

Setting Goals, Choosing Content and Methods

From my first meeting with David, I knew his primary interest in having Tai Chi classes at the Foundation was to help students with their balance and confidence in moving through space.

The long-term goal was to have students able to perform a short Tai Chi form but to get to that goal we had to move through a series of smaller goals that related to improving students functional capabilities, such as ease in going from a seated posture to a standing posture.

We were only one week away from the first class and I was worried. The way I had always taught, explaining and demonstrating while students watched, was not going to convey content to the NJFFB students. The technique of giving students

individual guidance through the movements could be used only sparingly because the other students could not benefit from a one-on-one interaction that they could not see.

Figure 7



I found myself constantly thinking about the upcoming class. One day while I was shopping, I noticed the stores had already put out their summer merchandize even though it was only April and still chilly. I saw a whole box of long, colorful, small diameter Styrofoam cylinders named “pool noodles.” They were intended to be children’s toys: good for floating in the pool, swatting friends AND, I realized, for Tai Chi!

I cut each pool noodle in half, making very lightweight staffs. I thought these staffs would give students a sense of orientation in space not unlike the much longer walking canes with which they were all familiar. I told Kate and JoAnne my idea and we began training with the “wands.” We noticed that the wands increased perception of movement when we were wearing the training goggles and made it easier to coordinate more complex patterns, like combining arm movements with body movements by using task imagery: e.g. “rowing a boat” combined with weight shifts created “push”; “draw a rainbow,

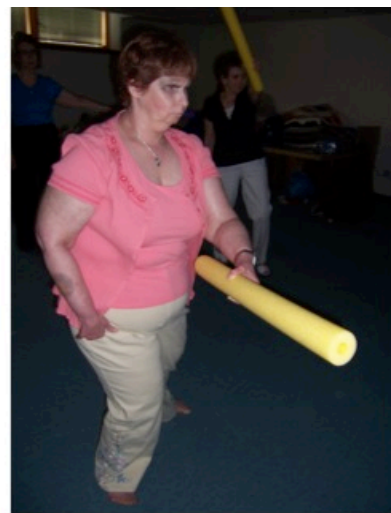


Figure 8: The wands helped develop intent

draw a smile” created “wave hands like clouds”; “paddle the canoe” created part of “brush knee and push.” (Figure 7) The wands also gave us a way to work with the concept of intent which made a huge difference for students who were totally without sight. (Figure 8) The other thing I liked about the wands was that they were not too far removed from Tai Chi tradition of using poles and staffs as a training method.

Creating and Managing Learning Flow

Time had come for the first class. The plan was for me to teach the first one to test our ideas, then I would meet with Kate and JoAnne to discuss what had happened, then they would each teach one class a week for the 8 week session. I would be available to substitute teach or observe a class if Kate or JoAnne requested.

I set up folding chairs in the class prior to the students’ arrival in a semi-circle creating a good distance from one another and pretty much all the same distance from me. Five students had enrolled so far but I set up a few more chairs just in case because I knew it would be difficult to set up chairs and guide students into the class at the same time. I wanted entry into class to go very smoothly to build the students’ confidence. As the students appeared at the door, I introduced myself and guided them to their chair. Everything went smoothly and we spent a few minutes finding out a little about all of us. It’s always fascinating to meet a group of people and among other things I discovered that one of the women had tap danced professionally. She had recently lost her husband and was hoping Tai Chi would help her ease depression.

As mentioned previously, one of the goals we had discussed with David was the ability to go from seated to standing with ease and confidence, the ‘sit-to-stand’ skill. I planned to work with sit-to-stand in the first class and all subsequent ones as it would be a good indicator of progress. My plan was to use the Tai Chi concept of “center pole” to help students develop control over their central equilibrium during the sit-to-stand. Beginning with the students seated, I introduced the idea of stretching their “center poles” while bending forward at the hips. As I demonstrated the movement in my chair, I was dismayed to see that there were as many different interpretations of my verbal instructions as there were students in the room. Some were arching their backs, some were rounding their backs, some were tipping their heads back. It really hit home at that moment that the students couldn’t see me AT ALL and I absolutely could not rely on demonstrating movement to convey the meaning of my words. I realized that I wasn’t going to succeed that day with the concept of stretching the center pole, so I moved on quickly to have them come to standing. The sit to stand was noticeably difficult for most, so I knew it was going to be an important piece to improve upon. Once standing, we worked with weight changes from side to side, first in a “horse stance”, and then, moving weight front to back by taking a small step forward and then keeping both feet planted. Mostly, I was finding out what was comfortable, what was possible, what was confusing, what was too difficult. I never took my eyes away from the students, I was looking for every possible clue in their reactions and I was also afraid of

someone losing balance and falling. It was difficult to access how the students were feeling because they were not looking back at me, I could not read them through their eyes. I mirrored all the movements I described so as not to confuse the students who could see a little bit, that way everyone was always going the same way in the room and the students could sort of feel and follow the wave of movement that was created. I thought it was premature to introduce any footwork that involved something as complicated as a concept of 45 degrees in this first lesson. When I gave everyone a wand, I could feel the students relax a bit. The wands gave everyone a sense of orientation and purpose. By the end of class, we could do “wave hands like clouds” combining small steps with weight shifts with one arm moving with the wand, alternating ‘drawing a rainbow’ and ‘drawing a smile’.

David had observed the first class and thought things went well. Feeling somewhat encouraged, I met with Kate and JoAnne to let them know what had happened and to work together to create an effective way of presenting the concept of central equilibrium, stretching and moving the “center pole”.

Kate, JoAnne and I searched for language to develop the concept of stretching the center pole. We came up with a helicopter taking off as a way to express stretching upward in a perpendicular manner and then compared the helicopter to the image a jet plane taking off. The jet plane image was meant to express the forward as well as upward stretching of the center pole necessary for the sit to stand trajectory. As it turned out, this language didn’t work very well, either, probably because it relied on students having had a visual experience of helicopters and jet planes taking off. ‘Stretching the center pole’ ended up being one of the most difficult concepts to convey and hands on guidance as well as different language was required. Kate found that explaining that the distance between the students’ heads and their chairs would not shorten when they tilted forward worked, particularly when this idea was compared to feeling the distance between head and chair shorten when heads were bowed down causing the center pole to bend. When I observed Kate’s class a month later, every single student had a confident, securely balanced sit to stand. It made me want to cheer out loud.

Working with the NJFFB students, we all became more tuned to the delicate nature of managing **learning flow**. A teacher has to give information to the students to begin the flow and then continue just the right amount of new information to keep the flow going. Not enough new information, the students become stuck and disinterested. Too much information overwhelms and also blocks the flow. An excerpt from Kate’s teaching journal describes the process of how a teacher works with learning flow:

“I really believed Tai Chi would benefit my students at the NJFFB, but I didn’t know how to convince them of that. I didn’t know how to convey to them what I would normally express by example, by having them watch me. I felt like I was certain to fail. I dreaded going to the Foundation, and I was just as lost about teaching them as they seemed in regard to why they should bother being there. When I explained the benefits of practice, it appeared incomprehensible to them, and I felt completely ineffectual ...

but I felt compelled to keep trying because I believed this to be a challenge that would transform my teaching skills ... in the third week, I realized I had to change my approach. In the first two classes, I had felt that I had to adhere to a formula ... I realized I had to listen and adapt as I received spoken or unspoken feedback from them ... I stopped trying to explain what I now realize they weren't ready for, like 'energy in the hands' or 'bubbling well-spring'. I did simple things that were familiar in the beginning of class and I stopped trying to cram everything into each class. When I let them feel a simple application for "opening", they all lit up a little ... after that, the classes became easier. They were getting used to the movements, so when I explained the benefits of increased balance and agility they would get by shifting weight and learning to feel 'full' and 'empty' before they moved and how power was increased by learning to link up their body as a whole; these ideas began to make sense to them ... another reason it became easier was that I was no longer afraid they'd be unstable or lose their balance ..."

Learning how to create and manage learning flow is at the apex of the **Teacher's Skill Base Pyramid** because it represents the highest level of teaching skill. It can only be learned from experience and from building the skills that support it: setting goals, choosing content and methods that match **The Frame** of the class, organization, communication, and relationship building.

Summary

Figure 9



When I observed class at NJFFB one month after we started the program, I felt satisfied that we were making good progress. The students were moving

confidently across the room, performing footwork that included the concept of 45 degrees as well as straight, their sit to stand skills were solid, and they had made the transition from using the wands to form intent to being able to express a clear intent without the aide of a wand . (Figure 9)

The challenge in the next four weeks will be to link what has been learned into a series of continuous but separate movements requiring the use of transitions. Then, the students will be able to practice a form.

This article intends to present an example of using a model to create a process that could be applied to teaching in a wide variety of settings and also to teacher training. It's not meant to be read as a "how to do" formula. The purpose of the model was to give the teachers involved a way of talking about their methods and choices, supporting the creativity of each teacher but allowing enough standardization of approach that another teacher could take over the class from time to time.

The ideas that were used to create this model were based on principles that have been identified as contributing to teaching success in academic settings. I recommend the recent book by Doug Lemov, Teach Like a Champion , © 2010, to read more about them.

Research on learning complex motor activities was also utilized which suggested that giving students attention focusing cues about how to do the movement prior to performing a movement helped them perfect the movement faster than giving corrections after they had done the movement.(3) In our classes at NJFFB, we used this technique almost exclusively, as every movement had to be explained in explicit detail before the students could try it.

I would like to thank in particular, JoAnne and Kate, for their enthusiasm and dedication in undertaking this project with me.

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