

Notes on Leading Classes

© Guy Windsor, November 2009



Essays and Articles from www.swordschool.com

These articles are provided free, for the WMA community at large. You may distribute complete and unaltered copies in any form, provided that you do not profit from it.

The author remains the sole copyright holder.

Notes on Leading Classes

There are four key aspects to any well-run class or training session:

- Conditioning
- Technical practice
- Technical instruction
- Theory

Any given session will emphasise one or more of these aspects, but all should be present. I differentiate between a class, where new material is taught, and a training session, where material already learned superficially is practised, studied in more depth. Every alert student should be able to find new details and new depths in basic techniques, however many times they have been practised before.

Conditioning is a vital and often overlooked aspect of swordsmanship training. Your body is the primary weapon, if it fails to operate properly, no amount of technical expertise or weaponry will help. The long-term health benefits of good fitness should be obvious; what is perhaps less so is that with adequate core strength and joint strength, you can relax into a technique and ultimately learn to apply more force with less effort.

Learning techniques is what most people think of when they imagine studying swordsmanship: how to strike, how to defend, which foot goes where, etc. This is indeed vital, and as much as any other thing distinguishes one art from the next. Many students are therefore beguiled into thinking that if they know a lot of different techniques, they know a lot of swordsmanship. This is a dangerous delusion, because in combat, knowing one action well will serve you much better than knowing a hundred superficially.

However, the sources contain a large range of plays all of which have their use and their place, so it is necessary to go beyond one thing that works, and embrace the breadth of technical options available. What makes the difference between a hundred separate plays and a unified system that can be learned and applied is the theory. Every system has its dominant thread of tactical choices, and a coherent underlying idea of what will work best. This must be instilled at the beginning, so the many plays become in the student's mind variations on a theme, not separate actions.

When structuring a class, the first thing to establish is the composition of the students: what are their experience levels, were they all present when technique x was last taught, and so may be able to just get on with it, or does it need to be taught from the beginning? How many beginners, how many seniors? This is where a grading system and established syllabus are really useful, as they help the instructor to divide the class into knowledge groups: these know drills 1-3 and are ready for 4: these have just learned first drill only; these know all the drills and are ready to move on, etc.

Every student should learn at least one thing in every class. For a beginner that's easy, as everything is new and so giving them something is simple. For a senior, it's little harder, as there may be no more "new" material in the syllabus, so they must go inwards and find that for instance their *volta stabile* is not quite right, and work on that.

The class starts with a warm-up and basic conditioning. The students should at least occasionally be run through a thorough conditioning session, as very few actually train properly outside class time. However, we are not a gym, so allocating too much time to push-ups every session is a mistake. In five sessions, aim to spend one with 35 minutes or

so of conditioning, two with 20, and two with 15. In the classes with a shorter warm-up, emphasise more of the long-repetition material to redress the balance. Likewise after a vicious 35 minutes, allow time for recovery with slow careful reps, and don't push too hard for the rest of the class.

Technical practice is the heart and soul of swordsmanship; at least half of the class time after the warm up should be spent practising material that is already familiar, making it instinctive with many repetitions.

Technical instruction is a prerequisite for technical practice, and it involves three key components:

- Demonstration
- Explanation
- Repetition

The technique should be demonstrated clearly, several times. Then explained, using a minimum of digression. Then demonstrated again, with the explanation. This should take between 1 and 3 minutes. Then the students should have a go at doing it, for at least 3 minutes, up to 10. Always allow at least a couple of repetitions before making corrections while they figure out the new material, and then correct only one thing at a time: the biggest, most obvious mistake. Ideally, as you go around the class, everyone should receive at least an acknowledgement of their efforts. This can be in the form of a nod and "good, carry on" if they are at the stage where they just need more reps, or a short, quick correction. Take note of whether the correction holds over the course of several repetitions, and if it does, praise, and add a further correction if they are ready for it. If it didn't take, repeat or modify the correction. If more than three students are making the same mistake, stop the class and correct it with a second demonstration, explanation, demonstration (1-2 minutes).

Digressions with interesting and relevant anecdotes are a useful part of instruction, provided they are kept for times when you see the class is tired and needs a short mental break. Do not be self-indulgent with other people's time.

Common difficulties for instructors, branch leaders and anyone leading classes include

- Transmitting the information
- Solving student's technical or theoretical problems
- Organising the class
- Getting your own training done

It is vital that non-professional instructors delegate at least some of the class time (either entire classes, or parts of a given class time) to other seniors, so that they can get some training done. Professionals can reasonably be expected to train themselves outside of time paid for by their students.

Structure and Flow- troubleshooting a class or lesson:

The mark of an experienced instructor is the instinct for making the one most necessary correction, when faced with a student's many errors. Knowing what to look for helps in developing good teaching instinct, for both individual lessons and in class. There is always a "hierarchy of corrections", indicating the most necessary fix, and most errors can be broken down into "structure" or "flow".

All problems in class and in individual lessons derive from poor structure, and can be seen as blockages in flow.

Structure: a structural problem in execution creates a block in the flow of a given action.

Examples

- 1) In class: Going to fast; giving the students something too far in advance of their current level, creates knots of people standing around talking. In a good class you should hear a lot of clashing steel, but little talking.
- 2) In an individual: Wrong start position (e.g. shoulder too tense) prevents proper execution of the required movement.

Flow: a flow problem highlights a structural mistake:

Examples:

- 1) In class: students discussing what they are about to do suggests they don't know what to do- demonstrate clearly what's expected, or pick a simpler exercise.
- 2) In an individual: if the drill doesn't flow, one of the following must be at fault:
 - Position
 - Measure
 - Timing (within the action itself, or relative to the partner's actions)

Class Instruction:

- Set goal for class
- Demonstration, Explanation, Demonstration, Practice (Show, Say, Show, Do)
- Graduated exercises for different skill levels
- Use intervals
- Intellectual Structure of class (what, why, when)
- Physical structure of class (who, how)
- Observation
- Patterns of flow in class

Individual lesson:

Types of individual lesson:

1. Short technical lesson (5-15 min- one drill)
2. Long technical lesson (15min+)- many actions or topics
3. Warm-up lesson
4. Tactical lesson- "what" and "why" already clear: work on "when"

In each lesson

- Set goal for class
- Show, do, do, do, do
- Minimal verbal correction
- Progress in stages from simple to complex
- Set *perfect* example
- Use intervals
- Finish with student's excellence

General points:

- Be positive
- Observe carefully
- Give time for repetitions
- Use intervals
- Finish on a high note

Guy Windsor, Helsinki 2009