



Episode 85 – Martial Arts Curriculum | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey everybody we're back for another episode of whistlekick martial arts radio, this time it's episode 85 and today, we're tackling the subject of technique overload. I'm the founder here at whistlekick but I'm better known as your host Jeremy Lesniak. Now, whistlekick if you didn't already know makes the world's best sparring gear and excellent apparel and accessories for practitioners and fans of the traditional martial arts. I'd like to welcome our new listeners and thank all of you that are listening again. If you're not familiar with our products you can learn more or by over at whistlekick.com. All of our past podcast episodes show notes and a lot more on a different site and that's whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. From either site, you can sign up for our great newsletter and you really should. We offer exclusive content to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests for the show. Now, today's subject actually comes in from an email sent in by a listener and we have a fair amount of dialogue going with a lot of our listeners but this particular subject really seems to jump out at me and I thought this would be a great subject to break out into its own episode and share with all of you. The email and I'm gonna paraphrase a little bit of this came in from a listener and said there are 108 combinations for a punch and so how can one really be truly proficient with so much material on the other hand, it is an art and part of learning is just sometimes for fun but at what expense to our students? And so that was part of a larger email but you get the gist, that was the part that I really wanted to hone in on with today's episode and it's a great question that this dilemma of how much stuff do we need to know, how much should we know, how much should we be teaching. And let me start by saying, it's gonna depend. It depends on the situation, it depends on the art, it depends on a lot of things and we're to get into some of those specific dependencies as we go through the episode. But, the thing I want to get out the way these are my opinions, there is no right answer I am not a lifelong instructor, I am not even active instructor with my own school. I do teach of course, but I don't have the responsibility of bringing people from white belt up through the ranks and so if you do, you're gonna have a different perspective on this that I did most likely. But, I have had my own school so, we'll see. We'll see, I'm excited to see what the feedback is on this episode.

So, let's start with the subject of proficiency because that was really at the heart of the listeners question. And proficiency isn't something you achieve you aren't just proficient at something at some point. There's no line in the sand, there's no measurement that we can say oh while you've done this so you're proficient. No, it's a completely subjective view of how you do things and a lot of it is yeah, you know it when you see it but I think the fact that there is no objectively defined proficiency in something in the martial arts really does take center stage and something that we need to explore. Techniques are to get better with practice and with understanding absolutely but the proficiency that someone might achieve with let's say a sidekick is gonna be different depending on a lot of different things. We're going to explore those reasons but just think about that for a moment if I am a seven-year-old kid, my proficiency with a side kick, even if I put in a ton of time, even if I'm super talented great body awareness, what we would call proficient for a seven-year-old at some kind of mid-level rank, it's not going to be the same as what we would expect to call a proficient sidekick of someone let's say in their 20s or 30s. It's different and different is okay. Now, we start thinking about the subject of volume of expectations the number of movements the number of forms the number of defenses against let's say knife attacks that are expected at different ranks in some systems and in some schools, that really goes



Episode 85 – Martial Arts Curriculum | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

into a question something I like to call information overload. And one of the things that's really interesting with most people about information overload is when you saturate someone's brain with too much stuff, they shut down. They don't tend to discard the new stuff they don't tend to hone in on the things that work, they just reach a point where they can't handle it anymore. And as instructors we need to watch out for that, we need to make sure that we're not throwing too much at anyone but I see a lot of instructors especially new ones like to over teach. They want their students to know everything and of course that's really admirable. They don't want them to make the same mistakes that the instructor made as they were coming up through the ranks and most of them even articulated that they want their students to be better than them and I can't say that there's a more admirable goal for an instructor than to want your students to be better than you. I've seen it happen and it's awesome. I think that is probably the best measure of someone's quality as an instructor. But all too often in doing that the enthusiasm of the instructors have, they tend to forget that people learn by making mistakes and there's a lot of value in making mistakes. Human beings learn through failure. How do you teach a kid how to walk? You don't yell at them when they fall down, you don't pick them up and carry them around and say you'll never learn how to walk, No, you let the kid stand up and fall down a bunch of times they learn how to wobble, they stumble around grabbing on to things and ultimately they learn how to walk and that's maybe an easier process for a parent because it's been played out so many times. You know these kids can learn how to walk, you can see it happening, you can see the steps. But I think that looking at a martial arts student's path is really similar. We know that they're going to get through, you've got to trust that process. As an instructor, you have to trust yourself to say they're going to get through this. If you're the student, you have to trust that your instructor trust that you're going to get through this and you know what, you're not the first person to struggle with whatever is. It doesn't matter what the art is, it doesn't matter what the movement is, you're not the first person to struggle with that everyone else has to. And there is value in making those mistakes because for whatever reason, human beings learn better by screwing things up and correcting them than getting them right.

Now, some of the schools out there like the one that this listener emailed from have a pretty fixed sometimes even a rigid martial arts curriculum and there can be a lot of value in there. It guarantees that people know what's expected of them, for their next promotion or what's expected of them as a student in school of course the more that's written down the more people are going to understand that it's just communication. And it also can help limit the gaps if someone comes in and their training and they do really well in certain areas it can mean reduced time in other areas and of course to be a well-rounded martial artist you got hit all the different areas. So, having a curriculum I think is important whatever way it is represented in the school and if it's a smaller school or a school with a single instructor that curriculum is and always even written down and that's not necessarily bad. Again, diversity, different choices, different options I think they're all good they'll have value. I think we brought up in the episode on rank and promotion that having a structured curriculum can make promotions more fair, but there's also a tendency to want to include too much especially if a martial arts instructor has trained in multiple systems or under multiple instructors, they want to bring in all the great stuff that they learned. Right? I mean that's how all of the martial arts that we're learning now started at some point. Someone trained under somebody else and they made a twist to it or they trained with two or three people and they brought in the stuff that they like the best and there can be a lot especially if someone's not willing to let go of certain things. Well, this way might work for a larger person this way



Episode 85 – Martial Arts Curriculum | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

might work for a smaller person and this other way might work if and this and that and this. And so, by the time you're done, you have this huge curriculum and I don't think there's anything wrong with having options, but I think that that core curriculum, the basic expectations of the students as they progress should be fairly small. There's nothing wrong with teaching things on the outside of that there's nothing wrong with having supplemental things. But I think as the body of knowledge broadens, it can't help but cheapen that's probably not the right word, it can't help but reduce the proficiency, let's go back to that, that each student is going to attain for each of the individual movements.

Now I'm someone that really appreciates diversity in martial arts knowledge, I've trained in half a dozen different schools, I have more than one black belt and I like that I think it's a lot of fun to learn the way different people do things and I think for me that's because people are different. People have different bodies, the reasons that people are in martial arts class are different, the way someone would defend themselves in an actual confrontation is different and that goes back to my original instructors who you know, they were really key for [00:10:47.12] thought they might ever become an instructor, don't just learn it the way that works for you but ultimately learn it because you might want to pass it on. It might not work, a particular movement, a particular way of doing movement might not work for you but there is value in understanding it for your potential students. And I appreciated that but the things that don't work for me I did spend a ton of time on them right and that kinda makes sense. A good core curriculum is to leave space for individuality. There were things that I spent time on in my early martial arts career that no one else in my then dojo spent time on. I was self-teaching capoeira before YouTube was out there. I had very little to go on but I was playing with that and I had a lot of fun with that and my instructors encouraged that. Now they didn't encourage that at the expense of the core curriculum that we had, but it gave me the opportunity as an individual for some personal development for some self-expression. Because as the listener said in that email, martial arts is an art right? We can underscore that word art that kinda requires the practitioner to put some of themselves into it. If you're just repeating things physically that you're told to do, that's not so much from a martial art that's the fitness class right? And for some people that's what they want that's okay. But when we talk about martial arts on the show, we are talking about someone that actually values more than just the physical components of the arts. So, let me give you another example, self-defense. Self-defense is not my favorite aspect of the martial arts but of course I do want to learn how to defend myself, I want to be effective at that. And whenever I practice self-defense in a class setting, everything I do boils off to really it's four different sets for different movement patterns that I adapt everything else back to and it works and I like it and I'm confident in those movements and I can do them pretty much out of any attack at any time. It's also pretty boring. It's Boring for people that are watching and I've had some instructors who after seeing me in a testing or seeing me in a class setting have, I don't want to just encouraging, but actually criticize me for not having more movements in my repertoire. And if it's a setting were I'm able to have that discussion, my response is why? How many ways do I need to defend against that? Really you only need one, you need the one that works right and of course you don't know what one is going to work in the moment that you need it so you you want to have options but I'll relate it back to a Swiss Army knife. I think everyone understands the concept of a Swiss Army knife, pocket knife that you can fold out, different tools, the smaller the knife, the fewer the tools the fewer tools the less chance you can have what you want in a given situation. But what's the thing that always happens with those big Swiss Army knives? You can never find the tool you're looking for in the moment, takes forever you end



Episode 85 – Martial Arts Curriculum | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

up flipping them all out. So yeah diversity is good but how much is appropriate is a really individual thing? And I think as instructors and I think with the curriculum we need err on the side of having less than having more, because when you go less, everyone's proficient at those movements but if you're providing the space for individuality, it gives the opportunity for people to not be bored if they've mastered that and to find their own space for self-expression.

And so, this really all goes back to the reason that people train and because you can't have everything in your curriculum, it's kind of forces martial arts school to have an identity. More and more now I'm seeing schools pop up that have traditional Japanese program you know; a karate program and they've got a grappling program like jujitsu or Brazilian jujitsu and they've got a mixed martial arts program and they've got a cardio kickboxing program and they've got this program and they've got all these things and what's really the identity of the school. Now if you've got different training spaces and different instructors doing all those different things, I think sometimes instructors are afraid of having an identity to say you know what, this is what we do we are a traditional Shotokan karate dojo or we are a WTF tae kwon do dojang. Okay great. Once you've accepted the it's okay to have an identity, you can be better with it right? You can have less stuff than the curriculum, you can make sure that you teach it great that you develop the best teaching techniques and that your students get really good now if it's a self-defense school, there is probably gonna be less stuff in the curriculum because what are you really trying to do, you're trying to get people ready for the hopeful never going to happen case of someone being attacked, you want to drill it into their head, here are the five things, 10 things, 20 things whatever it is that you're gonna work on, were gonna drill them into you in different ways, different situations, class after class after class. If it's more of a traditional martial arts class and I underscore that word art, there's gonna be more stuff in there. Find that identity as a school, as a martial arts instructor and be okay with it. And part of being okay with that is the recognition that what you offer may not be the right fit for some potential students. And that's why there are different martial arts schools and different instructors and different styles because the needs of students are different and I think some martial arts schools get really nervous about that. I think they wanted to train everybody I think that's the way to look at I think as a martial arts instructor, even the business side of it, the better the people you're turning out the more attention you're going to have, the more those people are going to be marketing for you and the more they're going to bring like-minded people to your training space and you're gonna have more financial success. If you're trying to offer everything to everyone, it kinda cheapens the value of any one thing and you're going to attract people that are attracted to cheaper things. As I'm talking about this piece I think I could go off on a whole other episode so I'll stop on that part there, and I'll keep rolling.

If you think about a curriculum logically the less stuff you're practicing the better you're going to get it. If you're putting in the same amount of time right. If you just practice punching and you punched at a class 2 hours a week, you'd become a pretty good puncher pretty quickly but you also get pretty bored and if you get bored you're probably just practicing. So ultimately you're not getting very good, you're not getting better so you need some variety in there. So, if we line up all these things we've talked about, I would say at any stage in training there should only be enough material in the curriculum to keep the student excited. Now that doesn't have to be limited to belt rank it doesn't have to all be dumped on the student when they earn your new rank. Someone gets to Green belt, you don't have to say hey you



Episode 85 – Martial Arts Curriculum | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

got uniforms to learn and you got these three techniques and these five sequences and this defense against a knife and this defense against a choke and this, this, and this and we're gonna cover all that material over the next month. It can be metered out, it could be hey you got learn this movement, once you got that movement down, now can teach you this new form because this new form incorporate this new movement. Think of it as a spectrum, as a timeline. That's a better word. Think it is a timeline and the belt ranks are fixed points along there but there are these smaller divisions like a ruler or whatever that you hit that progression as you move across. Everybody likes new things but they really have to know what's expected of them before moving on. Don't just teach someone something new because they're bored. If their bored, that can often reflect back on the instructor and what is being taught and how it's being taught right. I've had classes where I've taught nothing but no front kick, side kick, back fist reverse punch for an hour and kept Students engage there's a lot of different ways that you can do that, so you got to think outside the box .and if you want to turn this around one of prep this in a way that we can make the student understand what is expected of them, I've got a great example of a school that I'm friendly with, I was spending some time with the instructors recently and they showed me the sheet that they use for their students. In order to progress to the next belt rank one of the requirements is that they do each of the forms that is expected of them 50 times and they've got this sheet with a mark it off so let's imagine that you know, this is a traditional karate school so, at white belt they're expected to learn pinyan shodan and to get their yelled out they have to have done pinyan shodan 50 times. And then at yellow belt, they get another form another kata, so they are expected to do their new cut to 50 times but they are also expected to do pinyan shodan 50 times. And it keeps going like that up until the point of black belt where they're doing something like a thousand forms, a thousand katas just to knock that piece out just for that requirement and I think that's really neat. Whether or not you agree with that methodology or you agree with those numbers, the key is that the students know what's expected of them, it's something even a young child at a low rank can understand and I think that that's really key.

Now what if you're trapped in a sense you're an instructor in this school where you're not the owner, you're not the head instructor, you have any say over the material that your teaching and it sounds like the listener who wrote in might be in that boat I remember that all of advanced techniques and concepts really build off of more basic ones. You know whether you think of them as Legos or a pyramid or something like that, when you're instructing you can demonstrate that in the way that you teach you can break things down and actually quite a bit and the more age and rank progresses the more that really becomes necessary especially if someone has some deficiency, something that they're there missing. If you need other ways to break it down, that's were talking other martial arts instructors be it in your school or at other schools can really be helpful. I think one of the ways that we lack as a community is sharing teaching techniques and it's something I would love to see happen more. I know it does happen but I know a lot of martial arts instructors that play their cards really close to the vest. Now what if you're a student at a school that's like this that you know, really feel like there's a lot for you to have to learn to earn your next rank or feeling overwhelmed? In that case, the advice is really the same. You've got to learn how to break things down and if it's not something you can do yourself, you might have to ask some questions, you might have to ask for some help in breaking those concepts down or those techniques it is something you might have to do outside of class. The more that you're expected to know, the more likely you are actually going to be practicing outside of class the more important the



Episode 85 – Martial Arts Curriculum | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

more necessary that becomes. One of the things I often share with lower ranks, is that I genuinely don't know anyone that has earned a black belt and not spent significant time training outside of class and I'm not saying that in order to be a legitimate, people like throw that word around, in order to be a legit black belt you've got to train 10 hours a week for you know, X number of years I hate putting those time frames on some things because when I'm speaking I'm talking about different schools different arts, different people. It's a lot easier to do that with a specific style of a specific school, so I'm not gonna do that. If you do that, that's great I'm not saying you shouldn't but becoming a black belt really mastering anything is going to require some time on your own and I think that just enhances the value of it.

So how does your school do it? Do you have a fixed core curriculum? Is it really well spelled out, lots of details, maybe a handbook? Or maybe it's a list of forms that are learned at certain ranks, maybe you've got a couple techniques spread in there too? Do you think there's too much material to learn in your school or maybe there isn't enough expected of the students? However, you do it at your school, I really want to hear from you let's get some public comments going, let's get some discussion out there. You can shoot us a message on social media, we're on Facebook Twitter Pinterest and Instagram username is whistlekick and every case. Or you can leave us a comment on the website whistlekickmartialartsradio.com this is episode 85, drop something in the show notes there or remember you can always leave his comment on YouTube. And for those of you, we don't really mention this on the show very often, we actually have a private Facebook group for the show. So, if you go on to Facebook and you search whistlekickmartialartsradio, request to be added somebody'll let you in and sometimes we have some good conversation going over there to especially about the show. So, I'm expecting some conversation to pop up there. If you want to be a guest on the show or maybe you have an idea like today's show topic, go ahead shoot us a message you fill out a form on the website and don't forget to subscribe to the newsletter, so you can stay up on everything we're doing. You can learn more about our products at whistlekick.com and you can buy some of them now at Amazon so check that out over there. That's all for today but until next time train hard smile and have a great day.