

LEARNING IN LIKELY PLACE: Varieties of Apprenticeship in Japan  
A collection of texts about Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive, and  
Computational Perspectives, edited by John Singleton

We will review the chapter: Seven characteristics of a traditional  
Japanese approach to learning by Gary DeCocker.  
An American disciple tells his experience learning nō, martial arts  
and tea ceremony at the Oomoto Japanese Arts Center, part of a  
'new' religion founded in 1892 in Kyoto. As taught at the Oomoto  
Center, the practice of the arts is a spiritual quest.

Read excerpt of the 7 Characteristics (p.69)

n Japan and will probably continue to play a part in the approach teaching and learning.<sup>3</sup>

### The seven characteristics

1. *Copying the model* – Mastery of the model is of foremost importance. Unique interpretations are discouraged. Creativity is allowed only after years of study.
2. *Discipline* – Teachers often stress the need for severity in teaching. Enduring hardship, both physical and psychological, is thought to promote personal growth. Above all else, students are encouraged to endure.
3. *Master-disciple relations* – The roles of the teacher and the student are clearly defined. An image of the ideal practitioner of the art exists and is held up as a model.
4. *Secrets, stages, and the hierarchy of study* – Teachers impart the skills or techniques of the art in hierarchical stages marked by the granting of certificates, titles, and ranks. Progress in the study of the art takes place by increasing the repertoire of movements or patterns. In many of the arts, “advanced” skills are often no more complex than those taught to beginners.
5. *Established lineages* – Schools or franchises exist for most of the arts. They often gain legitimacy for their teachings by tracing their lineage to the founder of the art.
6. *Nonverbal communication* – Teachers rely on nonverbal communication by having students imitate a model provided and explained by the teacher. Oral communication often is in the form of metaphors or parables.



Figure 4.1. A calligraphy teacher guides his student's hand to help her feel the flow of the brush. (Courtesy of The Oomoto Foundation.)

7. *Art as a spiritual quest* – The study of the art is a gateway or a means to a higher spiritual plane. The ultimate goal is not mastery of the art, but mastery of the self.

### **Reflections on the seven characteristics**

This section of the chapter includes a discussion of each of the seven characteristics, first, from my own experience as a student of the arts, and second, as represented in *Jubokushō*.

Learning in doing.

The Master doesn't teach: the student learns.

Teaching / learning

Karada de oboeru: Learning with the body

Callus on your fingers

"The key to learning by observation lies in the word unobtrusive."

"Unobtrusive observation is an important factor in the training of artist and craftsman in Japan, in which the student must discover the method of knowing for themselves".

There is first of all a powerful pedagogy that depends upon the observational skills of a motivated learner. It is the ability to respond to teaching without teaching and is personified in the learner or apprentice called a minarai: observer. But it is the learner who has to puzzle out the ways in which unobtrusive observation and persistent stealth will be tolerated in particular places at particular times in such a way that the necessary skills and practices will become evident."

## *Copying the model*

Mastery of the model is of foremost importance. Unique interpretations are discouraged. Creativity is allowed only after years of study.

At the beginning of each lesson at Oomoto, teachers usually presented us with a model – a five-minute demonstration in martial arts, *nō*, or tea ceremony, or the writing of a few characters in calligraphy. The students then copied the teacher's form. While watching the teacher's demonstration, I often focused on a specific point of difficulty for me such as the placement of the feet or the turn of the wrist. Sometimes I would repeat that part of the movement, moving my feet from one place to another or turning my hand this way and that. At these times, my teachers rarely offered assistance. In fact, they often showed displeasure.

I realized later that they saw the movement very differently than I did. For me, it was a combination of parts. For them, it was an integrated whole. The calligraphy teacher emphasized the movement of the brush from one stroke to the next: The flow of the brush was not to stop until the character was completed. *Nō*, martial arts, and tea were the same. The movement continued from beginning to end. The flow unbroken.

In martial arts, the teacher repeatedly told us that the source of the movement was the *koshi* or hips. If moved correctly, the hips would move the rest of the body in a coordinated way. The upper half of the body should be relaxed. The shoulders, arms, and hands curved slightly with no edges. The goal, according to the teacher, was to allow one's *ki* energy to flow from the hips, through the upper body, and into the sword.<sup>4</sup> The other teachers described similar postures, movement, and energy flow. When the parts of the movement were not joined together into one, an edge or break would result. Here the energy would dissipate. The beginner needed to remember only two things: Start with the correct, rounded posture, and move from the hips. With these things in mind, the student repeated the model, gradually working toward the teacher's form.

*Son'en and the model.* Son'en begins *Jubokushō* with a detailed description of the correct brush grip, including a diagram from an earlier manuscript. He then states:

The correct shape of the hand when holding the brush is ...  
though a difficult ...

This paragraph makes me realize the Western mind is prone to consider the actual details of the strokes than the whole character and more importantly its *élan*, its rhythm and breath: *souffle*).

When well-executed the Chinese character provides a kind of *frisson*, seems to be dancing on the paper, and provides a strong emotional impression to the viewer. Also, in the hands of different masters, each will draw their own version of the characters, none will be the same, yet can be read by most Chinese readers.

Teacher is just an older student

of practice, everyone treated the senior student like the teacher, showing respect to the position of teacher, if not the person occupying the role.

The martial arts teacher once explained to me that the teacher was merely the oldest student of the art. He illustrated his explanation with a metaphor. During the chant before and after practice, everyone faces the same direction, but the teacher leads from a position a few feet in front of the students. The chant focuses their attention toward the ideal world of the heavens where true perfection in the art exists. From the students' point of view, the teacher's level may appear unreachable. But, according to my teacher, all that separates the teacher from the students is a few years of study. In the infinite distance between the worldly practitioners and the perfection of the heavens, the teacher stands only slightly ahead of the student – about as far as he is ahead of the students during the ritual chanting. A far greater distance separates all of them from perfection.

*Son'en and his student.* *Jubokushō* does not offer much insight into the relationship between Son'en and his student, the young Emperor Go-Kōgon. One role of the teacher, according to Son'en, is the selection of appropriate models.

A beginner's calligraphy will surely suffer if he says "Here is a work from the brush of one of the Three Masters," or the like, and without consulting his teacher, he studies a piece because the text is intriguing and the characters are interesting. (12)

The teacher also should critique the student's calligraphy every week or so (9). The unstable political condition of the period, however, may have prevented Son'en from meeting very often with Go-Kōgon.

### *Secrets, stages, and the hierarchy of study*

Teachers impart the skills or techniques of the art in hierarchical stages marked by the

The professional actor continues to learn throughout a career - to believe that one has achieved a perfect control is to lose the possibility of continuing art.