

Teaching through PCNs

I have written before about PCNs, my nickname for Pre-Conceived Notions. People have preconceived notions about the martial arts, about specific styles, and about their histories and founders. Students have preconceived notions about what their style should provide for them and how it should provide it. They have PCNs about what their rank should be and when they should receive it (and how much hoopla should attend the award). But there is another aspect of PCNs that I would like to address from a different aspect.

When teaching basic karate, one can demonstrate a movement, describe it, and then drill on it with Sensei's occasional verbal, tactile, or visual corrections. In my opinion, the more skilled the teacher, the more he/she can explain why the movement is done as required and can demonstrate why it works better than the close-but-incorrect version. A teacher can have a successful career instructing martial arts with that sort of skill. In application, however, it is not enough to have the student emulate a movement correctly; he/she must also get the timing, angle, energy, etc. correct, as well. When teaching at this more difficult level, one will often see a student apply what he learned in the manner that had been demanded of him for the last several years, and still not get the expected results. The student then repeats the movement faster and harder, seldom aware that the movement he perfected in class might not be the movement needed to get the job done. In other words, the class itself and the teacher who explained why the movement works so well have helped create a PCN in the student's mind.

I find aiki students—even students who understand the subtlety of aiki—most susceptible to PCNs, not because aiki students are naturally more gullible than karate students, but because preconceived notions appear in any movement that requires precision application rather than brute force, aiki or not.

Recently, I was teaching an aiki version of one of [Funakoshi's nine throws](#) (see *Karate-do Kyohan*) that resembles *Ippon Seoinage* (Judo's back-carry throw). In order to minimize effort so that the smaller women could throw the bigger guys, I emphasized a deep pivot out of the opponent's line with the use of a relaxed, heavy, arm drop. No matter how I said it, students would either shorten the pivot or add a strong pull with the arms. I described, demonstrated, and even nudged them through the movement physically, but their preconceived notions were too set. The throw *must* take arm strength, they thought, and since they were out of their opponent's way, the pivot could not really be that important. Just the opposite was true. Sometimes in advanced application, what you see (or think you see) is not what you get (or what gets you to be successful). I had to give them my lecture 47b on PCNs before they dared trying it my way.

On a different throw, one needs to reach toward the attacker's shoulder joint on the inside of his punch (not an easy motion to time correctly) and then lightly draw one's grip toward the opponent's fist as if extending to the side of one's shoulder. Every student wanted either to pull the attacker's arm out or yank it down to the ground. Their PCNs had conditioned them not to hear the words I was saying, but accept what they *knew* had to be the truth. I had to stop to explain that subtle off-balancing prepares the attacker to be more fully

off-balanced, but that trying to do it with strength is not only more difficult to time correctly, but actually gives the opponent the urge to tighten up and resist. I had to exit the teaching of the technique and illustrate how a very minor movement can subtly disturb an opponent's balance so that tilting him over is relatively easy.

I have come to the opinion that a teacher, or at least a senior teacher teaching senior students, not only must demonstrate and describe his techniques correctly, not only must demonstrate them without depending on undue cooperation from his partner, not only must explain how they work, but also must teach through the students' typical (and sometime a-typical) PCNs.

Perhaps that is why there are so few senior teachers to senior students.