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Study the old - understand the new

How history changed the teaching methods in Karate

Abstract

A standard Karate training consists nowadays of three parts: kihon (basics), kata (forms) and kumite (rule bound fighting) (Sori Doval & Uozumi, 2010). While kihon and (sports-) kumite are rather new developments in Karate, kata have a long(er) history. In this workshop a possible evolution of kata and how it is practiced today is shown and evaluated.

The participants are split into two groups, a main study group and a supporting group. Those groups are then broken up into smaller groups to foster cooperative learning (Gillies, 2016). There are three phases within which the assignments of the groups have a specified goal. The phases are linked to certain points in history (around the turn of the 20th century). The participants are asked to introduce their knowledge from different disciplines and analyse the learning process through problem solving (Savery, 2006).

The workshop is a helpful tool for the participants to gain an understanding of how the circumstances around the turn of the 20th century changed the teaching methods in Karate.

Keywords

Karate; history; workshop; Itosu Anko

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Introduction

To have a look into the history of Karate can help us to understand why nowadays a standard Karate training consists of kihon, kata and kumite. From these three teaching forms kata is the oldest. But how did kata evolve? How did history change the way Karate kata were/are taught? How can we understand those changes? Is a workshop a helpful tool to understand decisions that have been made in the past? These questions are the basis for this study. The workshop is designed to help to answer the first two questions. The other two questions are discussed after the active part of the workshop to evaluate its design.

Background

Most people who take up Karate practice will learn their lessons in a standardized way. They learn how to bow in, do warm up and strengthening exercises, and then go on to Karate kihon that is basics. The basics are taught in three ways: standing while executing techniques, walking while executing techniques (kihon ido) and practicing techniques with partner in a set format (kihon kumite). The next steps will be to learn hitori kata (solo forms) and kumite that is rule bound fighting with a partner. For a beginner Karate therefor consists of three parts which are not much connected to each other. If the learner does not study the history of Karate it will not become evident why a fighting art should be taught as Karate is. To know the history may also change how we learn and teach today. In the beginning of each fighting system there must have been some kind of aggressive behavior. Old books like the *Bubishi* show us in postures solutions for different attacks (see figure 1 left picture). That means students of a fighting system actually learned how to fight for their own life. But around the turn of the 20th century Karate practice looked like in the right picture (figure 1).

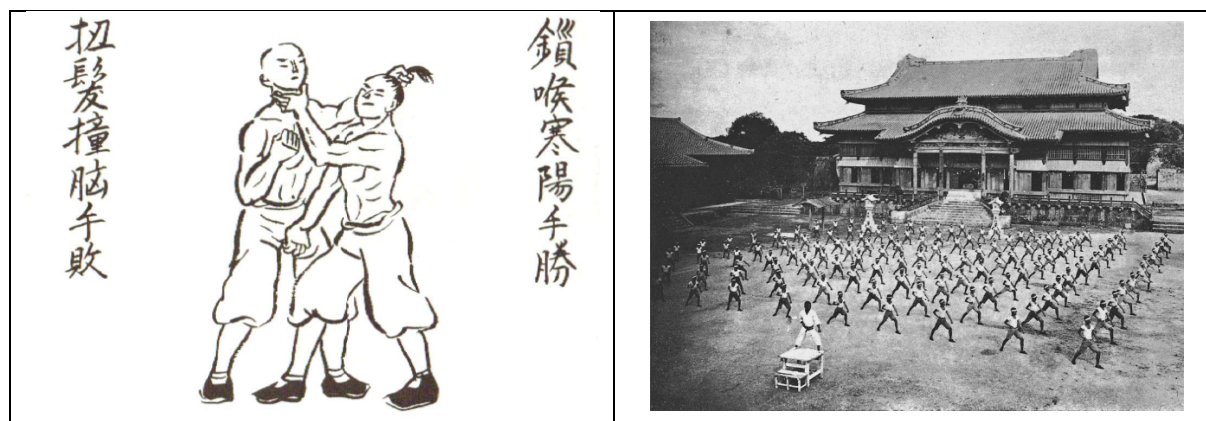


Fig. 1. Left: Posture from the *Bubishi* (McCarthy, 1995, p. 174); Right: Karate practice at Shuri Castle of Elementary School students (McKenna, 2009, p. 62).

There must have been reasons why the methods of teaching Karate changed and why realistic attacks and dangerous techniques were banned. There were also changes in the overall appearance of Karate practitioners and how Karate was demonstrated in public. It was no longer a highly individual fighting system taught from one teacher to one or a few disciples. But it was taught to large groups of young students in a militaristic setting.

Links to the Past

Miyagi Chojun tells us: “In the olden days [...] Toudi - (that is, te) - unfolded into an iron-clad ritual of secrecy. Kata were only passed on to the very best students” (McCarthy & McCarthy, 1999, p. 48). That means kata was not the first form of teaching Karate. And if one was not a top-level student, one probably never learned any kata. Miyagi goes on:

“From the middle of the Meiji period (1868-1912) [...], the iron-clad ritual of secrecy [...] dissolved as public curiosity grew. As a result, many local experts prepared to meet the changing times as karate-do was largely being accepted” (ibid.).

Through the Meiji Constitution the class system of the feudal era was abolished and with it many privileges of the Okinawan gentry. In 1905 Karate was introduced into the new established school system. Itosu Anko (1831-1915) played a major role in introducing Karate into the school system (Swift, 2019). The “links to the past” in the workshop are based on his life.

Itosu Anko had also a key role in Karate’s history because he was the teacher of later Karate teachers like Mabuni Kenwa and Funakoshi Gichin. Mabuni wrote that Itosu

“learned the Kata of Karate mainly from Matsumura Sensei of Shuri, Matsumora Sensei and Gusukuma Sensei of Tomari, and from Nagahama Sensei of Naha. However, the Kata we learned were neither those of Matsumura Sensei nor those of Matsumora Sensei, but rather a brand new innovation” (Swift, 2019, p. 72).

It is an important point Mabuni mentions here: although Itosu learned from the three main systems of Karate of his time, he did not teach as he was taught. Itosu invented his own system of teaching Karate and with it influenced many of his students.

Workshop Methodology

The participants are observers as well as part of the process of developing a new way to teach martial arts in a set study design (see table 1). Therefore the workshop is open to everyone. No knowledge of Karate techniques is required. The participants are split into two groups, a main study group and a supporting group. Those groups are then broken up into smaller groups (with participants from both the main study and supporting group) to foster cooperative learning. In this way all participants are able to contribute ideas and at the same time are “responsible for completing a part of the task” (Gillies, 2016, p. 41).

There are three phases within which the assignments of the groups have a specified goal. The participants of the main study group learn movements, practice them and teach them. The participants of the supporting group teach, observe and learn. The phases are linked to certain points in history (around the turn of the 20th century) and the circumstances in which Karate evolved at that time.

This problem-based learning approach helps to understand the problems people faced in the past, how they solved them and what other ways there might have been. The participants are able to integrate their knowledge from different disciplines and analyse the learning process through problem solving (Savery, 2006) at the end of the workshop.

Tab. 1. Workshop schedule.

Phase	Time	Action	Purpose
Introduction	Minute: 0-10	Show the study design	To get familiar with the study design
Form groups	Minute: 10-13	Get into groups with different assignments	Prepare for the first group phase
First group phase	Minute: 13-20	Learn (teach) a specific set of movements	To gain new knowledge
Change groups	Minute: 20-23	Get into groups with different assignments	Prepare for the second group phase
Second group phase	Minute: 23-30	Practice a specific set of movements (observe the process)	To find a way to teach the new learned movements
Change groups	Minute: 30-33	Get into groups with different assignments	Prepare for the third group phase
Third group phase	Minute: 33-40	Teach (learn) a specific set of movements	To find a way to give the knowledge to the “next generation”
Discussion	Minute: 40-50	Discussion of the process and outcome	Evaluate the study design and gain / share insights into how kata may have evolved

Expected Outcomes of the Workshop

The participants will learn about and from the history of Karate. If circumstances change, it is likely that teaching methods change as well. It is expected that the participants of the main study group will not teach in the same way as they have been taught. The personal teaching preferences of the participants will also have a major impact on the study results.

Workshop at the 8th Conference “Kampfkunst und Kampfsport”

The above written information about the workshop’s contents was presented as part of the “Active Learning” panel at the conference before the workshop. 18 (active) participants with diverse martial arts backgrounds took part in the workshop. Six teams with three participants were formed. One out of each team belonged to the main study group. The other two participants were in the supporting group.

In the first group phase the following information was given for the main study group:

“Imagine: You are a boy around age 14. Your health and physique are weak. You like to get strong. Your family’s social status allows you to seek out martial arts experts and ask for instruction.”

The two participants of the supporting study group in each team took the role of a “teacher” and a “second student”. The “teacher” was allowed to teach any technique out of his martial arts background to his two “students”.

The information for the second group phase was:

“Imagine: You live in times of great change. Your family’s status does not secure you any rights anymore. But you support the changes and militaristic movement of your country. You want every boy to get strong.”

The participant in the main study group were asked to think about (and try on their own) how they could teach what they have learned in the first phase to young kids. They were also allowed to discuss their ideas with their team.

For the third group phase the following supplemental information was added:

“Imagine: You are a teacher at a middle school. After writing a letter to the ministry of education¹ you are allowed to teach martial arts as physical education at elementary school to large groups. Your aim is to prepare your students for military service.”

In this phase the main study group participants needed to imagine having a big group of students. They should teach what they had learned in the first phase without taking too much time for a single student. The goal was to build conformity in the group of young students.

Discussion

The last part of the workshop was a group discussion. The feedback of the active group was threefold:

- A workshop about the history of Karate is a good way to understand the changes that have been made in the teaching methods and is not limited to Karate.
- The group structure and roles were not always clear to all participants.
- For those who “lived” their roles it was an intense experience on more than one level.

For further workshops it would be an idea to make it even more a role-playing game. The participants in the main study group should be easily identifiable by an outer sign. Also, who the teacher is in the first phase. The workshop structure can be transferred to other martial arts to learn about their history as well as to learn through teaching in a given mindset.

There should be more time to share and discuss the experiences of the participants and to reflect on the different aspects of teaching (and learning) a martial art after the active part of the workshop.

¹ Also known as “The Ten Lessons of Itosu”, Itosu Anko wrote in his “Lesson 2”: “In Karate, the practitioner strengthens their muscles, tendons and bones through relentless training, ideally to the point of being able to repel a physical blow to the body. If one reaches this ideal in their training, one will fear nothing, stay true to their training principles and gain valiant dynamism and spiritual strength. If children are trained in Karate from the elementary school age, when they become soldiers in the future, this will assist in their advancement in the skills of sword and bayonet fighting. I believe Karate will be of use for spiritual and technical improvement in the military society. Do not forget what the Duke of Wellington said after he defeated Napoleon the First at the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium ‘Today’s victory was first achieved from the discipline attained within the playgrounds of our elementary schools.’ This is, indeed, a wonderful maxim.” (Swift, 2019, p. 253-254)

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