Where Children Learn How to Learn

BY CORNELIUS N. GROVE

"In Japan, kata is used for kindergarten kids—even preschoolers—and it begins on their very first day at school."

IF YOU EVER have learned a Japanese martial art—karate, aikid, judo, etc.—or tea ceremony or flower arrangement, you likely will have heard of the concept of kata. Literally translated as "form," it also means "way of doing" in the sense of an established orderly process. In the martial arts, kata refers to a finely choreographed pattern of precise physical movements that a learner practices and absorbs into his or her neural and muscular systems.

Kata is not just some ancient notion prettied up to appeal to modern folks. Today, the kata concept is turning up in mainstream business thinking. Here is how an American-made website discusses how the application can be used for improving oneself and/or one's workgroup:

"Brain scientists like to say, 'Anytime you do something you're more likely to do it again.' From sports and music, we know that these ingredients develop new skills and habits: (1) structured routines for beginners to practice, (2) frequent repetition, (3) feedback from a coach to correct our practice, (4) optimism and enthusiasm. . . ."

The objective of repetitive practice not only is to learn to perform certain movements and techniques correctly, but to gain the ability to do so in a natural, reflex-like manner. Repetitive practice ingrains the movements of the kata in mental and muscle memory so they can be carried out smoothly without thought, even in novel circumstances. In Japan, this repetitive process for learning something new is called "entering through form."

In addition to the Japanese emphasis on kata, the idea is held among many in East Asia that, across millennia, wise scholars and skillful artists have honed to perfection the basics of learning anything that is worth knowing. So, if something must be learned, a novice should seek active guidance and unsparing critiques by someone—a "master"—who already has worked long and hard to perfect it.

In Japan, kata is used for kindergarten kids—even preschoolers—and it begins on their very first day at school.

In all nations with early childhood programs, preschool teachers face the challenge of dealing with tiny youngsters for whom a classroom is utterly new and strange. Clearly, some semblance of order needs to be established during the fledglings' early weeks, but how teachers in East Asia conceive of "classroom order," and the ways they expect to establish it, are unlike our American approaches.

In Japan, the difference is not merely about pedagogical practices; it is about a fundamental orientation to all of life and learning: There is a right way to do something that everyone must master. This concept informs preschool teachers' thinking about classroom order and how they establish it. The little ones are facing a wholly new situation, so their teachers will shepherd them to enter it through form. The process is gradual: two steps forward, one step back. The teachers are patient, but persistent—gentle persuasion relentlessly applied.

On the children's first day at school, and every day thereafter when they arrive hand-in-hand with their mothers, they encounter a waiting teacher. There is a right way to greet one's teacher. As child and mother come within speaking distance of the teacher, they make the first move. Coming to a full halt with both feet together and hands in front, child and mother bow, inclining their heads from three to six inches, and announce in standard formal language, "Good morning, Teacher." The teacher smiles in recognition and returns the greeting and bow.

To Westerners, this might seem formal and ritualistic, even unfriendly. That is due to an East-West cultural contrast: In the U.S., informal speech and behavior convey positive regard for another because they signal friendliness. We do not like rituals because we associate them with a lack of spontaneity and warmth. In East Asia, though, formal speech and behavior convey warmth and positive regard for another because they signal respect. People in East Asia expect and appreciate rituals because they pave the way to congenial relationships with others.

On their first day at school, new pupils will not know the kata for greeting a teacher. No problem, as adults will help the child get it right, patiently modeling how to do it during each day's arrival.

How to greet a teacher is just the first skill for the neophytes to master. There are many more how-to routines to be learned. The children proceed to the classroom to put away their belongings and change clothes. After removing and hanging up their traveling smocks, shoulder bags, and traveling hats, they put on play smocks and hats. When they have stacked their parent-teacher message books on the teacher's desk, they are free to run about and play.

Changing clothing and organizing materials on arrival is one of the many basic habits of daily life that Japanese preschools take great pains to inculcate in students. The habits will be further elaborated in elementary school and will remain with the children throughout life.

Different preschools have different morning routines. In many cases, pupils formally assemble after they all have arrived. Here is an account from one preschool of what happens next:

"The day begins properly when the teacher plays a melody on the piano. It is the signal for the children to sit down in a circle. They should clasp their knees and remain quiet until all are seated. The teacher plays until everyone complies. Then she breaks into a contrasting drill that is the new signal for everyone to jump to their feet. They all bow nicely, after which she plays the good morning song, which has been practiced until it becomes an automatic response. It is the same song each morning, so everyone joins in with great gusto. The teacher says 'good morning' and the children chorus their reply."

There is a huge gulf separating free play that is unregimented, unsupervised, and uninhibited and the scenes depicted above of an

orderly, ritualized, formal daily ceremony. Are we talking about different types of East Asian preschools here? No, both are in pursuit of this value: The youngsters will gain an active sense of community.

Solidifying this in young hearts and minds is a combination of three activities: unrestrained free play, choreographed group behavior, and reflection. There are other choreographed activities, too. Each is part of the kata of attending school. Preschool is where the children are coaxed and coached to enter it all "through form."

Western observers visiting Japanese upper-elementary classrooms are astonished by the effortless efficiency with which teachers conduct lessons. Students transition from one activity to another—sometimes rearranging the furniture—as though they were a single organism. Yet, merely one sentence spoken by their teacher prompted them to do so—*e.g.*, "Get into your four-person groups." Work in small groups proceeds smoothly, with students ably filling roles such as leader and recorder. Whole-class instruction is business-like because the children observe routinized procedures for presenting, asking, and answering questions, and so forth—and it all is accomplished without tight authoritarian control.

Japanese upper-elementary classrooms are characterized by learning processes that proceed smoothly and effectively because when those youngsters were in preschool and first grade, they were intentionally taught how to contribute actively to efficient classroom learning.

During the early grades, pupils are explicitly taught—then practice, practice, practice—the correct ways of greeting their teacher; of arranging items both on and inside their desks; and of sitting with backs straight, hands on knees, eyes focused forward. They learn and practice the proper way to sit while studying, to raise one hand to signal a public contribution, to stand to speak, and to come to the front of the room and publicly present their ideas (such as a math solution). They learn to rearrange a room for small group meetings and how to again make it suitable for whole-group instruction. These highly efficient classroom learning routines have been termed "learner-trained learning."

As children become more adept at setting up the room, teachers gradually withdraw almost completely from the setting-up process. They prefer to allow children to learn how to organize themselves and work together, even at the expense of extra time and some confusion.

Every routine basic to daily classroom life is broken down into a series of careful steps, painstakingly practiced again and again until it becomes second nature, and then speeded up until it becomes an automatic, smoothly executed part of the schoolday, accomplished with the speed and assurance of a drill team.

When there are well-rehearsed, virtually choreographed templates for each of the activities necessary for any classroom lesson to proceed efficiently, teachers need not issue complex instructions nor monitor how well they are being followed. Teacher and students can direct the vast majority of their attention to the new material to be learned.

One researcher estimated that, compared with American teachers, Japanese teachers are able to spend almost 50% more time per classroom period imparting subject content.

Who is responsible for each student's learning? When this is asked comparatively about schooling in two or more nations, the answers often expose deep cultural contrasts.

Here is an example from our own nation. In August 2016, the "Commentary" section of *Education Week* featured an opinion piece ("Who Should Be Responsible for Student Learning?") by a retired school superintendent who is on the faculty of a graduate school of education. In answering his own question, the author mentions state graduation standards, No Child Left Behind, the Common Core, teachers unions, charter schools, and teacher-related factors such as certification, accountability, and tenure.

That is a long list. Surely, no potentially responsible person or entity has been overlooked.

If you are Japanese, however, you notice a significant omission: the pupils. Japanese pupils know how to participate in classroom learning supportively. That is because during their preschool and early grade training, they practiced the physical moves and the roles and routines. They often attained the desired outcomes of their individual and collective efforts. So, from then on, the pupils themselves share some of the responsibility for their own effective learning.

Furthermore, the teachers' stance vis-à-vis their pupils can become nonauthoritarian. They rarely need to issue detailed instructions about any activity related to the progress of a lesson. It all has been fine-tuned and practiced repeatedly. They have only to state the nature of the next learning activity, relying on their pupils to efficiently make the request a reality.

One researcher cited the example of the Suzuki piano-teaching method. Novices repeatedly rehearse actions, such as reacting to the teacher's entrance, arranging items on a desktop, and sitting properly. They are coached to execute movements precisely, such as orienting the body, using the hands, and focusing the gaze. Is the teacher being authoritative?—yes, but after it all has become internalized, the need for further detailed directives from the teacher is slight.

You could think of it this way: Training small children to learn how to learn infuses classroom procedures with mindfulness, not merely on the part of the teacher, but on the part of the pupils.

Perhaps you are wondering why I have explored only the youngsters' learning how to learn, ignoring the process by which they actually begin learning academic material. One reason is this: Japan's Ministry of Education guidelines explicitly discourage academic learning in preschools. ★

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