



Teaching and Learning a Tai Chi Form. What Works?

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Teaching and Learning a Tai Chi Form. What Works?

"...I determined to never give up my practice again. Morning and evening I did just one form, seeking only to keep up my regimen without lapsing. Actually, at that time I was very busy with teaching and other school responsibilities and had no free time even for self-study. But from this period on, before long I had made progress."

Cheng (1985) pp27-8

Aim

The aim of this study is to find out what strategies help learners who want to remember the sequence of moves in a Tai Chi Form. The inter-relationship between home practice and learning a form is also explored. It is hoped that the conclusions and action plan will be useful to Tai Chi teachers in selecting teaching and learning activities, resources and strategies to support their students.

Context

Practising independently at home on a regular basis is a vital ingredient in making serious progress with Tai Chi. Yang Chengfu (1883-1936), from whom much of today's Yang Style Tai Chi flows, gave the following advice on regular practice

'Regarding practice time, each day practise twice upon getting up from bed. If there is not time in the morning, then practise twice before retiring. Within the course of a day, one should practise seven to eight times, but at least one time per day.' *Dictated by Yang Chengfu, recorded by Zhang Hongkui.* Quoted in Zhongwen (2006), p15.

Many Tai Chi students, including myself, have struggled with setting up a regular home practice routine, even to practise once a day. My own students have often said this is a key concern for them. The great modern master of Tai Chi, and student of Yang Chengfu, Cheng Man-Ch'ing was refreshingly honest about his 'laziness'. Writing in his Tai Chi manual in 1956, he said that this led him to create the Yang Short Form to reduce the amount of time needed for daily practice. Cheng's writing on personal practice has provided profound inspiration to me in setting up consistent personal practice.

"As I realised that I was lazy, I tried to find a way to make it easier for me to persevere. The kind of T'ai-chi Chuan that I had been taught comprises 128 movements, of which many are repetitions. To go through a full round takes more than ten minutes at the recommended speed. Realising that many others were facing the same difficulty, I decided to eliminate the repetitions and drastically to reduce the number of movements to 37. One round in the morning and one in the evening will total no more than ten minutes a day."

Cheng (1981) p2

My own teacher, Alan Peck who studied with Dr Chi Chang Tao (highly respected pupil of Cheng Man-Ch'ing), gives very sound advice on daily practice, encouraging the application of relaxation to attitude as well as the body.

"The benefits of t'ai chi are accumulative, and so regular practice is something to aim for. Do remember that t'ai chi is intended to improve the quality of your life, and not to

become another problem for you; it is likely that you have enough problems already.

“If your practice is irregular do not despair or inflict guilty feelings upon yourself; use the experience as an opportunity to develop a relaxed attitude, and at the same time think about the advantages and benefits of practising, and so organise a definite time for your next t'ai chi practice.” Peck (1990) p 57

As a beginning student of Tai Chi, difficulty with remembering the movements acted as a barrier to home practice for me. I found it relatively easy to follow along with new moves during the class, but once outside the classroom, I could not remember them at all. Although the teacher provided a manual with written descriptions of the Form, I found it difficult to follow and would probably have benefited from a more 'live' resource (visual or audio or both), to follow along with.

Based on my own learning experiences and encouraged by ideas from learning styles theories, I provide resources for learners and try to encourage independent practice (for example: recommended books, handouts, audio instructions, and a DVD). However, during background research for this study I was unable to find empirical evidence about what works for students in remembering forms, or establishing regular home practice. Therefore I set out to gather raw data from a small number of students and teachers.

The wider context for this study is the more fundamental question of how, and if, tutors can encourage learners to practise at home, the role of the teacher, and the nature of learner autonomy in Tai Chi learning. To keep the task manageable, it is assumed that teachers can take actions and provide resources to support students remembering the form and remove barriers to home practice. The research questions for the study have been narrowed down to:

- 1 What do Tai Chi students and teachers say helps students to remember the sequence of movements in a Tai Chi Form?
- 2 What barriers do students perceive getting in the way of home practice?
- 3 What motivates or inspires home practice?

Method

Data were gathered from students through a questionnaire (Appendix 1) which was offered both online and paper. The online version using Survey Monkey software (www.surveymonkey.com) was offered to students in an email link. The students surveyed were mainly members of my own Tai Chi classes, with a small number of friends who study with other teachers.

Tai Chi teachers' views were gathered through a 'poster' exercise at the 2007 Tai Chi and Chi Kung Forum for Health (TCKKFH) annual gathering. Tai Chi teachers attending the TCKKFH meeting were asked to indicate which, if any, of a list of methods help their students remember the sequence of Tai Chi moves in a Form. They were also asked to write in other methods they found helped students. (Appendix 2)

Results

Student Home Practice, Motivation and Barriers

All but one of the students said they did some home practice. About half said they did their Tai Chi outside the class only occasionally, over a third practised at least once a week, including one student who said they practised at least once a day. (Table 1)

The most frequently cited answer, given by 15 (80%) of students, about what inspired or motivated them to do home practice was 'feeling or wanting health benefits'. The next options most frequently chosen were 'something my teacher said or did' (6) and 'wanting to learn more about Tai Chi' (6). The other options offered were 'meeting up with fellow students outside the class' (2) and 'something I read in a book' (2). The three students who ticked 'something else' wrote in 'mental health benefits', 'the moment: by candlelight, early am/pm beside Ullswater' and 'desire to practise and catch up with other class members who started earlier'. (Figure 1)

Table 2 shows students' views about barriers to home practice. Over half said lack of time was a problem, although additional comments indicated that not all felt time was the real issue.

"'No time' suggests that I haven't any time, which is not quite right. 'Other things getting in the way' would be more accurate."

Tai Chi Student

Not being able to remember the movements was cited by four students, and four ticked concern that they were practising wrongly. Only two students said lack of a suitable space was a problem.

Remembering the Form

Students were asked to indicate how easy or difficult they found it to remember a Tai Chi Form they are learning. Eleven (61%) said they found it 'somewhat difficult' and 7 (39%) said 'quite easy'. (Table 3)

Student views on helpful methods for remembering the sequence of moves in the Form are shown in Table 4. Top choices for students were repetition in class, home practice and working with another student in class in that order. Additional comments added (see also Table 6) emphasised repetition and one student said that understanding the 'concept behind the move' helped. In giving comments on the research process, a specialist teaching observer added 'using a mirror' to the list.

The students were mainly very positive about the methods they had tried. Only three methods were said by any student to be not helpful at all: books (1 student), handouts (2) and working with another student in class (1).

Results from the teachers on helpful methods are shown in Table 5. Repetition in class was the top choice of teachers, followed by home practice and then working with another student in class. Figure 2 shows that the ranking for these three top methods were exactly the same for students and teachers. The next most popular method with teachers was handouts. Audio and video recordings came next and least popular were

books, making own notes and using wall posters.

Discussion

In spite of small numbers of students and teachers surveyed, the similarity of results from two independent data sources encourages me to believe that the data were reasonably robust and credible.

It is interesting that both students and teachers mentioned most often the 'traditional' methods used in Tai Chi classes, (repetition in class, home practice and working with another student in class). All three of these involve students physically doing the Form themselves which is no surprise given that Tai Chi is, especially at the beginning, largely a psychomotor skill. Resource-based methods such as books, audio and video recordings came further down their lists.

Gummerson has noted that repetition is at the heart of martial arts study.

"The learning environment for the student of martial arts is practice, practice, practice. In truth, repetition, repetition and repetition would be a more accurate description."
Gummerson (1992)

Information about the psychology of learning indicates the importance of repetition, but also that practice should be 'distributed' rather than 'massed'. Child (1997, pp162-3) notes this and the appearance of 'mental inhibition' after a certain time occupied with a learning task. Time is needed for dissipation of inhibition, allowing 'recovery', after which memory is more effectively re-enforced by returning to the task. This supports the introduction of elements of a new segment of form early in the class, then referring back when the new moves are introduced later.

Learner Autonomy

Tai Chi study is by its very nature highly personal. We are using our own bodies and studying ourselves in the process of learning Tai Chi. Learner autonomy is in a sense built in. Home practice is by definition unsupervised so the teacher has little power to ensure students do practise. Furthermore, any attempt by teacher to force students to practise would also run counter to the very nature of Tai Chi which avoids the use of force, rather meeting resistance with softness.

Clark stresses the need for students to take responsibility for testing out what they read and are told.

"Books about Tai Chi can be helpful, especially to beginners, and it is wise to listen to a teacher's advice. But most important of all is *to check out what they say for oneself.*"
(author's emphasis) Clark (2001) p60

In this study, a majority of students indicated intrinsic motivations for home practice: 'feeling or wanting health benefits' and 'wanting to learn more about Tai Chi'. The teacher can support students by helping them become aware their personal reason for home practice. The teacher can help by acknowledging that these reasons are not necessarily concrete, specific goals for the future. The 'goal' can be much more open ended than achieving an externally measured goal or being able to do their Form

independently.

Conclusion

Figure 3 shows a list of the helpful methods this study has uncovered for remembering a Tai Chi Form. An attempt has been made to list these in rough order of popularity but, given that each of the methods was helpful to at least some students, it seems sensible for teachers to incorporate as wide a variety as possible. Students should be encouraged to try out different strategies in the class and at home to find out which work best for them. Figure 4 is my personal action plan for encouraging students to do home practice. It is hoped that this may also be useful for other Tai Chi teachers. I have already begun to implement some of these actions in my teaching with good results. In particular some of the suggestions given by teachers have been very effective.

Figure 3 Helpful Strategies and Resources for Remembering a Tai Chi Form

L	Repetition in class
L	Home practice
L	Working with another student in class
L	Handouts
L	Video and Audio recordings of the Form
L	Meeting up with fellow students outside the class
L	Books
L	Students making notes and drawing diagrams
L	Wall poster to use at home
L	Using a mirror
L	Encouraging students to create their own resources
L	Always practising in the same place so that surroundings provide a reference to aid memory
T	In class, using imagination to visualise practising at home without the teacher
T	Naming the moves out loud in a running commentary as students do them in class
T	Building up new moves out of smaller elements and introducing elements of the new moves early in class, refer to them later when introducing the full move
T	Holistic approach to memory, including feelings/emotions and senses
T L	Demonstration by teacher, and students trying out, martial applications
T L	Taking photographs to show progress – increasing confidence and hence memory

L=learning activity T=teaching activity

Figure 4 Action Plan

• Support students to identify their goals and reasons for studying
• Be open, sharing my own experiences of home practice and being an accessible model for students
• Ensuring students know it is OK to make mistakes in home practice
• Encourage students to notice a good time and place for their practice within their own life and lifestyle
• Use a wide variety of activities and resources to engage students in as many ways as possible. Review the list at Figure 3 periodically as a reminder of options.
• Introduce small elements of new material early in the class and return to them later when introducing the new moves
• Ensure sufficient repetition of new moves in class
• Return briefly to new moves at the end of class to allow for 'recovery'
• Programme Planning – spread learning the Yang Short Form over a longer period than 30 weeks to allow more time for repetition and revision
• Keep on sharing ideas with other teachers
• Give the class handout a higher profile by including it in a loose-leaf handbook with other useful information and a place to keep personal notes

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Tables

Table 1 Frequency of home practice

Q4 Do you do your Tai Chi outside the class? If yes, how often?		
	number	%
Occasionally	9	47%
At least once a week	6	32%
At least once a day	1	5%
No, I only do my Tai Chi in class	1	5%
Other *	2	11%
Total	19	100%
skipped question	0	

Table 2 Barriers to home practice

Q6 What, if anything, has got in the way of doing your Tai Chi outside the class?		
	number	%
Lack of a suitable space to practise	2	11%
No time	10	53%
Not being able to remember the movements	4	21%
Concern that I will practise wrongly	4	21%
Something else*	6	32%
Total	19	100%

* 'Something else'

"Family ties which have now gone away. At least that is my excuse."

"Difficult to find a fixed time of day to practise."

"I often practise the early moves, but have found I can't hold my attention on the later moves, so do not always complete the set."

"'No time' suggests that I haven't any time, which is not quite right. 'Other things getting in the way' would be more accurate."

"Doing Tai Chi for a second year has helped my confidence."

"Never remember to do it."

"Laziness! Need to build up habit and incorporate it into life."

Table 3 Ease of remembering Tai Chi Form

Q1 How easy is it for you to remember a Tai Chi Form you are learning?						
For me, remembering a Tai Chi Form I'm learning is	very easy	quite easy	somewhat difficult	very difficult	TOTAL	skipped question
	0	7	11	0	18	1
	0%	39%	61%	0%	100%	
<i>comments on Question 1:</i>						
<i>quite easy, but depends on the moves</i>						
<i>quite easy, second time around</i>						
<i>somewhat difficult, but getting easier</i>						

Table 4 Student answers on helpful methods

Q2 Which of the following, if any, have helped you remember the sequence of moves in the Form?	very helpful	somewhat helpful	not helpful at all	total students who had tried this method	% of respondents who had tried this method**
Books	3	7	1	11	69%
	27%	64%	9%		
Audio recording of instructions	0	1	0	1	7%
	0%	100%	0%		
Video or DVD of the Form	5	6	0	11	65%
	45%	55%	0%		
Handouts	4	6	2	12	82%
	33%	50%	17%		
Repetition in class	18	2	0	20*	100%
	90%	10%	0%		
Practising at home on my own	7	8	0	15	88%
	47%	53%	0%		
Meeting up with fellow students outside the class	2	3	0	5	28%
	40%	60%	0%		
Making my own notes and/or drawing diagrams	0	2	0	2	14%
	0%	100%	0%		
Wall Poster	0	1	0	1	7%
	0%	100%	0%		
Working with another student during the class	5	10	1	16	100%
	31%	63%	6%		
Something else - please describe below	2	0	0	2	
	100%	0%	0%		

* one respondent ticked two boxes on this question so there are more answers (20) than respondents (19)

** respondents who did not answer a question were excluded from the base for these percentages

Table 5 Teachers' answers on helpful methods

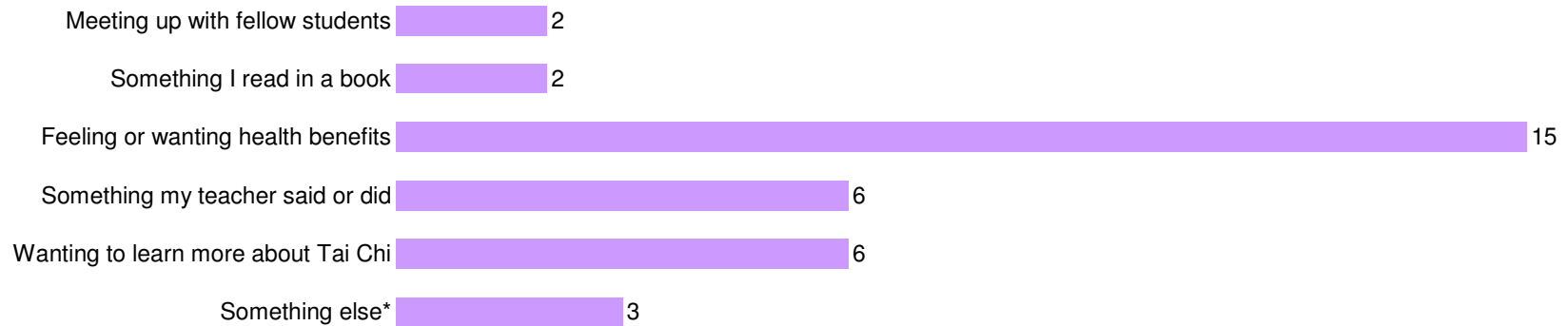
Which, if any, do you find helps your students remember the sequence of tai chi moves in the Form?	number of teachers	comments added
Books	4	
Audio recording of instructions	7	"only for those with visual impairment" "learning disabilities sometimes"
Video or DVD of the Form	5	"people with learning disabilities love to watch the form they are learning"
Handouts	8	"with diagrams" "learning disabilities pictures"
Repetition in class	12	"learning disabilities – routine"
Practising at home	9	"engage carers"
Meeting up with fellow students (practising with peers)	5	
Making notes/drawing diagrams*	2	"people with learning disabilities love names for bones, Chinese words using pictures and charts"
Wall poster**	1	"see above"
Working with another student during class	8	"people with learning disabilities varies"
Something Else		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using '<i>pretend you are at home practising and I'm not here</i>' • Naming the moves which becomes a little '<i>mantra</i>' • Demos of martial applications • Students initiated their own resource in class. One student '<i>spoke</i>' the moves while another '<i>wrote</i>' them and then photocopied notes for the others – 8 Posture Form broken down into 8 paragraphs. • Superimposition in context of other existing or new concepts • learning about an interconnected whole – eg: remembering the '<i>feeling</i>' / emotion. • Using photographs to show progress is encouraging (helps confidence & hence memory) 		

** this was intended to refer to students making their own notes/diagrams but may have been interpreted by teachers as meaning resources they provide*

*** intended to refer to wall poster for use at home, and may have been interpreted as for use in class*

Table 6 Additional comments by students

Q7 Anything else you'd like to add?
<i>"I know that 'no time' is the poorest excuse of all, but it is closest to the truth. I know that I will never really improve until I start putting more into this but whilst my enjoyment of the weekly class outweighs any frustrations at not knowing a certain (few) moves I will continue. I hope that as we pass the point in the sequence at which I joined things will get better as I am repeating moves I should know."</i>
<i>"Must get started again Alison"</i>
<i>"I personally would have preferred to do less of the form and with more repetition of moves to feel like I was getting the hang of it a bit more and hence feel more encouraged. I do however understand the purpose of maybe pushing people outside their comfort zone in order to learn more."</i>
<i>"Alison has taken the class at a steady pace forwards – firmly but with a sense of humour which is so important in any learning process."</i>

Figure 1 What has inspired or motivated you to do your Tai Chi outside the class?

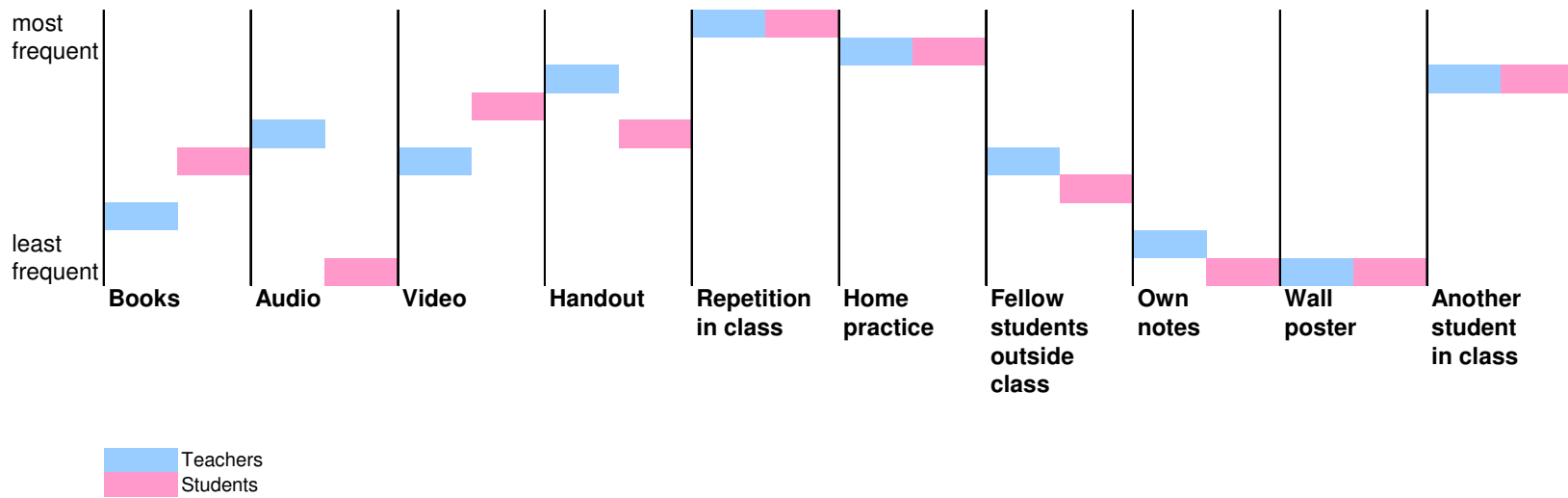
* "I feel mental health benefits."

"The moment: by candlelight, early am/evening beside Ullswater."

"Desire to practice and to catch up with other class members who started earlier"

Figure 2 Helpful Methods for Remembering Form - Teachers and Student's answers compared

(Methods ranked by number of Teachers indicating method helps students and ranked by number of Students saying 'very helpful')



Learning Tai Chi

What works for you?

This research project aims to find out what kinds of support are most effective in helping Tai Chi students remember the Form and what motivates students to do Tai Chi outside the class. Taking part should take only about five minutes and will help other Tai Chi students get effective support.

1. How easy is it for you to remember a Tai Chi Form you are learning?

very easy quite easy somewhat difficult very difficult

For me, remembering a Tai Chi Form I'm learning is

2. Which of the following, if any, have helped you remember the sequence of moves in the Form? Please tick to show how helpful each have been.

very helpful somewhat helpful not helpful at all haven't tried this

Books	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio recording of instructions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Video or DVD of the Form	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Handouts	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Repetition in class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Practising at home on my own	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Meeting up with fellow student(s) outside the class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making my own notes and/or drawing diagrams	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Wall poster



Working with another student during the class



Something else - please describe below



3. If there is something else that has helped you remember the sequence of Tai Chi Form moves - please write below.

4. Do you do your Tai Chi outside the class? If yes, how often?

- Occasionally
- At least once a week
- At least once a day
- No, I only do my Tai Chi in class
- Other (please describe)

5. What, if anything, has inspired or motivated you to do your Tai Chi outside the class? Please say more about your answer at Question 7.

- Meeting up with fellow student(s) outside the class
- Something I read in a book
- Feeling or wanting health benefits
- Something my teacher said or did
- Wanting to learn more about Tai Chi
- Something else (please say more below)

6. What, if anything, has got in the way of doing your Tai Chi outside the class?

- Lack of a suitable space to practise
- No time
- Not being able to remember the movements
- Concern that I will practise wrongly
- Something else (please say more below)

7. Anything else you'd like to add?

Flip Chart Answers from Teachers

Learning Tai Chi
What works?

Which, if any, do you find helps your students REMEMBER the sequence of tai chi moves in the form? Please tick ✓

BOOKS ✓✓✓	
AUDIO RECORDING OF INSTRUCTIONS ✓✓✓	L.D. Summary ✓
VIDEO OR DVD OF THE FORM ✓✓✓	Learning Diagrams ✓ how to watch the form they are receiving. ✓ L.D. Pictures ✓
HANDOUTS ✓✓✓	
REPETITION IN CLASS ✓✓✓	L.D. Routine ✓ engage classes ✓
PRACTISING AT HOME ✓✓	
MEETING UP WITH FELLOW STUDENTS ✓✓✓	(Practising with peers)
MAKING NOTES/DRAWING DIAGRAMS ✓✓	D.S. Love names ✓ For bones, Chinese words using pict + ✓ charts ✓ DS See above.
WALL POSTER ✓✓	
WORKING WITH ANOTHER STUDENT DURING CLASS ✓✓✓	DS ✓ Videos ✓

SOMETHING ELSE →

using "pretend you are at home practicing + I'm not here"

naming the moves which becomes a little "mantra".

Demos of martial applications

Students initiated their own resource in class, one student spoke the moves while another wrote names + non philosophical notes for the others - so posture form broken down into 8 paragraphs, superimposition in context of other existing or new concepts - learning about an interconnected whole - e.g. remembering the 'feeling' / emotion.

Technical Note on Survey Methods

Response and Survey Design Issues

In total 19 Students answered the questionnaire, 6 on paper and 13 through the online survey. Responses could be made anonymously to encourage open expression of views, although some respondents did give their names. The paper questionnaire was made available to students at classes (questionnaires were taken by approximately 12 students), the online version via email (19 invitations). Recipients were also invited to pass the questionnaire on to other students they knew. Because of this, the anonymity of responses, and some overlap between email invitations and class invitations, it is difficult to be precise about the response rate but 19 responses seems an encouraging number.

As the Teachers' poster style questionnaire was available to fill in unsupervised over the course of half a day, it is not certain exactly how many responded but it was in excess of 12 out of the 27 members present at the weekend meeting. Some also gave very interesting and detailed notes of other strategies they use to help their students remember the Form. I have already begun to use some of these suggestions in class.

One difficulty with the teachers' data may have been the blurring in some of the teachers' minds between resources used in class to help learners *perform* movements in the class, and resources and strategies that help *embed the learning in memory*. It is the latter that this research seeks to address. Having individual discussions with teachers may have been a better way to elicit the intended information. An attempt was also made to limit the study to what helps students remember the sequence of moves rather than remember the moves themselves but this distinction was difficult to maintain, especially in the Teacher study, and perhaps not particularly useful since the ability to both remember the moves and remember the sequence are likely to encourage home practice.