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**The Role of Traditional Martial Arts in the Modern Community**

Part 1: Research & Critical Theory

Part 2: Case Study & Empathy in Action

## **Part 1: Research & Critical Theory**

We live in an expanded globalized culture and as such become cultural consumers as well as producers. In this current age of virtual spaces, digital anonymity, information overload, and cultural production, the relationship between traditional martial arts practices, health, and society is more important than ever.

Martial artists are active producers of a shared collaborative culture, and as such engage in and explore the intersections between the body, identity, and community. This act of cultural production creates a shared subjectivity between the role of traditional values, instruction methods, and the goal of the martial arts; to create healthy communities. Although the macroscopic relationship between traditional martial arts practices, health, and society are often presented from a superficial and pop-culture standpoint, martial arts practitioners must work to redefine the role of the martial arts as a responsive tool for community growth. Ultimately the role of the traditional martial arts is to be responsive enough to help develop healthy students and communities by fostering stronger connections to empathy.

Traditional martial arts practices have always sought to encourage and promote holistic health and wellness. Understanding how to communicate with

the body is the first step to understanding how to move closer to nurturing empathy within students. By developing a pedagogical approach that centers the physical body, the martial arts as a discipline is able to utilize kinesthetic movement as a means for exploring and engaging in new concepts and perspectives. *Kinesthesia* refers to sensations of movement informed by the senses such as vision, hearing, touch, as well as internal sensations of muscle tension and body position. Employing physical and instructional techniques such as proprioception, exteroception, and synchronising rhythm; martial arts disciplines utilizes *kinesthesia* or movement as a foundation.

Proprioception is defined as the sensing of one's own position and movement stimuli from within the body through sense receptors in the muscles, joints, tendons, and the inner ear. While exteroception is the detection of environmental events or stimuli through receptors in the eyes, ears, and skin (Longstaff 1996). Synchronizing rhythm refers to the mimicry or copying of one person's bodily movements to enact or react their movements through your own body.

The basic foundational tool for teaching martial arts is synchronising rhythm. In training the lead instructor often mirrors students movements. This way the students can copy the instructors bodily actions directly without having to

transpose an action in their head. Students also utilize proprioception to develop an understanding of spatial awareness, judge distance, as well as hone their balance. Students engage in exteroception by learning and reacting to the environment around them and adjusting their bodily movements based on the information gained through their senses. A student might learn to adjust the way they move across a floor based on the tactical feel of the floor or react to their environment by moving around specific obstacles (Reynolds 2007: 185).

Physicality is an important part of traditional martial arts, however it is only one part of the edification process. Traditional martial arts practices incorporate pedagogical concepts, methods, and philosophies that evolve both mental and emotional wellbeing. In particular kinesthetic movement is highly intertwined with a psychological concept known as embodied cognition. Brian Knoth describes embodied cognition as “what is going on inside the brain integrally depends on what is happening with the body and how it is interacting with its environment,” (Damasio 2008:17). In other words our physical actions, experiences, relationships, sociocultural backgrounds, and history affect our ability to learn and develop as both individuals and as a group.

Neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese describes embodied cognition as “the functional mechanism underpinning *Einfühlung*”, or empathy (Gallese 2008:

776). Empathy explores the idea of projecting one's self onto others in contemplation by peripheral experiences (Lipps 2920, 1923). Through synchronizing rhythm students learn and engage with their bodies and is identified as a pre-empathetic experience. Laying the groundwork to generate deeper empathic ties through the study of kinesthetic empathy.

Kinesthetic empathy describes the ability to experience empathy merely by observing the movements and actions of another human being. Kinesthetic empathy is a key interdisciplinary concept in our understanding of social interaction across creative and cultural practices such as the martial arts. In practice, kinesthetic empathy builds up the students ability to perceive, engage, interpret, and respond to others. However, kinesthetic empathy is far more complex than just "putting oneself in another's shoes". Evan Thompson, a social and clinical psychologist identifies four types of empathy; "affective and sensorimotor"; "active and cognitive"; "mutual self and other understanding" and "moral perception" (Thompson 2007: 387). Encompassed within the martial arts discipline, Thompson's last two types of empathy play the biggest role in students' development. "Mutual self and other understanding" is a social understanding that involves imagining yourself in your place but also understanding *you* as an *other* who accordingly sees *me* as an other to *you*

(Thompson 2007: 398). At this point, children begin to explore and develop a cognitive understanding for other identities, positionalities, and perspectives outside themselves. Often we see colored belt students working towards acting or imagining themselves as a higher rank belt while at the same recognizing that they themselves are a mentor for lower ranked colored belts.

The fourth type of empathy, "moral perception" is the development of the idea and understanding that the *other* is a being who deserves concern and respect (Thompson 2007: 401). At this juncture students not only recognize people as an *other*, but they also begin to associate ideas, feelings, and emotions attached to how we interact and how we *should* interact with other students inside the gym but also outside the gym. Encompassed within the hierarchy of the martial arts gym, moral perception empathy development is heightened when students begin to take on assistant roles. They are now, in part, responsible for another student's development and their actions can and will affect their growth as martial artists.

Traditional martial arts exist in an ever expanding technological world that politicizes and polarizes. We as a society are suffering from an imbalance in our physical, mental, and distinctly our emotional health. New technologies, integrated into our physicality, are challenging and transforming our capacity

for empathy within our everyday lives (Foster 2011: 168-169). As martial artists we must be extremely aware and intentional with how our bodies and the bodies of our students are positioned, presented, experienced, and understood historically, socially, culturally, geographically, and technologically. Empathy is the tool through which we frame these concepts, engage in communication, and how we work to redefine the role of the martial arts as a responsive tool for community growth (Sutton 2007: 32-33). Research alone is not enough, we must take action and integrate empathy into our business structures, our policies, our staffing, and our programming. Full Circle Martial Arts Academy is working towards creating new programming that harnesses the research on empathy, partners it with community engagement practices as a means to develop healthy students and communities.

## **Part 2: Case Study & Empathy in Action**

If we view martial artists as active producers of a shared collaborative culture then we, in part, are responsible for helping shape that culture. Martial arts instructors are tasked with critically recognizing the causes associated with this deficiency of empathy, so that through collaborative community action they can pursue empathetic engagement (Freire 1970: 49). Traditional martial arts practices are embedded with a focus on empathy and can co-create transitional spaces in which empathy is explored, learned, and practiced. It is through this vein that we analyze a new community-based program implemented by Full Circle Martial Arts Academy (Full Circle); Learning Full Circle.

Full Circle operates in the Black Hills region of South Dakota. Originally home to the Lakota Sioux Oyates, the Black Hills region is surrounded on all sides by various sovereign nations, government sanctioned reservations, complex identities, geographies, and histories. Part of the work that Full Circle engages in is to acknowledge the complex heritage of the martial arts in relation to the complex history of the region and the community members that they serve. As Paulo Freire referenced “we do not exist apart from each other, instead we exist in constant interaction” (Freire 1970: 50).



In 2016 Full Circle was invited and contracted by Indian Health Services (IHS) to operate a Taekwondo program on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. This program was financially supported through an IHS suicide prevention grant. The community-based Taekwondo program served over 50 native and non-native youth between the ages of 3-17. The primary programming focus was on primary and secondary school-aged children. However auxiliary programming such as community self-defense, and fitness classes were added after six months.

Ultimately the program closed down after a year due to lack of funding, communication, and assumptions. The failed program propelled Full Circle to think about the ways in which martial arts, as a cultural art form, connect, build empathy, and support healthy communities. They began reviewing their entire business structure, policies, and programming. Asking themselves; who are we currently serving? Who has access to our programs? Who doesn't have access? What barriers are there to access? Could we remove these barriers? If we can't, who could? What assumptions are we making? Do those without access want access? If our programs close down, who would be affected?

In 2019, Full Circle applied for the South Dakota Change Network fellowship and grant. Through this educational fellowship, Full Circle was able to

work collaboratively with change makers across South Dakota, North Dakota, and with the National Arts Strategies team, to evaluate, reframe, and build a more inclusive approach to the martial arts within the Black Hills communities.

A \$5,000 grant was awarded to develop a new community-based program, Learning Full Circle. Learning Full Circle is a martial arts focused juvenile diversion program. This program took two years of intense research, community meetings, youth discussions, partnership negotiations, staff training, and financial planning to implement. What this program allowed Full Circle to do is to investigate our community and identify the gaps and people that we were not reaching. We found that Native youth are incarcerated and placed in juvenile diversion programming at a disproportionation rate to their white counterparts. The recidivism rate of Native youth is twice as high as their white counterparts (Pennington County, SD Interview). Pennington County only offers five educational programs for court mandated youth, none of which are art related, movement related, culture related, or focus on emotional and empathy development.

The program was implemented in January of 2020 and is still in its infancy. Learning Full Circle is a juvenile diversion program that utilizes martial arts training, culture, and community to build empathy, and self-confidence for

Native youth. We partner with community organizations such as; Pennington County Diversion, Allied Arts Fund (scholarship funding assistance), and Lifeways (substance abuse prevention and trauma treatment agency). Through the program and training in the martial arts, Native youth explore kinesthetic movement, develop kinesthetic empathy, establish healthy relationships, and work to create space in which shared culture can be experienced.

Participants are Native high school aged students recommended and referred through Pennington County Juvenile Diversion offices or Lifeways. Martial arts skills are taught through a one-month course where the participants work collaboratively to learn, demonstrate, and test for their first martial arts belt while integrating the three main goals through the learning process. During each class, a trained Martial Arts Instructor and regularly enrolled martial arts students meet and train collaboratively with the referred juvenile diversion students at the Full Circle Martial Arts Academy facility.

The success of the program is measured by a program pre-survey, a program post-survey, training reflection sheets, and designated program guidelines. In addition, Full Circle will partner with Allied Arts Fund, a local non-profit organization that provides advocacy, support, and grant opportunities for arts organizations in the Black Hills region. Allied Arts Fund

administers a program entitled Share-A-Seat. The Share-A-Seat program provides a seat to an art event, workshop, or a scholarship for a senior or a student. Full Circle will utilize the Share-A-Seat program and Allied Arts Fund expertise to provide scholarship funding for participants of the Learning Full Circle program participants who want continued training after program completion.

The Learning Full Circle program is new and still in its infancy. Their goal is to explore and gather data on effective training methods, and to analyze the success of integrating kinesthetic empathy directly into martial arts training. Through programs and processes like the Learning Full Circle program the relationship between traditional martial arts practices, health, and community can be bridged. Ultimately allowing traditional martial arts to be responsive enough to help develop healthy students and communities through empathy.

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