



International[®] Taekwon-Do

Does being an instructor help or hinder our own
training and progression in Taekwon-Do?

How do you know? Pros and cons?

Advice for others?

Essay for 5th Dan Grading

by Duane Meek

*“Soldiers are as strong as the general who leads them, and, in a like manner, students can only excel under an excellent instructor. We cannot expect a bamboo to grow in a field of reeds, nor can we expect to find an outstanding pupil under an unqualified teacher”.*¹

What would happen to Taekwon-Do if students stopped becoming instructors?

Views held by some within our organisation, are that less students are opening clubs and becoming instructors than in previous years, a sentiment that is further reflected in our organisation’s statistics.

Could it be that the reason for this is that some view instructing as hindering their own training and progression?

As an instructor of a newly established club, formed only 2 and a half years ago, I believe that I am in a fortunate position to answer this question.

From training as a white belt and only being concerned with myself, to becoming an assistant instructor of an already established club and to then starting and instructing at a brand-new club, I believe I have a unique view of all aspects of training and instructing, both positive and negative.

In order to first try and answer whether instructing aides or hinders our own progression, I believe we first need to establish how we measure or define progression.

The most obvious choice, I believe, is grading, as it is the ultimate test in Taekwon-Do to determine whether or not an individual has progressed since the last time they were tested and whether or not they meet the requirements of a particular rank to a specific standard.

Using myself as an example, and my preparation for the upcoming grading, for which this essay is a requirement, I can compare it to my last grading.

It is pertinent to note, that I am currently preparing to be tested for 5th Dan while also running and instructing a club two nights a week, compared to the same time 4 years ago when I graded to 4th Dan, whereby I was assisting in an already established club with multiple other black belts and for the most part able to predominantly focus on myself.

While it may not be the most scientific approach, my main analysis was spent comparing the number of extra training sessions attended, outside of my regular club, which became evident very quickly that I had spent significantly more time training at other clubs this time, in contrast to the previous period.

It may seem obvious that I would currently train more outside of my own club as I have no one more senior to learn from, but what was surprising, was just how much extra time was spent training at other clubs in the year building up to 5th Dan, versus the same instance when training towards being tested for 4th Dan.

When reviewing the additional training sessions attended, a requirement to be specified on the grading application, it was observed that I spent an average of 1-2 extra training sessions a week outside of my regular 2 training nights 4 years ago versus 3-4 times a week outside of my own club during the current period.

It is my belief that as well as the aforementioned reason for the increase in additional training, I also credit this additional motivation to train due to a sense of responsibility for not just myself, but I now also hold myself accountable to my students, i.e. I want to perform at my best, not just personally, but I also am aware of how my students may perceive me which creates extra incentive and drive to excel.

The final comparison will come post-grading as it's difficult to relate one example with another when the latter has yet to occur. Combining the additional training and years of instructing however, which was absent prior to being tested for 4th Dan, I believe I am much better prepared for grading than in previous years, evidence that will hopefully be determined in due course however.

So, while some may see instructing as taking up their personal training time, which could be viewed as a negative, I believe that it can also be a positive if one is motivated by the perceived judgement of their students.

Some may also have the opinion that as an instructor, they are focussing on the needs of others rather than themselves, however I believe that there are also many advantages to teaching others.

I consider that as an instructor, one develops a better understanding of fundamental movements over time in order to teach them to others. It highlights any gaps in one's knowledge as we can't teach something if we don't truly understand the movement, purpose, and application behind every technique ourselves.

Additionally, there is an increased justification to attend classes, when one may otherwise have stayed home. As an instructor, we can't just take a night off because we feel tired, unmotivated or mildly unwell for example. There are students depending on us being there so one will inherently miss very few classes, if any.

Understandably however, there are also some disadvantages to being an instructor. The most obvious one was somewhat addressed previously, whereby one may have less training sessions focussed on themselves, particularly if they don't train outside of their own club.

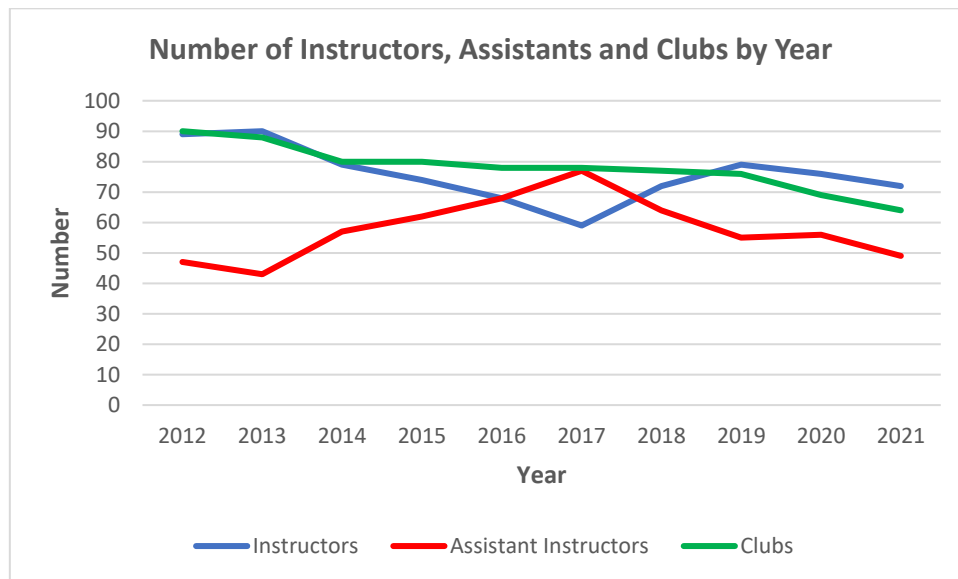
Many instructors may also find that they have no one more senior than themselves at their own club which may negatively impact their own training. This may be because a more junior student may not recognise incorrect or improper techniques for example due to their lack of knowledge of techniques outside of their own syllabus, or else because they feel uneasy about correcting someone more senior, particularly their own instructor.

Finally, some instructors may experience what is referred to as "Imposter Syndrome". This is a belief that one's success or skills aren't legitimately achieved as a direct result of their own effort or competence.

I believe that all of us, both as students and instructors have experienced moments where we doubt our own abilities and I suspect that this may also deter some students from becoming instructors and may also be a contributing factor to the decline in the current number of instructors within our organisation.

As mentioned previously, there is a view within International Taekwon-Do (iTkd), that less students are opening clubs and becoming instructors than in previous years, a fact that it is further backed up by statistics. ²

The graph below illustrates the number of instructors and assistant instructors over a ten-year period, from 2012-2021, as well as the number of active clubs during that same period.



It is possible to interpret this data in many ways, however what is apparent is that for the most part, there has been a steady decline in the number of active clubs and instructors over the past decade, while the number of assistant instructors stayed about the same despite increasing for the first half of the decade and peaking around 2017 before also steadily decreasing.

I am sure there are likely many contributing factors to all of this, and I believe that this could be examined and debated many times over, however I wanted to simply highlight that there are less instructors today than we have had in previous years.

iTKD started with approximately 90 instructors at the beginning of the decade and now has only 72 as of the end of 2021 and it's also worth noting that we also have a lot less clubs now too.

My understanding is that some clubs have amalgamated over time so I would expect with the amalgamation and closing of clubs, that most instructors would join other clubs and continue to teach if it's what they enjoy doing and see instructing as a positive, but as is becoming evident, it seems that many may not see it that way.

To summarise, I believe that there are both pros and cons to being an instructor and that it can both benefit and incumber one's own progression in Taekwon-Do. Whether it aides or obstructs one's own development is purely up to the individual and whether or not they see it as an opportunity and take advantage of that prospect to their own benefit or whether they envisage it as a threat towards their own training progression and choose instead to avoid it and focus purely on oneself.

In response to the question posed earlier as to what would happen to Taekwon-Do if students stopped becoming instructors, it seems apparent that without instructors, Taekwon-Do would eventually cease to exist without anyone to learn from, as with a reduction in the number of clubs and instructors, it's inherent that it also would prompt a decrease in the number of students.

My suggestion for anyone contemplating becoming an instructor is to first talk to other instructors about their personal experiences and to weigh up the positives and negative highlighted above before making any decisions and for anyone that is committed to becoming an instructor or who is already instructing, I would give the following advice:

Join in where possible. Do not simply tell students what to do but demonstrate and participate yourself at every opportunity. Do the warmups, exercises, line work and drills etc along with your students.

Obviously, you will need to observe your students to ensure they are performing movements correctly, but also practice regularly alongside your students. As well as benefiting from the cardio exercise and the extra practice, you'll also gain the respect of your students as they'll see you are also joining in with them and can put into practice what you teach.

If possible, stay behind after training or arrive early and practice in your own Do Jang. Many of us don't have an ideal training environment at home, so make use of the extra space when you get the chance.

Practice outside of your own club. Either at home on your own (if possible), or ideally at other clubs with others of similar or preferably higher rank than yourself. They will be able to provide feedback based on their knowledge of your patterns and fundamental movements, that you may not even be aware you may be performing incorrectly.

Finally, and perhaps the most import, have fun. Although we practice and teach a serious, military based martial art, we all continue training in Taekwon-Do because we enjoy it and in recent times there have been many more children joining our organisation which changes the dynamics of class structure and teaching substantially. Being an instructor has many benefits and rewards, but it is also a big commitment not be taken lightly.

References:

1 - *General Choi Hong Hi – Page 46, Encyclopaedia of Taekwon-Do, Fifth Edition 1999*

2 - *Data export from iTKD database supplied by International Taekwon-Do Computer Consultant, Mr Breen, which contains on the number of clubs, instructors and assistant instructors over a 10 year period from 2012-2021. Raw data also supplied with essay which has been collated by myself into chronological order and sorted.*