

Ranking Systems In Martial Arts

By Mark Spence

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Recently, a student at my school met with his friend, whom he had trained with previously at another school. When my student mentioned that at his new school, (Chi Sau Club), there was no grading system, his friend, who trains at a very rank orientated kwoon, asked “How do you know how good you are then?” That question illustrates a major philosophical difference between rank and non-rank schools.

The vast majority of martial arts organizations have gradings and rank in order to measure and indicate the level of skill attained by their members. Regular examinations check the progress of students, and determine whether they are ready to move to the next level of learning and difficulty. Rising to the next rank can be a powerful motivation. Students are keen to learn new techniques and are, justifiably, proud when they receive a new belt or badge to mark their increasing seniority and knowledge of the system.

Beginning my own training in a ranking system school, I remember watching senior students playing sticking hands and longing for the day that I could learn such a cool trick. I admired high-ranking instructors and hoped that eventually I might climb to such heights.

After a couple of reasonably intensive years of training I reached the equivalent of that schools black belt. I was now an instructor! Students were required to adopt a stance whilst I was teaching and address me as Instructor Mark. A bow was also mandatory. I was 26 years old at the time and, having left school at 16 to become a musician, this was my first experience of having rank within an organization. I am sure my chest was often puffed up. I may have even strutted a little. Along with my swelling head, I also noticed a change in the junior students. They seemed easier to control during chi sau sessions, and would move that bit further when holding a pad against my strikes. It was as if my newly elevated rank had instantly improved my skill level. That instructor’s sash had given me superpowers!

Pondering this change, a niggling thought entered my mind. I knew that my skill level had not jumped that much, if at all. Something else was happening. The students now perceived me as an instructor. Any martial artist wants the instructors at his or her school to be good. Most schools promote themselves as superior to the competition, and students naturally want to believe that they are at the right place. For a school to be good, the instructors must also be. Inevitably the students, either consciously or not, start to act out what they would like to be true.

Flushed with the elation of having achieved institutional status, I tried to put these thoughts out of my mind. I really just wanted to enjoy a little adulation. But a disquieting realization crept in. The students were helping me to look good, so that they could feel better about themselves and their training. My superpowers were really the martial arts equivalent of the emperor’s new clothes.

Ok, one could take a pragmatic approach. Everyone is happy, enthusiastic about his or her training, the hierarchy is preserved and everyone knows their place. What is the problem? The problem is

that there is an impediment to the transfer of knowledge. Junior students are not allowed to be better than their seniors, ever. Nothing is treated realistically as that would be a direct challenge to the senior teaching. We get back to the question asked of my student. How does one know how good a practitioner is? Apparently from the badge or belt they are wearing.

If examinations were fair, and all students the same in terms of both talent and dedication, then maybe rank would be a reasonable indication. However, anyone who has trained in martial arts knows just how wide the range of ability within one rank can be. As well, much as it may shock some people, examining instructors are often biased or uninformed when it comes to assessing their students.

Eventually I lost my love for that precious badge. It seemed to get in the way of learning. I spent the next 18 years stubbornly refusing to participate in another grading. Unfortunately, my attitude may have alienated me from some of the other instructors, but I was not being precious, (in my eyes anyway!). My stance was not an attack against the school hierarchy, although I am sure it may have been perceived as such. I merely wished to study kung fu as honestly as possible. Interestingly, the most skilled instructor in that school, also had the same attitude, and remained at one rank for well over 20 years. Ironically, I always respected him for that. Much more so than if he had risen through the ranking system. To be fair, he has recently jumped up a few levels in the last couple of years. But I am sure that he does not believe that his actual skill has leaped so suddenly and belatedly.

Even if rank was a reliable indicator, the point that I wish to make remains. The respect engendered by the imposing of seniority through rank, stifles a student's ability to learn. I'll give another example:

A couple of years ago, a friend of mine traveled overseas to attend a very good martial arts school. He had heard stories about the level of skill there and was, with good reason, excited about beginning his training. One of the first people he trained with was introduced as a senior. This was a non-ranking school, but the concept of seniority can have the same effect as rank on many students. I am not implying that by merely eliminating rank, the problem outlined above can be solved. Anyway, after rolling with the senior, my friend spoke to his training mates back home about the amazing force that this bloke had, and how heavy his hands could become. Knowing that his new classmate had many more years training, and knowing the, (well deserved), reputation of the school, he felt that he had come across a much greater skill level than his own.

After a few weeks my friend got to know his senior better. He realized that he did not really like the guy's character, and started to see him as boastful, rather than skilful. When they rolled just a few weeks later, my friend completely dominated his senior. He found that his early assessment became entirely untrue, once he got over his preconceptions about what skill level his classmate should be.

As I said, this was a non-ranking school. My point is that if a definite rank had been enforced, along with all the hierarchical trappings that infect many schools, my friend would not have had the chance to train at his real ability. That would have been perceived as rebelling against the established order. I can think of many incidents where seniors have beaten up on juniors when the skill level of the student was enough to test the senior. That kind of thing does not help with the transfer of knowledge and skill that should be the object of any martial arts school.

So what to do? I have already stressed that I do not think that merely eliminating rank will prevent the conundrum presented here. However, I do believe that the more emphasis placed on rank, badges, belts, grand uniforms and the military enforcement of hierarchy, the worse the problem will be.

For those seniors who feel unable to drop their precious badges or belts, I have an alternative that should fulfill their need for recognition. Capes! Large and bright, everybody recognizes superman, don't they? Maybe a little prostration from juniors could also be mandatory. Shouting at those in lower grades can also relieve stress wonderfully. I have often seen this, especially from instructors who, possibly, do not have much personal power in the real world. For the rest, spend some time in a non-rank school. It can be quite liberating, and educational.

- Mark Spence, 2008

