

In the beginning was ENIAC, and there was only one. Then there were a few in awesome isolation behind glass walls at centralized facilities being served by studious folk in white coats. These few folk were the possessors of arcane knowledge, and many were the users and user groups that queued up to access this resource and learn the strange incantations of Job Control Language. Then there were regional computing centers linked to these, each in turn surrounded by their clusters of dumb terminals, and all was well. Then users started to talk with each other, first using the links between the large resources, and finally directly, with smarter terminals, one to the other, and the Internet was a reality. Soon, there was peer-to-peer cooperative computing with each user having the equivalent of a super-ENIAC at their personal disposal, and the glass rooms filled with dust and anguish. At last, those resources in the glass room realized that there was life after the arrival of networks. They changed, upgraded and redefined themselves and then became openly available resources for all, and no longer required exclusivity.

The point of the above tale is that the exact parallel seems to be taking place in the karate world. In the beginning, there were only a few possessors of this arcane knowledge. They, like ENIAC, were not all that magnificent when seen in hindsight, but when viewed with our early eyes, seemed godlike. In order to attempt to insure the transmission of “correct” knowledge, control was exerted from the center in increasing rings (central dojo, regional dojo, branch dojo, etc.), with as much authority centralized as possible, since, of course, everyone outside of the central dojo was really only beginning. This was relatively efficient, and so became the standard, even after many in the outer rings had gained as much if not more experience, training and knowledge that those at the center had when they started the system. The downfall of the arrangement came about because the modern Western society is extremely fluid, and individuals travel much more, and more widely, than in former times and places, and will happily compare notes. Blind filial piety is not a universally revered concept in the West. People soon realized that they knew not only everything that their former “masters” knew, but in fact knew more, had analyzed it better and no longer needed to be subservient. This has had both good and bad effects. In exact analogy to the Internet, there is now unparalleled access to information, and the freedom to obtain it for those who want to and are willing to put in the work. There is also a proliferation of “noise” (to speak charitably) amongst the “signal,” and the consumer must remain vigilant.

What does this imply for organizational karate? One can take the ENIAC vs. Internet extremes as 2 models: a) the pyramid/membership model and b) the networked service company model. To date, and traditionally, martial arts organizations and federations have followed the pyramid scheme model. I use the term “pyramid scheme” with full knowledge of its pejorative content, and will paint the picture as starkly black and white as I can in order to highlight the differences. The usual history is something like this: some senior student of an instructor or a set of instructors opens a school somewhere, gathers students and slowly promotes them based on some inherited or assumed authority. This person’s students eventually leave and some of them, if ranked at “black belt”, will open another school. They will feel inadequate to promote their own students and invite their own teacher to do the promotions. Now the pyramid has 2 layers. This continues for several more layers. Eventually the demands on the top person become such

that they conflict with another job. Accordingly, the top person makes his hobby his job, and inevitably seeks to maximize his income. Now we have all the elements of the usual pyramid scheme in place. The result is that maintenance of the pyramid becomes more important than what the pyramid was originally supposed to accomplish - the transmission of real knowledge as widely as possible and the certification of technical competence in as efficient a manner as possible. What we get instead are policies that try to isolate the pyramid from competition, denigrate all possible competition if it can be seen to exist, and insure the revenue flow by assessing a whole raft of fees from a captive membership. We all know the catalog of these fees: initiation fees, annual membership fees for individuals, annual membership fees for schools (although how a school/gym can be a member of anything without the individuals being members is beyond me), graduated test fees (why graduated?), rank registration fees (which is a second fee for the same test, again usually graduated), and so on. Hustling new members insures the revenue stream; there is no way to get your competence assessed by the seniors in this type of organization without becoming a "member". The underlying assumption was that an individual must be a member of an organization in order to have "valid" rank. The corollary of this assumption is that when an organization grants rank, the grantee somehow "represents" the organization from that moment on. This last point is the justification given for extensive and invasive background checks of "character." This usually results in requirements that incoming individuals with rank in "that" pyramid be forced to start over from the bottom of "this" pyramid, thus producing the greatest number of fees. Most of the time in pyramid schemes, rank is the marker for power within the pyramid, as well as a correlate of income stream. There is an obvious drive to gain rank and thus administrative power by rising in the pyramid, to get the most money for the least work. While this is good if very aggressive capitalism, it can result in a feudal and coercive (monopolistic) structure with no upwards information flow and rule by arbitrary decree. One result is the drive towards dynastic schisms, splitting the pyramid. But the worst result is that those who do the lion's share of the real work of transmitting the martial art - the local usually low ranked teachers - benefit least, while those who shuffle papers and occasionally show up to provide tests take home all the fees.

It was not always like this. In Okinawa, karate teachers were not arranged into stylistically pure hierarchical organizations in the early days. They didn't "own" their students. There are sufficient tales of them sending a student off to another teacher to learn that teacher's specialty. They also trained with each other, and traveled at times to China to acquire other ideas. In a sense, they embodied the Internet model of organization: a communication network of peers and associates rather than a governing hierarchy. Yet, even the Internet has standards committees; otherwise, the domain name system for web addresses would collapse. How can this be enabled in the karate world? Let us take in contrast to the above, a second organizational model that does not hustle "members," but provides a defined service or services for a fee. These services in the martial arts context are relatively few in number, in fact only 2: first to provide certified examiners to test and document technical competence, and second to provide certified teachers upon request. This type of organization may also host some fee-based networking efforts to link the community it serves in the form of supporting "user groups." Members of the service company are few and restricted, and the company itself

expands only if the workload demands it. Anyone can buy the services from the company irrespective of any other arrangements or affiliations.

For the dojo owner, this augurs a radical redefinition and empowerment that might seem frightening at first. If the illusion that the head of an organization is no more the font of all supreme knowledge, what does it mean to think of oneself as an organizationally affiliated dojo owner or instructor? The very term “branch dojo” implies a pyramidal organization with some form of central control. With a network-centric view, the entire vertical structure collapses, and one is left standing in the rubble, feeling both lost and alone. For some, this reversion to personal responsibility for not only one’s own training, knowledge and advancement, but also that for one’s students will be intolerable. Their recourse may be simply to ignore the situation, and continue to act as if the pyramid existed, taking no initiative, and looking always to some single individual for guidance. Whether they succeed and prosper or simply fade away will depend on the nature of their relationship with both their “master” and with their students. For those who adopt the freedom wholeheartedly, it means that they can finally associate with whomever they wish, making such arrangements as seem good to them, changing as needed to fit their evolving interests. For the individual student, it also augurs a revolution in how one defines oneself – no longer in terms of a single transmission lineage or affiliation, but in terms of a web of influences uniquely synthesized into a personal karate method that will have strong stylistic influences, but is not bound by any one style.

If this stylistic freedom becomes the norm, how is it possible to develop a certification method that can reassure a potential student as to an individual’s competence? This is the same problem as seen in the computer world, and has been answered with the GNU public license system. In a world where the basic “code” is open to inspection by everyone, and signed by the authors, honesty is built in from the beginning, rather than bolted on by an after the fact or implied certification. One’s karate training history and the quality of one’s performance (both personal and in the quality of students produced) should be open for inspection. In the commercial world, this is done by companies such as UL (Under-writer Laboratories) or CU (Consumers Union). In other words, a karate company could issue a certificate that states, in essence, that on this particular date, this particular person fulfilled that company’s technical requirements for x rank. The receiver of such a certification would not represent the company in any way, nor would there be any residual obligations in either direction. Further, this kind of company could issue training seminar attendance certificates along the line of continuing education systems in the medical fields. Some organizations already do this with training / rank “passports” that document an individual’s history and experience. In this way, the company itself would have a clean and clear focus, as well as a built in quality control: it must provide valuable services to survive. Further, it would likewise have no coercive method available to maintain its revenue stream, i.e. it would be honest by design, rather than by assertion. This kind of company may fulfill the ideal of a politics free martial arts network facilitator providing teaching and certification to those who no longer could handle the existing coercive organizations. In a way, the entire evolution of the karate industry has parallels in the political world to the imposition of centralized totalitarian communism following World War 2, subsequently followed by the revolt and rise of free

market capitalism. In politics, there were precedents that the free market could work. In karate, it is, however, radical and has never been tried before. Organizations like SRSI, ATAMA and ISOK are such experiments. Only time will indicate their success or failure.

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