

H. Allen Brizee – Research Areas

My research areas include rhetoric, composition, mixed research methodologies, and professional writing (specifically, user-centered theory and usability). I'm interested in classical rhetoric, modern and postmodern rhetoric and how we can use all these theories together to teach critical reading, thinking, and writing to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as adult learners. My interests in composition pedagogy span all of the approaches to teaching writing: classical rhetoric, common sense realism, expressionist, cognitive, epistemic, post-process, and workplace writing. And before I'm labeled a jack of all trades, master of none, I should probably clarify my goals. I'm interested in how teachers of writing can use *all* of these approaches to help students read, think, and write critically in college writing and in the workplace.

To explore a fun analogy between combining all the areas of writing pedagogy and Chinese gung Fu, read on...

The Style of No Style: Writing Pedagogy and Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune Do

What does writing pedagogy have to do with Chinese Gung Fu and one of the most famous practitioners of martial arts? Perhaps nothing. But let's play. To answer the question above, we first need to look at Chinese Gung Fu (or Kung Fu), how it began, developed, and how Bruce Lee turned the world of martial arts upside down with a simple, common sense proposition.

A Very Brief History of Chinese Gung Fu

Though fighting styles and fight training certainly existed in China before 527 CE, it was during this time (as legend has it) that the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma moved from India to China "...to spread Buddhism..." and develop the first arts of Shoaling Gung Fu (Shaolin Society). The chaotic, and often deadly, political situation in China at the time spurred a vigorous interest in personal combat and self defense. In addition, studying Gung Fu was a way to achieve inner peace, enlightenment, and fitness. Gung Fu was not viewed in the same way it is today, in many contexts, as a way to burn the energy of hyperactive kids or beat up someone. For the Shaolin monks, studying Gung Fu was a complete spiritual endeavor.

When Shaolin Buddhism spread throughout China, the popularity (and necessity) for learning Gung Fu grew as a way for the monks, and their allies, to defend themselves against local warlords and the dynastic powers maneuvering for influence and control. Fractures in China's dynasties, and the vast distances between Shaolin temples, led to the development of different styles of Gung Fu. The most noteworthy of these regional differences is the split between northern and southern fighting styles. Northern styles use more of an aggressive, open technique and kicks, while southern styles stress defense by incorporating shorter stances and punches.

Differences between fighting styles due to regional separation were complicated by varying styles within the Shaolin techniques based on the specific approaches to combat. These approaches imitate the movements, temperaments, and fighting behavior of the following animals: tiger, crane, leopard, snake, and dragon.

Fallen monks, to make money and gain prestige, would often open schools of Gung Fu. The conflict between these schools flourished; they competed to see which fighting form was best.

The rivalry between schools was fierce. The stakes were high when masters of different styles clashed, and duels were sometimes to the death. Clans, adhering to different philosophies and fighting techniques, competed for influence. Also, a school's income could be increased by enrolling students interested in learning the best fighting styles. Therefore, the secrets of fighting techniques were guarded closely. So it was that the deep-seeded competition between the different schools of Gung Fu came about. Flash forward two thousand some years...and if you would, please imagine some of the similarities between the competing schools of Gung Fu and the antagonism between competing techniques of writing pedagogy...the clashing masters on stage at Cs, kicking and punching, but not with fists or feet, but with words and rhetoric. Now to Bruce Lee...

Bruce Lee's Revolutionary Proposal

Bruce Lee (b. 1940, San Francisco, USA) began his formal martial arts training in Wing Chun, a technique based on the southern styles of Shaolin Gung Fu. He excelled in Wing Chun and gained fame practicing under master Yip Man. But as Bruce aged, he grew dissatisfied with the closed, limiting forms of Wing Chun. His personal philosophy, as well as his ideas of personal combat, moved him to search for freer, more flexible approaches to life and training. And so he began to develop Jeet Kune Do, which he described as the "...style of no style."

Bruce realized the limitations of adhering to closed forms, such as tiger or crane, when faced with a free-flowing, chaotic combat situation. He also saw the limitations in philosophies that stick to set ideals or preconceived notions unable to view different situations as they are, at the moment. The ability to remain flexible and draw on all you have learned to respond to the challenges of the moment is central to Jeet Kune Do. Problems came when he started to publicize these views. Traditional followers of the deeply valued closed forms of Gung Fu criticized Bruce, often attacking him with words and kicks, for mixing methods, for analyzing the shortcomings of the individual fighting forms publicly, and for teaching western students these "heretical" ideas. But despite the resistance to Jeet Kune Do, Bruce adhered to the simple, common sense proposition, 'why can't we use what is available to us to best overcome the challenges at hand?'

Important to remember is that Bruce did not develop a new style of Gung Fu. Rather, he realized the limitations of the closed forms and began incorporating techniques from all the schools in his methods. In addition, Bruce started using techniques adapted from forms of combat outside Chinese Gung Fu: western boxing, fencing, wrestling, Taekwondo, Silat, Jujitsu, Karate, etc. When facing an opponent, you can imagine how confusing and effective this sort of mixed method would be. Bruce also realized that each of his students came to him with unique abilities and shortcomings. He knew that teaching students a set form, based on the idea that the one style and all its moves was the "best," could never work to fully prepare people for every situation:

Bruce Lee recognized the fact that what works for one individual may not necessarily work for another. This is why Lee did not want Jeet Kune Do to be described as a style, since styles tend to partialize and freeze combat, which is alive. The student is liberated from any style and given the freedom to search out what works best for him or her. (Jeet Kune Do)

Wrap Up

In order for this tale to work, you need to accept at least four premises:

First, that the comparison between Chinese Gung Fu, its philosophical search and fighting styles, is fitting for a discussion of writing and writing pedagogy (you may find it too combative or oppositional unless you consider the search for peace Buddhism advocates);

Second, that the analogy of the competing styles of Gung Fu and competing methods of writing pedagogy (and the institutions championing individual approaches) is effective;

Third, that my ideas of mixing writing pedagogies works with my discussion of Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune Do;

Fourth, that the possibility of many truths exists for any given situation, and that a good way to help students face these varying writing situations is to use a mixed method technique combining all the writing pedagogies. In order to do this, however, we must take a step back and look at writing objectively (also a move suggested by Bruce Lee regarding fighting).

My point is that the solution to a very serious problem facing rhetoric, composition, and professional communication today may be diffused by considering the possibility that one single approach might not be the answer. In postmodernity, we must consider this. We must move toward a more flexible stance in teaching writing. We must consider that students come to us with complex and varying needs and expectations, that the challenges they will in the future are equally complex, and that they will need a flexible understanding of thinking and writing to overcome these challenges. I believe this is very similar to the philosophies of Jeet Kune Do.

In addition, rather than having isolated voices yelling at each other from a distance, we now have entire programs solidified around a single philosophical approach (tiger style?, crane style?, etc.). The potential damage this sort of strategy could have on our field cannot be underestimated. The childhood spats that led to the theory wars of the 70s/80s have grown up into adult-sized fistfights with far-reaching and possibly damaging consequence in our field. Peer-reviewed journals, conferences, and textbooks that disparage one approach while championing another are all outcroppings of these conflicts. We now risk a fracturing of rhetoric, composition, and technical writing not unlike the break between English and rhetoric/communication that left both fields weak. We must not allow this to happen.

This, essentially, is my position: students will face any number of possible writing and thinking situations during their time in college and in their lives after they graduate. In order to prepare them for these many challenges, we must teach them about the different types of thinking and communication we use in our personal lives, school, the workplace, and in civic engagement: introspective narratives, academic analysis papers, poems, memos, and technical communication. Therefore, I believe it's our duty to teach students using all the writing pedagogies; this includes these often-criticized overgeneralizations: expressivist (Platonic), pragmatic (neo-Aristotelian/Quintilian), cognitive (Flower, Hayes, et al.), poststructural/cultural/critical studies (Berlin, Bartholomae, Marx, etc.). In other words, what I propose is the Jeet Kune Do of writing pedagogy. And how do we do this? Walk on...

I teach first-year composition using a lot of meta discussion on thinking and writing to provide students with as much context and options as possible regarding knowledge making, composition, and argument. This is the objective technique I touched on above. Have I perfect this approach? Nope. Do I have more work to do? Yup. But for now, we start out the semester with a solid base in Greek/Roman rhetoric and then move into other types of writing, such as personal reflection, process-based revision, and yes, even cultural/critical theory. I call this rhetoricS and composition because we approach the course with the idea that many types of rhetorics exist and that part of our job as thinkers and writers is to observe the situation and decide what type of thinking system and writing approach best fits the needs of the moment (much like the flexible, objective observation called for in Jeet Kune Do).

During the course, we talk about the different types of writing my students have done and what pedagogical theory this writing might fall into. Is this perfect? Of course it isn't. As soon as we establish categories, we find examples that either don't fit or that could fit in multiple categories at once. Categories leak, but at least this exercise gives students a sense of the different types of thinking, writing, and knowledge-making they have done, will do in the course, and will be expected to do in college and after they graduate. We must do the best we can to address the multiple learning needs of our large number of students. There is no way we can figure out the "best" approach to teaching writing for every student for every instructor at every institution for every writing event. We need to embrace all the pedagogies to teach our students to think and write in the varying types of situations they may face. In short, it's time to look past the limiting forms of one style and begin working with an amalgam of all styles, so that we begin teaching "...the style of no styles."

Work Cited

David Gallahar's Gung Fu Institute
<http://www.gungfuinstitute.com/jeetkunedo.htm>

Jun Fat Jeet Kune Do
Symbol: <http://www.jkd.com.hk/Eng/>

Shaolin Society
<http://www.shaolin-society.co.uk/index2.php>