

MONDAY MOTIVATOR!

DIFFERENTIATION AND TAI CHI INSTRUCTION

By Linda Peyser

From 2006 to 2013, Linda Peyser was a middle school principal in the Middle Country School District. During her tenure as a principal, she often seized opportunities to provide staff development in the form of short articles aimed at specific curriculum or instructional topics. Inspired by the methodology of her Tai Chi instructor Laoshi Laurince McElroy, the article "Differentiation and Tai Chi Instruction" was written to demonstrate a practical example of meeting the learning needs of a diverse population of students. Ms. Peyser was a student of Water Tiger's Tuesday evening public class at Sachem Public Library (Holbrook, NY USA) from 2005 until 2010 when her responsibilities as a principal of a Long Island public school restricted her ability to attend the offering. After she retired, she returned to the room in August of 2013 for Water Tiger's Monday morning class in the same venue, where she continues today.

Several weeks ago I decided to chronicle how my Tai Chi instructor, Laoshi Laurince McElroy teaches. I am enrolled in a class of twenty odd adults of post college age or above. All twenty of us have our individual skills level. Some of the twenty began with Laurince five years ago and have continued. Some, like me, have been with him the past 2 ½ years. Others are what I call the transients – adults who sign up for an 8 class session, attend the first two classes, and are never seen again. For the most part, the classes are well attended, but there are the students like me, whose jobs and real life preclude them from perfect attendance. So, we have to make up for lost classes as we go.

When I first looked at joining the program, Laurince really had envisioned the current program as only having one level of student – advanced. The flyer for Tai Chi registration pretty much said so. So, while I really wanted to enroll years ago, I thought I wouldn't qualify since I had no experience whatsoever. However, once I took some classes in a local studio in my neighborhood, I mustered enough courage to sign-up. The added incentive to do so was that my local instructor left the studio and was not replaced.

I will never forget the first night I attended Laurince's class. I was petrified. Although I had some conversance with the Form, I felt like I had come from another planet. While students moved around me with silent gracefulness, I demonstrated how directionally challenged and clumsy I could be. Of course, I wasn't the only "newbie;" several other adults shared my lack of experience and physical dexterity as well.

That night the less able muddled through with the help of Laurince, his assistant, and other students in the class who assured us that we would learn just as they had. And we did. Laurince also provided us with visuals and written directions for the various postures. In addition, his website is available if we need to see a demonstration. Laurince also suggested some references, in particular, [The Complete Idiot's Guide to Tai Chi and Qigong](#) by Bill Douglas to further our understanding (You can stop laughing now!).

Slowly, session after session, more and more adults with little or no experience began entering class. That's when Laurince recognized that he had to come up with a more effective mode of instruction, which he now refers to it as "the studio model." What it really means is that Laurince had to differentiate instruction.

One session runs for 8 weeks; each 1½-hour session begins with twenty minutes of large group engagement. We begin with a group exercise which Laurince refers to as sets. Laurince leads us in various "postures" of these exercises. The sets change after each 8 week session, but during any one session we are essentially learning and practicing the same skills.

With regard to the opening of class, Laurince sometimes defers to his assistant Francesca, but for the most part he leads and instructs us in the sets. Prior to beginning a set, he cautions us to perform the exercises within a range of motion that is comfortable and healthy for us as individuals. After each set of exercises, he gives us the opportunity to ask questions or make observations. He also takes opportunities to critique our performance as a group and will sometimes make individual corrections silently without interrupting the flow of the exercises.

Once the exercise set is completed, we have 20 – 30 minutes of work time before the break. Laurince sometimes divides the class into two distinct groups, sometimes three. One group is always comprised of the newcomers, the group who has to learn the fundamentals. The rest of us are instructed to create small groups and work on sections of the Form together. Sometimes Laurince's directions are very specific as to what movements we are to practice or how we should be grouped. Other times he leaves us to work on sections of the Form that are particularly challenging to us. On the nights that Francesca assists, Laurince has her work with the beginners to start off the work session. Then, he circulates among the smaller groups. He watches each group, offers critiques of what he sees, and often assists students in body position. When Laurince notes common issues, he stops us and demonstrates the correct form. When he is especially impressed with our performance, he announces that too. As Laurince moves from group to group, he gives us students the opportunity to ask questions as well as make observations of our own. At some point, he switches responsibilities with Francesca and she joins the more advanced students. Then, he works with the newcomers. Even when Laurince is teaching solo, he can still monitor the groups while working with the beginners. He gives the beginners a skill or movement to practice while he circulates among the other groups.

Beginners who feel ready to move on are always encouraged to join their more advanced peers; those of us who would like a review of the basics or a specific movement can go to the newcomer group. In that way the class remains fluid. Students can move in and out of any of the groups to suit their levels of comfort.

Prior to the break, Laurince usually explains how the last 30 minutes of class will go. Sometimes we continue to work in small groups. If it is the third class of the eight-week session, we have a group meditation session. If not, Laurince may choose to have us review a Form from some prior eight-week "journey" as he calls each session. In those instances, we are all invited to participate in the review, but if we can't, then we can continue working on the Form from the current session. Then, the last five to eight minutes of class concludes with ten breathing exercises.

Last week, I asked Laurince how many different levels of skill he would say his current students demonstrate and his response was, "Twenty levels for twenty students!" That's when I told him that his studio sessions were an excellent example of differentiated instruction. He thanked me for the compliment and then followed with, "Now, what does that mean?"

Laurince, who has taught many training courses in the corporate world, admitted that he had never heard that terminology. He was very pleased to know that what he thought was just good common sense methodology was actually an effective educational practice. I am also very pleased that he is my Laoshi as well!

