The Karate Kid in the Classroom: English, Learning and the ‘tranversal contents’
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Abstract
We deal with a requirement of the Educational Reform to ‘traverse’ all knowledge we teach with the contents specified in point VI of the Law, namely, the attitudes & values that foster a balanced, ‘whole’ personality in learners. We propose film-viewing in class of an American teenager cult movie which has enjoyed continued popularity since first screened in 1984. We will examine it from psychological, cultural, philosophical perspectives & will reflect upon the film structure which consists of the progressive stages of a learning process. Although participants are expected to be familiar with the film, key scenes will be shown as reminders.

Framework
The latest Education Law require teachers to plan their academic activities within a concept framework based on point VI of the Law whereby the school has to foster students’ wholeness as a ‘person’ and a citizen, to balance intellectual with ethical development, and to do this without encroaching upon the learners’ freedom. The contents necessary to that end must, in the very words of the law, ‘traverse’ all abilities and knowledge imparted at school. And that is how the notion of Transversal Contents appears in the EGB curricula.
These contents have been in turn organized in CBC (Common Basic Contents) in different groups depending on whether they focus on person/values/social norms/ general attitudes, etc.
We teachers are expected to seek out issues that act as didactic organizing principles so that students can make sense of the learning proposed. And they will do so by means of a personal organization (and assimilation) of these contents. We are also expected to be creative enough as to shift the subject’s
concept from the one we have been taught to that which is required today where contents are interrelated. This makes interdisciplinary work a must.

We have to make values and attitudes into contents to be taught. This calls for planning, achievable goal-setting, some adequate criteria to measure achievement, the design of a suitable methodology and the like.

In the past we were taught supposedly universal values that went largely un questioned. Nowadays globalisation confronts us with alternative visions of reality. The prevalent notion of equality includes also that of plurality. Hence the urge for material complex enough to cater for this plurality, and appealing enough to make of this kind of work a pleasant and fruitful experience for everybody concerned.

The work on clarification of values, self-regulation, moral dilemma, role-playing, role-model should be based on the metacognitive analysis of attitudes and norms that rule students’ behaviour. Not only must school be asked to teach ‘useful’ things but also try and bring up more reflexive persons who think before acting and fulfill themselves while trying to make a better society.

In the specific field of language teaching, all this implies a choice of material which, as in the film we propose to study here, the linguistic dimension is completed and eventually superseded by the significance of other dimensions, such as the logical significance (which allows for interdisciplinary work with other subjects such as Music, Geography, History, Sports, etc), the psychological significance (which deals with a specific period of human growth & its corresponding interests, in this case adolescence) and the sociological significance (that refers to the teenager and his/her problems of adjustment to the environment).

Karate Kid, the film.

I would like to question briefly the criteria for the choice of films for the classroom. We have heard of the frequent occurrence of titles such as Dead Poets' Society, The Sound of Music, The Browning Version etc. In the choice of all these as well as in many other titles you may supply, the overriding concern seems to be the standard of language, the
entertaining quality of the material, the moral values involved, etc. So far so good. Yet we know that students, in their free time, tend to see other type of films which they like at least as much as the ones we have carefully screened for them. They are aware they may not stand comparison from an aesthetic or philosophical viewpoint, yet they enjoy them all the same. In this category does Karate Kid belong, and to this category do I propose to refer now, to the advantages involved in using this kind of films in the classroom.

Karate Kid can be classed as either a martial arts stunt with which Hollywood competed, in this case successfully, with its Hong Kong counterpart, or a typical Hollywood teenager product. In both cases there is a basic plot, built from the conventions of the genre, which is all too predictable.

As a martial arts film, it consists of the struggle between the good and the ‘baddies’ which comes to a head in a mega tournament where the good boy manages to overcome the enemy by virtue of his technical superiority as well as by his attitude towards his discipline (i.e. karate). This attitude consists of undertaking karate as the PATH or manner of being in the world. This in turn presupposes a continual effort to transcend the boundaries of human frailty, physical boundaries as well as spiritual, with a marked emphasis on the latter. It also implies the encounter with a Sensei, a Master of the Do. The circumstances of this meeting, the nature of the teacher-student relationship, based on mutual respect, love, loyalty, etc will pave the way to the ‘heart to heart’ instruction, i.e. to non-concept learning, which is the WAY to knowledge. Such is the core of the message in the film.

The plot presents a protagonist constantly harassed as he tries to stand on his own in his new environment, trials of manhood really which should grant him admittance into the group of his peers at school, the love of his girl, the right of way through the new territory. The ‘baddies’ are led by a master that seeks the annihilation of the rival, so it becomes apparent that the enemy of the hero is also an enemy of the SPIRIT of karate, a corruptor of it. Thus the struggle, in this kind of film, always takes place not so much
between antagonistic groups or figures as between two different masters or opposing views of reality, between an assertion of Life and its denial, a cult of Death, between a master of authentic values and a master of false ones, a natural master which teaches freedom and a perverted master which enslaves his students to himself. In this film we are given the possibility to examine their actions critically, their handling of students, their words & gestures. The conflict as we have outlined it, takes place between the newcomer Danny Lorusso, an ItalAmerican just arrived from New Jersey, supported by his Japanese master, and the locals, an Angloamerican gang of blond Californians under the bullying leadership of an instructor with airs and methods of a ‘fueher’. (See: the poster of a green beret on the walls of his ‘dojo’).

As a teenager movie, Karate Kid deals with the adventures & misadventures of an adolescent tackling a double challenge, both at home, and at school. At home the absence of a father figure, a role model to grow by and to balance the influence of an overprotective mother. The Kid’s mother is a shy fond woman, courageous enough to leave the East in search of new opportunities, yet still immature to realise she is dragging her child far from his natural environment at a critical moment in his growth, when the need for stability is greatest. The film will make of this search for stability, for balance, one of its key metaphors. (Remember: the advertisement for the film showed the actor Ralph Macchio balancing gracefully in the position of the crane).

At school, his second challenge, he must conquer a space for himself in the territory ruled by the powerful blond gang led by the beau John Lawrence. As we have said before, there is nothing memorable in this film except the attention paid to the nature and progress of the hero’s learning. That is what we find useful to notice and to comment upon. Indeed, beyond the wish fulfilment, beyond the catharsis the film affords teenagers, I think it is this which accounts for the unabated popularity enjoyed by the film, whether this
aspect is perceived consciously or unconsciously, intuitively, or by active reflection.

Thus the experience of watching and discussing the film in the classroom with the students is very motivating. In the first place, the choice is not so obviously ‘pedagogic’ as with the other category of films mentioned. It contains an element of surprise, eventually puzzlement. Students do not usually expect any learning from mere (‘time-wasting’) entertainment. In the second place, the film does not portray exclusively upper wealthy classes as in the other films mentioned. It addresses a wider audience, reflecting the idealistic view of democracy of the American political creed in the fifties, in the aftermath of the II World War, a die-hard of the eighties when the film was shot and a ‘hot-cake’ issue of our own time.

**Things to notice**

The social picture, as in soap opera, shows a rise from the lower socio-economic level of the protagonist up towards the girl from the house on the hill. This upper social level does not exclude him automatically: it is not on this level that the conflict takes place, although there are some hints that the hero is not entirely welcome, either. We think that the provisional acceptance of the hero in that social milieu is both ideologically and structurally indispensable in order to emphasize a psychological truth that the film hammers home in connection with adolescent education i.e. that admission or rejection by people often depends on our own attitude towards them rather than on any unwillingness to receive us. It is obvious that the hero experiences such dislike with the transplant from his native New Jersey that he projects this negative feeling on the world around him. On the other hand, his rejection by the senior male group at school is real and wholly independent of his will. And this will be the FIRST STEP in the process of learning, to acknowledge his frustration, his anger, to keep his emotions in check which distort his sense of reality. To meet the real enemy which is inside as well as outside oneself and has to be defeated simultaneously. Simbolically, the conflict is visualised in

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different ways. For instance, the Kid cycles all over the place, the gang ride motorbikes, machines that inevitably connote an authoritarian bullying culture. The music illustrates accordingly.

**Things to question**

The film also raises some questions, such as the relevance of the course of action taken by the Kid to solve his predicament: why karate? In the context of American culture, we would have half-expected a gun. In some unfortunate cases I personally know of, the choice was a (jack)knife. The result was always tragical, death on one side, stigma on the other. In all cases it was a question of destroying the adversary. A physical destruction. In the film, karate appears to have a twin meaning: the annihilation of the adversary is the goal of the perverted master, the good one chooses to neutralise him, i.e. to render him powerless. Strictly speaking, the efficiency of the karate practised by the Kid is not to be found merely in the physical expression of it, rather in the inner change that this expression mirrors: his spiritual achievement, his new empowerment. The Kid’s real trouble was not so much his physical condition (smallish), or his inability to deal effective blows, but his isolation, a marginalisation that drives him towards instant self-fulfilment, that breeds a desire in him to impose on others, to swagger: he wants the most popular girl, the most spectacular car. He longs for compensation, for revenge over humiliation, he no longer seems to care for human contact.

Another question raised by the film, at least from a feminine viewpoint, is why the girl should prefer the immature Kid to the taller, more manlike, more attractive John Lawrence. Actually the question IS asked by one of the girl’s friends. The first answer that rushes to our spectator’s mind is that the girl in this type of film ALWAYS loves the main actor. Yet, the film dare produce another reason, more human and believable. John Lawrence only trusts and feels proud of his physical strength. He belongs in the large tradition of the typical self-sufficient macho hero of the American cinema. The girl beside him is nothing if not a glorification of his manhood. For the Kid, instead, she
means happiness. He needs her to love her, to develop his capacity for love. 'Go look for your balance' the Master tells Danny, meaning by this to go and see her. He will grow through this relationship, too.

**Things to look up and discuss**

As the film starts, it focuses on time and place: September, autumn, departure from Newmark, a popular district in New Jersey ("I'll be back soon" the Kid promises his friends) towards California, the sunny land of opportunities. The mother drives and sings the song 'California here I come' that Danny hates. They have an argument. Arrival is signified by palm-trees. 'No more winters' says the mother, 'this is the garden of Eden'. And this is the legend of California, too. Danny kicks a door open and knocks a boy over at the other side. 'Freddie Fernandez' says the boy good-humouredly and Danny answers in Spanish 'tanto gusto'. A contemporary reading could mistake it for a reference to the Hispanic minorities but in fact, in the context of the Californian legend, it should be associated to the myth of Zorro, the lonely hero who fought alone against an evil authority. There is nothing sordid, or shabby in this setting, this is a low middle class large, clean, luminous building which, though devoid of luxury, reflects a dignified standard of living. People, furthermore, look good, healthy, well-mannered. Sports, dancing, beach picnics, music and games, nothing is amiss. Yet the ironic comment is never far off: on Danny's school wall, there is a bronze tablet which reads,

Building dedicated to Truth/Freedom/Tolerance
By the native sons of the Golden West, 18 April 1969 (See)

'Golden' here is translated as 'sunny' in the subtitles but the word is to be taken literally as well, in connection with the Gold Rush. The movement upwards has also the sense of growth similar to that of plants gearing towards the sun, as with the bonsai the Master nurtures. But growth does not only concern the Kid: his mother too must struggle for success in the new place (she has been selected for a management training course at
the computing company she works for). The web of relationships in the film is solved in parallellisms & oppositions as follows,

i- Kid

his girl

Mother Master Mother Father
(alone) (a widow)

ii- Kid: in love with his schoolmate

his Master: still in love with his dead wife

iii- Master/Disciple relationship: between Mr Miyagui and Danny there is an intensely personal relationship as opposed to that of the American instructor who commands his group as if they were a military platoon, by issuing orders and keeping their initiative in check, regardless of their feelings. (cf: his boys' discomfort when, at the last combat, they are told to break the Kid's limb)

Between the Master and the Kid instead there is real concise dialogue. It flows slowly, speakers approaching each other warily, as in a real fight, to avoid unnecessary blows and bruises. First, they talk bonsai, then they talk work, further on, some personal references occur, until it flows freely in the scene where the Master, in a state of complete drunkenness which he calls the Japanese Blues, teaches him the Kamikaze war-cry 'Banzai' (in the film only a funny blend of the Japanese 'campay', cheers, and bonsai, the plants, an extraordinary moment if we think of the connotations of the word for an American audience, aware of the Pearl Harbour trauma, and for the American Japanese, placed in internment camps in California during the Pacific war.

iv- Female roles: In the mother/son relationship the dialogue is full of misunderstanding. She is totally unaware of the Kid's troubles. In the boy/girl relationship, the girl functions as mother's relay, a necessary substitution in
his growth, but there is also misunderstanding, although of a shorter duration, ‘I thought you were different’, she reapproaches him once.

**Things to see, hear and think about**

Danny’s difficulties to adjust to the new environment are a symptom and a metaphor of the difficulties he finds in adjusting to his new status: no longer a ‘kid’ really, not yet a man. The geographical-spacial dimension becomes thus also temporal. There is a bi-directional movement of his conflict: at school, the favour of his girl alienates him from the boys’ friendship. At home, his alienation from his mother which begins as they leave New Jersey, and is apparent in the reproach ‘Why didn’t you ask me?’ (i.e. I am an adult, too) drives him towards Mr Miyagi, the landlord.

After the process of his education is completed, he wins the girl over and his peers’ respect because he has finally learnt to channel his energy in a positive way; by the same movement he obtains his mother’s understanding. The film is of course filled with those adolescent icons related to clothes (kimono, yukatas, karateguis etc), to music (the radio set that causes the riot at the beach) to the machines already referred to (bikes, motorbikes, cars....).

**Progression of the narrative**

Structurally, we notice a 4-steps progression of the narrative which roughly corresponds to stages in the learning process of the Kid. We might define them as follows,

1. Stating the problem: from departure to California up to Danny’s failure to find his place in the community. (See: episode of the Mask Ball).
2. The start of the journey (Way of the Do): from the striking of the ‘deal’ with the Sensei or Master to (self)discovery (of his acquired knowledge)
3. Balance learning: a process in itself: from his first clumsy falls to his independent practice (See: boat in the lake)
4. The mega tournament or Final Exam: Closure of all the themes of the film as they all meet, symbolically and literally, at this last stage: master and
disciple, mother and girlfriend, rivals, neighbours...the whole community.

To the last image of the film, significantly, that of the Master.
If we explore these steps or stages briefly, we notice that to the false sense of reality, the false sense of knowledge that causes Danny’s failure in the first place, there follows the shock, the pain of making real contact with the world which in this case means owning up to his ignorance, to his shortcomings, to his fear etc. This self-awareness is the threshold to learning. Danny, in his childish omnipotence, thinks he can learn karate all by himself, in the kitchen, with a book. As if learning consisted of a collection of recipes, and success a formula to be attained by following directions. As in the traditional medieval metaphor of the blind leading the blind...to the brink of fall, here the ignorant teaches the ignorant. This is very dangerous self-sufficiency. The outcome is of course predictably disastrous: he overcomes with a surprise lucky kick the leader of the rival gang and that will entail their relentless chase and hatred. Danny’s behaviour at this point acts out the stereotype of karate as violent, clumsy, exhibitionistic. And now he has exposed himself to very real danger. The search for a Master also has a false start: he has mistaken the gang’s coach for a true master and has asked him to give him lessons. He is not only rejected but he has laid himself open to the enemy now. They know now that he is incapable of self-defense, that he is frightened but intends to fight. His understanding of the nature of knowledge is still misguided, a belief that some exercises, some diet, some advice can turn him into an able man. This misconception of reality bars him from recognizing the real master, who is always a master of life as well as an expert on some given field. We notice, for instance, that the gang coach is attached to a ‘dojo’ or professional space, an institution of some sort. The true master uses his own home as dojo where you can see how he lives, i.e. who he really is. We see how the opposition reality/appearance is made to play a relevant role in education, to develop the students’ ability to discriminate between true/false.
The coaching of Danny had been under way with the pruning of the bonsai, although he had not realised it at the time. Danny wants to know how the master has acquired his knowledge. The answer is: from his father in Okinawa. At every new learning, the same question will pop up to the same answer. So Danny finally exclaims in admiration, ‘you must have had SOME father!’ The communication of knowledge appears thus as a valuable function to be performed from generation to generation to ensure survival. The Kid will be the next recipient of that wisdom, he is then filling the place of the son in the scheme of things as they are presented, and this position allows the primordial element in the act of learning to surface, which is love on the part of the father/teacher, and gratitude that is the son/student’s response.

Moreover, the act of pruning, a traditional metaphor of education, is here made to perform another function: to express the master’s faith in the abilities of the disciple, a necessary act of encouragement at the onset of the learning process.

The inauguration of the second stage of the process begins shortly after the Mask Ball, when Mr Miyagi finds Danny half-unconscious from the savage beating inflicted on him by the gang. Danny in unable to see in his landlord, an ordinary old man shabbily dressed, the master he is after (‘all is not as it seems’ the master says at one point). However, he ends by accepting him as such, as it emerges from the following exchange,

- have you ever taught anyone?
- No
- would you?
- it depends
- on what?
- reason
- as revenge
- my son, you look for revenge. That’s start by digging your grave; fighting is last answer to problem.
The dialogue quoted reveals the basic attitude expected from a karate practitioner: a thorough understanding of the danger entailed by violence. Besides, the Master ‘s words to Danny later on, contain what is essential in the film’s message concerning the approach to the study of karate, ‘your boys have bad attitude: karate for defense only. Not such things as bad students. Only bad teachers. Teacher say. Students do.’

(Note: an interesting linguistic exercise could be devised for the class at this point: to study Mr Miyagi’s speech and spot the grammar mistakes. Or to re-write it as a native speaker would have said it).

The second stage consists then of the formalization of the relationship Master/ Disciple by means of a sort of contract or ritual engagement, made of words, gestures and symbolical objects,

‘ We have a deal: you trust me, I teach you’, says the Master while he hands Danny the band from his head ceremoniously. That same band that had been used to soothe Danny’s wounds after the vicious attack of the gang. A symbol of Danny’s identification with the Master , with the healing power of knowledge and understanding. (Notice: significance of the word ‘deal’ in American Eng.).

As the third stage unfolds, Danny attends classes regularly and does as he is told, he scrubs floors, paints walls, polishes cars etc following precise direct ions. He toils incessantly and his body aches all over, he is learning actually but he does not know. One day he has enough and bursts out in indignation: it is the test of trust. The master lets him go at him, then, without bothering to explain, just shows him that what he wanted to learn has already been learnt. Then comes the third and critical stage: the teaching of balance. Still does Danny verbalise, a vestige of his childish impotence. His master scolds him: ‘you talk too much’. He also mocks him.( Cf. The fall off the boat). But he never stops teaching, i.e. giving. (Cf ‘Concentrate’, ‘look in the eyes’ ‘focus your power’, he keeps repeating). Later on we will see Danny practising the master’s techniques all on his own, i.e. he is becoming himself a master, his
own! Now we can compare this change, what he is now, with the absurd figure he had cut before, practising in his mother’s kitchen.

In what we like to call his Final Exam or tournament, the last narrative unit of the film and last stage in the process of learning, there are also different phases to distinguish. We will only focus on the last one: the decision, freely made by the Kid, to continue fighting in spite of his broken ankle. And also the permission, requested from and granted by his master, to use a technique for wounding, the kick of the crane, the last resort to stop a vicious rival.

At the start of their relationship, Mr Miyagui had formally asked the Kid if he wanted to learn Karate. He had answered, as his usual flippant self was wont to, ‘I guess so’. The Master had not accepted that, ‘No I guess so’, Karate here DO or NOT do, no middle way’. In this manner, he helps the Kid commit himself. And by that commitment freely and fully undertaken, the Kid achieves his objective, which is basically no longer to be a kid but grow up to full manhood. We believe that not only with karate this is so. And THAT the film shows, in an attractive mix of earnest manner and gentle sense of humour, so that beyond some degree of conventionalism and stereotyping, we can heartily recommend it for the use in the classroom.

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