

Aikido



I took up Aikido (the 'Way of Harmony with Spirit') in March 2000, having had the martial art recommended to me by a few people. Until I came across Aikido, I was unaware that a martial art existed with principles that fitted my own ethics. It wasn't long before I also discovered that many elements of Aikido have direct parallels within permaculture. Here I set out to design a learning process that benefits everyone within the system; students, my local club & the whole school as beneficial guilds of people & Aikido itself.

The Design Process



O Sensei Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido (the title 'O Sensei' refers to him specifically as founder)

What I have set out to do here is to design a process that maximises yields for all of the living elements within the design. Whilst I am the one element within the design that is actively making choices to maximise my learning, I can still design a system that provides the maximum *potential* yields for all of the others at the same time. My first task then is to identify those other elements & then to look at how I can combine them all in the most beneficial way.

Non-living elements:

- Dojo (training venue).
- Transport.
- Books.
- School's teaching video.

Living elements:

- *Myself.*
- *My Senseis.*
- *My fellow students.*
- *New & potential students.*
- *Our Club*
- *The School*

Observations:

About myself:

- I feel a lot more 'alive' after doing Aikido.
- I generate a lot of Ki in my hands at sessions.
- I have suffered sports injuries in the past when 'overdoing it'.
- I learn best by 'doing'.

About others:

- The established students have developed a real sense of people-care for each other.
- New students are often the only real beginners in the club & can find it difficult to stick with it.

About Aikido:

- Aikido already follows many of the ethics & principles that underpin good permaculture design.
- Co-operative training methods mean a lot less injuries than other martial arts.
- The gradings system seems to encourage learning by providing targets.



Morihei performing an Aikido exercise outside to build *ki* power. Nature is an inexhaustible source of *ki*, and we must learn how to harness and concentrate that force.

About training aids:

- The School's training video is difficult to watch, having poor sound & video. This makes it difficult to see what is being done & to pick up the extra tips that would enhance training.
- Most Aikido books available emphasise different elements, depending on the style that the author trains in. Thus, books that contains the detail that students of our style need are few & far between.

Principles: Aikido as a form has developed from a Taoist ideology, Tao (pronounced 'Dow') literally meaning 'the Way'. Perhaps then it is not surprising to discover that Aikido already follows many of the same principles that guide good Permaculture design. For instance:

'Co-operation, not competition': There are no competitions in Aikido except against one's own limitations. Students train with each other co-operatively to improve their skills together.

'Edge': The student will harvest any attacker's energy at it's 'edge' (i.e. at the beginning or end of a strike - the points of least force), where there is the most potential to turn it back against them.

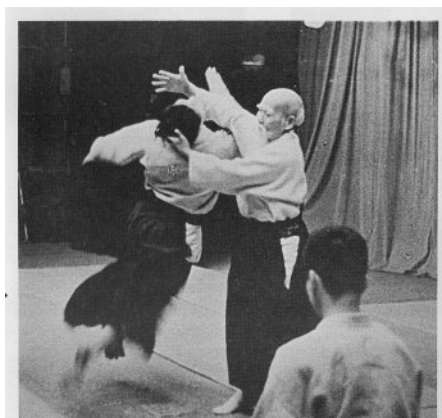
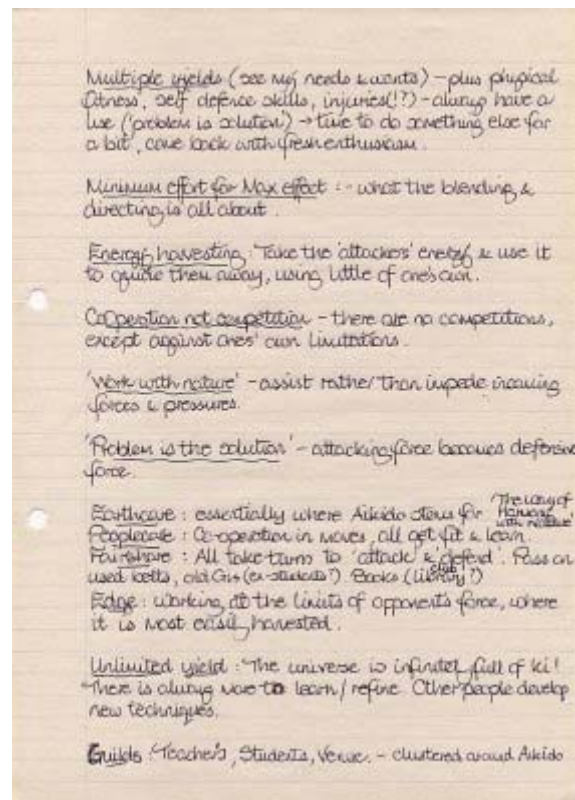
'Minimum effort for maximum effect': Aikido done properly should be virtually effortless, as it is all about turning any attacker's energy back upon them; using as little of one's own energy as possible.

'Multiple function': Aikido training has many benefits; fitness, flexibility, co-ordination, co-operative skills, mental focus, self defence skills etc.

'The problem is the solution': Any attacking force is blended with & so becomes the defensive force.

'Work with nature': Assist, rather than impede incoming forces & pressures - this is exactly how an Aikido student defends themselves against any attacking force.

'The yield is theoretically unlimited': There is an infinite amount of Ki in the universe & there is always something new to learn or discover. Even Senseis of many years never stop learning.



Morihei taught that in Aikidō we should treat our partner with the utmost respect. One's partner is entrusting his or her life to you, and we must handle that precious object with the greatest care. Morihei often counseled his students, "Hold your partner as you would cradle a baby."

Ethics:

Peoplecare: Aikido trains each student to improve their physical & mental fitness, with flexibility exercises, energy (Ki) exercises, blending moves & meditation. Everyone works at their own level & students learn to always be aware of other students skills & needs.

Earthcare: The basic philosophy underlying Aikido is that *"the only true form of self-defence does not stop with defending oneself against others, but strives to make oneself worthy of defence by nature herself. It respects the principles of nature."* - Koichi Tohei

Fairshare: Training takes place in a co-operative fashion & when working in pairs, each student gets to take their turn in both attacking & defending roles.

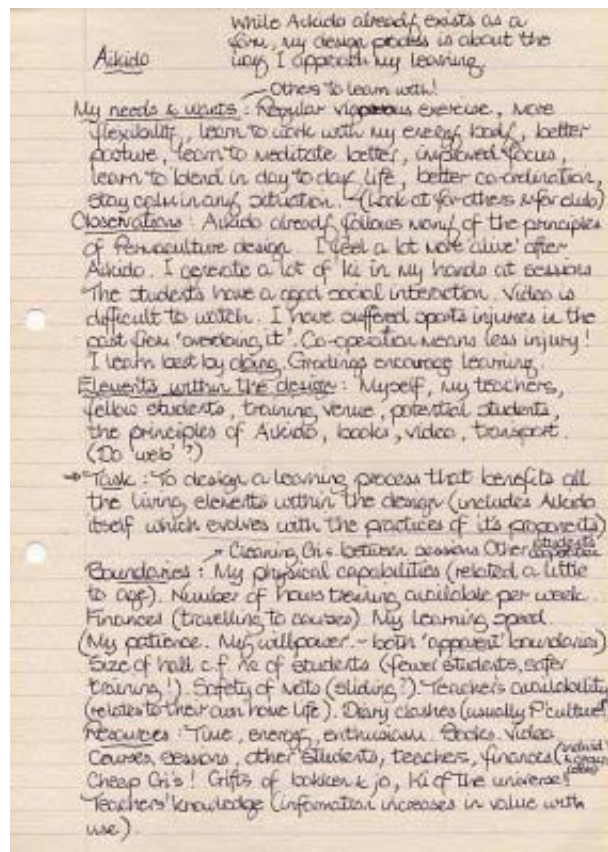
Clients' needs & wants:

My own:

- Regular vigorous exercise.
- Better flexibility & posture.
- Better co-ordination.
- More awareness of my energy body.
- Meditation practice.
- Improved focus.
- To learn to 'blend' in everyday life.
- To learn to stay calm in any situation.
- Others to learn Aikido with!

My fellow students:

- Many of my own above, plus:
- Self defence skills.
- More confidence.
- Social connections.



My Senseis':

- To continue to learn new Aikido techniques.
- To have a group of interested students to teach.
- To improve their own teaching methods, to keep them interested!
- To feel valued for the service they provide free of charge.

New & potential students:

- To be shown the great benefits of Aikido.
- To be excited about learning Aikido.
- To feel welcome.
- To not feel overwhelmed & inadequate.

The Club:

- To provide access to Aikido for local people.
- To teach Aikido fairly & effectively to all its members.
- To grow sustainably.
- To generate new Senseis.
- To promote the ethics of Aikido within the local community.

The Kolesnikov School:

- To teach the Kolesnikov style to all the students who seek it.
- To show the great benefits of Aikido to all.
- To grow in a sustainable way.

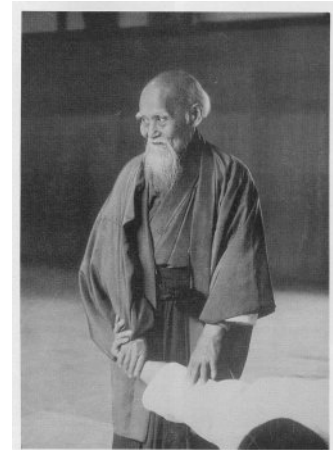
Aikido:

- To be information that increases in value through use.
- To evolve dynamically.

Boundaries:

My own (& these also apply in varying degrees to other students & Senseis too):

- My physical capabilities (related a little to age, but then again look at O Sensei Ueshiba...!).
- My financial situation (travelling to courses).
- Senseis' availability.
- The number of hours training available every week (relates to venue & fellow students, not just teacher's presence).
- My learning speed.
- The quality of the teaching.
- The quality of teaching aids.
- The 'stocking density' of students in the training hall!
- The safety of training mats (esp. not sliding around).
- My willpower (only an *apparent* boundary).
- My patience (again, only an *apparent* boundary).
- Diary clashes with other important events (often permaculture) & other home life 'distractions'.
- Keeping my training Gis (suits) cleaned in between sessions.
- Other students' skill & co-operation.



Ozaki-suzata, "pinning techniques," make up the fifth pillar of Aikidō. Pins represent firm control. Morihei emphasized the health-promoting properties of the various pins: they stimulate the joints, stretch the muscles, and otherwise invigorate the limbs.

Club & School:

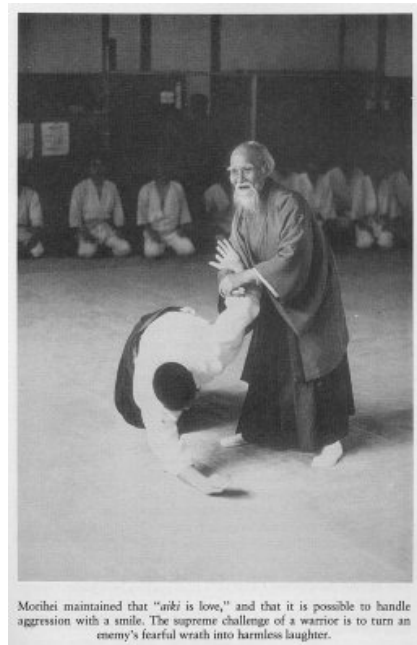
- Financial constraints (upon venue affordability, good mats, subsidised courses & advertising).
- The number of qualified Senseis available to teach (both for the club & in the School).

- The geographical distribution of those qualified Senseis (clubs need to be dispersed to give more people the opportunity to find Aikido locally to them).
- Sensei Kolesnikov's & club leaders' administrative abilities.
- Sensei Kolesnikov's & club leaders' promotional skills.
- The general awareness of Aikido amongst the general public (& also in relation to other more aggressive martial arts).
- The pulling power of highly advertised 'modern distractions' (i.e. computer games, fast food outlets etc).
- Cultural perceptions of Eastern philosophies.

Resources:

My own (& mostly applies to other students too):

- My time, energy & enthusiasm.
- O Sensei's knowledge gained over a lifetime of seeking & training.
- My own Senseis' knowledge & desire to pass it on.
- Twice-weekly club training sessions.
- Monthly courses taught by Sensei Kolesnikov.
- Annual summer school (intensive training week).
- Finances to cover my training expenses.
- Other students co-operation.
- Training aids (books & School's video).
- Gifts of bokken (wooden sword) & jo (staff).
- Two extra cheap training Gis (£5 each!).



Mochihei maintained that "aikido is love," and that it is possible to handle aggression with a smile. The supreme challenge of a warrior is to turn an enemy's fearful wrath into harmless laughter.

- Transport to get me to training sessions.
- Infinite available Ki in the universe.

Senseis:

- Much of the above, plus:
- Interested students to pass on the techniques to & enhance their own teaching strategies.
- Improved understanding resulting from many years of training.

School & local clubs:

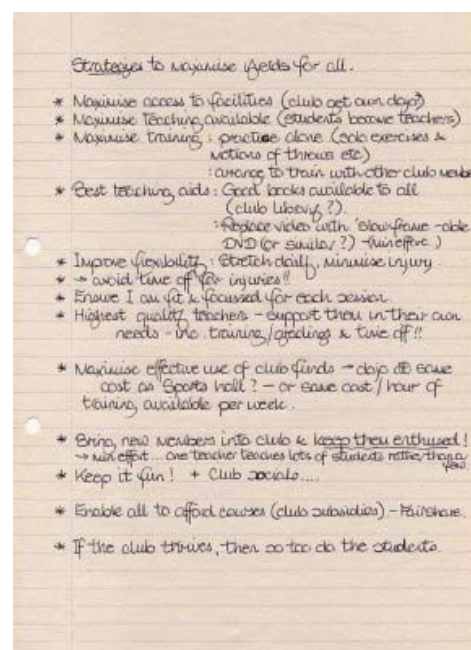
- Students.
- Senseis.
- All the valuable qualities of the above (i.e. time, skill, enthusiasm, etc.).
- Training venue.
- Finances.
- Aikido.

Strategies:

I can apply a few strategies in order to help maximise the yields that each element in the system seeks to generate. These are:

For myself & other students:

- Make best use of the available training time.
- Don't get injured!
- Get good access to effective teaching aids.
- Enjoy training!



For clubs & School:

- Maximise the access to facilities.
- Maximise the teaching time available.
- Ensure Senseis teach to a very high standard.
- Keep existing students interested & enthused.
- Bring in new students & minimise early losses.
- Maximise the effective use of club & School funds.
- Make available good & effective teaching aids.
- Ensure that all students have access to all training opportunities.
- Keep it fun!

Applying the principles: I can use permaculture principles along with these strategies to help me produce my design.

'Co-operation, not competition': Club helping all students to access training (lift sharing, course subsidies) & training aids (club library); more students improve & can help each other train better.

'Diversity (beneficial connections)': Parents provide the club with money to give their children beneficial training (& some time off!). Children benefit from adults helping to teach them. Adults benefit with teaching experience & extra money in club funds to help cover more of their training expenses. Club benefits from having more members when their own needs are being met.

'Guilds': Senseis, students & training hall clustered around Aikido; together Senseis & students can afford to pay for the training space & have each other to train with. Senseis learn to teach & students benefit from their knowledge. Aikido benefits as it becomes information that is being used, thus increasing in value.



'**Minimum effort for maximum effect**': Teaching full, but not over-crowded classes. Improving teaching quality through coaching courses has a knock on effect to the other students. Making available a good training DVD or higher quality video. Making available training information via the WWW. Providing advice on issues such as getting a club Dojo or training mats to club leaders.

'**Multiple function**': Ensuring that Senseis get to train themselves when they need to, also ensures that students get a better standard of teaching.

'**Multiple supply**': Providing more than one training evening. Having more than one Sensei per club. Providing club information on paper & on WWW. Providing selection of books in club library. Providing club 'video' in different formats (i.e. DVD & VHS video).

'**Relative location**': Providing good access to the training aids & information students & Senseis need, either through the club or via the WWW. Make the training location(s) easily accessible to the most people.

'**The yield is theoretically unlimited**': Club getting Dojo to enable training anytime. Encouraging high grade students to become new Senseis, enables more training sessions. Starting new clubs means more training opportunities. Better access to training & training aids means quicker learning & more Senseis sooner. Putting valuable information on the WWW makes it accessible to almost anyone.

The Final Design

Myself & my fellow students:

This part of the design I have created to cover my own needs primarily, though most of what is here will also apply to my fellow students as well. My first branch represents this very process; the design of my learning experience using this mind-mapping process & as such all there is to know is here on these pages. In order to maximise my learning potential I need to make the most of available training opportunities & this I can do in several ways.

The most obvious strategy is for me to attend every session that is being taught (currently twice weekly at the club, with weekend courses most months throughout the summer). In order to be able to do this I need to ensure that I don't book any other important events that I need to attend at the same times. I also have to ensure that I am fit for each session which involves me taking all precautions in my daily life to not get injured. Daily stretching increases my flexibility & is an important element in this, as is being careful not to overdo anything when I get tired; a situation that has led to me incurring frustrating injuries in the past.

The courses held at various venues around the South West most months during the summer are particularly valuable as they are taught by the Head of School, Sensei Kolesnikov 6th Dan; who has been teaching full time for over 30 years. Travel sharing already happens to a degree, but could be optimised with a bit more planning, especially for long distance travelling. I also have to remember that even if I'm not feeling particularly energetic before a training session, this is usually in my mind & I shouldn't let this reduce my training time. As long as I don't have an obvious physical injury, then I know that the training is likely to leave me feeling much better afterwards. It's also important to enjoy the training & I make sure that I don't take anything too seriously, while still acknowledging the value of what I am doing.

To supplement this taught training, I can also train at home. Of course stretching is effectively part of this, but I can also practice some of the other exercises as they are done solo anyway. Even the partner exercises I have been able to practice to a degree, though it is easier if there is someone else to work with too. Training with other students outside the club can also be a help, particularly before any gradings, though this is not so easy for me as I currently don't live very close to anyone else.

Using other training aids, such as books & our School's video can help, though the difference in styles between various books can often be confusing. The School's video is also not optimised for effective learning. Whilst it may have been the best available quality when it was produced, it's poor sound (barely audible) & it's fuzzy picture reduce it's potential value. To improve my access to good teaching aids, I can ask for a replacement to be made & for a recommended reading list to be produced. I can also instigate the start of a club library, to enable good access to these books for all club members.

The Club:

There are plenty of strategies that the club (or more accurately, the people running the club) can take to increase its effectiveness. Maximising teaching time can be achieved on two fronts: the first of which involves maximising the time available to students in a safe training space. The current arrangement at the club involves hiring a Sports hall by the hour, though there are several boundaries associated with this.

Firstly, we are limited to training at times when the hall is available. The training mats get used for all sorts of different things & are not looked after very well, we also have to put them out & clean them before each session & then put them back again afterwards. We are also never going to be any better off, either in ease of use or financially, from training more often.

Obtaining our own club Dojo could be achieved by leasing a space using the current income of the club. This would have the advantage of being able to be used at any time, therefore enabling as much training as needed. We could obtain a grant & buy our own mats which could be left down permanently & be much better cared for. The Dojo itself could also be decorated in a much nicer fashion & have plants too, bringing nature into the training space. The more training sessions that were held, the more income the club would have left over to subsidise other elements of the training. The other current boundary to maximising training time lies in the amount of time a Sensei has available during the week, especially if they have a busy home life. Therefore, one of the longer-term strategies would be to encourage higher grade students to become Senseis themselves & then to teach extra sessions at the club. With our own Dojo, this would be easily facilitated.

Whilst it is beneficial to bring students through to become Senseis themselves, it is also important to ensure that their teaching will be of the highest standard, this of course applies to all Senseis in the School. The club could subsidise coaching courses for new Senseis & facilitate regular feedback sessions for them with more experienced Senseis to clear up any uncertainties that they may still have. This is one of the elements to ensure that training is safe, another would involve sending Senseis on First Aid courses every couple of years as well, again the club should pay for this. The training space should also be suitable; not too crowded & with good, non-slip training mats. In case any accident occurred, insurance should also cover any eventuality.

The club should ensure that training is made available to all. Classes should be run for adults & children & any other groupings that a need is identified for. People with difficulties, either physical or financial, should be helped if this is preventing them from getting the most from training opportunities. The principle of Fairshare should be applied to all training situations. Making extra training aids available to all also connects with this. Starting a club library of good Aikido books would be a very useful facility. A simple club members pack could be produced including a welcoming letter & items like a recommended reading list & instructions on how to use the club library, a list of grading moves, information about training sessions & courses etc.

This would be part of a strategy to welcome & reassure new members, to help reduce the number of new students who give up after a few weeks or less. Keeping new members is an essential part of increasing member numbers, but existing members need to be kept interested too. Keeping the training varied & interesting is essential & all standards must be catered for. All students should get at least some individual tutoring in order to make them feel valued. In order to bring in new members, the club needs to keep publicising it's activities. This can be done using posters, a website & writing articles regularly for the local newspaper. A club notice board would also be a good information point if one can be kept somewhere prominent (one of the results of moving to a Dojo would probably be the loss of a current notice board at the Sports hall).

Finally, it needs to be kept fun & as well as ensuring that there is an element of this in every training session, monthly club socials can help increase the bonding between club members. The inevitable Christmas party also has a place here, particularly for the children who train at the club.

The School:

The School, that has it's headquarters in Oldham also has a role to play in the overall structure & has strategies that can be applied within the design to maximise the yields for all involved. The club exists to promote it's particular Ki style of Aikido to as many people as possible & to do this it needs to maximise the opportunities available for people to train. The first strategy is to maximise the access to training sessions. This can be achieved both by increasing the number of clubs & the number of sessions held by each club. The former is facilitated by encouraging Senseis or higher grade students that relocate, to start new clubs & by providing more teacher training to help them do this. The latter is also helped by providing advice to clubs, such as details of how to go about getting a club Dojo or obtaining a grant for buying training mats.

Increasing the number of Senseis in the School also helps to maximise the teaching time available. However keeping existing teachers interested & feeling supported is as important as bringing through new ones.

Ensuring that the teaching is of the highest standard can be attained by regular coaching courses, where the Head of School can assess how each Sensei is progressing. The School can also help increase the overall number of students, by providing promotional materials & giving advice on how to bring new members in. Encouraging the founding of new clubs also helps to achieve this.

The effectiveness of training aids used in the clubs could also be ensured by providing the recommended reading list for the clubs. This, along with other information could also be uploaded to a website, with password access if necessary so that only members can get to view it. The existing training video could also be updated with great benefits. A digital video camera used to film something similar, with added close ups of important details in moves & all put onto an indexed DVD for instance would be a much more useful tool & would certainly be a real case of 'minimum effort for maximum effect'. If the books available are not entirely to the School's satisfaction, then perhaps Sensei Kolesnikov himself could even find the time to write his own book.

Senseis:

Much of what applies to myself & other students also applies to Senseis & as they are likely to be involved in running the local clubs too, much of what I have written in that section too will also be applicable to them. As well as these things, there are a few more strategies that apply specifically to their own needs as teachers. Maximising the effectiveness of their teaching requires several different areas to be addressed. Improving their own teaching by attending coaching courses & learning new teaching methods is an essential part of this process & each Sensei also needs to develop a good rapport with their students.

Teaching small classes is not a very effective use of a Sensei's time, but at the same time an overcrowded training area is potentially dangerous & students may not all get the individual attention that they need. Each Sensei needs to find the optimum class number dependent on the time available in the session & the size of the training area & set out to encourage this number of students to attend each session. Each Sensei also needs to be able to have some time off occasionally to keep them fresh & enthusiastic; having more than one Sensei in a club can help facilitate this.

Each Sensei also needs to ensure that they also get the opportunities they need to train at their own level & to maximise their own learning, this is effectively the most important thing for the club as this is what will be passed on to all the other students. Each Sensei also has to feel that their own learning needs are being fulfilled. This is important for their own moral & to keep them wanting to teach. Making sure that Senseis feel appreciated for all the voluntary time that they put in is also key to this.

Design Review

Having done Aikido now for almost two & a half years, I have had plenty of time to assess the potential effectiveness of my design using the experiences of both myself & my fellow students & Senseis.

What went well

Mindmap: My design exercise went very well & putting the mindmap together was particularly satisfying.

Books: I have been very fortunate to find a good collection of interesting Aikido books, some of which are now out of print.

Stretching exercises: These really did make a significant difference to my flexibility when I was doing them daily & this effect has continued despite having reduced their frequency for the time being.

Lift sharing: On the whole, lift sharing to courses around the South West & up to Oldham has worked quite well. The club now subsidises full vehicles entirely & part-full ones only to the degree by which they are filled.

New teachers: Our club now has two home grown Senseis who have recently taken over from our original Sensei, who has taken on another club at which the Sensei retired (old age). The other club that our original Sensei was running has also been taken on by new Senseis & so the system is beginning to bear more fruit.

Appreciation: I initiated buying a beautiful Acer (Japanese Maple) tree to which other students contributed, for each of our Senseis last year to show our appreciation for their efforts, & they were both very gratefully received.

Sign: I was really pleased with the Aikido sign that I made; it has since been used regularly at sessions & has a special place in my caravan in between. **Fun:** There is no doubt that we do have plenty of this & it really helps the group to bond together. Club socials occur most months after training & yes, we do have the Christmas parties too.

What was challenging

Injuries: I haven't yet managed to consistently avoid injuries as they have also occurred as a result of my gardening work & once from going over the handlebars of my bicycle.

Dojo: So far the club's attempts to find a suitable Dojo have not yielded anywhere suitable. In the meantime we have been moved back & forth from different venues, one of which was on the outskirts of town & was difficult for some students to get to.

DVD: Trying to convince Sensei Kolesnikov that it would be worth his while updating the video, especially as I don't have a digital video camera & the skills to do it myself!

Double booking: Despite doing my best to avoid it, some things have still clashed frustratingly. Perhaps the most frustrating one being the date this year that I had planned to host a Council of Management meeting at my home for the first time, clashing with my one opportunity every six months to grade for my next Aikido belt.

Training: Finding the self-discipline to train regularly on my own. Trying to arrange to train with others outside normal sessions, when I live so far from everyone else.

Books: Finding the time to read all these great Aikido books that I have acquired. Being frustrated at having lent two books out now & having never seen them again (people who stopped coming to training); it doesn't give me much confidence to donate the others I have to a club library!

Numbers: Keeping enough adults coming to training despite their other commitments. Helping with the childrens' class (to help out Sensei), but finding them difficult to deal with. Getting other adults to come & help with the childrens' class, so it's easier for us all & there is less chaos. There are a lot of children (25-30 per session) & it is important that there are enough adults there for them to get what they need too, so that they will keep coming.

Turnover: Keeping new members has been difficult as they have often found themselves on their own as beginners & I remember how daunting that can feel. I had a lot of determination to learn the art, but not everyone has that much focus.

What I would do differently

Not a great deal.....

Inertia: I probably should have taken more account of how difficult it might be to get these ideas across to people, especially Sensei Kolesnikov. He is obviously a very busy man, though spending a little time implementing some of these strategies could make life easier for him in the future.

New members: Also I might have put even further emphasis on keeping new students from giving up early on, as the proportion of those that have stayed against those who haven't is very low. One way that was successful before was doing a big publicity drive which brought several new students in together & then they didn't feel so much on their own. Now there are four of them who have graded to green belt together.