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## Accrediting Prior Experience and Learning in the Martial Arts

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## DISCUSSION OF EXPERTS

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### Accrediting prior experience and learning in the martial arts

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**Abstract.** The martial arts are many and varied, and it is almost inevitable that a person will try several different clubs, styles or systems before they find the one that suits them. It follows, therefore, that a student walking into your club will probably possess some amount of previous training and experience. The question is: Do we acknowledge this fact and, if so, how?

This article seeks to go some way to answering this question so that we, as instructors, can “give credit where credit is due”

#### Introduction

In almost every modern college and university it is possible for a person with a suitable background to be considered for APEL. For example, the normal entry requirements for entry to a degree course at university would require someone to possess at least 5 GCSE's and 2 A Levels. However, applications might also be considered from people who have alternative qualifications and/or experience in the same or a similar kind of area. To explain further: Say that the degree course is in Physical Education. A person who has had very little in the way of conventional schooling might still be eligible if they have gained some NVQ's in Fitness, Sport and nutrition, etc.

Or, another person who has the required amount of GCSE's, but no A Levels, might still be considered if they have gained work experience in a related area, such as a football coach, community sports leader or even a martial arts instructor! This makes the application process a lot more fair, and has helped further and higher education to become far more accessible to a much wider section of society, encouraging people into colleges and universities that, just a few short years ago, would never even have considered continuing with their education, training and qualifications.

In short: This system has been put in place in order to make the student application process a lot

more ethical and inclusive, in line with Government guidelines concerning both equality and diversity and the encouragement of more people into further and higher education. It has been proven to be successful, and is now an accepted practice by most tutors/lecturers in most subjects.

In post graduate education, this process is even more prevalent: A person who has a Bachelors degree in one subject will normally be accommodated on a variety of post graduate certificate/diploma courses and, sometimes, even on to certain Masters programs that will probably have little or even nothing at all to do with the subject they originally studied.

So, how can this strategy be incorporated into the practice of martial arts? After all, it is far from unusual for a prospective student to have some training and experience in other clubs and probably other martial systems. Well, as we all know, there are so many different styles and systems out there, so how can we (or, even should we!) accredit a person's prior learning, experience and ability? What follows are a few suggestions as to how APEL might be implemented in the martial arts.

#### What is APEL?

Definition: Accreditation Of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) is a process that enables students

of all ages and abilities to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess.

There are a wide variety of different terms used to describe accrediting past learning. Some of the most common are as follows:

- Recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- Accreditation of prior learning (APL)
- Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)
- Prior learning assessment, recognition of skills (PLAR)

I have chosen to use the acronym APEL (Accredited Prior Experience and Learning) as I feel this is easily understood and will be more readily understood by the martial arts fraternity.

### Why APEL?

Students should claim APEL because they:

- Can potentially enter the new class at a more appropriate level
- Can avoid having to learn something they already know
- Can have their past training acknowledged learning and capabilities gained

Instructors should offer APEL because it:

- Encourages students from other styles and systems to train with you
- Enhances students levels of self-esteem
- Breaks down barriers that can sometimes exist between martial arts
- Improves the over-all standard through the absorption of more experienced students
- Enhances students' understanding of martial arts training as a lifelong process

By offering APEL provision, you are clearly stating to the student that “We are interested in what you have done before, we do think it is important, and we acknowledge all of the efforts you have already made.”

### How to go about it

Establishing where your students are in their learning is one of the basic pre-requisites of being a good instructor. However, once you have clarified this point, and you think the student might be eligible for some APEL, then you will need to begin the verification processes which will be discussed in more detail later. To begin with, though, you might want to use an APEL form, which should furnish you with a much clearer understanding about what you will need to do next. I have included an example of such a form on the next page.

### Identifying the Bare Essentials

To implement the APEL process properly and efficiently we need to begin by trying to forget all about the styles or systems of the different martial arts altogether. Instead, we need to strip away all of the “trappings” and to concentrate upon the “core competencies” involved that are inherent in literally all martial arts.

Things like: Improved coordination, balance, discipline, agility, focus and concentration, etc. These skills are to be found in all martial arts in one way or another and so can readily be transferred from one art to another. They “belong” to the individual person, if you will, rather than being idiosyncratic to a particular martial art itself. Once this is done, we can gage the persons individual abilities in each of these, and how this would fit in to our own martial arts and training regime, which means that we can now turn our attentions to the type of martial arts they have practiced.

Again, we will need to generalise somewhat and one method for doing this would be to divide the martial arts into different categories, such as for example: Those that concentrate upon striking, such as Karate, Kung-fu, Tae Kwon Do and Kick-Boxing etc. Those that concentrate upon throwing, locking and break-falling, such as Judo, Aikido, Chin-Na and Jiu-Jitsu, etc. And those that utilised weapons, such as Kendo, Bo-Jutsu and Kobu-do etc. (I must reiterate here that this is only a very basic, general type of example, and is by no means to be looked on as any kind of definitive guide)

### Individual Evaluation

Now, I think it is safe to assume that, if a person who had some experience of Tae Kwon Do walked into a Kick-Boxing club they would most probably already possess a lot of very useful transferable skills, and would have a pretty good idea of what was going on and what would be expected of them. They would know about the dynamics of different punching and kicking techniques, they would know about the importance of accuracy and correct distancing, and they would also know about defensive tactics, stretching and flexibility, and obeying the rules. Yes, they would still have to adapt what they already knew (their “skill-set”) to a new way of doing things but, this should be no real issue with the persons abilities rapidly being effectively transferred to this new type of application and environment.

Also, there would of course be other things that might well be completely unfamiliar or strange to them, techniques and procedures that were

ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING (APEL)  APPLICATION FORM	A MARTIAL ARTS CLUB A MARTIAL ARTS ASSOCIATION A Street A Town
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This form must be completed in order to make a claim of Prior Experience and Learning. It should be used if you have a martial arts grade from another style, system or organisation.

SECTION A Personal Details	
Surname	Martial art(s)
Forename(s)	Grade(s)
Title (eg Mr, Ms, Miss, Mrs)	Male / Female
Correspondence address	Telephone Number
Postcode	Email (for current students, we will use your student email):
SECTION B Past martial arts training and qualifications	
Martial art style:  Studied for:  Grade:  Instructor:  Organisation:  Contact details:	
Martial art style:  Studied for:  Grade:  Instructor:  Organisation:  Contact details:	
Signature	Date: ____/____/____

completely different to anything they had ever done before, and these would have to be learned, but: When applying the principal of APEL, we are not looking for what is strange, but what is familiar. We must concentrate not on what is different, but on what is similar, and how best we can help the student to integrate into our class as quickly and painlessly as possible.

"This is all very well" I hear you say "but, what if the situation is a bit more extreme? What if, for example, a student of Tai-Chi wanted to try out some Jiu-Jitsu?" Once again, we need to refer to the basic, fundamental skills that are integral to all martial arts: This student would already possess a good center of gravity, having trained their balance and posture, they would also know about the importance of maintaining good form when practicing. They would know about discipline and respect, and would be reasonably fit and supple.

Again, there would be other, unfamiliar concepts and techniques (such as break falling etc) that would need to be practiced and learned but, the important point here is that they would still possess a reasonable amount of useful transferable skills that could and should be harnessed and utilized in a positive way, rather than (as I have seen happen all too often!) having them ignored, discarded or, (even worse) ridiculed. The same would be the case with a person who had studied Kendo who wanted to try out Judo or another who had practiced Karate and wanted to learn Chin-Na, etc. There will always be something of use to be found in their skill-base that they can bring with them.

### Not seeing the Wood for the Trees

Of course, every case is different, and must be examined according to its individual merits, but this type of APEL is fair to the prospective student as it aids in preserving their levels of confidence and self-esteem simply by acknowledging what they already know and the effort they have made in getting to know it, rather than belittling them by stripping them of their rank and making them begin all over again. This helps to avoid certain problems that can otherwise occur. For example: I remember a friend telling me of a particular situation that serves to highlight the importance of APEL all too clearly:

She was running a beginners class in Jiu Jitsu, and had geared the content accordingly. However, one particular student seemed to be finding everything a bit too easy. This might not, at first glance, seem to be of any concern but, in actual fact, it was having a very negative effect upon the other students, who had all started to feel rather

clumsy, inadequate and even stupid! After all, they were being taught exactly the same things by exactly the same person, but the only person that seemed capable of understanding the techniques properly was this one particular "beginner".

Upon further inquiry, it transpired that this student already possessed dan grades in both karate and aikido, and had fifteen years involvement in the martial arts behind him. Hardly a "Beginner" I think you will agree! He had turned up with the noble (if somewhat misguided) idea that he should exhibit humbleness and humility by donning a white belt, and saying nothing at all about his prior training and abilities. It is precisely because of occurrences such as this that we desperately need to confront the issue of APEL in the martial arts effectively and as soon as possible.

### Verification

From the perspective of both the instructor and any prospective students, APEL can only be a good thing. Be warned, however: It can be a bit of a headache to implement correctly! It is obvious that an instructor cannot simply take some ones word for it that they have whatever amount of prior training and experience behind them: They must be able to substantiate any claims made with acceptable documental evidence such as License books, certificates, trophies and written references, etc. It might be helpful to have a specific "APEL form" for people to fill in, so you can get an initial idea as to what they have done before and what level they have reached, etc.

Do not ever ask any prospective student to "prove themselves" on the Mat, as this could be a recipe for disaster! (There is, perhaps, nothing more dangerous than a person who is eager to prove themselves performing potentially lethal techniques upon others!) They must provide proof in the shape of a checkable and verifiable trail of official documentation. Notice the words "checkable" and "verifiable" here: You MUST check out their qualifications no matter how "official" they may look or what signatures appear to be at the bottom of them. It is all too easy these days for even a rank amateur to manufacture a very convincing set of certificates with very little effort. Therefore it is the responsibility of the instructor (or someone else appointed by her/him) to take the time and trouble to carry out this duty, to ensure that everything is correct and above board.

Sometimes, it will be patently obvious that the person concerned does, indeed, know what they are doing simply from their technical competence

and the way they conduct themselves. At others, it will become apparent that the person is, shall we say, “exaggerating the truth”? (I once had a guy say to me that he had done a lot of Escrima (which he pronounced as “Ecreema”) and Savate (which he pronounced as “Savatee”! amazing!) In each case, however, their claims will need to be substantiated and/or investigated, so that good practice is not compromised.

Once you have ascertained the person’s prior learning and experience, you must decide what to do with this information. For example, one suggestion would be for them to actually continue to wear the symbol of their rank or grade, as long as they clearly display something that will enable people to see they are from a different system or style (such as the badge of the association they used to train with, etc) In this manner, there will be a period whereby you can judge and evaluate the person through what is called “Performance Based Assessment” This simply means observing them during their training sessions and making a mental note of how well they seem to learn new techniques and adjust to a different way of doing things. In this manner, it will be possible to gauge how much (if any) APEL they might be entitled to, and inform them of this so that they know exactly where they “fit in” and what will be expected of them at the next grading exam.

In my own personal opinion, special provision ought to be made for any advanced ranks (brown belt +) as they are taking a very courageous step by embarking upon training in a completely new style/system. Some organizations have special “conversion” programs, where advanced grades from other styles can undergo special intensive training courses throughout a certain period (normally a year) at the end of which, they should have reached a similar level in the new style they are studying. This, at least to my way of thinking, is a lot fairer than making them go through the whole process again!

Another reason for stringent, strict verification processes is because there seems to be a strange type of sub-culture developing in the martial arts consisting of what I call “floaters”. These are unscrupulous types who tend to “float” from one organisation to the next, each time attempting to enhance and exaggerate their past level of experience and grade.

That is why APEL should never be looked upon as being an “easy” way to get from one grade to the next. Rather, it should be a method of allowing people to take the knowledge and skills they have acquired with them on their journey of learning. Therefore, I will state again here, loud and clear:

It is the responsibility of the student claiming APEL to supply appropriate evidence in order to substantiate their claims, and that this evidence

must be subjected to further verification processes in order to check the following:

- Authenticity: that the student really does have the past training they are claiming
- Quality: that the training was undertaken by a reputable organisation
- Currency: The amount of time that has elapsed since this training occurred.

Standardisation is important for APEL in the martial arts in order to help quality assure both provision and delivery. This is yet another reason why organisations such as the IMACSSS is so important, because it encourages dialogue between various martial arts associations in several countries.

### **Ethical considerations**

Whether we like to admit it or not, there is still a lot of politics involved in the martial arts world. Politics exist between different styles and systems and even, in some cases, actually within these styles and systems. Such is the nature of the human being: We often choose to disagree with each other. However, we should never allow these disagreements to be to the detriment of our students.

APEL, just like everything else, is open to interpretation and abuse. No doubt, some instructors will view it with suspicion, being completely unfamiliar with the concept and seeing any experienced student from another system as a potential threat or a spy.

Others may see APEL as affording them with the opportunity of stealing advanced students from other systems. Obviously, both of these views are equally wrong and are to be discouraged. In my own experience, many years ago, I can clearly recall turning up at an aikido class because I wanted to broaden my horizons. The instructor came over and, after he found out I was already a practicing judoka said: “Ah, I see. So you have had enough of all the grunting and wresting, and now want to learn a more refined martial art”

Needless to say, I didn’t hang around.

Again, some years later, with a bit of experience under my (by then) black belt, I was told by a kung fu instructor (once he found out that I was practicing karate) that he was now retired and didn’t accept students anymore. All this while a class was going on behind him, and people kept asking for his advice and guidance on doing the techniques!

Each of these experiences left me feeling both very puzzled and extremely frustrated, and I know of several other people who had similar experiences.

How many people are discouraged by such behaviour? How much is lost? I wish to clarify here that i am in no way casting aspersions upon

either aikido sensei or sifu of kung fu. Indeed, I did find other, more liberally minded, instructors in each of these excellent martial arts, and went on to enjoy years of training with them. Other people I know have had similar experiences with instructors of other types of martial arts, and it is just so unfortunate that we were made to feel so uncomfortable by this (luckily) small minority.

## Conclusion

In these days where it is possible for a person to change their hobbies, pastimes and even their careers several times during their life, it is vitally important for us to acknowledge the fact that learning and experience are continually evolving and accumulating within the individual, and that each of these become an intrinsic part of any prospective student with whom we are presented. I am sure there will be resistance by some individuals in some quarters to the application of APEL in this way.

Indeed, I have seen some absolutely appalling situations where a Dan grade in a particular martial art was actually told they would have to go through another black-belt grading, and still be demoted to a lower rank! This was in the same martial art, just a different style! This person was a fine technician, and an excellent instructor with years of training and teaching behind him, yet he was subjected to a ridiculous and degrading (literally) cabaret, simply because (as sometimes happens) this "style" believed they were far better than any/all other styles and systems. This kind of practice is, at best, rather silly and, at worst can be very damaging both psychologically and emotionally for the person being dealt with.

The past experiences and learning of any person should be viewed as being a valuable asset rather than any kind of threat, and they should be both permitted and encouraged to bring these transferable skills with them when they join your class. Let's all try and take a leaf out of the professional educator's books, and encourage the students that come to us to learn by treating them with the respect they rightly deserve. Just a suggestion, but one which I think would be of mutual benefit.

## References

Not much exists regarding this topic. What useful material there is I have listed below:

1. Galloway, Jerry P. (1991), *Critical Essay on Martial Arts Education*, "TaeKwonDo Times", vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 52-55, 86. Which touches upon the subject.

2. Lee-Barron, James (2011), *The Complete Martial Arts Instructor*, (chapter 13 deals with this subject), Lulu Publishing. ISBN: 978-1-4477-6272-0
3. National Offender Management Service. Physical Education for Prisoners, 26<sup>th</sup> September 2011. Reference Number: PSI 58/2011 (unclassified). Alludes to offenders having prior physical training, including martial arts, accredited.
4. Website: <http://www.londonkarate.org.uk>

Go to the "Instructors" section and look at "Conversion" and "Refresher". You will see that this organisation uses a robust APEL provision.

## Uznawanie wcześniej nabytego doświadczenia i nauki w sztukach walki

**Słowa kluczowe:** APEL, sztuki walki, edukacja, trening, oszacowanie, ocena

**Streszczenie.** Autor tekstu opisuje zalety programu, w skrócie nazwanym APEL, który jest procesem umożliwiającym uznanie nabytej wiedzy i umiejętności studentów w różnym wieku i o różnych umiejętnościach w dziedzinie sztuk walki.

Autor porównuje zasady uznawania nabytych kwalifikacji przy przyjęciach na studia na różnych poziomach nauczania i odnosi je do nauczania sztuk walki. Twierdzi iż, chociaż sztuki walki różnią się między sobą to zawierają pewne wspólne elementy takie jak między innymi umiejętności: koordynacji, równowagi, dyscypliny, koncentracji i ogólnej sprawności. Podejmując się nauki nowego stylu lub sztuki walki powinno się opierać na nabytych już umiejętnościach, a nie zaczynać zupełnie od podstaw, narażając już doświadczonych zawodników na poniżenie i degradację do poziomu zupełnych nowicjuszków. Według autora stosowanie się do zasad APEL jest ważne zarówno dla uczniów, jak i dla nauczycieli tak by wcześniej nabyte umiejętności były brane pod uwagę i umożliwiały dalszy rozwój i postęp. Dzięki umieszczeniu w odpowiedniej grupie zaawansowania ćwiczący mogą uniknąć powtarzania nauki poznanych procedur, wzmocniona zostaje ich samo-ocena, zostają zachęceni do ćwiczeń, łamane są także bariery istniejące między niektórymi sztukami walki, a także wzmocniane zostaje zrozumienie faktu, iż trening sztuk walki to proces trwający całe życie.

Autor udziela licznych wskazówek pochodzących z własnej praktyki co i jak należy brać pod uwagę przyjmując na zajęcia ucznia, który ma doświadczenie w innych sztukach walki np. autentyczność przedstawionych dokumentów poparte aktualnym doświadczeniem, reputację szkoły, w której ćwiczący trenował oraz ilość czasu, która upłynęła od ostatnich treningów.

W tekście wyrażone są obawy co do powszechnego stosowania zasad APEL, gdyż niosą one wiele pozytywnych wartości, ale mogą też być nadużywane. Autor namawia jednak do brania pod uwagę nabytych wcześniej umiejętności, gdyż w ogólnym rozrachunku są pozytywne dla ucznia, nauczyciela i całej grupy.