

Aikido and Ideational Flow

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Regarded as one of the most difficult and effective of the martial arts, Aikido is derived from adapting and blending ancient Japanese martial arts like Jujitsu, Karate and sword fighting with breathing and meditation studies. My research investigates the interdisciplinary synthesis of ideational flow and the practice and philosophy of the art of Aikido. To what extent can design leadership based in Aikido transform co-creative flow?

The project questions what new behaviours, skills and tools can assist designers to meet the demands of contemporary knowledge creation whilst maximising 'ways' of spreading ideas? Overall, this research seeks to understand and reflect on existing disciplinary experiences through researching other creative 'pathways' – such as 'Aikido' – to reflect on how designers think instead of purely what designers think. Hence the project will investigate how designers can connect broader understandings of 'leadership' with specific design knowledge to enhance creative performance. The emphasis is on how designers can potentially 'manage' their thinking within the ideation process – maximise "ways" to spread 'memes'.



Over a three-day period, audiences in New Zealand have been offered an unprecedented opportunity to observe Toshiharu Sawada Shihan (7th Dan, Kimori Dojo, Nagoya) and local Wellingtonian Aikido practitioners in training.

One of the ideas here was to observe specific patterns of behaviour, use of language, and symbols. The research also explores the conceptual possibilities of applying Aikido theories beyond the conventional 'dojo' setting – referred to as “Takemusu Aiki” or “Courageous and Creative Living” (Saotome, 1993; K. Ueshiba, 1984; M. Ueshiba, 2002) ...

Creativity is a product of the cross-pollination of many factors, including personal characteristics, social, cultural, and environmental factors (Sternberg, 1999). With design-based thinking increasingly located in between dimensions and disciplines, new thinking and ways of practicing are required by designers to stay relevant in a post-disciplinary future. This project explores 'ways' of connecting creative leadership in Western terms – as a product-orientated, ideas-based phenomenon (Mayer, 1999) – with an Eastern view of creativity that Pope (2005: 60) describes as the expression of an inner essence “through 'being' or 'becoming' rather than 'doing' or 'making'”.

Since 2007 this research has used ethno-autobiographic methods to collect data on the culture, customs and practices of people who train regularly in Aikido at a local dojo to identify the traditions. Over the past twenty years, an increasing number of Aikidoka have been creatively extending Aikido practice outside the conventional dojo setting influencing fields such as education, psychology, health, business, sports, music and the military (Levine, 2003). Aikido differs from other martial arts for Westbrook and Ratti (1970) in its essential motivations and intentions as it is an art of self-defense – there is no attack – and there is a constant reference to the inner energy, the inner strength or ki as the particular form of energy to be employed. In addition, Aikido's characteristic strategy is embodied in the form of entering and blending movements that are always circular, with the Aikidoka at the centre point of a 'dynamic sphere' of interactions occurring around the periphery.

Aikido's versatility offers a creative answer to any kind of attack, and involves learning experientially with and through the body. Aikido cannot be practiced conceptually. For Pettman (1992: 3): “unless you do Aikido movements you can't actually know how they feel and what they ultimately mean”. The embodied knowledge is learnt through recurrent practices – within a context of action – that transcends words and language. Aikido is viewed as a 'generative practice' (Strozzi-Heckler, 2007b) as it “is a conscious choice to embody a behaviour that can be used in whatever situation we find ourselves. It's a commitment to a way of being in the world. It is life affirming, creative, and it produces a reality by how we orient to our life situation” (p. 83). As McMahon (2005: 90) observed, for Ueshiba “the secret of Aikido is not in how you move your feet; it is how you move your mind” and this involves “exploring ourselves, how we move through the world and how we interact with others” (p. 86).

I look forward to hearing of any similar projects that bring together design, martial arts and the creativity of the body.

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