

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

The year 2020 has, to say the least, presented many challenges to the Performative-Arts Community. This document has been put together to give some guidance to our Certified Teachers and, indeed, all of our members, in navigating the uncertain waters of Stage Combat online. Whether you find yourselves teaching classes from your home office or, as students, trying to perfect your techniques in your back yard, there are many things you should consider.

First and most importantly of all, pay attention to your local and institutional guidelines on safety. Our members are literally scattered across the globe. All locations have varying levels of infection and are dealing with the pandemic in ways that are (hopefully) the best for its specific populace. That said, please stay informed and do your best to keep yourselves safe and healthy. The old saying, “it is better to run away and live to fight another day” holds a great deal of truth. If you do not feel safe going back to [*whatever level of contact is being asked of you*] then do not do so. Keep yourselves, your friends and family, your students and those you do not even know, safe.

Many have asked, “what is the safest distance to be apart?” We wish that we could give you a concrete number for every situation. But there is simply too much variance in both state and local recommendations, not to mention every individual’s personal health and willingness to train in-person, to do so. The oft-repeated standard is 6 feet but remember that this should be considered a bare minimum. Some teachers are taping out 10-foot squares for each student with six feet between each square. Some are doing 12-foot squares indoors and some are teaching outdoors with six feet or more between each student and no taped off sections. Outdoor spaces make airborne transmission less likely, and could therefore be considered *safer*, but no in-person training should be totally considered to be *safe*. Indoor spaces remain the most difficult to navigate due to challenges with air circulation and a general shortage of space for distancing. Rotating smaller groups through an indoor space requires shorter work periods and “downtime” for cleaning between groups (exact times vary depending on the source but expect each hour of classroom time to be about half instruction and about half clean-up and “downtime”). With that being said, if you and your students are not all wearing masks that properly cover both nose and mouth then most distances, whether indoors or out, will be too small. Many of our teachers will not be going back into a classroom for in-person training at all until a vaccine is available. Some will be doing so with their school’s recommendations to guide them. Others are still waiting to find out what exactly will be asked of them. When in doubt refer to the SAFD’s primary concern; SAFETY.

We are all going through this for the first time, and certainty is in short supply, so there will inevitably be more changes as information is updated. It is challenging for certain but we are dedicated artists and we will continue to train and we will inevitably make many discoveries down the road. Remember to stay safe, keep open to thinking outside the box and keep sharing your successes (and setbacks) with your colleagues. Together we will fight our way through this!

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

Look for links to websites and other information throughout this document. They have all been visited and examined multiple times. If a link is broken you should be able to readily do a search given the keywords provided in the link's description.

CONTENTS

- **Introduction:** Things we should keep in mind with online training.
- **Standards of Learning for Online Training:** Student learning outcomes for online teaching syllabi.
- **Forms (Kata):** What these are and how they can enhance training.
- **Training Weapons:** A very brief look at finding inexpensive and safe (to people and furniture) props to use in training in our home studios.
- **Liability:** A quick note on issues of liability in teaching online.
- **Teaching Movement Disciplines in a Time of Disruption:** Professor Timothy Pinnow, CT/FD for the SAFD and VP for Strategic Initiatives for Colorado Mesa University, did a great Webinar that addresses teaching in this new online environment. (Forty-five minute video – see link)

Link: [Teaching Movement Disciplines in a Time of Disruption](#)

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- **Colleague Resources:** A few people with experience to share...there are many, many more!

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

INTRODUCTION: Things to Keep in Mind with Online Training

1. *Realize that everyone out there is having similar challenges.* As educators and artists, we are all in this together.
2. *You will make mistakes.* This is still pretty new to most of us; many of whom got into this art form to swing a sword and hip toss our partner. It will be messy at times and you will find things that work and those that don't. Frequently remember #1 above.
3. *Embrace the new.* This is going to be very, very different from what we are used to as Stage Combat and Movement teachers. Avoid trying to recreate your exact in-person classroom experience on Zoom (or whatever virtual platform you are using). Innovate and explore.
4. *Ask your students.* Keep checking in with them to see what is working and what they need. Yes, always do this but now, more than ever, make sure you take a moment to see how the students are doing and listen to their input. You may wish to have your students fill out short, weekly journal entries; these are an effective tool to stay on top of things that are working for them and things that are challenging.
5. *Know that there are some things that will be difficult or impossible to do online. Focus on techniques that lend a new, and potentially exciting, way to look at your training/teaching.* For instance, you may find that you are able to more clearly observe your students, without distractions, when viewing them on the screen; "chats" for student questions and discussions may allow a new "voice" for students that have been reticent to speak in front of the group; you can easily share "instant replays" with the class when doing filmed assignments; you have the potential to offer insight and/or explore challenges of playing for the camera; you can share documents, historical PPT presentations, film clips and other types of media with your students. There are many things you CAN do well online...discover them and share!
6. *Ask for ideas from your colleagues share your own discoveries.*
7. *Be aware of unusual safety concerns.*
 - Students may be in restricted areas in terms of clearance.
 - Students may be outdoors with concerns of heat, sunburn and dehydration.
 - Students may be reported to police for "being armed," especially with realistic looking knives
 - Students (and teachers) may suffer from "screen overload" so include breaks, shorter training sessions, etc. Keep connected with your students and watch for cues that they need a change of pace. (Take care of yourself as well!)
 - Students may not be in a place where they have privacy. This means they may have a younger sibling running around or grandparent in the room. This also means that whatever you say may be heard by anyone nearby so keep that in mind.
8. *Keep it simple.* As you begin keep it simple until you and your students get comfortable with Stage Combat online. Most of us are already months into this but your students may not be. Keep drills easy and assignments do-able. Remember that they probably spend several hours a day online outside of your class.
9. *Split classes if you can.* Take the opportunity, for example, to split a three-hour class into two one-hour long classes (perhaps advanced students in one and beginners in another) with an hour of group instruction with the whole class. Make it work for you and for your students.
10. *Remember your discoveries!* Learn from this new paradigm and use your new discoveries to improve your teaching or technique when we are, once again, fighting face-to-face!

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

STANDARDS OF LEARNING FOR ONLINE TRAINING

(These standards are relevant to in-person, as well as online, training and should be considered when designing ANY course of Stage Combat.)

Below are five¹ broad student learning outcomes. The first two are didactic (describe, define, identify, etc.) and the second two are performance oriented. The fifth SLO is one that the instructor can tailor to their individual program.

By the end of this course, the students will be able to:

- Identify, define and demonstrate (through written and/or verbal assessment) a knowledge and understanding of the basic stage combat terms and definitions covered in class,
- Identify, define and demonstrate (through written and/or verbal assessment) a knowledge and understanding of the basic tenants of safe and effective stage combat techniques covered in class,
- Safely perform stage combat techniques and choreography specific to the [theatrical weapon style] requirements for the Society of American Fight Directors, and
- Create the illusion of a dangerous character journey through moment-to-moment interplay among intention, obstacle and action.

The SAFD strongly recommends that the instructor create a fifth student learning outcome that aligns with the curriculum and mission of *their individual program*. For example: By the end of this class, the student will be able:

- *Integrate body mechanics principles (balance, coordination, grounding, spatial awareness, breath and vocal support) into the action of a stage fight; or*
- *Identify and define the various acting elements of a fight scene including the inciting moment, the characters' intentions within the fight and their overall objective; or*
- *Anything else that links to the broader learning objectives of the overall program.*

¹ Technically there are multiple learning outcomes within the first two categories (defining/identifying and demonstrating are separate skills) but, for simplicity and without sacrificing meaning, they are included as one "line item."

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

USING FORMS FOR ONLINE TRAINING

Form: A detailed, choreographed drill in a specific discipline, which students of stage combat may practice alone and/or in groups when training. Forms are common elements of training and testing in most martial arts and all assume an “invisible” partner or partners. In Japanese the term *kata* (“form”), in Korean the term *poomse* (“pattern”), and in Chinese the term *taolu* (“pattern” or “routine”) all are applied to training and testing forms.

Specific to stage combat, the primary focus of most forms are as follows:

- Offer the fundamental principles and concepts of the particular form’s discipline/techniques. These include control, balance, coordination, concentration, as well as the discipline’s stances, footwork, offensive and defensive techniques.
- Help focus on specificity, precision, and accuracy of technique.
- Help develop proper footwork and balance, keeping the center of gravity in the right place.
- Help build muscle memory.

Forms in martial arts generally embrace the Taoist principle of the "unity of opposites" (yin and yang). This is reflected in some of the following:

- Patterns generally move in all four directions (right, left, front and back).
- The path of movement (footwork pattern) is uniform, the same steps taken both right and left or back and forth.
- Each direction of movement is mirrored in the opposite direction, training both sides of the body equally. (e.g., movement to the left could focus on techniques for the right side of the body and movement to the right could focus on techniques for the left side of the body.)

Training both the right and left side of the body equally is recommended as this contributes to symmetry and balance in the student while also allowing the teacher/observer to see the same movements repeated from different angles.

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

WEAPONS FOR ONLINE (at home) TRAINING

Below are suggestions for prop weapons to be used when the student is working from their home, backyard or other non-controlled classroom space. Keep in mind that these are representative examples. There are many, many more suppliers of similar products than we have room to list.

Note that these are not necessarily meant to take the place of actual in-person training classes although many could have some potential use in such an environment. Each teacher should consider their particular group of students when making recommendations on acquiring their prop weapons. The examples below were chosen with several criteria in mind:

- *Safety*: These generally tend towards softer materials like rubber or foam and shorter lengths (for swords) to accommodate smaller working spaces.
- *Cost*: Fortunately, these props tend to be relatively inexpensive. Students should be able to easily obtain prop weapons for \$5 to \$20.
- *Realism*: For knives this is less of an issue as “trainers” tend to be *relatively* close to the feel of the real thing. For swords, you should look for ones that give clear visual information that is readily seen via online communication platforms. Weight is something that we just may not have for many students.

Rubber Knives/Daggers:

Whatever knife trainer you get, make sure that it has a clearly defined true edge, a clear grip and visible delineation between blade and grip (some sort of guard is helpful – see photos below for examples). Remember that you want your training blade to be as close to a stage combat weapon as you can get, in terms of size and shape, so that techniques can be clearly evaluated via online platforms.

These are easy to find and there are literally hundreds of places to obtain these online. An excellent choice is Cold Steel Rubber Training Knives. These are a great deal in price, available styles and durability. You can even paint them if you prefer a flashy prop to train with. These are available in many styles and from many vendors (the link below is for a simple “fighting dagger” style but search around for others).

These are suitable for use in “knife” and for the dagger in “R&D.” Prices range from \$6 – 15 or so and you can get package deals with multiple knives or with other training weapon props. They even have a Rondel dagger training weapon if you prefer to train with a Medieval flair (the true edge is not really existent so you might need to use tape to show it).

These links are all for Cold Steel models but you can find other brands if you look. Remember to look for rubber (or aluminum) training knives...NOTHING sharp!

Amazon link for the search “Cold Steel training knife” keywords: [Amazon Cold Steel training knife](#)

Link to Knifecenter.com: <https://www.knifecenter.com/series/cold-steel-knives/cold-steel-trainers>

Link to BladeHQ.com: <https://www.bladehq.com/item--Cold-Steel-Trainer-Fixed-Blade--44319>

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning



Cold Steel rubber training knives

Aluminum Knives:



*Aluminum Knives
by Rogue Steel*

Aluminum is another option although they will cost a bit more (\$30-70). Note that the handling on many aluminum knives can be a bit different as the common paracord grips are not as “realistic” as the Cold Steel knives above in terms of shape, but these look cool as heck and offer a lot of customization options; color of grips, blade length and shape. You may find these at numerous online dealers and from many SAFD members who are also makers of fine stage weaponry. Representative examples include, but are not limited to:

- [Rogue Steel](#)
- [Vulcan’s Forge](#)
- [Jesse Belsky](#)
- [Gotham Armory](#)
- [Keen Edge Knives](#)



*Aluminum Knife
by Keen Edge Knives*

Training Swords:

For an “at home” training sword, given potential space limitations, you will likely need a shorter weapon than used in a typical classroom setting. That said, you will want the sword to be at least 17” overall and it should have a defined/visible guard and definable true edge (note that shinai are great training weapons but the true edge can be hard to visualize, so a strip of painter’s tape can be used to show where the edge(s) would be). Also be mindful of the fact that these might be used by a student with lamps, pets and siblings nearby so foam swords can be a good idea. If you have the space and the budget, we recommend a training sword that is as close to the appropriate stage combat weapon as you can get, in terms of size and shape, so that the student can be clearly evaluated via online platforms.

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

A simple search for “rubber training sword” on Amazon yields many results (see below for link). Again, if you go with Cold Steel (or a similar maker like Blades USA) you will get an affordable, durable product and a wide selection to choose from. If you are concerned about training in your small apartment you can go with a shorter style like a gladius.

You can also go with a toy foam sword if you are on a tight budget and/or are concerned about accidentally breaking things in your house or injuring your cat. The link below is for Amazon.com and shows a variety of inexpensive colorful foam swords.

[Colorful foam toy swords](#)

This link is also to Amazon.com and shows hard rubber training swords.

[Rubber training swords](#)

More foam medieval swords in the \$20-30 range:

https://smile.amazon.com/SparkFoam-Medieval-Swords-Ranger-Short/dp/B07D9732DN/ref=sr_1_24?dchild=1&keywords=foam+training+sword&qid=1594224170&s=sporting-goods&sr=1-24



Cold Steel Bokken; \$17

[Red Dragon Armoury](#) makes synthetic (rubber-like) training swords that look great and are as close as you might find without going for a steel sword. The cost will be in the \$60-85 range in most cases but they are a good investment. You can choose colors and assemble you own as well as buy replacement parts. You can get them on Amazon (of course) but also from a number of other dealers (just Google Red Dragon Armoury).



<https://www.buyingasword.com/red-dragon-armoury-2>

LARP weapons are foam replicas made for use in Live Action Role Playing and are not meant to be used roughly but more as costume pieces. They look pretty cool and are as safe as a foam sword can be. You can get them from the same link as the Red Dragon Armoury trainers above as well as other dealers and they tend to be about the same price as the hard rubber trainers. Reputable makers are Palnatoke, Forged Foam and, for really high end foam, Calimacil.com (you will pay \$100+ for these).

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

LIABILITY

This question has come up in several forms and is a completely valid concern. As teachers, we all need to remember that yes, we are in control of our classroom, virtual or in-person, but only to the limit that we can reasonably be expected to be so. What does that mean? Read on...

What about liability in space selection and weapon selection? How are we addressing actually deducing whether or not a student is using a dull knife? How do I, as a stage combat teacher, and arbiter of my classroom, extend a safe classroom space for students to study and explore violence inside their homes?

We spoke with our legal counsel and we are on solid ground with our liability in executing online training. In truth, these considerations are no different than what we, as teachers, should be discussing with our students under “normal circumstances.” Our students rehearse in their dorm rooms, homes, parks and many other spaces when not under our direct supervision. Discussing what is safe for them in their outside rehearsals should *always* be a part of the conversations that we have with them *on day one*. In fact, NOT talking about these issues is what opens you up to liability. These conversations include; what weapons they can use for outside rehearsals, what sort of surface they should be working on, being sure not to “fight” where their rehearsal may be mistaken for an actual altercation and so forth. Generally, we have seen a lot of positive feedback from students who have been working in their homes. There has even been overwhelming evidence that parents, siblings and other family members became interested in the student’s study in a way they never had before and it truly made the students (gleefully) “up their game.” Instances of friends, partners and family members holding the camera or doing knaps or throwing in off-camera lines were common. Yes, you should tell them not to “practice” on their little sisters or brothers but...we always have to tell them this.

As far as weapon selection goes, we have provided general guidelines but have left room for our teachers to make decisions based on their years of experience and training. The teachers should inspect (online of course) each student’s weapon just as they do when a student wants to bring in their personal rapier into class. Take the time to have them hold it up to their camera and move it around as needed so you can see it clearly. The parameters in the previous section were set down with safety and cost in mind and we found “weapons” on Amazon and similar sites that cost less than \$10 each.

We cannot control what anyone does outside the classroom, be it a video classroom or otherwise. If your student eschews using a previously determined “acceptable” training knife and then cuts themselves while rehearsing with a sharp kitchen knife, despite the guidelines that you, as the teacher, have laid out, then there is not much we CAN do.

SAFD Best Practices Document for Online Learning

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Your SAFD Colleagues as Resources

There are many of your colleagues out there who are ready, willing and able to offer guidance into this new method of teaching. Here are just a few who have offered their time and insight:

- Timothy Pinnow, CT/FD (see his video link above): tpinnow@coloradomesa.edu
- Samantha Egle, CT & founder Humble Warrior Movement Arts: humblewarriormma@gmail.com
- Jenny Male, CT and CT representative: jennymalefights@gmail.com
- Robb Hunter, FM and FD representative: fghtnce@gmail.com
- Most of your colleagues! Check them out: [Society of American Fight Directors](https://safd.org/) <https://safd.org/>