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Why Team Academy?

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Taking any new product to market can be a struggle, especially if it's innovative, perceived to be 'ahead of its time' or it challenges the status quo. Getting people to change or adapt their behaviour, without them being able to fully identify an immediately apparent reason, need or benefit, can be met with resistance and scepticism. "Why do we need this... what we have already works fine?"

And so it is with the Team Academy model. Why should we give up on an ages-old pedagogical model of teaching which is embraced worldwide? A model of the 'sage on the stage' where the teacher is the expert, the curriculum is decided, controlled and measured and success of institution and pupil are based on pre-defined proximal outputs. The world of work is little different, and organisations large and small look to training, advisors and consultants to provide solutions to growth requirements or answers to 'problems'.

But what if we are being myopic and ignoring the inevitable? What if we are part of a social evolutionary process that demands that change in the way we are 'taught' is not only unavoidable but necessary? What if traditional models of teaching can no longer keep up with our need to learn? Emerging literature and commentary would suggest that team learning is not just a 'new thing' but an inescapable and necessary response to a world where uncertainty, change and complexity demand reactions where an 'expert' prescribing a single or universally accepted solution becomes a nonsense. One-size answers certainly do not fit all clients.

So what is the point of Team Academy? Is it just an interesting and innovative educational model that will amuse minds and provide research activities for academics until another 'flavour of the month' emerges, or is it something far broader than this? Is it indeed part of an evolutionary, learning necessity – a phenomenon whose time has now come?

What might a global Team Academy Network look like? What would be its purpose? Why should we promote it? Is this a black art that is to remain in the domain of academia? Is it a virus that has already been released?

Or could it be an antidote to a much deeper, embedded problem in that the way that we teach is not wholly appropriate for tomorrow's world?

In order to make sense of this, I'd like to share some of my own personal learning journey with you. It is a journey of the reflexive praxis of an entrepreneur, not a commentary or analysis by a bystander. In saying this, I also need to be clear about my personal belief with regard to the term 'entrepreneur':

I believe that: an entrepreneur is an individual who has a capacity to interpret their task environment in ways in which they may subsequently add value to situations which may be problematic or for which there are few perceived resolutions. In doing this they will not only develop their own 'world-view' (G. weltanschauung) but possibly – and certainly withig established organisations - alienate others by taking what are otherwise deemed to be unacceptable risks that may not subscribe to accepted causal management practices.

A person who starts a business venture is not necessarily an entrepreneur – and if they are, this is far from a guarantee of success as measured by business support and government organisations. Until convinced otherwise, I believe that some people are born with the traits and attributes that allow them to naturally 'be entrepreneurial'; to others, this can be encouraged or mimicked to some extent; for some it is an alien and uncomfortable state.

I also make no apology for the style in which I'm offering this story and my thoughts to you. This is not meant to be an academic treatise – it's written to offer the reader both insight and foresight to a world – my world - of entrepreneurial learning, how this might occur and why it might be even more appropriate across society in general.

When I was at senior school, the careers advice that we were offered was pretty shoddy. Mine was in the form of, "Ah, but you'll stay on and take your A-levels and then go to university!".

It was at this point that I learned what has turned out to be one of the most powerful questions in a coach's armoury:

"Why....?"

Subsequently stolen by Simon Sinek, I realised pretty early on that this must be a neat question, as it is frequently met with silence, confusion or anger. Sometimes, it is met with all three of these responses (not necessarily in that order) so I advocate use with caution. Both my careers advisor (who was also the PE teacher) and my parents seemed to have some difficulty with the question, although my parents (both teachers) in their wisdom, came up with a working fix. Or perhaps it was an ultimatum:

“If you can find yourself a job that offers training, then you can leave school without taking A-levels. If you can’t find a job by the end of term, then you will stay on and take your A-levels...”

In doing this, I don’t think that they realised the amazing start they were offering me to my working life. ‘More school’ was exactly what I didn’t want at this stage. More school, then even more school – even if it was in the shape of a university – sounded like a life sentence. I had no idea what I wanted to do, but what I did know was that it was time for me to get out and DO something.

I rose to my parents’ challenge, identified ‘jobs with training’ and ended up being accepted for an apprenticeship by a major national corporation. I started ‘work’ two weeks after leaving school aged 16, only to discover that six weeks later, they were sending me back to another version of ‘school’ – a further education college. Which is where something unusual happened.

For years, I had struggled with mathematics. Addies-ups and takies-away were fine, but trigonometry, algebra and other dark arts just made no sense to me at all. I excelled at engineering drawing, having a natural ability to visualise things in more than one dimension. My English composition was OK, physics and chemistry acceptable, I loved geography, but maths? Why? It was almost as mysterious as Latin.

Bizarrely, after a few hiccups, maths now became my best subject. This was undoubtedly because I was now studying electrical engineering and on a daily basis I was working with volts, amps, ohms and farads, all of which are explained with electrical theory which in turn is glued together with maths (and physics and some other stuff). Maths, at long last had a purpose. Maths in isolation, as a process or a theory without a means of application, was useless to me. It wasn’t worth remembering.

That is, it was useless to me until I needed it.

So why, in most of the world, do we continue to teach to curricula determined by observers, normally at the expense of creativity, personal attributes and relevant application?

I didn't last for too long 'doing' electrical engineering and I resigned from my first, perfectly sensible job-for-life at the tender age of 22, with nothing more than a desire to carve my own way in the world and a belief that I could. I did not have an ambition to be financially wealthy, but needed freedom, exploration and adventure. I was, and hopefully always will be, immensely curious – not good for cats as I understand, but essential if you have an appetite for the path less travelled by.

One of the things I had discovered as I began my apprenticeship was that there is a big, wide, fascinating, diverse world out there, where not many people are too impressed by your ability to regurgitate theory – they're more interested in what you can do, or perhaps more importantly, what you have done. I also discovered that I didn't get on very well working for people with little authenticity, or for organisations with little vision or a will to improve. It was time for some self-determined learning – 'heutagogy' before it was given a name – and my career as 'merchant adventurer' was launched.

This isn't an essay about entrepreneurship, but rather about what I would call entrepreneurial learning. In order not to wander too far off-plan, we now need to leap forward some forty years so that I can offer you some provenance to what I am sharing. Needless to say, the intervening years were, let's say, formative. I am living proof that Nonaka and Takeuchi's Model of Knowledge Creation (probably) works – and the more you allow this to become an unconscious 'subroutine' (*unconscious competence....?*) the more you want to learn. It feeds the curious.

Distilling the full journey, the raw and potent spirit looks something like this:

- Became self-employed
- Incorporated first business
- Grew business
- Did lots of stuff
- Sold business
- Ran away to sea and started second business

- Decided that it was time for a change, stuck a pin in a map and moved to a different part of the UK trading wild beaches and remote islands for rolling fields and trees.
- Collided with academia and began a new adventure

That's as much as we have time for here, but I'm sure you get the gist of life thus far. Perhaps we can dip back into the journey as I reflect on points as they're raised.

2020 saw me relocated in rural Lincolnshire, working as a Team Coach in the nascent business department of a small university delivering a business programme based on the Finnish Team Academy, or Tiimiakatemia, philosophy of team learning. This was not something that I had planned or thought of, and the result of some serendipitous meetings as I began to navigate my new and self-enforced task environment some five years earlier.

I've immersed myself in the practice and study (note the order - action first) of entrepreneurial team learning. I've completed a course of International Team Mastery; I've travelled throughout Europe and am both proud and humbled to be part of a now-global network of amazing people - fellow travellers who appreciate, promote and encourage the phenomenon that is entrepreneurship, through team learning.

So that's all good then? Job done?

No. Job starting. Because it would appear that for many, the TA way of learning isn't seen to be 'academic enough'. It is viewed with scepticism. It is seen as 'resource intensive'. It removes the 'teacher as the expert'. Some even say it's cult-like. Yet – whatever 'it' is – it would appear that 'it' works.

Despite a laudable track record in Finland, where the programme had its genesis over 25 years ago, this does not offer enough efficacy for it to become an acceptable mainstream delivery model elsewhere. Academia requires theory and research in order to validate provenance. Change isn't necessarily good, it's scary. Change suggests 'replacement', which in turn could suggest that any previous state is no longer suitable or may indeed be flawed. In academia, seeing is not necessarily believing. Being 'wrong' is not acceptable. Failure is scary and to be shunned.

I first 'saw', or experienced, TA at the University of the West of England (UWE), in the UK. I was invited to take part in a 'learning expedition' – a short two-day visit to see what TA was all about.

What did I see? What did I learn?

I saw a group of young, enthusiastic, engaging people who were passionate about their course and the journey they were on. I had my first encounter with a 'team coach', who didn't seem to do very much; I had fun joining in with activities they had prepared for us. I saw something that, based on my life experience to-date, made immediate sense.

So what?

I didn't realise it at the time, but this was the beginning of a whole new journey for me too. Somewhere in the distillation process that I mentioned earlier, I did pass through a 'filter' of academic learning that saw me emerge with a Master's Degree and expanded my ability to think. However, although I'd experienced life as a (mature) student, I had managed to escape the machinations of institutional academia. So when I experienced TA for the first time, I had no other delivery process to compare it with - apart from my own learning journey as an entrepreneur.

Five years down the line, and I find myself as Programme Leader of a tiny cohort of students, constantly arguing as to why 'my' programme should not be shelved in favour of "more traditional offers that guarantee bums on seats". Yes, it rather looks as if I am 'poacher turned gamekeeper'.

For me, I have spent a lifetime looking for ways to engage stakeholders in my business activities and have actively (and successfully) sold many things ranging from locks and safes to wildlife holidays. What have I learned from this? Difference sells. Discounting any academic argument, here is a product that's newsworthy. Here's a product with a USP.

However, they're still not currently interested.

So here, perhaps, is a tension – universities are run as academic institutions, not commercial organisations. In general, they are generally risk-averse and not keen to dabble with 'new things'.

Their prime driver is a need to constantly appease a galaxy of regulatory standards that require boxes to be ticked that will at least maintain their position in some national survey or other. They are also paranoid about student satisfaction surveys, work allocation modules, reports, results, recruitment figures.... If only they were as passionate about future-fit learning.

Or entrepreneurial learning.

As part of my Team Coach training, I have visited Finland several times now as the *alma mater*, the genesis, of TA - or Tiimiakatemia. Experiencing TA in action – without realising at the time what constraints different regimes or cultures might place on individual programmes – one of my first thoughts on experiencing TA was, “where else? Who else?”. What I was experiencing was the condensation of the journey I had been on for many years, that “path less travelled by”, compressed into a degree course. Yet however amazing this new experience may appear to be, I can’t help but feel that this ‘formalisation’ raises a caveat in that there is the potential to make entrepreneurial learning a little exclusive – what about those without, or who have missed out on, the opportunity of learning in this way?

Viral marketing is a term that appeared a little over 20 years ago in the heady days of the beginnings of the ‘online’ revolution. Used to infer the rapid promotion of a product or service via social networks. Is it possible that TA is a form of as ‘viral learning’? Instead of people waiting around being told what to do by ‘experts’, what if there was a better understanding of the nature of ‘teams’ (as in, they aren’t just a collection of people who may need to do something) and ‘entrepreneurship’ (as in, this is no longer simply about running a business for financial gain at the expense of others, but about combining resource to add value). What if this model could also be rolled out outside of the constraints of formal education allowing social communities to form entrepreneurial ecosystems or communities of practice that could determine for themselves what they needed to do and also knew how to go about filling in any gaps in their knowledge that was preventing them from doing this?

This might sound quite utopian, and I’m sure that trainers, advisors, consultants and (some) educators the world over would throw their hands up in horror at the thought of prospective students and clients suddenly working out for themselves what it is they need to be doing and how to do it. The old ways of command and control, expert and pupil, have and have-not, have worked for centuries, why on earth would we want to change anything?

I'd like to share three other reflections with you, one from my previous business existence, and two from my current academic adventure:

- 1) As my first business grew, I realised that I could no longer do everything and that attempting to micromanage every process was not only unnecessary but unhealthy. I also knew that money wasn't the only motivator for those who worked with me – they genuinely wanted to be good at their jobs and take on more responsibility. We were early adopters of I.T. and (for both the size of the business and the era) had effective accounting and CRM systems in place. I offered some of the office staff the opportunity to attend our local college and work toward an accountancy qualification – even though this would be in their own time, they jumped at the chance.

The morning after they'd attended their class, we'd have a coffee together and I'd ask them what they'd covered the night before and let them explain how they 'made sense' of this in their work environment. Any changes they wanted to make to our processes were encouraged. However, it didn't take them long to rumble their 'trainer' at the college and discover that although they knew their way through whichever text book that needed to be followed, they fell flat on their face if asked a question that was 'off plan'. The lecturer knew the mechanics – the theory – of the subject, but had no experience of practical application. For my shining stars, their learning didn't happen until they brought it back to the workplace where it could be discussed and tested. At college, they learned very little of value. The Sage on the Stage was a phoney..

- 2) The Team Academy process is built around 'learning by doing' – self-determined learning as individuals and in teams. It all sounds very exciting but it can also be very scary for the learners. I have known students who have joined the course having gained top marks in business subjects at school and college become totally paralysed at the prospect of actually DOING something. Taking action is scary. No-one has told them how to do that. For some this is simply too much and they leave the course (*a good reason why this type of learning shouldn't be seen as an 'easy ride' and probably warrants a careful selection process as seen in Finland and elsewhere in Europe*).

I clearly remember one young lad – realising that he now had to DO something – approaching me like a frightened rabbit in headlights.

“What’s up?” I asked as he stood in front of me wide-eyed and visibly shaken.

“I... I ... don’t know what to do...!”, he spluttered.

“OK. Don’t panic. What do you think you could do...?”

At which point the spell was broken and he described the first steps he was going to take in building his new venture. We still laugh about this ‘unshackling’ experience when we now meet.

One of the issues I persistently experience with young learners is that there is a ‘danger zone’ between ideation and action that they are terrified to enter. They have never been equipped with the tools that they need to competently navigate the zone in which it becomes necessary to DO something – ANYTHING! Some even struggle when facing the challenge of coming up with any new ideas and seem to have inherent inability – almost a ‘learned helplessness’ – to be curious and dare to find out what they don’t yet know.

Their schooling today has let them down. They have sat in the lessons. They have passed the end of term quiz. They actually know very little.

- 3) I won’t win many friends in academia with my next statement: I say to new students, “You are here at university to gain a degree qualification. You can do that by playing the game of academia, in that, if you follow the ‘rules’, complete your assignments and answer the questions that you are asked in the acceptable format and therefor attain good marks, the University will award you a degree. But I want more than that for you. Some of you may go on to start your own businesses. Some of you will go on to work for other organisations. Either way – that’s fine – but once you leave the safety of university, you’re on your own and I don’t care much for your chances if the only thing between you and the next person is a piece of paper. I need you to be different. I need you to be the ones who stand out.”

And sometimes, this falls on stony ground, but for those who immerse themselves in what has become known in Team Academy as ‘the process’ there is not only a transformation, but often a transcendence. This is what I have witnessed working in a regime where ‘student attributes’ are viewed as an ‘also ran’ to core learning, being offered as an extra-curricular award.

And therefore, my challenge to any teacher, educator, trainer, mentor or coach is this:

“In working with your student(s) what is it that you are learning together?” Because if you’re not, I’d suggest there’s a danger that your thinking is not straying beyond what might be called ‘explicit’ or proximal learning and that it may well not be future-fit.

I have now told you my story, and it’s time to conclude this chapter. I hope that in relating real-life experiences to you that you are able to relate to insights from a journey not yet complete. When my students are struggling with an assignment, I often say, “Let’s go back to the question – what is it asking you to do?”. So, let’s just reconsider the point of this chapter:

Why Team Academy?

In order to offer an answer to this question, let’s consider another: “what are we learning for and how are we doing this...?”

In his foreword to the brilliant “Building Top Performing Teams” by Lucy Widdowson and Paul Barbour, Professor Peter Hawkins talks of the ability of organisations to become future-fit. Surely it follows that, in order to be able to achieve this maxim, then our *learning* is also to be future-fit.

Of course we cannot accurately predict the future, therefore we cannot predict precisely *what* it is we need to learn – but that is not the meaning of future-fit. A more accurately statement may be that we need to adopt a future-fit *way* of learning, embracing a paradigm shift in what is, in general, currently on offer as ‘teaching’ and ‘training’ and re-thinking *how* we learn. The world in which we all live, and for which we learn, is a VUCA (*volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous*) environment where ‘wicked problems’ abound. It is no longer the domain of the Heroic Leader and entrepreneurship no longer defines the profit-fuelled journey of the stellar business icon, but rather the realm of agile teams who can add value.

At which point I’d like to offer a final reflection on my time at sea. Learning to sail is a complex process and competence is built by combining practice and theory. It’s possibly the ultimate reflexive experience.

But there's not much that can prepare you for your first storm, other than an implicit belief in the integrity of your vessel and crew coupled with your own ability to use all of your senses to interpret myriad inputs of ever-changing information that assaults your senses. A planned course can become like a business plan in a pandemic – irrelevant – as you quickly respond to an emerging situation which could lead to discomfort or even danger. There is no denying that you will learn from the situation (probably retrospectively) but there is also no other 'expert' to call on that will tell you what to do. You are on your own. You need to be able to constantly adapt and re-interpret whatever you have previously learned as new situations emerge. It is also an occasion when time spent ensuring that systems and processes are fully operational, well-practiced and robust add to the resilience of the whole operation and make the experience tolerable.

And it is this ability to 'navigate' (Wood, 2017) or 'knowing as we go' (Ingold 2000) that I believe the process of entrepreneurial learning in teams offers us. The exciting concept for me is that it's already out there – our mission (should we decide to accept it) – is to embrace the role of the Team Coach as a fellow learners and curators of The Process. The 'guide at the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage' – or as one of my team entrepreneur students said, "the ghost in the room", which I take as a compliment.

The Team Academy concept currently exists predominantly (but not exclusively) in the arena of higher education business qualifications. In his insightful video address recorded for the 25th celebration gathering of Tiimiakatemia held in Jyväskylä, Finland, 2018, Peter Senge likened traditional business schools to factories whose output was an MBA with questionable competencies. He complimented Team Academy by explaining how their students may reach the same goal, but equipped with the necessary skills and attributes to be more effective actors

Perhaps it is time for a new paradigm for entrepreneurship; a relevant definition and proper understanding of 'teams and 'teaming'; a critical evaluation of education and a better vision of 'future-fit' learning.

Perhaps Team Academy is indeed an idea whose time has come.

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Peter Senge's video address is available online at <https://youtu.be/2BBEiTFqw7c>