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Theories and Experiences on Team Learning



BASICS OF THE THEORY





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”There are three important elements to Yiquan training: Relaxation, use of mind (i.e. mental imagery), and the concept of contradictory power.” - Juha Leino in translator’s foreword to Zhang, C. (2011).

In this short paper we will argue that the elements named in the quote above from a book on Chinese health exercise and martial art Yiquan (the name translates roughly to intention (style of) boxing) have relevance for the practices of vocational higher education. In Yiquan, the goal of training is to allow the natural processes of the body to function effectively. This is achieved, first, through relaxing, or letting go of tensions that induce unnecessary rigidity and letting the body stand, sit, lie or move freely without rigidity.

Relaxing in Yiquan does not mean collapsing as relaxing is often understood in western cultures. The concept of relaxing in Yiquan is similar to that in Alexander technique, a process

of learning to avoid unnecessary muscular tension by retraining reactions. In Alexander technique, focus is on building and maintaining a posture where the relationship between the head, neck and spine allows for a free functioning of the whole body as a system.

Incidentally, educational philosopher John Dewey who was himself a student of Alexander has written that Alexander's method "bears the same relation to education that education itself bears to all other human activities" (in foreword to Alexander, 2007/1932). This relation can, perhaps, be summarized as a process that allows for methodical examination, careful deliberation on and fine-tuning of processes which, when running their course without this fine-tuning, would be less than optimal and possibly have a harmful effect on ourselves, our relationships, our communities or the world we live in.

This is in tune with Gert Biesta's argument that the concern of education lies in examination, deliberation on and finetuning of desires and expanding the space of intelligent choice over them, or "*the transformation of what is desired into what is desirable*" (Biesta, 2014).

A study conducted at Google over team efficiency (Duhigg, 2016), as well as previous research by, for example, Edmondson (1999) shows that, from all factors contributing to effective teamwork, psychological safety, or the experienced ability to take risks within the team without feeling insecure or embarrassed has the highest contribution to team effectiveness.

The concept of psychological safety on the team level

carries some similarity to being able to relax or to let go of unnecessary and harmful tensions on the individual level. This relaxation of tensions is necessary for the thoughts, ideas and emotions to flow freely in dialogue, which can itself serve as a method for letting go of harmful tensions that are often based on less than well-founded assumptions, evaluations and judgements within the team.

Thus, I will suggest that coaching and team learning in Proakatemia can be understood through a model that functions on three different temporal levels: the foundation (what is already), the educational situation (what is taking place) and the educational process (what is becoming). These in turn can be summarized with regards to their main foci:

1. The foundation: Psychological safety and trust, or suspension of unnecessary and harmful judgements, assumptions and mental rigidity on both, individual and collective level.
2. The educational situation: Introducing (through slowing down), maintaining and deliberating over useful tensions and contradictions.
3. The educational process: Initiating (making visible) and maintaining relatively fast cyclical processes where the interplay of useful tensions and contradictions can take place and facilitate growth.

THE FOUNDATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND TRUST

It could be said that in Proakatemia, the team and the trust shown to the students by their peers, customers and coaches both compels the students to work and learn in a more involved manner, and provides a relatively safe and supportive environment for learning, often through mistakes and shared reflection. Students collectively own their team enterprise and their learning processes. They acquire new skills and knowledge not for some future working life where they suddenly become useful but to be better in running their business and to be able to better support their team. This gives both the studies, in form of books read, essays written, dialogue workshops led and participated in, and the development discussions with the coach, as well as real business projects profound meaning for the students.

The basis of coaching is in taking on a peculiar mindset of a team coach. Instead of focusing on delivery of a specific content matter or appearing 'scholarly' or 'teacherlike', the team coach focuses on the results of the team members' actions, as well as her own actions that influence the actions of the team members who have personal interest in the outcomes of their collective action:

Training is about those situations in which those who learn do not really share in the use to which their actions are put. They are not a partner in a shared activity. Education, in contrast, is about those situations in which one really shares or participates in a common activity, in which one really has an interest in its accomplishment just as others have. In those

situations one's ideas and emotions are changed as a result of the participation. (Biesta, 2014)

Students who have previously been trained in individualistic institutional settings often fail to see the consequences of their own actions (incl. communication) for what others and the whole team are able to achieve. This is where the coach plays a crucial role in maintaining a safe environment where the students are able to reflect on their interactions, give and receive feedback, and engage in dialogue with others. The focus of team coaching is in enabling students to reflect on the consequences of their choices of actions, including inaction, for the whole.

The coach builds and guards a safe and dialogical setting, where difference and uncertainty can be tolerated by the team members. Safety is also crucial for people to be able to express their vulnerability, which is essential for building trust within a team (Lencioni, 2015). It is very difficult to feel empathy or trust towards someone who does not appear vulnerable. It is also difficult to express our own vulnerability when we notice that others are uncomfortable with expressing their vulnerability in the presence of others. We quickly assess the situation and decide whether a situation is such that our vulnerability as human beings will be accepted and respected by others.

MAINTAINING USEFUL TENSIONS

Independent persons do not come together to form a relationship; from relationships the very possibility of independent persons emerges. (Gergen, 2009)

When I started my PhD research in Proakatemia, it soon became apparent that even when people talked about how good and relaxed the atmosphere in Proakatemia was, there were a number of tensions that featured often in dialogue, perhaps the main one being that between individual difference and the collective or communal consensus. Other potentially useful tensions and contradictions besides that between self and others that often come up in dialogues and conversations with students and coaches include those between individual and collective freedom and responsibility, use of time (leisure/work), current situation and dreams (for future), as well as doing (action) and thinking about doing (deliberation).

*Certainty is antithetical to learning:
When we increase certainty, we
reduce the space for learning.*

Transformative learning is built on friction and uncertainty. Managerial perspective is often focused on running things smoothly. Some people may mistake the smoothness and easiness of a process with efficiency, even in terms of learning. This, however, is an illusion. Without challenge to our existing frames of reference that will inevitably make us slow down and feel uncomfortable, there can be no transformation of those frames of reference. Education and “learning” without transformation of existing frames of reference and mental models becomes mere training and adapting.

From a coach point of view, there are constant tensions between letting things be and intervening, as well as achieving certainty over the value of one’s work and coping with the uncertainty, or the risk of not being valuable as a teacher. An

advice attributed to the founder of Tiimiakatemia, Johannes Partanen for a coach not to intervene when she feels like it, and to intervene when she does not exemplifies this tension: Taken as a reflective exercise it flexes the coaches' ability to intervene (decision not to intervene is a form of intervention) in a meaningful way, even when she does not comfortable doing so. As a coach, one seldom knows for sure how to intervene in the most fruitful way. The possible actions almost always range from non-intervention - still a form of intervention in itself, to taking hold of the whole situation and leading the team through the rough waters. The coach should care about finding a good way to intervene in each situation but, I argue, she should focus even more on remaining in the tension between different options and maintaining her ability to choose between them in an intelligent way, not becoming constrained, for example, by the students' expectations. Tension between different options inevitably involves the risk of making wrong choices. Still, if one wants to grow as a coach, that risk has to be taken and lived through over and over again.

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Stating that the students and their teams should be trusted with full responsibility of managing their own business and learning does not mean (1) that students should be left to their own devices in the learning process or (2) that individual students will have full freedom to do as they please.

Quite the contrary, faculty members engaging in coaching of self-managed teams need to be more aware of the team and individual learning processes and goals and coach both the whole team and the individuals through continuous

dialogue, supportive encouragement and positive challenge. Once the team and individual goals have been agreed and set, the freedom transforms from negative liberty, or the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints into positive liberty or “the possibility of acting — or the fact of acting — in such a way as to take control of one’s life and realize one’s fundamental purposes” (Carter, 2016). While perhaps more collective in nature, positive liberty is often experienced by the students as an increase in the level of personal freedom, even more so than being free to act without constraints. In fact, the team and the community often set stricter constraints on the behavior of the individuals than teaching staff in a more stereotypical university setting would set with regards to working hours, work and study practices, as well as external behavior both online and in life outside the studies.

MAKING VISIBLE AND MAINTAINING LEARNING PROCESSES

“Don’t be a know-it-all; be a learn-it-all.” - Satya Nadella, CEO, Microsoft

In Proakatemia, explicit theory is not the starting point for designing educational or business practice. One could say that theory behind the pedagogical approach in Proakatemia defies theoretical analysis and needs to be examined as a whole formed by educational theory, practice and experience, as well as shared values and convictions. This becomes evident when one examines the timeline of practical and theoretical development: Most of the “foundational” theories were published after the beginning of Team Academy, the

predecessor of Proakatemia, in Jyväskylä. Rather than serving as a foundation for theory-based pedagogical practice, various theories are employed to understand and refine practice on an ongoing basis. In this continuous intertwining of theory and practice, some theories gain more traction and are included into the theoretical foundation of Proakatemia.

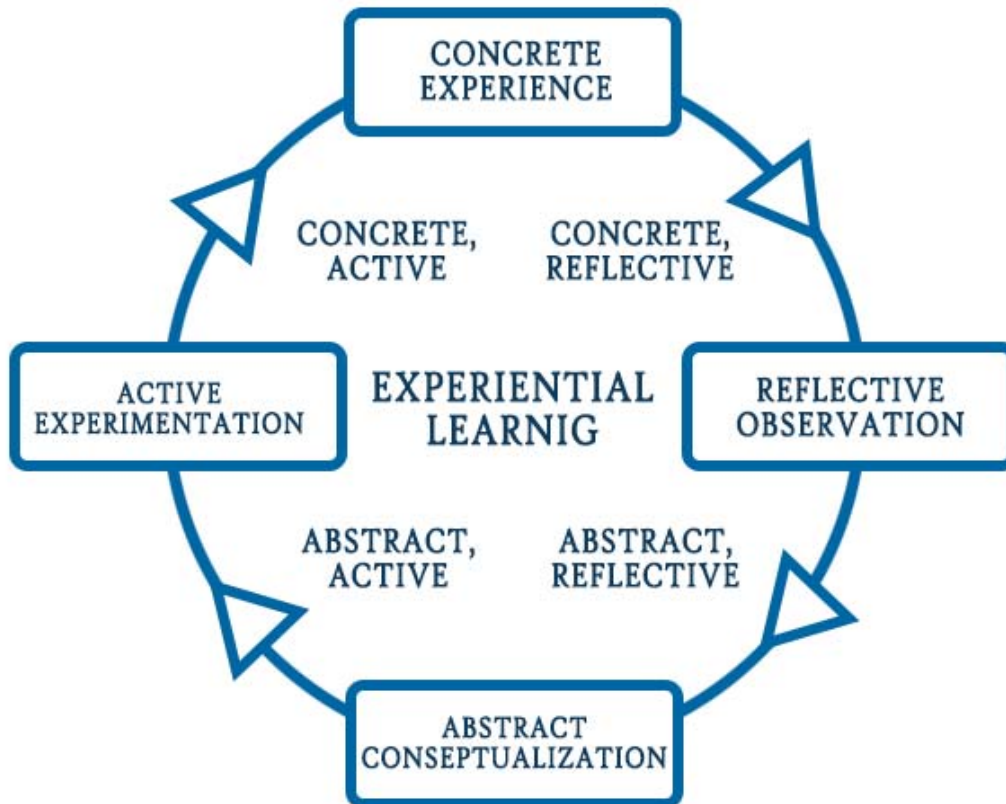
The most prominent influence on the pedagogical model comes from Tiimiakatemia model for team learning as developed by Johannes Partanen in Tiimiakatemia unit of Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences during the 1990s. This model was based on a radical form of social constructivism, combined with various theories of organizational learning (Senge, 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and self-managed learning (Cunningham, 1994). Many of these early bases of the Tiimiakatemia model still form the theoretical and practical basis of the design of learning environment and activities in Proakatemia.

Where Tiimiakatemia and Proakatemia models depart from usual pedagogical approaches in higher education is that, instead of being based on lectures, exams and essay-writing, or even learning tasks and workshops designed by the teaching staff, they take radical democratic and entrepreneurial freedom and initiative of the team enterprises as their starting point.

This freedom is guided by continuous dialogue within the teams, between students and their coaches, as well as between individual students and the whole community. The radical freedom for the teams to decide on their own business and learning goals builds on the coaches' trust on the students' ability to conduct business and manage their own working

and learning together, as well the coaches' work in facilitating a safe and dialogic learning community.

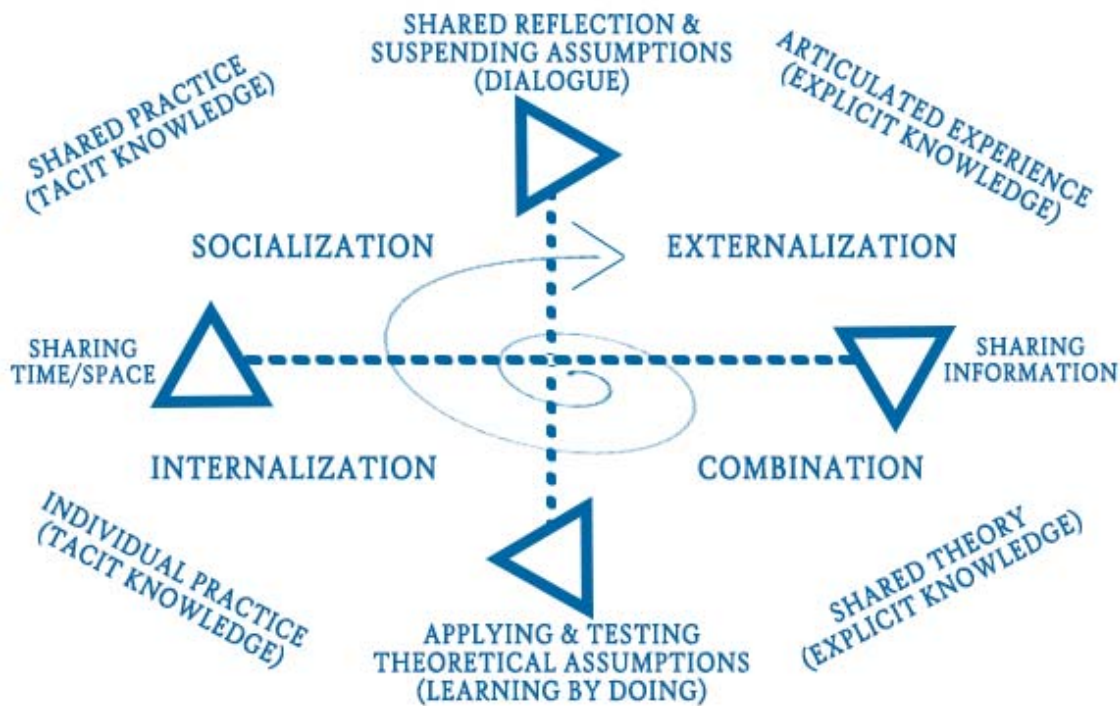
Interplay between useful tensions is present in David Kolb's classic model of experiential learning (1983).



*Figure 1. Kolb's model of experiential learning
(based on Kolb, 1983)*

In the model depicted above, the useful tensions and contradictions take place between focus on abstract and concrete matters on one hand, and active and reflective activities on the other. The process builds on the continuous interplay between active experimentation over abstract theoretical conceptualization and reflective deliberation over concrete experience.

One possible way to extend the model of experiential learning from the level of individual students to more explicitly cover the communal level is through the classic model of organizational knowledge creation, or “SECI-model” (an acronym of socialization, externalization, combination and internalization) developed by Japanese organizational researchers Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995):



*Figure 2. Elaboration on the (SECI) model of organizational knowledge creation
(based on Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995)*

In the above model, the crucial flows of tensions and contradictions lie between the personal and the communally shared, the experienced/theoretical (deliberating) and the practical (doing), as well as the movement between the tacit and the explicit forms of knowledge.

As seen above, many different cyclical learning processes could be applied in reflecting on the learning processes in Proakatemia. Even Proakatemia “Path to Entrepreneurship”, the overarching framework behind Proakatemia curriculum, can be translated into a cyclical learning process with underlying tensions between phases focused more on the team and action (building trust, doing) and those focused on the student and deliberation over her possibilities of action (courage, learning).

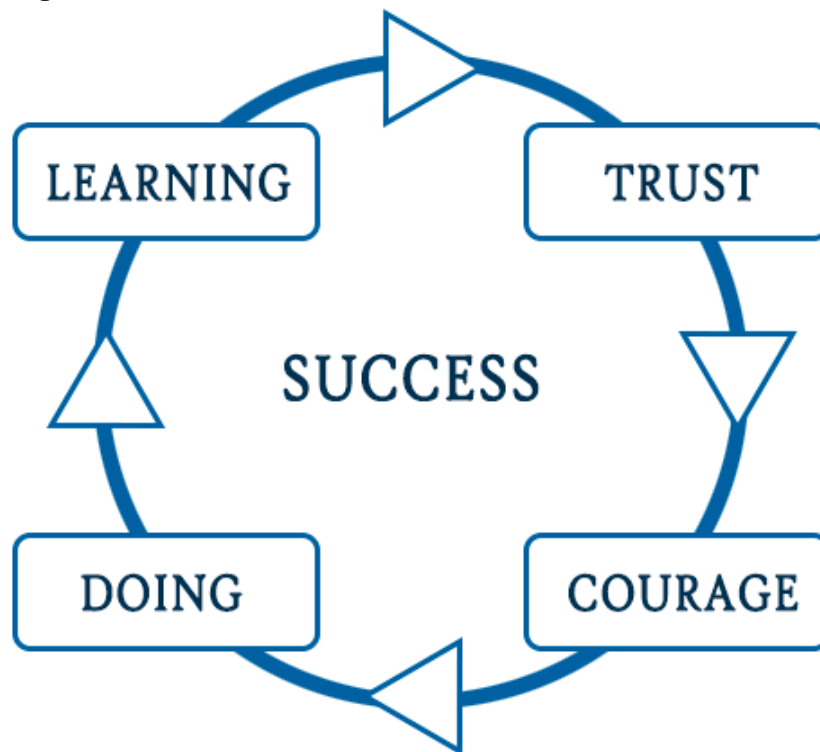


Figure 3. Proakatemia Path to Entrepreneurship as a cyclical model

Tensions are also inherent in the background assumptions of the model, such as very visible role of the students in taking the lead of their own and, also, their colleagues’ learning processes. If we are to take descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications at level 6 (bachelor’s degree) in European Qualifications Framework (EQF) seriously, allowing the students to practice managing

their own learning processes as well as those of the others in complex projects with an increasing level of uncertainty, the above processes that encourage fruitful tensions between the subject and the community as well as reflection and application become a necessity.

Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups. (EQF level 6 competence descriptor)

Studies (for example, Marton, 1981) have shown that educators tend to be unfoundedly optimistic on the transfer-effect of learning and theoretical models from lecture halls and classrooms into practice and that those models, when employed effectively in practice, are always entwined with practical, subjective experience of the real-life contexts. In brief, no theory that will have pragmatic value for the students can be learned in theory alone but it needs to intertwine with the students' past, present and future experience of practice.

We should perhaps treat any theoretical models not as models for designing pedagogy, institutional structures or learning environments as such, or expect them to explain how or why something “works” or why it does not. Instead, theoretical models in education are perhaps best taken as tools for deliberating over practices and, perhaps, deepening our understanding of the underlying processes just a little bit. As Biesta (2014) writes, the interesting question might not be whether education is a science or an art but what kind of an art it is.

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