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Theories and Experiences on Team Learning



# BASICS OF TEAM LEARNING & COACHING

THIS IS HOW WE LEARN AND STUDY AT  
TAMK PROAKATEMIA





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**T**his article and the training session that was held around the topic at Academic Adventures International Week of Proakatemia aim to open a door to everyday life at Proakatemia. We learn by working together. What do we really do in practice?

The Why?-question will be answered in the other articles of this publication. The curricula of Proakatemia is also explained in another article. Many of the challenges around team learning are also opened in the other articles – as well as successes and all kinds of experiences.

This article cannot tell all the tools for team learning or coaching; only a very few of them. There are several books around those topics. If you are interested in them, just Google, for example, Johannes Partanen.

## WHAT DOES THE CURRICULA SAY?

According to the curricula of Proakatemia, the studies and learning consists of

- \* Work in Team Company: projects for customers, company meetings etc.
- \* Seminars
- \* Literature & essays
- \* Team learning & coaching
- \* Free choice studies (15 ECTS credits)
- \* Final thesis (15 ECTS credits)

As their first thing at Proakatemia the students establish a company, most often a co-operative, and start to work as what we call teampreneurs. There are around 15 – 20 teampreneurs in a company. Each company gets a coach. They'll work 2,5 years at Proakatemia – after that they are free to do whatever they like with their company. The oldest team company, Villivisio, was founded in 1999 and it is still up and running a remarkable business in Tampere region.

After the paperwork, which is rather light in Finland, the team company starts to develop products and services and find customers for its services. It needs to form its vision, mission, and strategy, start the bookkeeping, marketing, human resources processes – all the basic things a company needs to take care of.

The teampreneurs are required to take part in seminars that are relevant to their businesses. Every month the team companies organize a joint seminar at Proakatemia. Other vice they attend seminars that are organized at the main campus, the Universities, business associations in the region, or even abroad.

The curricula also demands that the teampreneurs need to read and write essays to reflect what they have learnt from what they have read. These essays are published in the internet; have a look at Esseepankki of Proakatemia to look at the essays. Most of them are in Finnish since Finnish is the official language of Proakatemia, but rather many teampreneurs want to show their knowledge of English by writing and publishing in English, too.

There are three kinds of essays in Proakatemia. The first category is blog texts: short, witty, even provocative texts to provoke discussions around the topic, published in a blog, too.

The second category is individual essays: the teampreneur reads a book and writes a reflective essay bringing theory to practice. The books (or webinars or TED Talks – the form of the source information is not the point but the content) are chosen by the teampreneurs themselves. The most popular ones are famous business books, like Good to Great from Jim Collins or Blue Ocean Strategy by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, but anything is allowed as long as it is relevant to learning. Some teampreneurs have gained deep understanding of business life by reading The Little Prince or The Alchemist.

The third category is to practice academic writing. Two to five teampreneurs write together an academic essay. There

needs to be several sources of information, and much more content compared to individual essays.

There is a certain amount of essays every teampreneur is required to publish in a year. These limits are guided together by the board of Proakatemia (Business leaders of the team companies + the head coach). It is a tradition that a team company that does not write and publish all the essays in time needs to pay the costs of the Spring Party for all Proakatemians, or something equivalent.

All the hours that the teampreneurs do for their learning or for their team company are collected to "HOPS". It is officially an individual/personal study plan. It is an Excel workbook with six sheets. Everybody puts his or her hours in. The others are able to see each other's hours. As a project hour, you can only put in an hour from a project where you have a customer who pays for the services or products. In the end of the project, the hours and incomes are counted and we will see if the amount of work has been worth the money. We aim for sustainable business and increasing turnovers.

During their studies, the teampreneurs study 15 ECTS credit points of free choice studies. Those can be anything any university offers. It is a way to study abroad as an exchange student or to widen your knowledge in a special field, i.e. accounting, programming, and languages.

In the end of their studies every teampreneur writes a Final Thesis. It is academic work but, as all final theses in UAS in Finland, there needs to be a customer to give the thesis a platform. This means that purely theoretical theses are not allowed in Finnish UAS's. The requirements of the thesis in Proakatemia are similar to other students of TAMK UAS.

# TEAM LEARNING AND COACHING IN PRACTICE



Team learning and coaching mean several things and actions in practice. In Proakatemia almost nothing is obligatory. We apply actions that we find useful – if something does not work, we will probably change it soon. The picture above shows some names of the actions that are commonly used in Proakatemia. Since our official language is Finnish, some of the translations are not set phrases and might be used differently depending on the speaker.

## CHECK-IN AND CHECKOUT

Rather often, we begin a meeting or training session with a check-in. It is, for example, a question that everybody answers. The purpose of the check-in question might just be to get everybody's attention, to notice everybody, or to raise

thoughts around the topic of the gathering. It helps the shy ones to get the habit of taking part in the discussion. It helps the extroverted ones to give room to introverts. It helps the busy ones to concentrate in the situation in hand.

The check-in question round takes some time; if there are 19 teampreneurs and a coach, it takes easily 10 – 20 minutes. Those are valuable minutes and worth it, but just keep that in mind when planning the timetable. During the check-in a participant might want to share something other than the exact check-in question requires; something that is bothering his/her mind. It might be a personal problem but usually it is good that he/she gets the opportunity to share it with others.

Checkout takes equal or even more time from the end of the session. The answers provide valuable information of how the session has affected on participants. A very common check-out question is “What do you take with you from this session?” There could be other purposes, too, such as, “What was the most surprising fact you learnt today?”

*“Who was the most valuable participant today and why?”*

“Give special thanks to someone.” “What are we going to do next?” or “What are you plans for the weekend?” Depending on the question, the atmosphere of the meeting might end with joy, deep thoughts or even confusion.



**DIALOGUE - 'DIALOGI'**  
**TRAINING/DIALOGUE SESSION - 'PAJA'**  
**PRIMING/INTRODUCTION - 'ALUSTUS'**

The principles of dialogue are something that everybody must learn at Proakatemia – and not only learn but to act that way, too. There is more information about the dialogue in the other articles of this publication, and behind lie the ideas that are presented in Isaac's book Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together (1999).

Every team company has training sessions two times a week. Each session takes four hours. The topic is decided by the teampreneurs, though the coach may help with choosing it. The form of the training session is free. It is possible to take the whole team to the cinema to see a movie about Steve Jobs and to have a dialogue around that.

It is possible to have a specialist visiting and giving a lecture of some specific topic. It is possible – and most often the case – that one of the teampreneurs introduces a topic, gives some theoretical information around it and lets the dialogue take care of the rest. The feedback is asked in the end of the session; this helps to develop training session even better.

According to my experience as a team coach, the best training sessions begin by setting the learning goals for the topic together. In those cases, everybody is able to participate and involve in the process. The responsibility of the session is shared. The best training sessions have had a task to do before, such as to read a book or to be prepared somehow beforehand. The best training sessions include a summary, in a way or another. Everybody has discovered new things,

learnt something new, has been able to be impressed by new thoughts – and feels happy and motivated to learn more.

**CROSS-POLLINATION - 'RISTIPÖLYTYS'**

**LEARNING CIRCLE - 'TUPA'**

**LEARNING CELL - 'SOLU'**

Cross-pollination means that we encourage teampreneurs to visit other teams' training sessions. For that purpose the topics of the training sessions are often written on the wall of the team room.

Learning circle refers more to a university course but Proakatemia style. It is a set of training sessions that are run by a coach. The participants come from different teams. Typically, we have one learning circle in a semester. The most common topics have been leadership (especially meant for business leaders of the team companies and for project managers) and economics (especially meant for teampreneurs who are currently responsible of the economic affairs of the team companies or who want to specialize themselves in that area). The learning circle includes assignments, literature, dialogue and coaching.

Learning cells happen when two or more teampreneurs want to gather around an interesting topic. It is surprising to me how often these gatherings have developed into serious businesses. There was a learning cell for teampreneurs who were interested in fashion. They got a sustainable project out of their common interest. There was a learning cell for those who were interested in electronic sports; now there is an active association called Tampere eSports Club. Just recently, those who were keen on virtual reality games met on Friday

evenings at Proakatemia. An amusement center for virtual experiences was opened some days ago in Tampere center. Not all the cells end in success stories, but they are valuable occasions to try to find something new to learn.

## **LEARNING CONTRACT COTTAGE IN THE FOREST**

Learning contract is based on Ian Cunningham's (1999) ideas on setting goals. Every teampreneur and coach writes a learning contract every six months (in the beginning of the semester). He/she answers to questions:

- \* where have I been?
- \* where am I now
- \* where am I going to
- \* how do I get there
- \* how do I know I am there.

The time scale might be a semester, or till the end of studies, or to retirement, according to the stage of the team. It is possible to use learning contract as a tool in any kind of studies. In Proakatemia, the learning contracts are shared to other team members. It is very valuable to know what the other teampreneurs aim for. Only then, it is possible to form a shared vision for the team company.

Learning contracts are rather private. To share them there needs to be peace and quiet, time, and possibility to concentrate. For this purpose, the team companies usually rent a

cottage that is situated somewhere in the forest or at least far enough from everyday activities and interruptions. The coach is with the team and shares his/hers learning contract, too.

**COMPETITIONS**  
**CHALLENGES/INNOVATIONS**  
**24 HOURS**

Competitions tend to enlighten people. In Proakatemia there are several competitions during the year; some of them are serious and part of the curricula, some are to help some current matters forward, and some are just for fun.

The coach is allowed to give his/her team a challenge when he/she feels that the team needs it. There are no traditional exams in Proakatemia, so the challenges are used to evaluate how the team is developing professionally. In a challenge, there is a task from a customer. The team gets 4 – 24 hours, sometimes some days, to solve the problem. They present their solution to the customer who gives feedback according to how well the needs of the customer were met.

24 hours is the final “exam” for the team companies. It is held in November; the team will graduate in December. It is interesting that the younger team companies organize the 24-hour challenge for the graduating teams. The customers (companies) that give the tasks give grades for the teams. Money is included in the grades. If the customer is more than satisfied and marks the solution as five (on scale 0 – 5), the team company gets several thousand euros as a salary. If the customer is not happy and the mark is zero, the team company will pay the customer and in that way apologizes for the disappointment.

The teams prepare for the challenges as well as they can, not knowing what the challenge is about. After the challenge, there is a feedback session where the team evaluates how it worked. A Motorola, see next paragraph, is a good tool for that purpose.

## **DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSIONS ONE-TO-ONE COACHING**

Development discussions are used as in normal working life. The coach meets with each teampreneur every semester for one to two hours discussion on how the studies and learning are going. These discussions are valuable moments to rethink the learning contract and set future steps for learning. We discuss the quality of the essays, the reading plans, challenges of the projects, etc.

*There is the possibility to challenge the  
teampreneur to reach for higher goals – or  
just the opposite, if that happens to be the case.*

One-to-one coaching is something that every coach is available for. Any teampreneur can ask for coaching from any coach. The G.R.O.W. model is one tool for individual coaching but any other tool for coaching is possible, too.

**PRE-MOTOROLA  
MOTOROLA  
FEEDBACK**

Pre-motorola (Toivonen 2014, 71) is a pre-project plan. It is important that the teampreneurs think what they are going to learn by starting a particular project. If there is nothing new – then what could be done? Better quality than last time? More customers? New locations? Pre-motorola also helps to realize the things they need to learn to be able to start the project and keeps the customer's point of view clear in mind.

Motorola (Toivonen 2014, 71) asks five questions: what went well, what went badly, what we learned, what we will do better next time and what do we take into practice. The name motorola comes from the American company Motorola as it is told that these questions were asked in its project reports. Motorola-style feedback is used daily at Proakatemia. The questions are simple and work in all kinds of situations: in the end of a training session, in the end of a project, in the end of the academic year, etc.

To me, the most important thing is that the teampreneurs learn to always collect feedback. It is a valuable habit.

The teampreneurs are eager for feedback. They do get feedback from customers, as mentioned earlier, and from the coach, i.e. in development discussions. They want to get feedback from their team members, too. For that purpose, they organize feedback training sessions. What I have seen so far the tools for collecting the feedback are numerous. One of my favorites is the speed-dating-style feedback where everyone is prepared and then gives feedback for two minutes for every

member of the team. After two minutes, they change places and the feedback talk starts again with a new pair. There is a lot of talk and noise since everybody talks at the same time, but it is also very effective.

In the beginning of feedback training sessions, we usually talk about feedback in general. Afterwards it is good to share some thoughts of the feedback you got: how was it, what will you take into action. To be able to give valuable feedback in a straight but polite way is a skill that I wish everybody in this world have.

**PARTIES**  
**CELEBRATIONS**  
**AWARDS**

All too often work or studying tends to be boring and tiring. At Proakatemia, we feel that people need to celebrate when there is a reason, give credits when someone has succeeded and have parties just to enjoy life. Parties like the birthday of Proakatemia in the early autumn, the Yearly Gala in January and the Spring Party in May are part of the year plan. There is always a project team of teampreneurs who take care of the arrangements. It is a way to learn, too.

The main purpose for the parties and celebrations is to keep the spirit high and to strengthen the feeling of togetherness. Proakatemia, even though a “school” or university unit, is a tribe that provides safe surroundings to learn by working together.

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