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# Reflections

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Emerging Knowledge Forum

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and Laurent Marbacher

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# Creating the Job of Your Dreams

## Reflections on a Visit to Team Academy

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In December 2003, SoL France initiated a “learning journey” which let a group of nine participants visit Team Academy, in Jyväskylä, Finland. We had decided to go there for a number of reasons. One of us (Etienne Collignon) had been there before and was so enthusiastic about what he had experienced that he convinced the rest of us to come along. Most of us were interested to discover what had been described as a “living model of organizational learning.” We thought this could help us be more convincing about spreading these ideas in companies we are involved with. Moreover, several of us were keen to become familiar with new ways to develop entrepreneurs and to foster innovation, being active in one or the other of these domains ourselves.

This paper reflects on the experiences and the learning of this journey.

### What Is Team Academy?

Team Academy is a “school for entrepreneurs” created in 1993 by Timo Partanen. It is a part of the Polytechnic of Jyväskylä, a city located 250 km North of Helsinki. As such, it is part of the Finnish public educational system. Team Academy welcomes about 50 students a year to a three-year program that leads to a BA in business administration. Since its creation, Team Academy has trained nearly 200 young people, mainly coming from the central region of Finland. It has also in recent years developed different training programs for business executives or entrepreneurs, including an MBA program. From a pedagogical process point of view, a staff of three “coaches” runs the entire program. These coaches benefit from the administrative and technical support of the Polytechnic.

It is worth giving a glimpse of Team Academy’s brief history. Timo Partanen, its creator, had previously taught marketing at the Business School of Jyväskylä. He went through a phase of questioning the classical “classroom” approach to teaching business and proposed creating a different way for young people to learn. His first idea was that such a program would enable students to learn marketing. After several years during which its mission evolved, Team Academy became a learning-by-doing institution that develops young business entrepreneurs and leaders.

Team Academy has a close link to SoL. Several of SoL Finland’s founding members – Timo Karjalainen, Hanna Heikkinen, and Satu Vainio – are graduates of Team Academy and were the key organizers of the first SoL Global Forum that took place in Helsinki in June 2003.

### Unique Principles, Methods, And Practices

The visitor who arrives at Team Academy is first struck by the casual ambience of the

place. Installed in a refurbished machine tool factory, the Academy is an arrangement of “spaces” where entrepreneurial teams occupy corners, an area alongside a wall, a cubicle with a table and a few chairs. There are PCs all over, names and logos of “companies” on the walls, cartoons, plants, and young people talking, typing, reading, phoning, or strolling around.

We, the visitors, soon found out that here there are no “classes,” no “teachers,” no “exams.” How, then, can this unusual place of learning actually operate?

We discovered the answers as our visit unfolded, through our exchanges with Timo and his colleagues and with the students. Here is an account of what we found out in terms of principles, methods, and practices.

### **1. Teams as vehicles for learning**

It seems redundant to say that “teams” are important at Team Academy! Nevertheless, it is worth explaining what Team Academy means by this commonly used term. In a lexicon they shared with us appears this definition: “team: a group of Team Academy students who study together: they define their learning and performance goals, acquire shared learning experiences, are responsible for their own and each others’ learning, and help each other to find individual core competencies.”

It is quite remarkable to see that here teams are defined first through their *learning objective*. In practice, this emphasis on teams can be observed through the team project as the center of the pedagogical process. During his or her three years of education, each student will be involved with team projects. Starting with giving a name to the team, participants will propose their services to local businesses. They will deal with their customers, do the job, and invoice them. From project to project, the team will grow in an ongoing learning process. This process reaches its highest point in the very clear definition of an offering for a business that the students launch and manage after the end of their study. On the first floor of the building, an incubator for companies gives concreteness to this evolutionary process.

### **2. The fostering of freedom and responsibility**

To the question “what do you like most about Team Academy?” one student answered very spontaneously, “I am free and responsible.” This fundamental attitude is really one of the foundations of this very special business school. The whole architecture of the program answers the question “to what extent do our processes reflect our belief that our students are free and responsible?”

For instance, freedom starts on day one, when students are told that they have a week to form their five- to 10-person teams. Given the fact that teams constitute the core learning unit for each student, the absolute freedom given at this stage to the student could be interpreted as risky. Nevertheless, it is through this *self-organizing process* that Team Academy proves its consistency with its freedom principle.

At the same time, freedom has a strong counterpart: responsibility. Students are responsible for their learning. No program, no scheduled classes or lectures are planned. Each student has to reflect on his or her objectives and elaborate a “learning contract.” This contract is, first and foremost, a contract with oneself. But it is also a contract made public in the arena of the team, which adds to the responsible nature of this process (etymologically, to be responsible is to be able to respond for one’s action in front of others).



**Timo Partanen explaining the learning stages (“Rocket diagram”).**

### **3. Mutual coaching in dialogue**

The regulation of such a self-organizing system might appear to be a major challenge. In fact, the very strong principles of Team Academy act as a powerful “field force” that holds the organization together. There is a place and a time to embody these principles: the dialogue sessions. Dialogue is at the heart of Team Academy. For instance, once a week each team meets with a coach for a learning dialogue. Each participant (or small subgroup) explains his or her learning of the past week – what he has learned, how she learned it, where he is with his learning contract, what remains to be learned, what learning experiences need to be designed (readings, projects with a client, team activity, etc.). In this dialogue, *everyone is a coach for each other*. As the dialogue session goes on, some implicit knowledge might be brought into consciousness. Specific “birth-giving sessions” are designed to help a person or a group “give birth” to new knowledge in some critical moments. In that sense, dialogue is really used to allow the creation of collective thinking that transcends the mere addition of participants’ previous thoughts.

### **4. Learning by doing and reflecting**

Of course, these specific dialogue sessions wouldn’t make sense without all the action that takes place in between. An expression heard again and again in Team Academy is “*learning by doing*.” We have seen that in Team Academy there is no classical academic teaching: all the learning is driven by the student. But this learning takes place in action. The projects the students run are not simulations. They negotiate with real business partners, they earn real money, and have to make their “company” live a real life. Through intents, failures, and successes, students discover how well they master significant competencies and how they can enhance them.

The second point is that students are made *conscious of their learning* process. The understanding of what is a learning process is key to Team Academy, so that learning itself is one of the core disciplines “taught,” like marketing or leadership. This has important consequences. The intense reflection on their experience that students practice is surprising. It

contributes greatly to the maturity level of these young people. We have seldom observed the depth of listening that we noticed with Team Academy students. Our French accent should not be the only explanation for that!

### **5. Extracting learning from readings**

At this stage, the reader might still wonder how Team Academy students actually learn something, or how they can relate their experiences to a less subjective world – that of models and concepts. The answer is *reading*. We do not know of any other business school where students are required to read a book every two weeks. But by itself reading is not enough. Students are asked to write an essay after each book they have read. This means that they have to state what they have learned through the reading, what concepts they want to implement, how they are going to do it, and when. This goes far beyond the traditional “reading note” in which people typically do a copy-and-paste exercise to prove to the teacher that they know what the book is about!

The belief in the power of “written stuff” is strongly reflected in the bibliography that Timo Partanen has compiled over the years for his students. More than 1,000 books are selected, rated by range of difficulty, and briefly commented upon, to orient the student in choosing the right reading for his or her learning needs.

The updating of the bibliography is an open process. Students are invited to do their own research on readings not included in the bibliography (about 10% of total books), and the new readings are added to the common reference for future generations.

### **6. Making the customer part of the process**

It is clear that Team Academy also owes its success to the importance of the customer in the whole process. Students are put into contact with potential customers very early in their studies, and this gives them a better appreciation of what the business reality is. In fact, Team Academy has defined itself for a long time as a business school with a strong specialization in *marketing and innovation*. The refocus on entrepreneurship is quite recent.

As Peter Drucker said, “Marketing is everything.” Team Academy really builds on this belief. It’s not that students never get into accountancy or law – they actually need these disciplines to succeed as entrepreneurs. But in the model used to describe the learning process of the school, finance appears peripheral to the central learning of marketing and innovation.

Marketing itself is a superb learning subject. By definition, you do not know what your customer thinks, likes, or prefers until you listen to him or her. This listening to your market is a key to keep on learning. It is a never-ending process, since customers change, and since your capacity to serve them is also evolving.

### **7. Progressive venturing into the world**

As mentioned earlier, the student/entrepreneur teams develop themselves and their businesses over a three-year period. After that, some leave the Academy altogether, either taking their creation out into the real world or being hired by an existing company. In certain cases, the fledgling company can spend another year in an incubator that is installed in the Team Academy building.

Yet another path is to come together in a business community. Locally, a small group of

seven companies have created “*Crazy Town*”—a common physical space that (at first glance) looks like a business center, where companies share professional services and logistics. But Crazy Town has also emerged as a marketing concept shared by these companies (whose activities range from construction to offering outdoor team-building sessions): common advertising in the press, sharing of client information, positioning as nonconventional young entrepreneurs. Last, but not least, all these companies also share a learning process based on Team Academy principles.

## **The Observations that Inspired Us Most**

During our two-day visit at Team Academy, we were given the opportunity to *live the experience*, so to speak, from the inside. We walked around, talked to students, attended dialogue sessions, took part in a “birth-giving” session, and had many exchanges with the coaches.

We all felt that we had experienced something unique, which made us feel that we were not the same “after” as we had been “before.”

Here is how we put our strongest impressions into words.

### **Laurent Marbacher**

*I sense that so much is crystallized in this single, living project.*

It seems to me that one of the main lessons of Team Academy could be that “the other helps you become who you are.” Be it a client or a teammate, you cannot fully know who you are unless you are “spoken to” by *someone else*. This idea is illustrated by the South African tribes of northern Natal whose word to say hello, *Sawu bona*, means “I see you” (quoted from W. Isaacs, *Dialogue* or from the *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, p. 3). Some philosophers – from M. Buber to E. Levinas or P. Ricoeur – have put it the same way: Otherness is the ultimate criterion for human ethics.

I think that without really using that word, Team Academy is also reclaiming and living fully the *concept of calling*. When the “leading thoughts” (p. 3) say that Team Academy’s goal is to “encourage every teamster to create the job of one’s dreams,” this is a modern way to say that there is a very personal way to engage in professional life. To follow this path is to discover what customer I may serve, what skills I may put into action for someone. In a sense, there is out there a world that is calling me – calling me outside my habits or my preconceptions. This call is the way for me to go beyond my ego and to find myself in serving others.

In that direction, I think that the whole “learning language” that Team Academy uses has nothing to do with the kind of “instrumentalization” of knowledge we sometimes find in the business literature. There is a true form of contemplation of the extraordinary process of new knowledge creation. The very name of “birth-giving sessions” to describe this process is significant. In fact, I would suggest that Team Academy is using learning as a wonderful tool to keep its students aware of one of the beauties of life: the *emergence of new reality* – and particularly of new social reality. This emergence can also be given another name: meaning. This is why I would dare to say that I found in Team Academy a process that allows future entrepreneurs to go from learning to meaning. This is, I think, what education is all about.

Beyond these thoughts, inspired by what we had seen, the Team Academy experience led me to change some of my practices after I returned. For example, I tried a new approach for coaching young project managers, experimenting with a more systematic use of dialogue



**Visitors and students in a learning dialogue.**

sessions between them. I am also considering transferring my offices to a Crazy Town–type of environment, with new business partners interested in a joint learning process.

### ***Etienne Collignon***

*I am impressed by the way the organization has changed, moved, and innovated (since my last visit less than two years ago). It has an amazing ability to learn!*

About 10 major changes have been introduced in the last 18 months, and these changes truly reflect the character of the Team Academy system. Here are two examples:

- Senior students are now coaches for the juniors; coaching is henceforth considered a required competency when completing one’s studies at Team Academy.
- Two or three “companies” (with teams averaging eight members) meet once a month in an “Innovative Knowledge Community.” Its purpose is to cross-transfer knowledge, as well as help participants to become more creative and entrepreneurial by sharing ideas.

One is struck by the magnitude of these changes – they impact the organization, as well as time and space arrangements, and they are aligned with the initial concept. The changes are like ways to strongly anchor the starting ideas, made possible by the fact that one is now further down the road.

The changes make it evident that all players are in a state of creative tension and that they innovate. These results have been brought about by such factors as the leadership of the founder, listening to the signals coming from the outside world, the freedom to act, boldness.

Of the many things that struck us, one had to do with a disposition toward what one might call “learning by emotions,” which we observed among students and which was communicated to us, the visitors. One can understand why the enrichment was so powerful in such a short time. Timo Partanen, the founder of Team Academy, writes in a document entitled “Leading Thoughts”: “There is a language in the world that everyone understands and it talks about enthusiasm, about work encouraged by love, about determination to achieve things one hopes for and believes in.” For me, it is impressive to read the word “love” in a statement of organizational intent. It has great impact.

Since I returned home, Team Academy is often in my thoughts as a living model. I remember the people there in very concrete situations: “dialoguing,” conversing, visioning the

future, modelling, fighting with themselves to grow; and these act as permanent references in my decisions at work and often, as well, in private life.

Finally, I think my visits made me accept another vision of working activities, where the future is not only reasoned in my mind but also linked to new ideas we create when meeting others. And this is the unknown world we have first to observe and to accept, then to seize as strong opportunities to create richness and beauty in the world.

### **Manfred Mack**

*I had the feeling that Team Academy was a process for creating a new economy and a new society.*

The more I saw, the more I was convinced that here was a true major social innovation, a kind of model for the future.

This “laboratory” was actually a living demonstration of the manner in which individuals are made to grow by the collective and the collective does likewise for the individual, in a self-reinforcing process of development between human beings and society.

Team Academy, thanks to the genius of its founder, and of the small team of coaches that surround him, has brought together in this astonishing place the conditions which, because of their intelligence and their coherence, generate a process of extremely high value. I don't know yet to what extent it is replicable, but time will tell.

Moreover, because these young folks, I am convinced, develop true entrepreneurial capabilities, so important for the renewed vitality of our economies, they acquire a *philosophy of life* which lets them have a positive attitude with respect to professional activities, perceived as something pleasant that help you to grow. Finally, money does not appear to be an obsession; instead, the human factor seems to be more important. It follows that the likelihood of seeing stress invade organizations is significantly reduced.

The Team Academy experience has given me something very precious, which I would describe as increased boldness. It comes from the realization that important things I believe in can actually be accomplished. Team Academy has shown the way.

# Reflections

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The Emerging Knowledge Forum serves our community of reflective practitioners, researchers and consultants who are interested in the real-world dynamics of organizational life, and the application of the theories, methods and tools of Organizational Learning in their work. We are particularly interested in publishing work-in-progress that will benefit from reader input. The Forum is designed as a space for sharing ideas, opinions, theoretical models and research results that illuminate the processes and dilemmas of learning and change at the individual, group, organizational and cross-organizational level. Articles posted should pose particular questions or issues for discussion.

The scope is fairly broad, intended to be eclectic, intellectually diverse, and international. We are interested in contributions from researchers, consultants and practitioners. Research reports, learning histories, reflection pieces, conceptual models, theoretical propositions, interviews, case studies, personal accounts and commentary intended to clarify and analyze are all welcome.

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