

## Team Academy – trip to the wild west of management education

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, few universities see themselves as solely imparting knowledge. A key aim is that students should leave with skills that employers will find attractive. In the UK particularly, employability is seen as the key to competitiveness.

So, what about a university degree that not merely fosters employability skills, but future employers? Such a place can be found in the midst of the lakes and forests of Finland – Team Academy or Tiimiakatemia, to give it its Finnish name – described by management guru and organizational theorist Peter Senge as ‘the future of management education’.



Figure 1: Team Academy

Team Academy ([www.tiimiakatemia.fi](http://www.tiimiakatemia.fi)) is part of Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences (JUA), and is housed in an old wood factory. Universities of Applied Sciences are former polytechnics, and like many similar organizations in the UK, retain a strongly regional and practical focus.

However, Team Academy (TA) is unique in Finland for its highly practical approach to business education. It is a place where live projects constitute the entire syllabus and not merely a small part of the course; where students create companies rather than work for them; and where there are no teachers, only coaches.

Its origins lie in a story of a disillusioned teacher. Johannes Partanen taught marketing in a ‘normal’ school, but got bored with teaching the same things year after year to students who never learned. He also noticed that once he stopped teaching and started listening to students, learning started to happen.

And that, too, was when he had his big idea – learning should happen when people were doing things as part of a team. So, he posted a notice on the school notice board, inviting people on a round the world trip during which they would ‘learn some marketing on the side’. The first team comprised 24 people, and they carried out projects such as World Rally Finland in the centre of Jyväskylä, a network gathering for all Finland’s 10,000 polytechnic students, a Christmas market, and a lot of marketing research and sales for companies. They made enough money to finance their reward, a seven week round the world trip.

This took place in 1993, and now Team Academy is 15 years old. Aside from a ‘Learning Expedition’, a three day ‘taster’ of the learning approach, there are two main programmes, the undergraduate Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), and the Team-Entrepreneurs’ Leadership Programme (TELP).

In total, around 1000 people have either graduated or are currently on one of the TA programmes. There are currently 200 people (60 a year) on the three-and-a-half year BBA programme, most of whom are in their early 20s.

The TELP programme (currently being piloted) is designed on similar principles to the BBA, but lasts six months and is aimed at BBA or equivalent level students (it is worth over 60 ECTS credits). Each TELP has 15 to 21 students who all work together as a large team. The present group is very diverse, comprising an MBA graduate who has been working for Deloitte, several Erasmus exchange students, and an actor! It is truly international and the language is English.

## **What happens on a Team Academy programme?**

Henna, who chose Team Academy because she ‘liked school but not that much reading’ and was ‘inspired by the trip around the world’, described her initiation as something of a culture shock. The head coach, Johannes Partanen, told the first years – known as penguins because they all walk in line and say yes to everything – that he was not a teacher, but a coach, that they were not students, but entrepreneurs, and (most challenging!) ‘now you have to make money’.

Paula, another student, had a similar experience. ‘We have a mental model that says, when you are at school, you are studying. And someone will tell you how things are and what you should do and which books you should read and when the test is coming. It’s really difficult to understand that nothing is given here except for the premises.’

One thing is given, however, and that is that people work in teams. When people sign up, they are put into teams of 20; they have to take a ‘team test’ on

the Meredith Belbin model, which helps determine the team role that will fit them best. Coaches then allocate people to teams, ensuring a sufficient diversity of roles within each team.

Once in their team, however, their first task is to form their own student cooperative company, initiate projects and run a money-making business.

As part of this process, people consider what they are good at and what skills are already in the team. 'It could be,' explains Henna, 'that there are hairdressers on the team so they decide, let's form a company called Good Hair Day. But there will be others on the team who know about marketing, and others who are very practical and good organizers. So there is a combining of skills'.

An important part of learning is moving out of your comfort zone, so there is plenty of opportunity for new challenges. 'I would feel bad about myself,' says Paula, 'if after three and a half years I didn't do anything that I didn't already know. The point of Team Academy is to be challenged all the time. Once you finish one project, you get an even bigger project. Normally, we are running three to five projects at a time.'

About 50 per cent of the projects are large, long-term ones, although there are always short ones like running a marketing campaign or selling their services to companies. Or it could be running one of the many events that Team Academy organizes, from student parties to international conferences.

In fact, Team Academy is a major project in itself and many students help in its organization. Paula herself is project manager for TELP, for example. There is also the anniversary, held around January 15<sup>th</sup>, which regularly hosts around 500 people and requires a project team to organize and generally take the administration away from the coaches.

One of the goals of Team Academy is to develop leadership skills. Such skills cannot be taught in isolation, but require real, live projects. There is no shortage of these and the vast majority of students will probably take on several such challenges during the course of their studies; those that are reluctant to come forward may well find themselves pushed into them by their team.

There are no classes; in stead, there are training sessions (once a week for older teams and twice a week for younger ones) where the role of the coach is to the sort of dialogue which can facilitate peer learning and knowledge creation, known as 'fertilizations'.

In these sessions, everybody sits round a circle so that they can see one another, and discuss what projects they did, what they have learned, how the

finances are going, what was last month's turnover, and what can be done to make next month's turnover bigger. From day 1, they have to think and act as entrepreneurs.



Figure 2: A Team academy 'class room'

The whole curriculum of Team Academy is based on action learning, where learning takes place through real-world activity. The theoretical base comes from reading and from talking to coaches. The student is free to create his or her own reading plan, selecting books from a number of areas, such as leadership, innovation, learning, customers and entrepreneurship. Each book is worth a number of reading points, with the target being 120 points.

Each student has their own learning contract which defines goals, aspirations, and how they will be measured, and these contracts feed into the overall learning contract for the team.

The ways of assessing students is varied and includes 360 degree assessment, online reflective writing, and 'birth giving sessions'. The latter involve solving a particular customer case with a presentation backed by written theoretical material, which is evaluated by the customer, coaches and students.

A recent 'birth giving session' took place over two days with 14 students, who had to solve three cases:

- Model a way of coaching for more open communication for the government lottery company, Veikkaus Oy.
- Create an event for AKK Sports at Rally Finland that will attract 10,000 more customers.
- Create a year round sports centre from a ski centre and a golf centre, currently located separately but adjacent.

Teams are also assessed by their income, the cash flow, and the amount and quality of the customer base (customers are ranked as A = 10,000 € sales plus a continuing relationship, B = 1000 to 5000 € sales and an intermittent relationship, C = 1000 € and a one-off purchase). And everyone has to do a thesis, which is assessed as in other courses.

## **Theoretical base**

Action learning originally came out of the work of Reg Revans, the Director of the newly nationalized National Coal Board in post-war Britain. He believed that managers could gain a lot out of discussing their problems with other managers, and devised the formula,  $L = P + Q$ . Here L is learning, P is 'programmed knowledge' and Q the ability to pose appropriate questions, and explore the unknown so that it becomes known.

Action learning has moved on since the 1940s, and is used in a variety of ways in management education and training, particularly in workplace learning, and post-graduate 'Community of Practice' degrees, such as the University of Lancaster's MA in [Management Learning and Leadership](#). Despite being subjected to various interpretations, there are a number of basic principles. Learning happens through discussion of a work-based problem, with the object not being merely to solve the problem, but to appreciate, and integrate, different points of view.

The trigger for learning is a real life situation, but reflection is as important as action. Group members need to identify their particular learning style – whether they are activists, reflectors, theorists or pragmatists according to the Honey and Mumford model. However, the whole group needs to move through the Kolb learning cycle of experience – reflection – generalization – hypothesis testing, which combines the different learning styles.

Action learning normally takes place within what are known as action learning sets, which are stable groups of six to eight people. Students on the University of Lancaster's MA in Management Learning and Leadership work together in sets of four to six, as a series of self-managed learning communities, responsible not only for their own learning but also that of the group.

TA's 20-strong teams are clearly intended to reproduce the action learning set idea, although with a larger than normal set. (The idea is to maximize learning through a sufficiently wide range of diverse personalities.) Another difference is that people do not discuss work situations, they create them.

The skills needed for action learning are the ability to question, to be an active listener, to be good at giving and receiving feedback, to understand, and give to, the process of the group, to be creative at problem solving, and to be able

to reflect. It's also based on the premise that education is a shared, rather than an individual, process, whereas much traditional education puts emphasis on individual achievement.

With its emphasis on teamwork and group learning, TA definitely sees education as a shared experience. It draws inspiration from the organizational theories of Peter Senge, particularly his belief in the 'power of the community', and the 'individual who is willing to give out his everything for a cause that matters'.

The TA culture would not suit someone seeking the comforting discipline of regular assignments, term tests etc. It is looking for people who are motivated from within, and who are able to survive within an unstructured environment, where there are no firm rules except the ones that you create. TA does have its introverts, however, who can still thrive if they are prepared to leave their comfort zone and join the cut and thrust of dialogue and experiment.

The term 'community of practice' has been used to describe the TA process – the team is a group of professionals sharing and creating knowledge. TA also draws on the knowledge creation model of two Japanese theorists, Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaku Takeuchi. The initial dialogue involves participants looking at all aspects of a question, and once there is agreement on the best way forward, a model is drawn up and then put into action. Once completed, there is more dialogue about what went well, what did not go so well, and how the model could be developed and improved.

'It's about reflecting, innovating and acting,' says Paula, echoing the 'action/reflection' model of action learning. Her metaphor, however, is more prosaic than the Kolb Learning Cycle. 'We call it a washing machine because it goes round and round. It's dialogue then crystallizing and then modeling and then action. Then back to dialogue: reflecting, having new ideas and then again modeling.'

## **Ending unemployment through entrepreneurship**

The theoretical basis behind TA has been well thought out, but the practical aim remains thoroughly pragmatic. It boldly and uncompromisingly states its aims as:

'To remove unemployment in Finland and to revolutionize marketing and learning. To abolish the old structures which hinder new companies and accelerate progress through entrepreneurship.'

TA believes that by teaching people to be entrepreneurs, they become not so much employable as employment generating. Enterprise is a key element in creating a healthy society, so if you create an entrepreneurial spirit, you create

jobs and you also help put a brake on the old hierarchical structures that hold back the economy – the term used is ‘teampreneurship’.

At a recent TA seminar, Peter Senge commented that the idea of entrepreneurship was the opposite of teamwork, and whereas to combine the two might seem insane, it actually worked ‘in an amazing way’.

Henna acknowledges that the strong welfare culture of Finland creates a culture of support that makes people reluctant to do anything as daring as starting a company – ‘why would you start a company, if you can have easy money for living?’

Thirty per cent of TA students start their own company, and many of these companies become established and successful, employing people outside TA. A few are listed below.

- DialogueLife, [www.dialoguelife.com](http://www.dialoguelife.com), a company that measures team performance by assessing communication and dialogue, and that employs two people.
- A company that organizes events, including big rock festivals, [www.festago.fi](http://www.festago.fi), and that employs between two and 100 people depending on the season.
- A marketing and design company, [www.dot.fi](http://www.dot.fi), employing two to four people
- The Monkey Business coaching company, [www.banana.fi](http://www.banana.fi), Henna’s own company, which currently employs seven people and is growing.
- A personnel recruitment and event marketing company, [www.aivoteollinen.com](http://www.aivoteollinen.com), that employs between three and 30 people
- Moneral, [www.moneral.fi](http://www.moneral.fi), which makes wooden dishes, employs two to four people. The President of Finland bought 300 for a banquet for her Japanese guests.
- Team Mastery, [www.taitovire.fi/teammastery](http://www.taitovire.fi/teammastery), a collaborative forum for TA coaches.
- Secco, [www.seccoshop.com](http://www.seccoshop.com), which recycles old objects into reusable and attractive items - ‘car tyre inner-tubes are turned into handbags, washing machine drums into stylish bowls, computer keys into magnets and key rings’ boasts their website – employing 10 people in production and sales.

Even if the total number of new jobs created is not that high, the above remains an impressive list. And for the 70 per cent of TA graduates who do

not start new businesses, there is a 100 per cent employment rate (as against that for Jyväskylä University, which is 70 per cent).

This figure is attributed to the skills generated by the TA experience: networking with customers, lots of practical work experience, presentation skills, and the maturity that comes from the process of training by dialogue and team building.

## **Spreading the word**

The concept behind TA has proved highly contagious, with many companies and schools in Finland adopting its approach, and small TAs are being generated all over western Europe.

In Paris, there is Team Factory (2006), whilst TA offshoots have started up in Holland (2007), in Spain (Labein Technalia, 2007, and the University of Mondragon, 2009), and there has been a one-year pilot at the University of Essen using TA methods. All these are similar to the Finnish model but have had to adapt to different cultures – enterprises work differently in different countries.

To be part of the Team Academy brand, and to use its logo, involves going through the specially devised Team Mastery programme, which lasts from 12 to 18 months and involves six intensive meetings with a lot of practical work. Guidance continues to be given through visits and a 100 page manual with advice on different measurement criteria applying to the individual, the coach, the team and finances.

The anniversary of the founding of the Team Academy idea, on January 15<sup>th</sup>, has become an important event and a chance for the 60 to 70 coaches to meet up. There's also the start of the TELP programme and a 'sampler' three day Learning Expedition for newcomers interested to sample the coaching methods.



Figure 3: A presentation at Team Academy's annual conference

## Conclusion

It is difficult to compare Team Academy with other management schools because it is so radically different. However, a lot of thought has clearly gone into the teaching methods, which have been continually monitored and refined. Despite the apparent lack of structure, there is clearly rigour in the assessment process – the birthing sessions are exams in all but name, and not many business schools also evaluate their students' businesses.

It's also hard to argue with their employment rate – a key metric for all HEIs in the current climate. Perhaps the greatest strength of TA is that it allows students to experience the business world, but in a supportive environment where they can make mistakes and where the main objective is to learn. And the ability to cope with chaos and uncertainty is a highly useful skill in a world dominated by credit crunch and recession.

It's also hard to argue with the fact that whereas many students graduate into debt, the prize for TA students is a round the world trip, financed through their earnings whilst studying. Paula and Henna are both looking forward to

theirs. 'It's two months' holiday', says Paula, 'I will just reward myself for all the hard work I have done.' They have certainly both earned their reward.

Editor's note: Information on action learning taken from 'Generating a drive for collaborative learning through the use of action learning sets - the experience of post graduate students on a professional programme' by Marilyn Farmer, Jill Walters and Wendy Yellowly, available at [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/using\\_action\\_learning\\_sets](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/using_action_learning_sets).

Read more about Team Academy in 'Team Academy, a story of a school that learns', Hanna Heikkinen, *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 17: 1

Peter Senge about TeamAcademy Method (for Team Academy birthday): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLdcgnbNPI4>