
Dialogic Team Coaching in TAMK Proakatemia

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Two: Setting the Bearings

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This paper will explore the basic principles of dialogic team coaching in TAMK Proakatemia, a special unit of entrepreneurship education in Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) in Finland. Currently the learning community of Proakatemia consists of about 150 students studying in the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), Entrepreneurship and Team Leadership and physical therapist programmes; 11 coaches; about 20 students in the MBA in Entrepreneurship programme; and several hundred alumni who regularly take part in Proakatemia activities. In the Tampere region, TAMK Proakatemia is one of the most recognized university programmes and internationally it is quickly gaining more visibility. Proakatemia currently is developing an international BBA degree programme based on team learning and coaching, with the aim of developing the capability of students to work in the Finnish business environment, using both English and Finnish languages.

TAMK Proakatemia

Proakatemia was founded in 1999. It started as an initiative by two teachers in TAMK business, based on earlier work in the city of Jyväskylä, where they had posted a notice on a wall asking students, “Do you want to learn marketing and travel around the world?” They got 20 people to join the programme, and those people formed the first team enterprise in Proakatemia. They called it *Villivisio*, or ‘Wild Vision’.

In the beginning, Proakatemia operated in small premises in the basement of the TAMK School of Arts & Media. Students had to take care of upkeep of both the exterior premises and its interior – some cleaning floors, some sewing window curtains. Studying in Proakatemia was also quite unstructured, with coaches and students creating new structural elements and ways to solve problems as questions arose. Over the years, Proakatemia grew, with two teams of about 20 students starting each year, and it moved to larger premises. The curriculum became more structured, and a spreadsheet-based personal study plan was devised for the students to follow the course of their own work and studies.

Several ideas have formed the core of Proakatemia from the beginning:

- **Student ownership of the community and team enterprises** (they are cooperative companies).
- **The students' leading role in all activities in Proakatemia.** This is a marked difference from almost all other university programs, where most of the activities are led by the faculty.
- **The role of the teaching staff as team coaches, employing shared principles that guide their work.** Any faculty member who would try to take the responsibility for learning and business away from students and transfer it to him- or herself by, for example, attempting to directly control the activities or business of the team he or she is coaching, would only cause confusion and demotivate students.
- **Support, openness and courage from TAMK leadership as the head coach of Proakatemia acts as a mediator between Proakatemia and TAMK leadership and management.** This has, in retrospect, proved especially critical, as other similar programmes in Finland and Europe have often withered away or been downright cancelled because their working practices can be difficult to understand for leaders and managers of the higher education institutions.

The students in the Proakatemia BBA programme in Entrepreneurship and Team Leadership begin their studies at the main campus by studying the basics of business through such topics as accounting and marketing for half a year. They also spend one day each week on the Proakatemia premises with a coach, with whom they have dialogic training sessions on various topics. Sometimes these are self-selected and include such areas as team learning and starting their own business as a team. This initial half year also prepares the new students for dialogic training sessions, led twice a week for several hours at a time by each team member in turn.

After this initial introduction the students, in teams of about 20, start and register their enterprise as a cooperative company. They begin contacting companies in the area to find out about customer needs and they negotiate with each other about the type of business they want to build, including its products or services, its initial brand image, vision and values and its leadership structures and practices. The type of the company is not set by Proakatemia but rather by the teams; so far all have settled on a Finnish-type cooperative company, as this designation affords its individual members some financial independence from the economy of the cooperative, as well as more relaxed legal responsibility for different roles than would be possible in a traditional limited liability corporation. The teams are free to decide on their leadership structures, but they commonly emulate previous teams' arrangements and choose a format that includes a Business Leader (a CEO without the legal responsibilities that would go with the title), an HR Leader, a Finances Leader and a Marketing Leader, each with their own small teams. The first people to take up these leadership roles are usually selected through voting after a short presentation by each applicant. Later on, however, when the team members know each other better, coaches encourage them to engage in dialogue about leadership and, after that, they decide on the leaders based on the goals of the team as a whole.

From a team-coach perspective it is important to take a somewhat passive role during the first months, especially when in training sessions with the whole team. This is to balance the coaches' often quite-strong tendency toward preconception about what the students should be doing. In training sessions, it is often important to help the students perceive their own role as the ones responsible for whatever takes place in the sessions; this applies to everyone taking part, not just the student whose turn it is to lead the session. This often is best achieved by the coach being silent and listening without intervening. Where the coach *can* take a more active role is in conversations with individual students and with the leadership team of the student-team enterprise. There the coach can draw the attention of the individual students back to their own role in the team and discuss their ideas about how to best contribute or give direct feedback on how they are performing in different roles. The coaches hold development discussions with each student twice a year in conversations can take anywhere between half an hour and two hours.

As a team coach I spend most of my working time on the Proakatemia premises in an open-door shared office next to the space where the teams work. Our policy is that if a coach is in the office, anyone can enter and start a conversation. This has made the office a somewhat busy place to work with constant interruptions, so we often go to work elsewhere (at home, in library, in a café) if we need to focus for a longer period of time. Each coach sees their own team at least twice a week for four-hour training sessions (led by the students, with 15 to 20 people in the room, usually seated in a circle with movable chairs and no tables). They also take part in team-leader meetings, conduct development discussions with each student every half a year, tutor thesis work, and engage in countless informal conversations with students from their own team as well as those of others. (These informal conversations are such an important part of the learning process that Proakatemia has a dedicated cafeteria space in the middle for them.)

The team coaches' role mostly is not to deliver information or instruction – at least in the traditional sense – but rather to help the team build and manage an effective business organization as the students manage their own learning processes. All of the coaches are experts in pedagogy and learning processes, but we come from a wide variety of academic and professional backgrounds, including maths and language teaching to economics and marketing, as well as positive psychology and entrepreneurship.

Team-Entrepreneur Students in Proakatemia

The Proakatemia student body is relatively diverse. Some have just graduated from high school, while others have over 10 years of professional experience before coming to the programme. The age of students ranges from 18 or 19 to over 40, while most of them could be categorized as millennials, members of generation Y, between 21 and 28 years of age. Most of the students still have an ethnic Finnish background, but there also those whose

parents have immigrated to Finland, or who themselves moved to Finland when they were younger. Currently a high level of Finnish language skill is required of all degree students in Proakatemia, which limits the possibility of taking international applicants, but this will change with the starting of an international programme next year (2020). The students who come to Proakatemia have a wide range of different personal goals and interests, which necessitates continuous dialogue and negotiation about what kind of business the team wants to run together. Many of the students are interested in entrepreneurship because it allows them to set up a company to provide a living for themselves and others while working in a sustainable and ethical way (as with a group of male students, for example, who started an ethical cosmetics business). Others are more interested in the opportunity to become economically successful entrepreneurs, while still others want to set up a small business where they can work with something in which they are intensely interested, in a way that suits their personalities. Some of the students want to continue their family business or, in case of those associated with larger companies, become its leaders. (At the moment, for example, the CEO of a major food-producing family business in Tampere is a Proakatemia graduate.)

Generally, the students drawn to Proakatemia are more interested in trying out things in practice than in reading and learning theories in a classroom. However, it is fascinating to see how quickly they become interested in reading for their own development when they themselves can select their books, helped by an extensive list of resources and reading suggestions from the community. With regard to academic skills, the students who come to the programme are a diverse group. Some have done very well in high school, while others have struggled with reading or writing, with language or with maths. The entrance exam to Proakatemia does not qualify students based on their prior success at school – at the moment, in fact, the previous grades are not even taken into account (although this may change with the upcoming revisions to the general university admission process in Finland). Many of the problems the students have previously experienced are alleviated by the emphasis on teamwork and building on people's different strengths instead of focusing on grading their weaknesses. For example, the Proakatemia curriculum carries the requirement for more reading and writing than most professional university studies, and all essays written by the students are published on the open Internet (essee pankki.proakatemia.fi) but students who have struggled with reading and writing before often find out that in a different environment, with the support of the team, the community and the coaches, their weakness becomes less of an issue.

Values and Roles in Proakatemia

Proakatemia operates on a principle of giving students centre stage. The coaches are strictly here to help students develop in ways they themselves see as important for their entrepreneurial careers. Proakatemia curriculum provides a generic framework for an entrepreneurial development process, including the development of competencies that are generally deemed

necessary for succeeding as an entrepreneur. Proakatemia's path of five values ('Path to Entrepreneurship') provides the core of the curriculum:

1. **Trust** is critical for the development of a team enterprise or successful coaching relationship. Trust at its core means being vulnerable – making something that I value vulnerable to the choices and actions of others, because I trust them to respect my trust in them. In Proakatemia, we witness over and over that fundamental trust in students in important matters gives rise to their trustworthiness. For example, team entrepreneurs in Proakatemia often manage tasks and decisions that in other schools require decisions from the faculty members or even school management. This fundamental trust does not require a basis in previous actions but, instead, becomes a basis for future actions.
2. **Courage** is needed when team entrepreneurs need to challenge their own fears and feelings of inadequacy and find new customers to expand the team's business network. Courage has trust as its fundamental precondition.
3. **Doing** is necessary for reflection and learning in action. It is also very much needed as a basis for any meaningful feedback. Talk and theoretical reflection is not enough for building a capable enterprise together with others. When people trust each other and act with courage, their energy is directed to constructive action together with others rather than safeguarding their own individual positions.
4. **Learning** may follow from all of the above, but it is also necessary to keep this value in focus as an opportunity even when (or especially when) the team fails to achieve what they have set out to achieve. Failure can be a great – if not *the* greatest – source of entrepreneurial learning when a team has the trust and courage to look things in the eye together.
5. **Success** is not an individual value but one that transcends the personal self and its concern for its own advancement. In practice it means that an individual in Proakatemia should consider their choices and actions from the perspective of the long-term success of the team and others in it. Over the years, many visitors to Proakatemia have asked whether success should really feature in Proakatemia's value path, as it is usually thought of as something that an individual has relatively little control over. In Proakatemia, however, we emphasize how our choices and actions affect the success of the whole team rather than how our individual accomplishments advance us personally.

The role of a team coach in TAMK Proakatemia consists of five major coaching roles and their related activities: 1) *modelling* the shared path; 2) *building* safe shared space; 3) *challenging* and acting as a sparring partner; 4) *supporting* growth and offering encouragement; and 5) *seeing* and making visible. These coaching roles may sometimes be held in tension with each other. For example, coaches may sometimes be perceived by the students as their friends, but they must still maintain enough distance to be able to bring up, when necessary, difficult and conflict-risking themes that the team members are neither capable of nor willing to take up with their colleagues. They must be willing to challenge the team and individual students,

perhaps causing the kind of ‘friction’ which is sometimes necessary for learning and growth.

Team coaching is a holistic form of guidance and counselling that connects the growth processes of the team with the students in it. The team is a platform of mutual and personal growth for its members: the coach supports the development of the team through coaching individual persons and by promoting positive dynamics in the interaction of the team. The members of the team together create the conditions of growth for each other and the team enterprise.

The work of the coach *appears* to change surprisingly little during the course of studies. This may be due to the coach spending a lot of time growing with the team. At first, the focus is more on building trust, which requires a high degree of student agency, ensuring that the students know that the coach is on their side, and that there will not be a ‘catch’, or risk of failing to satisfy the goals set by the coach. Gradually, once the safe space has been firmly established, challenging students to move outside their comfort zones becomes more important. While many programmes gradually allow students more say over their activities and the learning process, in Proakatemia the students are fully empowered from the very beginning. This is also reflected in the leadership structure of the programme, as well as the strategic planning processes (Nevalainen & Maijala, 2012).

While it naturally becomes easier for the coach to treat students as younger colleagues – often as more competent experts in many topics – when they have known the students for a longer time, this should be the aim from day one. For example, when working with team entrepreneurs from different teams, the coaches usually never distinguish between first-, second-, third- or fourth-year students. The Proakatemia curriculum reflects a developmental process for both teams and individual students, but it has very little to do with how students are treated. Right from the beginning they are treated as capable team entrepreneurs with full participation and decision-making rights, including decisions over the direction of their company and the whole community. With these rights, they are also trusted to be responsible in their actions. For example, every student in Proakatemia has 24-hour access to all the premises (although there is a rule against spending whole nights on the property) and there are few locked spaces. Most of the international activities and almost all of the marketing activities in Proakatemia are expertly carried out by the student teams, and each May students organise Proakatemia’s annual ‘Academic Adventures’ international week.

It is relatively easy for a coach to spot, even early on, where individual student strengths lie, but coaching different personalities to develop these strengths can be challenging. Engaging in dialogue with a student who has rather similar personality and preferences to the coach is often quite straightforward and easy, but working with those whose communications style is very different from that of the coach can be more challenging. For many coaches, extending the capacity to work with students with a wide range of different personalities becomes a major professional development goal. For example, I have always found it relatively easy to work with students who share my preference for lively conversation, easily flowing from one topic to another, as well as those with a strong focus on the meaning of the topic at hand. However,

I have sometimes struggled with the more introverted and careful students, or those who focus on *power* or *emotion* rather than *meaning* in their communication.

My Personal Path as a Dialogic Coach

The first time I came in contact with the idea of dialogue must have been during my qualification training to become a subject teacher in the English language. Our didactics tutor was very philosophically oriented, and introduced us to the thinking of humanistic psychologists, including that of Carl Rogers, who had studied dialogue extensively in educational contexts, and the work of Paulo Freire in critical pedagogy and Mikhail Bakhtin in literature. It was at that time I began to rethink my own ideas of pedagogy and teaching, becoming enamoured with the idea of education as emancipatory dialogic work. During the teaching observation phase of my studies I also started paying more attention to the presence of the teacher and the various ways they engaged in dialogue with the elementary school pupils and high school students. If I had to select one person who had most influence on my dialogic coaching practice in the beginning, I would point to my didactics tutor.

One formative experience was a week of teacher training and observations that I did in southern Sweden, following third- and fourth-grade teachers in a mid-sized elementary school. There the pupils had no school bell, as we did at that time in virtually all Finnish schools. When the lessons were timed to start, the pupils came to the classroom, picked up their workbooks and started to work in small groups at their own pace. The teacher and the school assistant came in a few minutes later. (I later learned that there was one pupil who had a learning problem in the class and the school assistant was there for him, although he mostly appeared to work with anyone who needed help.) The pupils could also move freely between the classroom, the corridor where there was space for those who wanted to work by themselves in a quieter environment, and another classroom where there were classes in other subjects, like biology or geography. The teacher and the school assistant worked with whoever needed help in the class and engaged in dialogue with individual pupils and groups. At the time in 2003-04, the degree of self-direction of the pupils was very different from what I had experienced at schools in Finland.

I completed my MA thesis on the topic of authentic dialogue in communicative EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes in a university in 2006, and it was based mainly on the work of Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and David Bohm. It made me reflect more deeply on how I wanted to teach, and it gave me a solid basis on which to build more dialogic practices. This work helped me in training sessions I held with colleagues in a technical communication company, where I had also worked before my teacher training. It also helped a great deal when I later began my teaching career in 2007 at TAMK as a lecturer in English language for engineering and IT students, project management and website design. Many of my classes at the time were evening classes for adults who were already in their working life; in many of

these classes I was the youngest person in the room and very often one of the least experienced on the topic I was supposed to teach. In my previous work as a trainer I had learned to respect the experience of the participants as a source of learning content. Having become somewhat adept at drawing out and exploring in dialogue that experience together must have been what enabled me to work as a teacher with participants who were senior to me in so many ways.

These experiences, and my continuous experimenting in all of my classes, made me realise that I could often draw on younger students with little or no ‘professional’ expertise or experience – and that experience, when shared, is the main ‘tool’ and material with which I must work as an educator.

Beginning My Team-Coaching Career

My career as a team coach began officially in 2008 when I started coaching first-year Information and Communication Technology (ICT) students in TAMK Business Information Systems programme, working in small teams on various cases and projects. I quickly noticed that self-direction by the students and a dialogic approach to coaching motivated many of the students and allowed them to develop their ICT skills more rapidly. Often, however, this conflicted with the structures and practices of the school, where most of teaching was still based on lectures, workshops and exams.

In 2010 I started working in TAMK Proakatemia as a team coach for a tea enterprise called *Versio Osk*. In Proakatemia, I learned to rely on the core values of the unit as well as constant dialogue with the team-entrepreneur students and my coach colleagues. However, it was not always easy: I often realised that I had given advice (often bad advice!) instead of engaging in dialogue. Learning to give up the role of an expert advisor was, at times, difficult, when nearly my whole university training had emphasised the value of my knowledge (‘know-what’) and expertise (‘know-how’), instead of facilitating a process in which experience is shared and explored and understanding of its meaning developed in dialogue.

What helped me greatly in reflecting on how I was doing as a dialogic team coach was the set of shared core values in Proakatemia, formulated into a ‘Values Path’, as described earlier. The path allowed me to review my actions to see if I had acted and facilitated the values with the team, or if I had strayed and done something that did not promote – or was even detrimental – to them. For example, I might have inadvertently promoted my own expertise by giving direct advice (as truth) based solely on my own past experience or from a theory learned from studies or through reading, when the team actually needed was for me to help them explore their own past experience or figure out (as a team, not based on my expert opinions) how to find relevant information needed for the task. I realized that in the beginning, when I promoted my own experience or handed out expert advice like teachers are often expected to do, I often was acting directly against the core values of *trust* (in the ability of the team and in the value of their own experience), *courage* (to get in contact with the relevant experts in their own

networks), *doing* (trying out things in practice, rather than me as an expert predicting how things might go) and *learning* (by finding information and applying it in practice). Quite quickly I learned that handing out expert advice neither increased the students' sense of agency nor contributed to their success, and that a dialogic approach often brought better results; it offered a learning process that was much more effective for everyone, myself included. Indeed, suspending the attitude of a teacher as an expert was crucial to success. After a while, the students started joking about me knowing a lot more about the topics we discussed than I would allow myself to reveal. This was only partially true, as I suspect that many of the gains that the students interpreted as signs of my superior knowledge actually emerged because of the dialogic sharing of experience and knowledge construction rather than because of my prior experience. In a way, I think the team I was coaching allowed me to access a much wider knowledge base than I would have been able to without them.

Besides the continuous conversations with my colleagues and students, participating in professional networks like the Academy of Professional Dialogue and taking part in courses and trainings in facilitation and coaching, knowledge management, education and logotherapy, my current ways of developing the art of dialogic coaching also include practices that are seemingly unrelated to dialogic coaching. These include Chinese martial arts (*Yiquan* and *Tai chi*) to train for sensitivity and situational awareness, and to explore and train my reactions to what is taking place, and the Alexander Technique to learn about my own reactions and how to better deal with potentially stressful and high-stakes situations in coaching. The latter practices often enable me to suspend my judgements so that I can pay attention to what is actually taking place in situations where stress or anxiety would likely work against it, or against dialogue.

Knowledge as Reflective Dialogue in Action

When discussing the pedagogical practices in Proakatemia with people who have not visited the unit, one question often comes up (besides the usual ones related to grading and assessment): How do coaches ensure that students get the right type and amount of knowledge during their studies? This question may be motivated by a non-dialogic conception of knowledge, or *knowledge as facts* within higher education. According to this view, knowledge is a valued 'thing' that can be 'possessed' by an expert, who then can derive various social advantages because of this possession. According to Chris Argyris and Donald Schön in *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, knowledge as a possessed thing can consist of facts gained through scholarship, research or experience, as well as knowledge of rules and procedures. If one works within this conception of knowledge, teaching becomes information delivery (often through lecturing) or facilitation of information acquisition (reading assignments), alongside examining and monitoring this acquired information, rules and procedures.

A second view of knowledge suggested by Argyris and Schön is *knowledge as thinking like an*

expert. This includes utilizing cognitive procedures similar to those of the experts when solving real-life problems – for example, thinking like a doctor when diagnosing patients or like an engineer when designing engine parts to fit together as a whole and work with maximum fuel efficiency. In this view of knowledge, the teacher takes on the role of a tutor or a mentor who works alongside the student, looking at how he or she diagnoses and solves problems, praising the student after success, pointing out flaws in thinking and, perhaps, handing out appropriate qualifications after the student has successfully completed certain tasks.

A third view of knowledge they suggest is *knowledge as reflection in action*. This view states that knowledge is constructed within action through reflection on that action. This kind of knowledge cannot be separated from action, taught or examined outside it. Knowledge as reflection in action is always woven into a situation and cannot be separated from it. One example of this would be the way that an object being designed informs the designer as it is being made, and how she, through continuous reflection on that feedback and by organizing her own actions, can guide both the process and the way the object comes into being. A similar process can take place in a sales meeting: A salesperson gives a short presentation about the product while at the same time focusing and reflecting on the reactions of the potential buyers, continuously revising the speech as it emerges. The presenter skilfully aligns actions to the reactions of the buyers with the aim of bringing about a certain kind of action-oriented relationship. Similar processes take place when skilled leaders engage with their employees or stakeholders.

Thinking of these models as they relate to Proakatemia, even though all conceptions of knowledge are crucial for higher education, I would suggest that it is the third, often ignored view of *knowledge as reflection in action* that must be brought to the forefront in dialogic team coaching. In Proakatemia it must be extended to something like shared dialogic reflection in action, or *reflective dialogue in action*.

How can a coach then facilitate this reflective dialogue? The first thing would be to exemplify it in one's own actions. When working with students a coach has to be present, attentive to the experience of the students, listening actively, always respecting what they bring out and open up in their own talk. After setting an example, the coach has to help team members train their attention to each other's experience and how they contribute to (or harm) the overall dialogic space. If, for example, a student appears to take up too much floor time, the coach may have a private conversation with the student (who often might not have noticed that he or she is making it more difficult for others to take part), or encourage others to bring forth their experiences more courageously. Here the coach has to exemplify both trust and courage and encourage others to do so as well.

References

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Conference Session Extracts

From a conversation with participants considering the paper with the author

- Speaker 1:** What interests me about what you're doing, Timo, is that you have a business, and it'll fail or make money, and work or not work, so we have to find out how to do it. So I'm interested in the element of it succeeding. It is a real business where people put up their own money and have to make work. That allows everything else to start to fall in behind it.
- Speaker 2:** That was one of my thoughts too. How to create more project-based teaching in addition to teaching in a more traditional way? Because in my view, it's just as important to listen to people that have a lot of knowledge and wisdom. I have learned a lot by just sitting there listening. This combination of approaches – learning by doing, and this traditional listening to deep knowledge, is very important, I think.
- Speaker 3:** I had an interesting experience with a not-for-profit organisation that I've been working with in South Africa. A friend of mine and I are working on it together. They have 40 staff, mostly young people, and really diverse in terms of different cultures. We've been running a series of dialogues for them. But the Managing Director specifically requested, based on some experimental dialogues we did for six months, that we should not have any education up front. No theory. Because she really believes dialogue lives within us, and it is part of who we are. She went back to some of the ancient, different tribes, and sitting around the fire, and she really wanted to experiment with this. And as we got going, I noticed, I could see questions coming up – and complexity, like what are we doing? And why are we doing it? So in between each session I wrote to the staff. I noticed in myself that I did a lot of what I'd call invisible work, like container work, holding them in my awareness in a specific way. I thought there was going to be complexity, and there was. There were lots of questions, like, What are we doing? Why are we doing this? What is this process? So eventually, after three or four sessions, the Managing Director said, "Yeah, I think I was wrong. I think maybe we could do a day or two days of training". So do you just keep the thing implicit and create a real container?
- Speaker 1:** Functional familiarity means an appropriate level of development. I sometimes wonder whether we're teaching people too much dialogue, and not enough enabling them to do what they're trying to do.
- Speaker 4:** Well, it's turning some of the thinking on its head. In a lot of the most recent work we didn't teach anybody anything ever. No instruction. Never. It was never about that. It was always that there's a certain result sought. You have to interact together, you have to create a pattern where the interaction unfolds in a certain way. I think the focus is what's needed – what are you trying to do?

Speaker 1: But in a way, that's a distraction from the idea of how we learn, isn't it? The fundamental here is do we learn by being given answers and ways and means? Or do we learn by doing something and asking for, or reading or finding out from other sources, what's needed to get there? And they can be worked together, but they are different methods, aren't they? The one is: We'll go on a course and learn how to do it. The other is: We'll try to find out what's needed as we get going.

Speaker 5: What you're saying brings to my mind the difference between the team that doesn't have a project yet, and a team that's working together on a project. Because they are . . .

Speaker 1: Different animals.

Speaker 5: It's a different animal because when a team doesn't have a project yet, the feedback that they give to each other is, "Oh, you were so nice to me in the morning". It's like so introspective that they would go crazy if they continued like that. Because there's no outlet for their energy besides the team dynamics. When they actually have a project, it could be called a shared object of attention or intention. When they have a shared object, they start working intensely on something. They see their friends being interested in that same thing, and they become more interested in it themselves. Then you get another person joining in, and it's like there's a lot of teamwork. That's where the teamwork starts. They're going to be doing something. It can be staged. You don't have to learn how to do everything simultaneously.

Speaker 1: I experienced this in a maximum-security prison. We had offenders who were anti-social and wouldn't participate in anything, but I managed to get a couple of them to come to the dialogue group. They enjoyed the fact they could talk about anything and they did. For a long time, they talked about things, and they would still not go on any therapeutic courses or any educational stuff, but their interest in the dialogue was strong. Eventually, the conversation got onto how's your life working out? And what's going on and why are you in the situation you're in? Gradually, the conversation shifted to, Where am I going in my life? It became quite self-reflective, and they challenged each other really personally.

Speaker 4: Yeah, something must have happened so that they were talking about themselves. How did that transition occur?

Speaker 1: The way I facilitated it, our dialogue was a conversational dialogue. So we'd start off talking about football scores or whatever, gradually getting everyone involved. We'd get everyone talking and, gradually, it comes onto my family and my brother, or whatever. Slowly people get more and more involved in thinking about their lives and

what they're doing – and there are very few places to talk about that kind of stuff safely, because normally in a prison you get taken advantage of. So you build a container that has a bit of safety.

Speaker 5: We try to create that, or help build that as coaches. In development-stage discussions, people talk about their life goals. They have signed up for Proakatemia for three years. And sometimes their life goals are sort of going in a very different direction from where the team is going. So as a coach, I try to remind them to think about whether or not this is going to help their team to succeed.

Postscript

The author's reflections, written some months after the conference



Writing a paper for and taking part in the 2019 The World Needs Dialogue! conference certainly became a real learning journey for me. The initial idea for my paper was based on my work and experiences as a team coach and almost 10 years of experience in dialogue as part of the approach we call ‘entrepreneurial team learning’. The idea and the paper developed much further in online conversations with Peter Garrett and Jane Ball, through which the paper more or less ‘wrote itself’.

During the dialogue in the conference, we talked about our doubts about the basic role of dialogue alone in learning or constructing new knowledge. This perception mirrors a very common attitude that specialists hold towards knowledge, as information content that can be acquired and possessed by a specialist and which they can then disseminate to others. An alternative to the idea of knowledge as something to be acquired and then possessed could be taking the process aspect of knowledge more seriously – the training of people, through the disciplined practice of dialogue, to reflect together on what they are trying to achieve while they are trying to achieve it.

Other themes that came up in the dialogue were the significance and context of experience, and the goals that are shared by or at least relevant to the lives of those engaging in dialogue. We also talked about shifting attention from the individual experience to shared consciousness of the group or the team, and how a university degree program can provide an architecture for dialogic learning with a high level of student agency, dialogic spaces, entrepreneurial practices, traditions and relationships between the participants (the team entrepreneurs and their team coaches, and whether similar architectures could be implemented in different contexts like, for example, in correctional institutions.

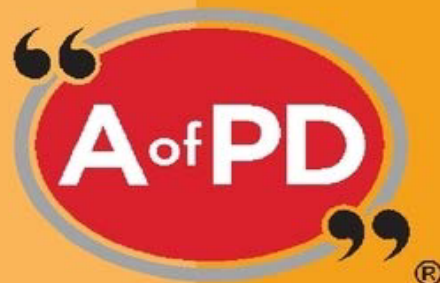
Going back to the dialogue, I can now see that the process that began with the paper is still ongoing and the theme is resonant with much of the work I have undertaken after the conference. In January 2020 we started a research group ‘Learning & Growth in Teams’ (LeGiT) in TAMK, where I have continued to study topics such as the role of collective reflection within the team and dialogue in team learning, and the changes needed in the practice architectures of conventional educational institutions. All of these are important if organisations want to create spaces for entrepreneurial team learning – including the core practices of dialogue and dialogic team coaching.

The World Needs Dialogue!

Two: Setting the Bearings

The collection of Working Papers by Dialogue Practitioners considered at the second annual international conference of the Academy of Professional Dialogue

Foreword by Peter Garrett
Editor Cliff Penwell



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