

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



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Living the Change You Seek

Roca's Core Curriculum for Human Development

By Sayra Pinto, Jasson Guevara, and Molly Baldwin

Last October, three remarkable leaders took me and some 700 others – including managers, teachers, consultants, and social activists – on a day of profound learning, joy, hope, and occasional heart-break. Sayra Pinto, Jasson Guevara and Molly Baldwin are leaders of Roca, a grassroots organization dedicated to personal and social transformation (see “Roca: A Community Cornerstone,” page 2). Speaking at Pegasus Communications’ “Systems Thinking in Action” conference in Boston, they engaged in issues never far from the surface

of any thinking person’s life and work: in Sayra’s words, “the possibility of who [we] can be.”¹

Roca and its 100 “street workers” – mostly 15- to 22-year-olds formerly served by Roca – have changed thousands of lives over the past 15 years. In the process, the people of Roca have changed, too. As Peter Senge reflects in his closing commentary, their journey of wisdom, love, and courage challenges us to rethink our notions of change, and to reexamine our capacity to serve our organizations, our communities, and the world we live in.

— Karen Ayas, Co-editor in Chief



Sayra Pinto

Fanning the Flame of Hope

By Sayra Pinto, Roca's VIA Project director

Roca works to create a space where people can grow and become more themselves. But we don't think of ourselves as “developing” people; we think of ourselves as developing ourselves and engaging people in the possibility of who they can be. And we don't say, “Hey, you want to learn about yourself?” because most people (including most executives) say, “Thanks, we know everything we need to know about ourselves.” Instead, we approach people where they are in life, and we build relationships with them. That's the key to self-awareness, learning, and change.

We've found two things in particular that are essential to personal development. Our communities constantly reaffirm these core principles:

- Young people want to fly, but society does a terrible job of keeping their hopes alive. Young people need encouragement and somebody to show up when things are hard. Those who haven't had anybody don't want to be let down yet again. Teachers, counselors, coaches, and others who try to “show up” and provide hope often take a lot of abuse from young people who have been disappointed.
- People aspire to transformational relationships. If you're showing up for a young person he or she will eventually get tired of telling you to go away, and begin to take you

for granted. That is actually a *good* thing: you become the most consistent, sustainable presence in that young life, and at that point you make a difference. *Both of you* change and grow. You become a mirror, holding the dreams of who that young person can be. These are not comfortable relationships: they involve a lot of searching and conflict, but also tremendous love.

Anchors Amid Uncertainty

When I was 16, a Roca street worker told me, “I’m going to show up for you whether you like me or not.” This person was stubborn enough to stand by me, even when things didn’t seem to be working, even when I was saying, “Leave me alone. You’re getting too close.” Now, at 31, I get to show up for other people. Most of our staff tell a similar story (see “Being There,” page 3).

“Showing up” often means being “in your face”; we’re good at that. But we’re good at it because we hold to the vision that young people and families can thrive and lead change. “Thrive” doesn’t mean “be trouble-free”; it doesn’t mean that problems go away. It means that people – not just young adults but entire families, including the teenage mothers who

Roca: A Community Cornerstone

Roca, Inc.² is a multicultural human-development and community-building organization. Its programs reach youth, young adults, and families in Chelsea, Revere, East Boston, Lynn, and Charlestown, Massachusetts. Roca works intensively with 1,300 individuals through restorative justice work, Peacemaking Circles, and multicultural programming, and reaches an additional 15,000 people each year through outreach and events.

Roca’s vision is one of young people and families thriving and leading change. Roca’s mission is to promote justice through creating opportunities, with young people and families, to lead happy and healthy lives.

Roca’s seven programs, described below, include a powerful combination of outreach, intervention, street work, leadership development, health promotion and access, educational programming, youth employment opportunities, community organizing, and community building led by multicultural, multilingual youth and adults. Roca invites young people and adults from the far corners of the world and from the local neighborhoods to build their communities together.

- **Project Victory** is an intensive after-school program for 12- to 15-year-olds which includes educational support, leadership development, and community service.
- **VIA Project** is an educational program that supports disenfranchised young adults through ESL (English

as a second language) training, high school equivalency programs, and job preparation.

- **Youth STAR** is a government-supported AmeriCorps program in which 30 young people develop leadership skills and educational goals, while providing community health and HIV/AIDS prevention education, and organizing and leading conservation work.
- **Healthy Families** provides intensive outreach to young parents under age 20. One-on-one home visits are enhanced by community events and weekly drop-in nights for young parents to come together.
- **Street Outreach Team** engages multicultural street- and gang-involved youth through intensive relationships, Peacemaking Circles, and leadership development.
- **Community Building Team** develops relationships with immigrant families; provides educational opportunities for community parents and other adults through numerous classes; and supports community organizing and multicultural celebrations.
- **Lynn Cambodian Project** works with street- and gang-involved young people and supports community building within the Cambodian community.

bring their children to our classes – engage in their lives and strive to do well.

We've found four core values that help us sustain our vision. In uncertain times these values are our anchor:

- **Belonging** – having a place in the world, especially for those who have been uprooted or displaced;
- **Generosity** – a sense of purpose, that we have something to contribute to the world;
- **Competence** – the skills to live and participate in this world, and an understanding of the rules of the game; and
- **Independence** – an awareness of how to move forward in the world.

For me, independence, in particular, is critical. Independence doesn't mean going it alone; nobody, and no country, can do that. But without a sense of strength and distinction come a loss of self, hopelessness, deep distrust, and a belief (as we see played out in parts of the developing world from which many in our communities come) that it's up to somebody else to determine the course of affairs in the future.

I come from a people with a history of struggle for independence and belonging. When I was growing up in Honduras, there were brutal civil wars in



Being There

By Jasson Guevara, street worker



Jasson Guevara

I came to Roca three years ago, when I was 18 years old, after being out in the streets. At the time, I thought, “Oh, boy, I want to stay here forever. They have weights, they have soccer – I’m *never* going to work.” One day Seroeum Phong, the director of the street worker team,

asked if I wanted to help run our weight program. I volunteered to help out – and I was late every day. Seroeum never made it an issue, but one day it really hit me: I couldn't get it together to show up on time for *three hours a day*, and I didn't even have to start until 6 pm.

Eventually I was offered a staff job, working with other youth who were involved in gangs to try to bring them into the VIA Project. I wasn't sure if I wanted to take the position or not, but I decided I would, since Roca had helped me. I spent a year running the weight room and soccer program – and I was finally on time for work. But through the first year, I wasn't trusted by some people in the community. It was hard to work through that, to try to do something positive when everybody thought I was involved in gangs or drugs or crime. But I had somebody who always believed in me, and that made the difference.

That's how young people feel when they have support. That's what I try to do – to be there for others. Kids' parents and families are not going to be there when there's about to be a fight, and someone needs to try to break it up. That's something that we can do, and that's why we get respect from the people we try to help. It is always about approaching people on their own terms and giving them your trust so they can trust you. Sometimes, as Sayra says, you have to keep pushing people. You get in their faces and they get in yours in return. But in the end, it tells people that there's someone who really cares what happens to them, and that leads to real change in people's lives. ■

El Salvador and Nicaragua, and genocide of indigenous people in Guatemala. Nobody talks about Honduras being in the middle of all that, because it's always been, in effect, a United States colony. What came of those experiences were feelings of dependence, suspicion, and self-doubt. In Central America, people have lost a sense of their own engagement with themselves, their countries, and their future. People cannot develop socially, economically, or personally with that kind of dependence.

Rules for Engagement

I've been asked, "How do you keep going? What does it take?" For years I would talk about how hard it is to make a difference. Now I find it really doesn't take that much, because after



a certain point, in essence, you're dealing with your own children. How can you begrudge the time, effort, and emotional energy you give to them? How can you begrudge your belief in them?

When I work with a 24-year-old who never learned to read and write, and who doesn't know the meaning of love, I don't begrudge my love for that person. That is the essence of education and personal development. When people walk into my life – which has happened quite a bit lately – to teach me how to be engaged profoundly in that love, I am thankful for their presence. They give me the opportunity for learning, for understanding what it means to be human. Many in our community live “on the edge,” which experience can create

a certain clarity about the world. But it's the exhilaration of life, not the closeness to death or desperation, that helps us see things for what they can be. It's the joy you feel when you look at the sky, when you feel your body moving and working well, or when you see change. Those who feel only pity for the underprivileged may miss the understanding that, underneath the hardship, there are profoundly dignified people – people who choose to live and who experience joy every day. Increasingly, I appreciate that kind of courage, because that's the same zest that I see in the young people with whom we work. What defines that courage is not tragedy, but the fact that we get to try, over and over again.

Shared Learning Journeys

When we see people engaged in the process of living, learning, and changing their circumstances, we share their learning journey. It is a humbling experience, as I learned from Samuel, a young Sudanese man. He was one of the Lost Boys of Sudan – thousands of boys orphaned by war in the late 1980s. Samuel returned home one day from caring for his cattle and found there was nothing and nobody left in his village. He and the other orphans spent seven years wandering from country to country, being refused asylum. Eventually he was

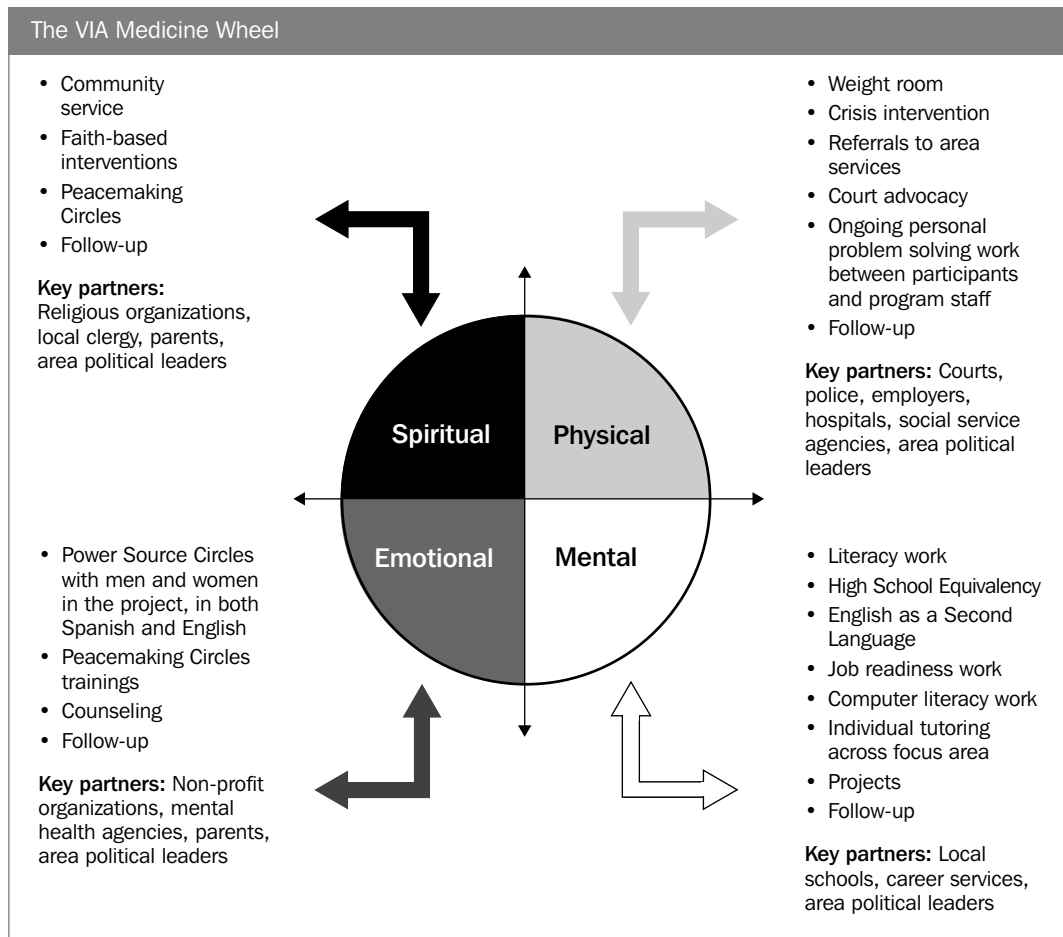
resettled in Boston, and found his way to our door. Samuel spent several months attending classes at the VIA Project, and at one point, he decided it was time to move on. About three months later Samuel returned to our building in tears, saying, “I don’t know what’s going on with me. I can’t do anything.”

How do I tell somebody who’s traveled for seven years across the desert that he’s not done yet with his travels? What gives me the right? How would I know what it means to go from country to country, to see my friends mauled, and to have to bury them? I decided that what gave me the right was that *somebody* had to be there, and had to say, “You’re not done.” But humility, in both the traveler and the Samaritan who meets him on the road, brings growth. It is part of what the Dalai Lama talks about in *The Heart of Happiness* when he describes what it was like to lose his country. The reason he didn’t lose his whole sense of being when that happened is that he rediscovered himself through relationships with other people. Relationships define us; they remind us that we belong, that we’re connected, and that we need the same basic things: communication, communion, common ground, a sense of purpose, and the wish for our children to be better than we are.

People try to construct logic models to explain these shared needs and use them as tools for change. At Roca, we explain what we do in terms of four primary ways that people engage in the world – through their *physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual* experiences. We try to anchor opportunities for growth in each of these four areas, and to invite others to engage in the opportunities they find.

How do I tell somebody who’s traveled for seven years across the desert that he’s not done yet with his travels?





We have seen this approach play out at the VIA Project. Students in one of our English classes were taking six months to learn the verb *to be*. There was nothing wrong with the teacher, or with the students; while in class, they were engaging their minds and demonstrating competence. The next day, however, the students would have forgotten everything. Whatever was getting in their way would be found only through another of those four ways

Our relationships are about nourishing the mind, the spirit, the emotions, and the body so that people can grow and be whole.

of engaging. We created a learning model – the VIA Medicine Wheel – based on those four kinds of engagement (see figure). To sustain learning we try to reach people in whatever dimension is most meaningful to them. If people are hungry, we feed them; if they get stuck in one area of their lives, it could be due to a hunger somewhere else. As learning partners, we try to provide a full table. Our relationships are about nourishing the mind, the spirit, the emotions, and the body so that people can grow and be whole. Everyone deserves that opportunity. ■

Where Learning Begins

By Molly Baldwin, Roca founder and executive director



Molly Baldwin

People in our organization and in our communities talk a lot about change. But in working for change, we try to hold in balance the high aspiration of creating a better world and the simple wish to live in an ordinary and good way. It’s our hope to be “brilliantly ordinary,” because we don’t pretend to be brilliant, and we need to be a little more ordinary for everyone in our community.

For most of Roca’s history, we were sure that everybody should change – except us. We fought for the schools to be different, and for the police and social service agencies to work with us to keep young people out of harm’s way. The notion that to change the world we’d first have to change ourselves – to the extent that it ever occurred to us – seemed trivial and self-indulgent. That view was an enormous problem because, as we’ve come to see, we can change *only* ourselves. Indeed, we have discovered that self-transformation is far from trivial; it is hard work and we have seen that it *can* change the world. One learning practice in particular has transformed us, our relationships with others, and our effect on the outside world. The practice is known as a Peacemaking Circle.³

A Transformative Tool

An indigenous practice of the Tlingit Nation in Alaska and Canada, Peacemaking Circles have helped the Tlingit restore and preserve the fabric of their society for many generations. They use the circles to rebuild relationships, to make peace, to make decisions, to celebrate, and to learn. A Peacemaking Circle is a profoundly democratic tool: in the circle, everyone is equal. The circle’s process holds the promise of both healing and participation – two important ingredients for building hope and community.

We learned about Peacemaking Circles from Judge Barry Stuart, a former Chief Justice of Yukon Territory, Canada. In November 1999 we were somehow drawn to attend a conference





he was addressing. We listened in amazement to his stories and afterward persuaded him to come and bring people to teach us about these circles. Over time, the circle process changed our organizational culture and strengthened our commitment to keep dreams alive and create openings for change. However, getting there was not easy.

Forty people came to the first training: young people, police and probation officers, community members, and friends. Halfway through the session, we decided to have a dialogue about street life. Everyone was very excited. To prepare for the dialogue, several of us conducted a fishbowl conversation in the middle of the full group. Within three minutes everything blew up. People were screaming, the kids were swearing, and everyone was saying, “See! This is never going to work!” I felt like somebody had driven a stake through my heart. But something positive came out of that wreckage. Watching the session break down, I understood how committed I was to divisiveness rather than unity – how far I was from being a peacemaker. I understood on a visceral level the problems with “us-and-them” thinking, and how I perpetuated that, personally and for the organization. I saw how destructive it was for us to continue to insist, “We’re right, you’re wrong! The issue is you, not us, because we hold the moral ground!”

That revelation was an enormous gift, and a painful one. It began a year-long personal and organizational journey. In thinking through our own shortcomings, we decided that the change we sought in the world began with us. Suddenly, that set us free. We knew we were not going to change overnight; we didn’t know how. We wanted to change – sometimes desperately – but because we’re human, we’d slip back to old ways of thinking and acting. But we’d found a way to shift (albeit gradually) our habits and our relationships with our families, our communities, and other organizations, with whom we’d often fought (see “Making Peace,” page 9).

Our insights from the Peacemaking Circles blew open the doors of possibility. One of the powers of the circles is that they're based on respect and forgiveness – profound needs in the world today. The circles let us *practice* those values, let us hear and see how other people experience those needs, let us work on our vision and intention, and let us change our behavior. As the circles took hold within Roca, it became very clear to us what Gandhi meant when he said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Creating Conditions for Change

Since our first difficult session, we have trained 139 staff members from the Department of Social Services and the Department of Youth Services in Peacemaking Circles. These people now work differently with kids, and with their own staff teams. They are doing some courageous work in looking at how they think, act, and relate to others. But we didn't try to change them; we saw that we couldn't. We were there instead to love them, because we needed them. We found that it's possible for us to live in a way that embraces our principles, and we've learned that change is absolutely doable. You don't have to be brilliant or heroic; you just need to be willing to make mistakes, and to have a vision. You need to know there's something different you want to be. You need the intention to make changes, and you need to act from a set of core values.

Making Peace

For many years, Roca had difficult relationships with other institutions; we fought with the Department of Social Services (DSS) almost daily. One day, before we began the Peacemaking Circles and while we were running a parks program in Revere, a young girl disclosed that she had been sexually abused by one of the youth staff. A police officer in the park took this child to the police station to protect her. When her mom showed up, the conversation between her and her daughter was in Vietnamese. The only other person who spoke Vietnamese was another youth leader from Roca who tried to translate for us. It was a chaotic scene in the meantime.

In the meantime, the police had called DSS and there was an argument about whose case it was, and who could best help this child and her family. Everyone was screaming. Finally Geri, a DSS manager we'd known for years, intervened, shouting at us, “What are you doing? Can't you keep these kids safe? What about your rules, and the law?”

We got through that situation and eventually started the Peacemaking Circles. One of the people we *hadn't* begged to come to circle – and we beg people all the

time – was the Chelsea/Revere area director of DSS. One day she asked to attend a circle and afterward told us, “All my staff are getting trained. We have to show up differently for these kids and these families.” This was an enormously brave thing to do, and it helped us look at our own behavior. Sayra Pinto and I soon realized that we needed to apologize to Geri, to the area director, and to other DSS staff, because we'd been hostile to them for a long time. We went to see Geri and told her, “You know, we're really sorry. We need to work with you. Can we start over?”

Geri's response was, “Are you nuts?”

Sayra and I just looked at each other. Geri went on, “I've known you for 15 years and I don't get this. Start screaming, will ya?” Finally, we made a deal about when and how we could call on her in the future, and worked through our apology. It was a big change in our reality – from anger to compassion and understanding. By thinking differently about ourselves, and showing up differently for others, we created extraordinary relationships with people and with organizations that we needed. As a result, we are accomplishing far more, together, for the communities we all serve.

Of the four core values we try to practice, I believe the most important are *belonging* and *generosity*. When people feel the sense of connection that comes with belonging, and the sense of purpose that comes with generosity, they are freer to work toward competence and independence. And *competence* and *independence* – which we define not only as self-sufficiency, but also as being healthy and safe – are where most training and educational programs end. Those are necessary outcomes but insufficient. Unless the personal foundations are in place – unless people feel connected and purposeful – nothing else works.

***The point isn't how
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The point isn't how we behave in a circle; it is how we behave in our lives. As Roca became a more transparent institution that actually practiced being vision- and value-led, and as we witnessed young people start to shift out of gangs and young moms make changes in their lives, we started to learn what *we* most wanted to be. That is a powerful lesson, and the first step in making change in the world. ■

Endnotes

1. A complete recording (audio and video) of the session that formed the basis of this article is available from Pegasus Communications (www.pegasuscom.com) under the title "Living Together Well: A Foundation for Changing the World."
2. For more information on Roca, Inc., visit their website at www.rocainc.org.
3. For more information on Peacemaking Circles, including research papers documenting the use of circles at Roca and elsewhere, see www.rocainc.org/circles.htm.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Molly Baldwin, founder and executive director of Roca, Inc., brings to her work extensive experience in management, program design, fundraising, strategic planning, community organizing, street outreach work, and youth leadership development.
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Commentary

By Peter M. Senge



Peter M. Senge

I cannot read the words of Sayra, Jasson, and Molly without being deeply moved. Undoubtedly, this is because I have had so many firsthand experiences with Roca that have left me changed. After almost four years, I know that I still do not understand how this organization works, or how it accomplishes what it accomplishes – in both the lives of young people and the larger communities from which they come.

What moves me about Roca?

First, Roca demonstrates how fundamental shifts in social and economic systems can be brought about “from the periphery,” especially by those far from official positions of formal authority. The young women and men of Roca are not the voices normally heard in shaping societal policies or corporate agendas. But, paradoxically, their distance from the centers of formal power may be the source of their effectiveness. They speak directly from the reality of their circumstances rather than from political positions. They believe that they can change those circumstances, not just cope with them. And, ironically, never having been assimilated fully into “the system” (such as the school system) means that they are in some measure free from its culture and assumptions. They still harbor a faith that true learning and becoming a human being define a person more than do grades and getting into the right college.

Second is the clarity of their voices. I am repeatedly stunned by the simple and direct expression of profound insight that arises from the Roca street workers. Several years ago, some other outside advisors and I had the privilege to spend three days with a group

of street workers. Much of this time was spent sitting “in circle,” as they say, exploring together our common work. On the last day, one of the young people asked if I would speak about leadership. I think he wanted to hear “from an expert.” For a moment, I did not know how to respond; I only knew that I did not feel at all expert in their presence. So I said that I would be happy to share some thoughts if we could first go around the circle and let each person say a few words about what “leadership” meant to him or her. By the time the second person was speaking, I was writing as fast as I could – for I knew what I was hearing was coming straight from a deep source.

A young woman from Guatemala said, “I think it’s about individual and collective action in determining right direction.”

An 18-year-old man from Cambodia added, “It’s direction in a democratic way – like geese in a flock, where a new lead goose takes over every few minutes. You don’t know you’re doing it. If I open the gate, it opens for others. It’s *not* one person’s brain working other people’s bodies.”

Next came a 20-year-old woman from Puerto Rico: “When I think of leaders, there’s always an essence or energy about them. I think that it’s about truth and standing in truth – a place of truth and integrity – and standing there even when it’s hard. My brother is like that.”

Celia, a 17-year-old woman from Colombia then said, “A leader is like my mother.” She paused for a long time to allow her mother’s presence to be in the room. She then talked about “the courage to follow intuitions you

have for the greater good.” She continued, “A while back a girl was being taunted by a gang of girls after school. Without saying anything, I walked up to her and took her arm and just walked her home. Afterwards, I thought, ‘That was a really crazy thing to do. You could have gotten hurt or even killed by those other girls.’ Then I thought, ‘Who was it who saw this girl in trouble and just helped her like that?’”

Seroeum Phong, the director of the street worker team, said, “When I think about leadership, I think about the whole human being. I think of a servant for the greater cause. I don’t like standing up in front of people. But I need to do it. Leadership is not just an inner state of mind, but an inner state of mind *for people*.”

Another young man from Cambodia then added, “A quality I struggle with is learning to speak from the heart. A lot of times I’m afraid for what to say. I wouldn’t be if I spoke from the heart.”

After several more comments like these around the circle, I told them there was nothing more that needed to be said. If they ever wanted to understand leadership, they should just look toward their experience and talk with one another as they had been doing. Everything else is just theory.

Last, I am moved by the simple presence of these young people. I suspect that few who heard Sayra, Jasson, and Molly speak at the Pegasus conference will forget it. In speaking often to large groups, I have come to recognize when there is “magic in the air.” That morning in October, a quiet descended on a cavernous convention hall filled with more than 700 people, and for a brief two hours we were truly together. Sayra’s strong voice and soft words vibrated. Jasson’s youthful manhood showed strength and vulnerability that opened many hearts. Molly’s humility and self-effacing

humor lighted up many faces. Afterward, people came up to me and asked “Who are those people?” One woman said, “She [Sayra] was channeling.” Many came just to exchange tears and gentle expressions of hope rekindled.

There are many lessons I have learned from Roca about organizations and change. An organization can be:

- **A training ground for human development.**

One of the most important ways an organization creates change has little to do with the organization itself. It’s not that the organization, as a *thing*, necessarily changes. It’s the people within it who learn and grow from their time together.

Organizations change the world through their impact on individuals and through the social relationships and networks that spring up and cross many boundaries, within and beyond the organization itself. The organization creates an environment where we get to be part of an extraordinary team, where we experience a way of being together that shows what is possible and orients us for far longer than our tenure as a member of the organization.

- **A strategic microcosm.**¹ In exceptional cases, an organization also can become a living model – a strategic microcosm – of the world that its members seek to create. This can be painful as well as inspiring. It means acknowledging that we embody the dysfunction, as well as the promise, of the whole, as illustrated by Molly’s discovery of “how committed I was to divisiveness rather than unity.” But, until this state is reached, the work is all about “changing *them*” rather than truly creating something new. I believe this is a key to large-system change.

Most often, learning is incremental and reactive – it’s driven by external events and results in little

development of new capacities. Occasionally, however, we go deeper. When people pursuing a cause discover that “the outside is inside,” and that there is no “them and us,” a transformation of will starts to occur – from anger to compassion and engagement. When the people at Roca started to see that there is only “us,” they began to re-define their purpose in a subtle and profound way. Their task became, as Molly points out and as Sayra and Jasson demonstrate, to *become* what they wanted to exist. When an organization sees itself as a source of the very problems it seeks to address, and as a place for creating something new in its own way of being, it also unleashes new forces for change on a larger scale.

• **An agent of external change.** Of course, any organization must be judged by the results it achieves, and it was through this lens that I first came to know Roca. At the first public meeting I attended at the Roca facility in Chelsea, I talked with a veteran, Irish police officer who said simply, “There is little positive we could do in this community without Roca.” Later, a senior state-government official described Roca as an important new type of organization that bridges government and communities, enabling state agencies to serve real community needs rather than just political and bureaucratic agendas. The VIA Project has received major foundation support, another indicator of the credibility established by Roca’s past accomplishments.

The fundamental justification of all organizations is to enable people to do together something they couldn’t do by themselves. But often this activity is self-serving: for survival or to earn a profit. This does not preclude people having a sense of higher purpose. But, without creating an environment that nurtures human growth, and without becoming a strategic microcosm, most organizations

simply do not know *how* to achieve a higher purpose.

But, more are learning. For instance, Unilever is a member of the SoL Sustainability Consortium, a group of organizations coming to see social and environmental balance as a strategic goal. A few years ago, Unilever, which sells more fish products than any company in the world, came to a stark conclusion: it wouldn’t have a fish business unless it found a way to slow the depletion of the world’s fisheries. This awakening led it to help create an independent organization, the Marine Stewardship Council, to certify whether or not fish products sold worldwide, including Unilever’s, are produced in compliance with sustainable fishing practices.

The Marine Stewardship Council and Unilever have a long way to go to translate this vision into reality. But the early progress in achievement of that reality would not have been possible without seeing that “we are part of the problem” and saying, “we have no future unless we take some responsibility for the health of the larger systems to which we belong.” Becoming an agent for larger change is not about losing self-interest, but about seeing a larger self.

Who Serves the Whole?

In interviews with nearly 200 scientists, and social and business entrepreneurs, Joseph Jaworski and Otto Scharmer found that many described significant shifts in their sense of self: in the midst of creating something truly new, “*who you are* disappears.”² Or, in the words of the Japanese philosopher Ohashi, “you encounter the alien self,” a self outside your normal experience of who you thought you were. We all have layers of identity, right up to the most public “I am a consumer,” or “I am a parent,” or “I am an executive.” But *our capacity to act in service of the whole* arises from

elsewhere. Suddenly, we're no longer deluded by the idea that we "are" our positions, our jobs, or even our personalities. As Celia said, "Who was it who saw this girl in trouble and just helped her like that?" I believe it is this continual discovery – that "I'm not who I thought I was" – that creates the genuine spirit in places like Roca. Whenever organizations can create an environment in which people are connecting and growing as human beings, and becoming more effective as microcosms of change, people become, as Molly puts it, "brilliantly ordinary." What makes them special

is not their personalities or accomplishments – but simply their aspiration.

As I read Sayra's, Jasson's, and Molly's words, they remind me of this spirit of aspiration, beautifully articulated by the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana:

"I want to contribute to a work of art in the domain of human existence. I want to evoke a manner of coexistence in which love, mutual respect, honesty and social responsibility arise spontaneously, instant after instant."³

Endnotes

1. The concept of strategic microcosms is developed in depth in Adam Kahane's *Solving Tough Problems* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004), and in *Presence: Human Purpose, and the Field of the Future*, by Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers (Boston: SoL, 2004).
2. Many of these interviews are summarized in Senge, et al., *Presence: Human Purpose, and the Field of the Future*, and available at www.dialogonleadership.org.
3. See Maturana, Humberto, "Metadesign: Human Beings Versus Machines, or Machines as Instruments of Human Design," Chilean School of Biology of Cognition paper (August 1, 1997), available on the website of *Instituto de Terapia Cognitiva*: www.inteco.cl/articulos/metadesign.htm.

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VOLUME 5, NUMBER 5

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



Emerging Knowledge Forum

Creating the Job of Your Dreams

Reflections on a Visit to Team Academy

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Published by The Society for Organizational Learning

► reflections.solonline.org

ISSN 1524-1734

Creating the Job of Your Dreams

Reflections on a Visit to Team Academy

By Etienne Collignon, Manfred Mack,
and Laurent Marbacher

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

The SoL Journal

on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

Volume 5, Number 5

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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.

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ISSN 1524-1734

EISSN 1536-0148

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Design & Production: DG Communications (NonprofitDesign.com)
Design Concept: OHO (OHOCreative.com)

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Reflections: The SoL Journal is published 10 times per year (July through June) in electronic format and once per year as a hard copy compilation by the Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, USA. Inquiries regarding subscriptions and address changes, back issues, reprints, and permission requests should be directed to:

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Reflections

The SoL Journal

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Reflections: The SoL Journal is published 10 times per year (July through June) in electronic format and once per year as a hard copy compilation by the Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, USA. Inquiries regarding subscriptions and address changes, back issues, reprints, and permission requests should be directed to:

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<http://reflections.solonline.org>

ISSN 1524-1734
EISSN 1536-0148

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Design & Production: DG Communications (NonprofitDesign.com)
Design Concept: OHO (OHOCreative.com)