# A Learning Community: An Exploration of the Lincolnshire Tripod

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# EV⊗LVƎ

Evolution of Lincolnshire's Visitor Economy

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## Executive Summary

Developed as an interdisciplinary collaboration, the project explores a group of students' ability to collaborate, learn, and make a worthwhile contribution socially. By using the self-determined learning and experience of the 'Team Academy' (TA) model of learning, which is based on the Finnish *Tiimiakatemii* model of learning-by-doing, the students decided upon, designed, and delivered a project that engaged with and explored the Lincolnshire visitor economy. Engaging in a series of activities and workshops aimed at the leisure and tourism sector, students increased their attributes and skills as part of their learning process by focusing on practical skills before theoretical knowledge. The process was facilitated using a Team Coaching approach in line with TA pedagogy. This promoted 'ripple effect' learning where learning did not stop with the students who engaged with stakeholders in a way that created a 'community of practice' at a County level.

Assessment, or defining 'success', is difficult to quantify as traditional forms of academic assessment do not necessarily acknowledge the student's ability to demonstrate praxis – they may 'know of' but can they demonstrate 'know-how' and can they alter responses to accommodate complexity? This ability was monitored through the project. The project was never intended to be an endeavour in the pursuit of academic excellence, rather it was an experiment in learning – does the passage through academic process alone equip students with attributes needed to be 'mission ready' in a complex world? We would argue that, in many cases, it does not and that currently we are not adequately equipped to assess this.

## Introduction

"A Learning Community: An Exploration of the Lincolnshire Tripod" project grew from the active interest of Georgiana Els and Chris Jackson in self-determined learning and experience of the 'Team Academy' (TA) model, which is based on the Finnish *Tiimiakatemii* model of learning-by-doing. In the United Kingdom, the TA model is present in several universities (e.g. Bristol Business School, Newcastle Business School, Aston Business School) where it usually resides in business departments and is recognised as an alternative method of entrepreneurial learning.

Georgiana and Chris wanted to develop an interdisciplinary collaboration by offering an opportunity for students to collaborate, learn, and make a worthwhile contribution socially. Taking 'Leisure and Tourism' as the focus of the proposed intervention, they recruited four students – two from University of Lincoln (UoL) and two from Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU), also in Lincoln. The students from BGU were both studying for a BA (Hons) Team Entrepreneurship, delivered using TA methodology, while the students from UoL were studying BA International Tourism Management and BSc Events Management and had not experienced TA-style learning.

Initially, it was hoped to recruit a larger cohort for the project but we found this difficult due to time constraints and the fact that the project launched toward the end of the COVID lockdown period in 2021. However, the size of the project team is not seen as a limiting factor.

## Aims

The overall aims of the project were twofold:

1) For students to explore a model of self-determined learning *(heutagogy)* where they decide upon, design and deliver a project that engaged with and explored the visitor economy sector in Lincolnshire.

2) For coaches to observe and explore what impact two very different prior learning styles might have on the execution of the project and how the students would work together.



## Process

The students decided that the project needed an identity and came up with the name 'EVOLVE' – an acronym for the Evolution of Lincolnshire's Visitor Economy. After initial meetings, the team agreed they wanted to better understand what sorts of skills, attributes and qualities are needed to thrive in a fast paced and ever-changing environment (e.g. post-Covid, post-Brexit, increased digitalisation, etc.). Engaging directly with the local community would support them to uncover this.

The team presented at two national events: the Seaside Summit 2021 in Cleethorpes on 4 November 2021 and Greater Lincolnshire & Rutland Visitor Economy Conference on 22 March 2022; an international event: annual Team Academy UK Team Coaches' Gathering "Reconnect, Reboot, Refresh" at UWE in Bristol, 29 June to 1 July 2022; and organised two workshops: Relaunching the Future of Lincolnshire's Visitor Economy at University of Lincoln on 28 February 2022 and "Navigating Possible Futures", delivered at the Greater Lincolnshire & Rutland Visitor Economy Conference on 22 March 2022.

After their first workshop, the team developed a broadsheet-style newspaper, cleverly crafted to incorporate the results of an expert panel discussion which included eight high-profile players in the Lincolnshire visitor economy (see Appendix 1). The audiences for the two workshops were largely derived from the local visitor economy, with attendees ranging from business owners, entrepreneurs, DMO directors, local council representatives, academics, and students.

## Method

To expect the process of such an endeavour to run smoothly would have been more than wishful thinking. Georgiana and Chris decided that, in keeping with TA methodology, they

would 'team coach' the students, adopting an inquisitive rather than directive or prescriptive stance.

The role of Team Coach requires some facilitative input when working with new or 'forming' teams. In this respect, Georgiana and Chris played 'good cop / bad cop' roles, with one offering minimal information while the other responded to questions with questions. Additionally, bringing four people together to work on a task does not automatically constitute a team. The BGU students (D and S) were aware of and had been practicing this for some time. The UoL students (E and I) were visibly uncomfortable with the process.

The process had a slow pace initially as the small group of students became a more effective team, making sense of the environment in which they were operating and experimenting with ways in which the main players could be engaged by making sure they had a holistic view. The coaches had to make sure that non-directive questions were asked, and some connections facilitated. In the early stages of the project, students were also paired with a business mentor – Ms. Lydia Rusling, Director of Economic Development at East Lindsey District Council, former Director of Visit Lincoln – who provided an industry perspective by having regular meetings with them and mentoring them in respect of the specific challenges of the Lincolnshire visitor economy.

*"Delighted to have supported the EVOLVE Project Lincolnshire formed of students and lecturers from UoL and BGU. Their mission is to improve the visitor economy in Lincolnshire through a series of interactive workshops and events (…) It has been a pleasure and honour to work with [them] on EVOLVE."*

*- Ms. Lydia Rusling, Business Mentor*

As stated previously, this was an experiment in learning – does the passage through academic process alone equip students with attributes needed to be 'mission ready 'in a complex world? We would argue that in many cases, it does not.

The process which we introduced was human-centric. At every step of the way, as they met challenges, we asked the students either what it was they needed to address that challenge, or what it was that they did not know that was preventing them from making a decision or taking action. In every instance, they worked out the answers for themselves:

- *"When are we having our next meeting?"* – "That's up to you – when do you feel it might be appropriate? Do you need us to be there?"
- *"Who do we need to contact in order to…?"* – "That's a good question – who have you spoken with so far?"
- *"We're fed up with …. missing meetings! What should we do?"* – "Have you asked them why they haven't been able to attend?"

We challenged them with a real-life task, and they responded accordingly. As a result, they now hold some mastery of the range of skills and attributes that they will need to achieve success, both in terms of developing and applying specialist academic knowledge but also the synthesis of wider experiences and ideas as they step beyond higher education.

## Key Findings

**Peer learning**

It was expected that we would observe some 'peer learning' and this was evident from early meetings where D and S had little knowledge of the tourism sector and E and I uncomfortable with an absence of direct guidance. In this project, we were working with students familiar with the traditional pedagogic delivery model of expert-pupil, and students who had been challenged with a team-coached learning-by-doing process. The former always wanted to be told how they should proceed; the latter were solution-focused. The subject-specific knowledge of E and I was soon used to inform activity encouraged by D and S without intervention.

However, on a broader platform, learning was experienced at many levels, as suggested in the executive summary. This is visualized in figure 1 below:
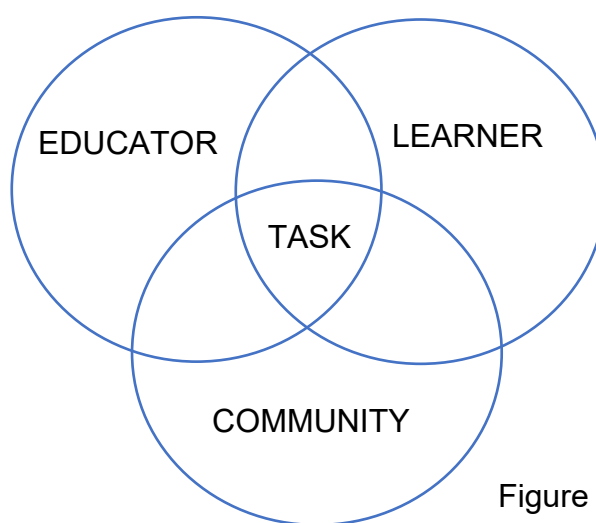


Figure 1.

We would also suggest that in this respect, the learning is not finite, nor is it identical. 'What is learned' becomes appropriate and yet different for all engaged parties:

For the Educator – pushing boundaries, exploring alternative models of learning and assessment.

For the Learner – experiencing learning through action and experiencing themselves as leaders who can add value

For the Community – Exploring solutions defined by stakeholders which add additional value by building trust and encouraging engagement. Through this wider engagement, the Client (Visit Lincoln) have shifted their emphasis from 'Visit Lincoln' to 'Destination Lincolnshire'.

**Team learning**

The concept of Belbin Team Roles was introduced early on in the project to illustrate how their ability to perform as an effective team could be improved by a mutual understanding that each person would be naturally predisposed to behaving in particular ways to different scenarios, irrespective of personality. This worked well and indeed provided a good base for initial discussions around who might undertake which roles or tasks. It also supplied material which the students could reflect on and offered valuable insight into why the process of project management can sometimes become frustrated.

The students did indeed begin to function as a small team, soon defining their project and establishing an identity with which to move forward. Having said this, progress was not rapid. In this respect we need to remember that as individuals they had other commitments to academic work – not to mention social and personal. This was a voluntary and extra-curricular project and at times they most likely queried its validity.

**Learning by doing**

Taking a 'hands-off' approach is not always easy. Watching individuals battle with frustration – both with the task and with each other – often encourages us to step in as the 'expert' or 'rescuer' and give advice. However, in doing so, it could be argued that we are simply salving our own frustrations in that we want to urge progress or demonstrate prowess, where critical reflection could ultimately be more productive or constructive.

Over time, one of the team was no longer committed to or engaged with the task at hand. They had openly admitted that they were not interested in the project and were only there to see if they could make useful contacts. This may have been an honest revelation, but it was not useful to the other members of the group. A pragmatic response was called for. By now, the team were beginning to understand that they were driving the process and that success or failure, however measured, would be attributed to their decisions and actions. They knew that we would not condemn any decision they made – as long as they came to a decision as a team. If they had said, "We want to drop this project", that decision would have been supported. The Coaches were taken aback and impressed in equal measure when attending the next meeting where only three students appeared and announced, "S will not be joining us. We have explained that their lack of interest and poor attendance is not helpful, so we've asked them not to come back. We've sacked them from the project." This was a lesson well learned for all of them and following this intervention, the project gained direction and speed.

**Assessment**

Traditional forms of academic assessment do not necessarily acknowledge the student's ability to demonstrate praxis – they may 'know of' but can they demonstrate 'know-how' and

can they alter responses to accommodate complexity – a reality often ignored in subjects where it is presumed that causal process delivers defined results

## A Summary of Key Recommendations

1. **Developing students' entrepreneurial learning can better equip them to operate in complex environments.** As previously stated, the TA learning model usually resides within business schools as a way of learning about business. However, as the aging paradigm of entrepreneurship is challenged and expanded to a broader definition of 'creating cultural, social and economic value', which is, 'domain neutral' (*Entrecomp 2016)*, it can be demonstrated that the overall process of entrepreneurial learning fosters skills and attributes which are otherwise seen as extra-curricular and arguably cannot be taught. These attributes increase levels of *psychological flexibility* and develop responses that are more pertinent to becoming an agile operator in a complex environment.

2. **Encourage a type of learning that can be appropriate across disciplines**:

   "(…) *the development of skills was quite fast paced as we were doing many things at the time. All of us had a chance to come across a variety of fields: marketing, events management, human resource management, project management, photography, etc. I value the opportunity of learning by doing, because we could have quick reflections and overviews of the results from things which we introduced to the market, published online, or discussed in the events. It was different from university experience in which you do not test the performance of created products.*" (Quotation from student E.)

3. **Challenge the way students are assessed**. Whereas traditional modules propose 'Learning Outcomes' which suggest targets to be attained at a point in time, the project explores the notion of 'Vector Targets' as a response to operating in complex environments. In this way, the curriculum (an ordered system) is adapted in a way that prepares learners for interacting with organisations and the world in general (complex adaptive systems), where emphasis is placed on "setting direction and finding stepping stones" (Doyle, 2021).

4. **Developing a module as a compliment to traditional programmes** that builds on the TA methodology and increases students' attributes as part of their learning process. At present, there is not a defined or accepted method of assessing learning in this way and this is something that the project team would like to further explore. The three students who were part of the project from start to finish selected dissertation topics linked and enabled through the project and the results have been fantastic (e.g., highest grade awarded in UoL Business School this year – 90% - for a dissertation on the "Regeneration of the Lincolnshire Coast through Events", plus a First-Class Honours award to one BGU student who wrote their final dissertation on 'Greenwashing'). This demonstrates the ripple effects of the project at an individual and community level.

## End Note

In isolation, this could be viewed as an 'interesting project'. Yet, on reflection, we feel that as well as advocating for and demonstrating the positive impact of more experiential learning opportunities – both for students and external stakeholders in this instance – we have also touched on an area worthy of experimentation and research going forward: assessment.

As an experiment in self-determined learning, the team of students set the target of delivering 'three events within the lifetime of the project', yet – for perfectly acceptable reasons – they only managed to arrange two. Does this mean that that the project was a failure? Not at all.

The learning process that this project enabled, the different challenges it continued to present to the team of students, and their response to the greater authority and autonomy that they found themselves with are all difficult to measure using traditional metrics. Yet, we can see, as can the students, that they have been positively influenced by this experience; that their approach to future projects, be they academic, professional or personal, will have changed as a result of this opportunity. They have a far greater understanding of the sorts of pressures and challenges that come with leadership and/or business ownership, of how to capitalize on opportunities and recognise and respond to potential threats, and they are far better prepared to face change and uncertainty regardless of the career paths they might choose.

How we classify and assess attainment is as important as how we curate the learning space. This should be encouraged to extend far beyond the limitations of any physical restrictions of the classroom or lecture theatre and challenge the instant gratification offered by cyberspace.

## References

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## Appendix 1

# EVOLVE TIMES

## BEST SOURCE OF LINCOLNSHIRE'S VISITOR ECONOMY NEWS

UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN

EV●LV∃

**COUNTY'S WEATHER**
SKEGNESS - 11°C
CLEETHORPES -11 °C
LINCOLN-13°C

BISHOP GROSSETESTE UNIVERSITY

# EVOLVE TEAM ORGANISED 1ST EVENT

## DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT IS THE NEW BLACK

EVOLVE Project is a student-led project created in collaboration between University of Lincoln and Bishop Grosseteste University. Three students and two lecturers are working towards evolution and development of Lincolnshire's Visitor Economy. There will be three interactive workshops and the first one's news are presented in the current issue. The first workshop was held at the University of Lincoln and it was based on high profile experts joining for a discussion about the Visitor Economy and sharing their insight.... (read more on the page 2).

## LATEST NEWS

Digitalisation is an unavoidable part of any business. It might have been a competitive advantage back in the days but not anymore. NOW it is essential.

However, are digital skills a strong part of Lincolnshire's Visitor Economy? Read more on page 2.

## VALUE FOR MONEY????

DURING THE 1ST EVENT A NEW TOPIC HAS EMERGED: WHAT IS THE VALUE FOR MONEY IN THE VISITOR ECONOMY? HOW DO BUSINESSES HAVE TO MEASURE THE VALUE OF WELL-BEING, HEALTH AND ENGAGEMENT. MAYBE IT IS THE TIME WHEN FUNDING BODIES SHOULD STOP COUNTING THE VISITORS AS JUST NUMBERS AND SUPPORT INITIATIVES SEEKING TO PROVIDE GOOD QUALITY SERVICES AND PRODUCTS.

ARTS, THEATRE, MUSIC, EVENTS AND OTHER RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES SHOULD GET MORE ACKNOWLEDGMENT FOR THEIR POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE SOCIETY'S SOCIALISATION, INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY. COLLABORATION IS AN ESSENTIAL STEP TOWARDS EVOLUTION

AND DEVELOPMENT OF LINCOLNSHIRE. DURING THE FIRST EVENT IT HAS BEEN POINTED OUT THAT NOT EVERYTHING IN THE VISITOR ECONOMY CAN PRODUCE MEASURABLE ECONOMIC OUTPUT, AND IT DOES NOT MAKE THE INITIATIVES WORTH LESS INVESTMENT AND SUPPORT. THE VISITOR ECONOMY IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST PROFIT.

## CIVIC PRIDE : SKILL OR CHARACTERISTIC
### READ MORE ON PAGE 2

# D A R K   A R T

IS IT NOT TIME FOR PEOPLE TO START TALKING ABOUT HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO APPLY FOR FUNDING TO DEVELOP THEIR BUSINESS AND SUPPORT THE INITIATIVES?