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NO EXAMS, NO GRADES, NO LECTURES

JUST FUN AND GAMES?





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While the topic our dialogue session held in Proakatemia's Academic Adventures might be slightly provocative, our intention is not to claim that exams, lectures, and grades do not have any place in modern education. Instead we explored the possibilities and realities offered by a learning environment that does not rely on these structures. In addition to looking at the offered possibilities, we also try to create insights on the requirements of building such an environment.

Proakatemia offers an environment where the students can graduate with a Bachelor's degree without attending any lectures after they have successfully completed their first-year studies. The possibility to go through studies without any extra lectures is possible for all the students in Proakatemia, but only a few of them go through their studies without attending at least one or few courses outside Proakatemia. Studying without lectures, grades and exams provides the students with an opportunity to find out the best ways they can learn on an individual basis without taking away any ways to approach learning and acquiring the information

they need in their studies. On the contrary, the opportunity to make meaningful decisions related to all parts of their studies leads the students to feel more committed to any lectures they might attend during their studies.

Replacing traditional forms of higher education, such as lectures and exams, with learning by doing projects, attending seminars and having long dialogue sessions with teammates can be observed as the students having an easy time. While the dynamics are certainly changed, such a claim would downplay the amount of work and preparation needed for successfully navigating through the studies at Proakatemia. While the methods involved in studying might look like it's all fun and games, the reality is quite the opposite. Entrepreneurship and team-based learning are not always fun and easy but require a high amount focus and commitment.

In this article, we will consider three different themes related to the topic and approach them with the combined perspective of a Proakatemia coach and student combined with the viewpoints of the quests at Academic Adventures. The material and thoughts were gathered in a three-hour dialogue session with the quests, and the information gathered in the session has been supported by the experiences of coaching staff at Proakatemia after the session was closed.

MEASURING LEARNING

One of the main differences between the Proakatemia model and more traditional ways to study in universities is the lack of grades and exams in most parts of the degree programme. This usually provokes the question of how we

measure learning and compare the success of our students. The answer lies in continuous feedback that the students get from various parties. They get feedback from their teammates, Proakatemia as a community, their team coach and most importantly from their clients. The students then use all this information as a guide for their self-assessment. Therefore, we feel that in Proakatemia there is no need for static grades in addition to all the dynamic feedback they will receive during their journey through Proakatemia.

Continuous feedback and assessment by results requires the students to either maintain a level of expertise they are content with or improve on the skillsets they have acquired. In many cases, the process of improvement is hidden to the student until the moment they should face a new kind of problem. A solution that provides value to a customer and therefore brings in money for the team enterprise gives a more wholesome look at the skills and abilities of an individual student than any grade could.

Grading an activity promotes certain boundaries related to the upper or lower end of the assessment values. How should we grade an activity that provides better results than the maximum grade possible? To allow the student to realize the potential of improvement and what could be achieved with added knowledge or hard work, they must have a free view on the possibilities ahead of them. The effect is multiplied in the team environment where an individual can receive several opinions and perspectives on how to improve, why they should commit more resources to a certain field or on the value of the skill or knowledge they are pursuing. Taking grades out of the team environment forces the team members to evaluate each other based on concrete results and achievements on an individual basis.

The coach plays an important role of setting healthy boundaries and supporting the individual members of the team, as well as supporting the whole team on setting goals and evaluating gained results. The lack of grades does not mean that there is no measurement or comparison, but instead these activities are based on a wider array of information than a static grade.

The use of grades is often argued to bring more opportunities for a graduating student to showcase their abilities, but the lack of grades has not stopped the students of Proakatemia from achieving their goals after graduation. The networks, experience and feedback gained during studies also provides the students with a greater ability to evaluate their own value for the market as an employer or an entrepreneur. The results achieved during their studies work as a better way to approach possible employers than a set of grades could. This process may require more work and more personal approach but, then again, the students of Proakatemia are often willing to commit to their pursuit of the next step.

Even with all the freedom and flexibility, the students of Proakatemia will receive two grades during their studies. They will write a bachelor's thesis that will be graded in the same way as a normal bachelor's student's thesis would be. In addition to the thesis, the students will complete a 24-hour innovation challenge as a team and the result they are able to come up with in that timeframe will be graded. The challenge always involves a company outside Proakatemia and they will commit to the task monetarily. The company will pay the teams per the grade they get for the assignment. With a grade of 1 the team will end up paying the customer for the time they wasted but a grade of 5 will bring several thousand

euros to the team. The combination of grading and monetary involvement combines the motivating factors of both systems to this final task for the teams.

CHOICE VS EASY WAY

The model of learning in Proakatemia promotes freedom in the daily lives of students. This freedom is applied to most of their schedules, choice of books to read, and choice of projects to do. Such freedom brings along a heavy responsibility as each individual student must actively participate in choosing how and what to learn on daily basis. There are some exceptions such as the two four-hour dialogues sessions with the whole team and coach present and some events that require the whole community to be present. But besides these, the students have a total freedom on how to plan their week.

To keep track of what is going on in Proakatemia and the learning processes of individual students an excel sheet was created in the early years of Proakatemia. All students mark their hours spent on team meetings, projects, seminars, reading books, and such on hour-by-hour basis. The sheet then calculates the number of hours spent in total and divides it to courses based on the topics the students have assigned the hours to. Having such an open and flexible way to follow the workload of individual students comes with a possibility and opportunity to abuse the system, but the excel sheets are also visible to other team members and the team coach so any abnormalities can be seen quite quickly.

The ability to track and build their process during the whole journey through Proakatemia creates contact points and supporting structures instead of constant surveillance

or strict structure of lectures and grades. The students know what is expected from them and the progress is reflected upon with the team coach at least twice a year, in addition to constant self-evaluation and feedback from the team. Following that, studies progress, every individual student is focusing on topics and issues that matter to them, and the team becomes a self-governing entity that aims to support everyone included as well as it can be done.

It's quite easy to observe that in an environment such as Proakatemia the choices and freedom are the main motivators for the students. From the first day on they must balance their life around free time and work while concentrating on a process that lasts two and a half years. The freedom doesn't mean that it would be easy to study at Proakatemia. If you ask our students, the opposite might be more true. The freedom to choose what to do to pursue their goals can sometimes mean workloads that are significantly higher than they would face in a more traditional way of learning.

“Instead of concentrating on finding the easiest way through their studies, the students learn to find the wisest way to approach their current target.”

You don't have to be a constantly over achieving student to survive in Proakatemia though. As the process takes two and a half years there are more than enough opportunities to slow down or even stop and choose a new path.

Most of the students do not settle on surviving though as they have chosen the programme to find out how to thrive and manifest their true potential. The expectation to take

responsibility and commit to thriving can be seen in every team at some point of their process.

To assist the students in their journey towards their goals, a tool called a learning contract is used. In this contract the students go through their life and underlying motivations and the contract is shared openly with their team and team coach. With the help of the learning contract every individual in the team can support each other in hard times or when they encounter any kind of doubts during their studies. It also provides the team coach with a tool to reflect upon the development of individual students.

All the free choices that students have will also put the teacher or coach under a new kind of pressure. Instead of knowing a few sets of slides that can be used again and again, the individual taking the role of a teacher or coach in this environment has to be as flexible as the system is. As the environment around is changing constantly and in rapid pace, the coaches should adapt as well. As such the focus for the coach is to observe, support and question the process of the students instead of providing them with all the information they might need. There will be someone who has the more recent information available anyway. It can be said that the coach has to meet the students where they are, professionally and emotionally, instead of waiting them to adapt to his or her own current state of mind.

Shared goals and ambitions also help lazy or unmotivated students to get to the same level with other students in the team or alternatively it helps them to realize that Proakatemia is not the correct place for them to study. Should this happen, the students have the possibility to continue their studies in the traditional business administration programme.

LEARNING SHOULD BE FUN BUT STILL CHALLENGING

Another fundamental part of studying at Proakatemia is the environment that promotes having fun while working and studying. This is underlined by several annual events where the whole community gathers together to celebrate a special occasion like graduating of teams or the birthday of Proakatemia. These informal events tend to gather almost all students and coaches as well as alumni who have graduated years ago, and that is what makes the events special. There might not be a better way to end an academic year than to celebrate the achievements that individuals and teams have reached and at the same time laugh together at the mistakes that were made along the year.

“Having fun is an active part of the social structure of Proakatemia.”

It shows in daily face-to-face interaction between individuals, be it students or coaches, as well as the daily routines of the teams. Bonding through shared enjoyment and leisure is as crucial as is bonding through challenges and hardships. This creates a more complete emotional attachment to learning and it seems to provide support for the students to challenge themselves in more diverse ways. The intense rhythm of studying in Proakatemia more than often leads to students spending time with team members during their days outside Proakatemia as well.

Having fun together and creating different kind of games work also to make learning and results tangible for anyone to see, thus reinforcing the communication inside and outside

the community. Deep involvement in the community works as a supporting structure for building courage and going outside comfort zones for the students to meet tasks that are more challenging. The shared times of fun and enjoyment also help to establish a bond of trust and care between the coach and team members.

Studying at Proakatemia is not just fooling around and laughing at things that have little to no value for anyone. The fun of learning comes from the balancing act between moments of total freedom and tougher times that may be rather hard to go through. Going between feelings on both ends of the spectrum can easily be emotionally straining and that is why the first year of studying at Proakatemia focuses on building the environment of trust and courage between team members.

Several entrepreneurs who have graduated from Proakatemia have continued the tradition of dialogue sessions, face-to-face feedback, and learning contracts in their own companies. Trustworthy environment where everyone can choose the best ways to learn and develop while producing tangible results is something to strive for in any environment.