

Yoda Was Wrong

The route, the root, and the one layer we've quietly closed

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I was mentoring someone a while back and showed him a technique I'd been using for years — a simple way of linking a group together so that communication and teamwork stop being things you talk about and start being things they have to do.

He loved it. You could see it land.

Then he said he wouldn't be using it.

Not because it wouldn't work. Because he had an assessment the following week, and on assessment you play it safe. You do what's required and no more.

I didn't have an argument for him. I'd done exactly the same thing myself, more than once. Every time I've been assessed, I've reached for what was comfortable and familiar, and every time I've come away being told I could have pushed further. I knew that at the time. I did it anyway.

There's a line I've carried since I read Robert Charrette's *Wolf Pack* years ago. His character Elson Novacat, waiting to fight, watches his opponent take last-minute instruction from a trainer and thinks: the ring is where you prove what you know, not where you learn something new.

For most of my career I've treated that as sound advice. I'm no longer sure it is. It's true of a fight. It's a poor rule for a profession — because the moments we call assessment are often the only moments anyone senior is actually watching. Tell people that's the time to play safe, and you have built a culture where nobody ever shows you the best thing they've got.

Still Water

Water that doesn't flow goes stagnant. It sits there, benefiting nobody. Get it moving and it waters the land, reaches people, does what water is for.

Ideas behave the same way. Kept in someone's head, or voiced once and shot down, they stagnate. They don't benefit anyone — not the person who had them, not the people they'd have helped.

Ideas have to be heard and they have to be tried. Some won't work. That's fine. The attempt is the point.

Which is why I think Yoda had it wrong. *Do or do not. There is no try* sounds like wisdom, and as a line about commitment it just about holds. As a description of how anything new ever gets built, it's nonsense. Trying is the mechanism. Remove it and you're left doing only what you already know works — which is another way of saying you're left doing only what someone else has already done.

A sector that only ever *does* can never find out what it might have been able to do.

The Dartboard

Three words get used interchangeably in education, and the confusion costs us more than it looks like it should. So here's how I use them.

Picture a dartboard.

The objective is the score. Get the highest total you can. That's what you're trying to achieve, and it doesn't change depending on who's throwing.

The aim is where you actually throw. Do you go for the twenty, sitting between the one and the five, where a near miss is punished hard? Or the lower part of the board, where nineteen and seventeen sit next to each other and the misses cost you less? That's a design decision. There's more than one defensible answer, and the right one depends on the thrower in front of you.

The outcome is the change. Not just what the score was — what's different now. Knowledge: they understand where the numbers sit and why the board is laid out to punish ambition. Skill: they're more consistent than they were. Attitude: they can miss three in a row and still throw the fourth properly.

Objective, aim, outcome. What we're achieving, how we go about it, what actually changed in the person.

I know the textbooks order those differently. I'm less interested in the vocabulary than in the fact that the three are genuinely distinct layers — and that our sector has got its grip on the wrong one.

We Standardised the Wrong Layer

Look at where we've landed.

Outcomes sit unagreed. Every provider runs its own formats, its own paperwork, its own language for describing what a programme is supposed to change in a young person. A school that switches provider has to learn an entirely new system to ask the same question. That's the layer where a shared language would actually help everybody, and it's the one we've left to private judgement.

Objectives sit unwritten — at least by the people best placed to write them. That's the argument I made in *Before the Next One*, and I won't rerun it here. If practitioners don't set the standard collectively, somebody external eventually does it for us, usually badly and usually after something has gone wrong.

And aims — the route, the design, the how — sit effectively closed. Not by regulation. By expectation. By a shape that enough people ran for long enough that it stopped looking like a choice and started looking like the standard.

That's the wrong way round. The route is the one layer that should stay open, because it's the only layer that has to flex for the group actually standing in front of you.

How the Route Closed

When I first came to Hong Kong, a programme was close to a blank sheet. A school would arrive with some rough outcomes, maybe an activity they'd seen somewhere and liked, and the provider designed something to fit. The provider was understood to be the expert in the how.

That's shifted, and the pandemic accelerated it. Direction moved across to the schools — and honestly, I understand why. Talent left the region in numbers. The hiring that followed concentrated on hard skills and safety, because those are the things you can't run without. The educational side of the work got thinner. Schools noticed, and filled the gap themselves.

I'd put less of the blame on schools than you might expect. What I see from the provider side is a lot of complaining and very little pushback. Very few attempts to say *here's why we've designed it this way*. Expertise that doesn't get defended gets deferred, and eventually stops being asked for.

Add the economics and the picture completes itself. The larger operators have the money, the reputation and the staff. Smaller ones follow them, because following is safe and a lost contract hurts far more when you're small. So the shape spreads, and the more it spreads the more any departure from it looks like a risk rather than a decision.

That's how a method hardens into a norm. Not by anyone deciding. By enough people copying.

The Question That Isn't Really a Question

Some years ago I brought in a rope system for climbing that was in common use elsewhere but hadn't been seen locally. It was categorically safer. It also used a couple of items in a way that wasn't the way people here were used to seeing them used.

Most staff got behind it. One or two didn't. Then a teacher on a programme, who had some climbing background, questioned it — not aggressively, but firmly, because they hadn't seen it before.

That one went fine. I explained the reasoning, showed that this wasn't something I'd invented on the spot, and they accepted it.

But I've watched the same moment go the other way, and it is expensive. An unfamiliar method gets challenged, the session stops, and what follows is an investigation, weeks or months of documentation and external experts brought in to confirm what was already true.

And it comes from inside as often as outside. *This isn't what I was told.* That's not really a safety objection. It's the product of training that taught one method as the method, rather than teaching one method and the reasons underneath it.

Where both sides are willing to listen, none of this is a problem. The damage comes from intractability — on either side of the conversation.

Not Everything Different Is Innovation

Here's the part that has to be said, or everything above reads as special pleading from someone who wants fewer questions asked of him.

Plenty of things get sold as innovation that are nothing of the sort.

During Covid we ran small pods to meet the group-size limits. The staffing was arranged strategically to keep every pod under the cap. On paper it worked. In practice one instructor was monitoring several small groups scattered across a site, and both supervision and facilitation got worse. It looked like a solution. It was a compliance manoeuvre.

Or the decision that only one instructor in a pair needs to carry a first aid kit. Nobody calls that innovation out loud. But it arrives dressed in the same language.

So here's the test I'd apply, and it isn't whether the thing worked.

Innovation happens at the aims layer. It changes the route — the design, the sequence, the activity, the way the learning is drawn out. It's proposed before it's run. Somebody else gets to look at it. It can be stopped.

A corner cut changes the objectives layer — ratios, kit, checks, supervision, the things the sector has agreed are not negotiable. And it's almost never put up for scrutiny first, because scrutiny is the thing it's avoiding.

An attempt that fails is still an attempt, as long as it was offered up, watched and reversible. That's the difference. Not the outcome — the exposure.

What the Freeze Costs

For the young person, it means the programme is built around what's recognisable rather than what they need.

Kurt Hahn set out his six declines of modern youth the better part of a century ago — fitness, initiative and enterprise, memory and imagination, skill and care, self-discipline, compassion. They hold up remarkably well. He also prescribed four antidotes: fitness training, expeditions, projects, rescue service.

Look at what our sector still runs. Expeditions. Projects. First aid and rescue. Fitness.

His declines were the outcomes. His antidotes were his aims — his best answer, in his context, to the problem in front of him. We've kept the antidotes and largely stopped interrogating them. Old problems, old ladders. And the declines a young person faces today aren't identical to the ones he was looking at.

For the practitioner, the cost is slower and sadder. Someone arrives in this industry full of energy and ideas and a genuine belief they're going to change something. Then: *we don't do that here. That's how we've always run it. The client was happy last year.*

How many times does someone hear that before they stop offering?

Practical Takeaways

IF YOU'RE A PROVIDER BEING ASKED TO JUSTIFY A DIFFERENT ROUTE

- 1 Answer with the outcome, not the tradition** — explain what this design changes in the young person that the familiar one doesn't; that's the only ground worth arguing on
- 2 Put it up before you run it** — a route offered for scrutiny is innovation; the same route sprung on people is a problem waiting to happen

- 3 **Build the culture internally first** — if your own staff can't suggest something from left field without being told how it's always been done, you won't have anything to defend

IF YOU'RE A SCHOOL OR CLIENT EVALUATING ONE

- 4 **Ask what's changed at your end** — your students, your curriculum, your needs are not what they were three years ago; a programme that's identical to last year's is answering an older question
- 5 **Ask whether it's the best activity or the easiest to sell** — easiest to sell to you, and easiest to sell to parents, are not the same as most useful to the young people
- 6 **Let each side be the expert in its own layer** — tell the provider what your students need to achieve, then let the provider tell you how they'll get there; that trade is where the value is

The only way we ever find out whether something will work is by trying it. Don't try, and you never learn how far you could have gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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