
Embodied Leadership with Tango: an experiential form to learn Leading & Following that makes pedagogical sense!

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Abstract

This paper presents the current pedagogical format of a leadership course, baptized “Embodied Leadership with Tango” (ELT). It establishes that ELT makes pedagogical sense, and invites conference members to co-create an improved version, in line with Pine & Gilmore. It is an auto-ethnography, as it describes my own experiences with didactically developing ELT. Even if I have occasionally asked participants for feedback, this was not done rigorously.

Just like windows of a house offer different perspectives on its interior, so academic theories offer specific perspectives on a subject. When looking at ELT through the windows of the three dominant learning theories: behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism, we see a robust pedagogical format, which should, of course, continuously be improved. Even if my own pedagogical background also includes other windows, I limit myself to these three schools in this paper.

Key Words *Leadership, Followership, Tango, Experiential Learning, Cognitivism, Constructivism*

Experience Theme *5. Educational experiences*

Focus of Paper *Practical/Industry*

Introduction: The ELT Experience

You have been invited to join a class, entitled “Embodied Leadership with Tango”. What images come to mind? Which emotions run through your body?

Well, you are actually about to start the class! The instructor, Joseph, is a middle-aged male, a Belgian who lectures Organisational Behaviour in the Netherlands, and who speaks English with an American accent. The class consists of 17 participants, mostly of your age, of different nationalities, with an equal mix of men and women. The professor tells you that “this is a management course, not a dance class”. He mentions his 22 years as a *learner*, starting with Catholic kindergarten, grammar school and ‘gymnasium’, and topping it off with a Bachelor at Cornell, a junior year at Sciences Po, a Master at Johns Hopkins Bologna, and a PhD in Tilburg. “Wonderful education,” he utters, “but somewhat meagre pedagogically. Instruction mostly consisted of listening to someone telling us what to think. I wanted to find out if there were other ways of learning, and spent the next 25 years exploring this at different Universities, in five countries, as a lecturer, trainer, coach and tutor, at BA, MBA, DBA and Executive level. I have experienced various pedagogical forms, from the traditional lecture to the avant-gardist ‘systemic constellation’.”

“But enough about me, what is your experience with management, with leading and following? And have you danced before?” And, he re-emphasises that this is not a dance-class, but a management training, that uses tango as an analogy for Leading & Following. He also assures you that former participants were quite enthusiastic about it, and that you are not obliged to do, or tell, anything. You utter a sigh of relief.

“Please, come and stand in a circle. In a few moments you will hear tango music, and I ask you to follow me and imitate my movements. We will move counter-clock-wise. At some point, I will say “Suzanne leads”, and I invite you to imitate Suzanne’s moves. After about one minute, Suzanne may say “Kwan leads”, and we all follow Kwan and imitate his movements.”

And so you start to move, imitating Joseph who holds his body straight up. He raises his arms, and drops them to the side. Everyone joins in, and there are bursts of laughter. Then Suzanne takes over, and she bends her knees, walking like a crab. This is difficult, but you try to imitate her. Then she speeds up, not following the music according to your sense of rhythm. She jumps. The group jumps. Laughter! Then Kwan leads. He is more careful, and walks in a straight line lifting up his arms, just like the teacher a few moments ago. He glances at Joseph, who just nods, and then shrugs his shoulders, which the group imitates. The song stops. Joseph asks us to remain standing in a circle facing each other. He claps his hands, and tells you to give yourself a round of applause! "Such fun," you think.

Joseph asks, "Who was your favourite leader?" "You," Suzanne says. "Why?" "Because you are an expert. You know what you are doing." Anyone else? "Kwan. He went slow and watched if we were imitating him. He seemed to care about how we were experiencing the exercise."

"What does following a particular leader tell you about his or her character?"

Suzanne wanted to challenge us, by making difficult movements that few of us could imitate. She seemed to enjoy that she was 'fitter' than us! (Laughter.) And Kwan was continuously checking with you, the professor, whether he was doing it right, or not. Such a pleaser! (Laughter.) But he was also checking if we were following him, and not just 'doing his own thing' like Thomas, who suddenly executed some hip-hop moves!

(Due to the 3000 word limit, I had to shorten this experience. Please find an additional paragraph on <https://nhtv.academia.edu/JosephRoevens/Posts>)

Is there science behind the experience?

Thank you for engaging in this pedagogical experience. I hope it incites you to follow the class, which lasts two hours and includes five different exercises, with discussions about Leading & Following. As mentioned in the abstract, this paper looks at "Embodied Leadership with Tango" through the pedagogical 'windows' of the three main learning theories: behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. I invite the reader to critically evaluate this mental exercise, and help to co-create an improved version of ELT.

I render this analysis in reverse, by starting with constructivism, the more junior theory, as I consider this window most applicable to learn Leading & Following. Learning how to Tango, however, mostly follows behaviouristic principles.

My epistemology, and methodology, is a personal approach to phenomenology and participant observation (Delbridge & Kirkpatrick, 1994; McHugh, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne; Roevens, 2009, 2008, 2007) with a pinch of social constructionism as espoused by Gergen (1997) and Rijsman (1973, 1990, 1996a). A key principle of phenomenology (Crotty, 1998) is that it calls for us to get back to the things themselves, to arrive at more immediate meanings by allowing for a direct experience of the objects of our perception. Leadership is something that needs to be experienced, more than it needs to be a subject of discussion. In *Managing* (2009), Mintzberg warns us again about the dangers of moving away from the practical everyday reality of managers Leading & Following specific people in specific situations, towards the artificial creation of aggregated prescriptive mental lists of managerial and leadership characteristics. This is also why I refer to Leading & Following in this paper, and not to Leadership & Followership (Hohn, 1999; O'Connor, 2003; Schein, 1992). Leading & Following is a continuous contextual movement in everyone's daily reality (Becker, 1962; Kets de Vries, 1991), whereas leadership, management and followership are static labels.

Constructivism

As a Learning Theory, constructivism equates learning with creating meaning from experience. Learning is more meaningful to students when they are able to interact with a problem or concept. Every participant to ELT has his own personal history with Leading & Following, and his own mental understanding of these terms. One person will recollect 5 years in junior soccer, following the instructions of a rough-mouthed coach, mingled with 3 years as a sous-chef in a 5-star restaurant. Another will recollect filling out Blake & Mouton's Leadership grid during OB, and presiding over her college's social club. Others will have their experience. As a teacher, I am

merely one-voice in the Leading & Following discussion, based on my own history, and on the theories that I have studied .

Having participants take on an active role in their learning processes, motivates them to learn. By creating interactive teaching strategies in meaningful contexts participants construct knowledge based on their own experiences. This knowledge is richer, and more true to them, than that of a so-called expert. When viewing ELT through the constructivism window, we notice that: 1. Tango is an excellent analogy for, and a “meaningful context” to experience, and to embody how you lead & follow. How you lead or follow a specific someone in a specific dance, illustrates how you lead or follow a specific someone in a specific organisation. Examples of this analogy include:

a. In line with Mintzberg, you learn Leading & Following, through practice, not just by reading a book. Similarly, tango is learned through many years of training. It takes a non-professional leader about 52 weekly tango-classes, and 250 hours of practice, to attain low intermediate level! Already by just doing five exercises, participants to ELT experience the necessity of skill ! In “Learning How to Dance: Courageous Followership. A CNO Case Study”, Chief Nursing Officer Joyce Batcheller, writes, “initially, I had a lot of excitement and joy about learning how to dance. This was quickly accompanied by anxiety and feelings of vulnerability. Learning something new and returning to a novice level was challenging. It was a strong contrast to the confidence and expertise I experience in my chief nursing officer role.” (2012, p. 24)

b. Tango demands concentration, dedication and patience. A recent neurological article even equates the effects of tango dancing with those of mindfulness therapy: “Tango ... a form of dance that evolved in Argentina at the end of the 1800s ... is an absorbing activity that promotes attention by demanding a strong connection with a partner, since in a dance of about 3 min, the partners must attempt to move as one, a synchronised movement with one partner stepping where the other has just stepped.” (Pinniger, Brown, Thorsteinsson, McKinley, 2012). Managers need similar aptitudes (Gómez Gómez, 2004, 2005; Grochowiak & Castella, 2001).

c. Tango requires you to empathize with your dance-partner. You need to feel who she is, what she is capable of, and even what she desires. Management also requires empathy (Hellinger, Weber & Beaumont, 2001).

d. During the exercises participants are continuously kept ‘on their toes’. This is analogous to managers being interrupted a lot (Mintzberg, 1973, 2009). Often participants will start talking with each other, or dreaming away while mechanically following the steps. A rapid command like, “now right leads”, or, “followers, close your eyes” immediately incites them to focus, and, if necessary, to adjust what they were doing.

2. After each exercise, participants explore questions such as, “did you prefer to lead, or to follow your dance-partner?”, “what makes her a good leader?”, “what makes him a good follower?”. This permits them to go into their own personal history on Leading & Following, and make a phenomenological connection with what they have experienced in the exercise (Poisquet, 2011; Stokes, 1994; Schon, 1982).

After looking at ELT through the constructivism window, let us now look through the cognitivism window.

Cognitivism

As a Learning Theory, cognitivism focuses on how information is received, organized, stored, and retrieved by the mind. Information should be organized, sequenced, and presented in a manner that is understandable and meaningful to the learner. In that way retention and recall are optimized. When viewing ELT through the cognitivism window, we notice that:

1. Before class, participants are invited to watch several video-clips on Youtube. These clips present the why and the how of ELT by using clear text, video-images of Haaga-Helia Hotel and Tourism Management students dancing, and a verbal explanation. Their purpose is to have participants acquire knowledge about the mechanics of the course, to understand its relation to leadership, and to make them feel comfortable with the instructor. To emphasize that the instructor is a management professor, a clip is included which shows Joseph lecturing about “The Strategy of Chaos” to professionals of a French multi-national. Even if “lessons from dance teachers about leadership”, can be highly entertaining, the quality of these lessons is often weak compared to more rigorous studies of the subject.

Feedback from the NHTV Academy of Hotel Management students, Haaga-Helia, and Hochschule Bremerhaven Academy of Tourism students, shows that only three out of ten watches the clips prior to class. Those who do, find it “useful and clear”.

2. Class starts with a cognitive hook to create interest. This could be the story of when I was co-training with a consultant who lectured about “Followership” to an all-male 45+ grey-suit & tie group of Eurocrats. After slightly dozing off during the 25 minute lecture, the Eurocrats were asked to join Embodied Leadership. Two hours later – *we had lost track of time* – the concierge urged us to “stop dancing and leave the building” as it was far beyond closing time and he wanted to go home ...

3. Prior knowledge is activated by asking participants about their own experiences with Leading & Following, and about theories they have studied. If necessary, to start up discussion, I mention Hersey & Blanchard’s Situational Leadership model.

4. Information is chunked in comprehensible and digestible parts. In a typical two hour class, we cover five exercises of increasing complexity, allowing participants to build up their skill gradually and to discuss the topic ever more precisely. Exercise 1 “Walking behind each other in a circle, to tango music, imitating the gestures of a designated leader” helps participants feel at ease. Everyone can do this. It also familiarizes everyone with tango music and its specific rhythm. The selected songs are from Juan d’Arienzo’s orchestra. They are clear and simple to move to, with a recognizable tempo and melody. They last around three minutes and are considered very danceable for beginners. This, in contrast, to the more complex compositions of, for example, Astor Piazzolla. Exercise 1 exemplifies that each leader leads differently, depending on his personality, his skill, the follower, and how he feels at this particular moment.

Exercise 2 “Walking together to tango music side-by-side” is more challenging. Experience shows that participants can distinguish between feeling more comfortable about matching each other in a leaderless duo, about leading a specific person, or about following. Situations such as “a follower taking over the leadership”, or, “a leader turning into a dictator”, occur, which opens up discussion about the characteristics of good leading, or following. Participants may also find out that their preference for leading, or following, depends on who they dance with.

Exercises 3 to 5, look more and more like real tango dancing. Partners face each other, eventually in the correct tango embrace, and make real tango steps. Experience shows that these exercises promote concentration, focus, connection with each other and empathy. And that it is often hard to make the dancers stop!

5. Fleming (2001) grouped individuals into one of four preferred learning styles – visual, auditory, reading and writing, or kinaesthetic. ELT covers all styles of learning, increasing the possibility of long term recall! One example of the robustness of the learned information, is feedback from two Hotel Managers who are examiners during our senior year final assessment. One student kept mentioning the “Roevens Leadership Tango” model that he had learned in freshman year, and how it helped him to symbolically tango with different guests, satisfying their needs or solving their grievances.

After looking at ELT through the cognitivism window, let us now look through the behaviorism window.

Behaviourism

As a Learning Theory, behaviourism is based on the idea that behaviour can be controlled, or modified based on the antecedents and consequences of a behaviour. Rewards, or punishments, are used to reinforce, or weaken, a specific objective outcome, a behaviour. When viewing ELT through the behaviourism window, we notice that:

1. Participants are invited to clap their hands at the end of every exercise, making them ‘feel good’, thus reinforcing their eagerness to continue with new exercises. My Aikido teacher, Tomita-Sensei, used to say that we should always clap in our hands, even after watching a bad performance, as we were “clapping to ourselves”. The reason for this is that clapping activates the acupuncture points of one’s hands, which – according to Chinese medicine – has a positive, invigorating effect, on both body and mind.
2. Positive verbal feedback is often used, such as, “Well-done. Good posture. Excellent interpretation of the music, Continue”.

3. Negative verbal feedback is occasionally used, such as, “Use your *other* right hand, please. Do not talk during the dance. You are enjoying this *too* much.”

4. Asking people for their opinion, and actively appreciating their participation, reinforces learning.

5. The exercises are made up of various behavioural outcomes of increasing complexity, which are reinforced and repeated. These are: 1. Feeling at ease with yourself dancing, 2. Feeling at ease with the group, 3. Feeling at ease with the instructor, 4. Familiarizing yourself with the music, 5. Getting your body ready for dancing without straining it, 6. Learning how to move and eventually dance to the rhythm, 7. Recognizing the difference in leaders, and 8. in followers, 8. Aligning your step with a partner, 9. Leading, 10. Following, 11. Describing how good Leading & Following works, 12. Knowing how to hold the tango embrace.

6. Brain research (Wilhelm, 2010) shows that bodily contact promotes the production of oxytocin, a hormone which helps us to trust others, and feel deeply connected with them, a condition we find pleasant. As Tango is considered a ‘walking embrace’, participants are continually receiving this benevolent ‘drug’, which reinforces their craving to continue this behaviour. More often than not, participants to ELT become friends, or, at least, more open to strangers. Because of this effect, ELT is now introduced at the beginning of the Bremerhaven International Summer school, a two-week intensive course on economics and cross-cultural leadership, with participants and lecturers from – at least – 14 different nationalities.

7. Recent neurological studies (Gaschler, 2010) show the existence of so-called “mirror neurons”, which makes it possible for animals and humans to copy someone’s behaviour, and also to empathize with them. One way that humans display empathy and mutual concern is by imitating another’s gestures. Biologist Desmond Morris already showed us this in his famous Naked Ape BBC documentaries ! Tango, in a way, invites you to imitate and to mirror your partner’s gestures, indirectly stimulating and inviting your empathy for them. If the empathy does not happen, this partner will not dance with you again.

Conclusion

Experience with Embodied Leadership with Tango shows that it works. It is a viable alternative or addition to classical leadership trainings. This is based on seven years of auto-ethnography, personally trying out different forms of ELT, and noticing that both multi-national participants and directors asked for more. ELT makes pedagogical sense according to the three major learning theories. And in line with the views of Pine & Gilmore (1999) and Schmitt (2003), I wrote it in such a form that you were virtually *sucked into the course* and are now eager to experience it *in vivo*!

Class starts at 19h in The King Georges Ballroom on the 7th floor!

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