天美的世界学院
Tianmei's World Academy
Psychology applied to environmental design

*Learning*

*Happens*

*Everywhere*

学习无处不在

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# Redefining how and where learning happens through an environmental psychology lens

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# Author Bio

Adina Deacu is an Environmental Psychology Researcher studying different learning, working and living environments as context of behavior, as well as the influence that human behavior has in return on the environment as a whole. Through all the projects that she works on, she takes into account both the physical environments (interior/exterior design), as well as the social ones (human interaction design). Through her work she helps individuals and companies to create better learning and working environments with a focus to maximize individual potential, while enhancing cooperation, productivity, levels of wellbeing, but also creating behavioral change.

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# Abstract

One of the problems with the modern educational system is that it targets the majority. This means that if students can fit in and follow the teachers' teaching methods, then they are considered good students. However, if they cannot, then the educational system categorizes them as students who don't like to learn or students with "problems". The problem is that currently, the educational system is not diverse enough in the way the learning material is delivered to respond to different learners' learning needs and styles. Einstein once said: "If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will always think it's an idiot". With the "one-size-fits-all" approach, there are many fish out there forced to climb trees, thus inhibiting their personal development.
In order to help address the above issues and redefine how and where learning happens,

"Tianmei's World" Academy was developed as a decentralized school concept, a "network of classrooms" aiming to provide equal opportunities for everyone to access quality education regardless of their skin color, financial and cultural background, while providing the possibility for the students to experience by themselves what learning methods and environments they feel are most suitable for their individual needs.

This article explores more in depth the core issues identified with the current education system, how a "network of classroom" concept would help solve them, the research done in order to reach the results, the academic evidence to support the methods developed, the measurable results obtained so far along with recommendations for further research.

**Key words:** education, diversity, decentralized, learning environments, "network of classrooms"

# Introduction

Diversity in education is a hot topic, yet it is not truly included into education systems. With increasingly developed technologies available, the only major "innovation" that has happened in education is digitalizing existing teaching methods. This means that the "one-size-fits-all" educational methods have just been spread faster without taking into consideration the negative psychological effects that they have on learners (Halpern-Manners et al., 2016; Williams, 2020). What the "one-size-fits-all" education system does is to label all those who don't fit in or can't follow the teaching methods as students who are not good at learning or students with "special needs" or "problems". Very little consideration is given to the physical environments in which learning happens and how these can be improved depending on the learning outcome that educators aim to achieve for learners. Little attention is given also to ways in which teaching methods could be adapted to different learning styles within the same setting. Accepting that different doesn't mean wrong, that there is not only one way of learning and teaching respectively, and reflecting that in the classroom design and activities is crucial for a truly inclusive, diverse and healthy education system to exist, where learners who learn differently are not labeled to have "special needs".

This paper is both an account of the author's personal and professional experience in relation to the subject matter and an invitation for the reader to explore education from a different perspective, as a way to challenge the status quo. The paper includes examples from different disciplines to emphasize the need to change perspectives and adopt a more holistic/systemic approach to find solutions.

Based on this knowledge, as well as the observations made during 3 years of continuous research (between the years 2017 - 2020), using events management as a tool to constantly prototype, "Tianmei's World" Academy (further referred to as the Academy) was able to innovate in the education sector in two ways:

**1** Redefine the idea of a classroom by turning every available space into a learning environment and developing the world's first decentralized "network of classrooms" school concept;

**2** Create a teaching methodology taking into account diversity in delivery while offering learners the freedom to choose what learning environments and methods they feel are most suitable for themselves.

Given that the research during the 3 years has not been done according to conditions requested in academia, but in a "trial and error" manner, more specific for the start-up entrepreneurial environments (Osterwalder et al., 2014), this paper will explain the problems noticed in education that triggered the need to innovate, the understanding of a learning environment from an environmental psychology perspective, academic evidence to support the findings and proposed solutions. A study case for the exact application of the methodology, as well as user feedback to further back the findings up will also be provided. The limitations and further research directions will be discussed at the end of this paper. To position the reader within the research context, it must be mentioned that the research was done in China in the adult continuous education sector and events will be further referred to as learning experiences. The author's role was that of a facilitator, employing academic research tools like observation and discourse analysis to collect and analyze data that would later be turned into proposed solutions and retested.

# Problems identified

The concept of the Academy and the need to innovate have its roots in the author's personal and cross-functional professional experience of having worked in different areas like architectural design, sales, customer service, education, and later on environmental psychology academic research. By changing many jobs across various sectors, apart from the "one-size-fits-all" approach mentioned above, the author was able to observe several additional issues:

## 1. Field-specific jargon for the same concepts

In many fields people talk about the same concepts that are called differently across different fields. Such field specific jargon creates unnecessary confusion and becomes a source of disagreement when people believe they are talking about different things when actually they are not. They just use different jargons to express the same ideas, not being aware of the biases they create. This was found to have a great impact on education, as it creates a loop. It starts from the way in which learners are taught to learn by focusing only on one field, neglecting the connection with other fields. To give one example, in many universities, innovation is taught as a separate major. It is not integrated as a subject in all other majors, so that every student is taught how to innovate within their specific field. This further reflects into the workplace with companies having to employ innovation consultants to compensate for employees' lack of skills on this side, to mention just one example.

It also comes back to the education system by making it more and more dispersed through the subdivision in different micro-fields, further adding to the confusion. One of the consequences is that the same concepts will be researched in different fields under different names. To give an example, what in neuroscience is called "anchoring" (Furnham & Boo, 2011), in environmental psychology is called "nudging" (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) and "anchor" is just an

"environmental cue" (Booker & Mullan, 2013; Stöckli et al., 2016). Lack of dialog between fields is counterproductive because it can easily lead to misunderstandings and even conflict. Apart from potentially creating conflicts, it also distracts attention from the part that each element plays in a bigger system.

For example, in adult continuous education there are schools to teach foreign languages and there are schools to teach soft skills like communication, self-confidence etc. However, while learning foreign languages soft skills are improved as well. Conversely, language is used when learning other skills, having as a result the improvement of language skills as well. By focusing one's attention only on one skill at a time, learners don't only have the impression that they are not learning other skills, but they also become anxious about not knowing what skill to choose to learn first due to the numerous choices that suddenly become available (Schwartz, 2016) when in reality there are more effective learning options that need just a change of perspective. As such, a more systemic approach (Senge, 2006) to education is needed.

## 2. Lack of incentive to innovate

Another problem found with the education system is that due to it being institutionalized, there is not a great incentive to innovate. Having strong support from the government or some of them functioning as NGOs relying on donors, their educators are afraid to try new things and innovate due to fear of "failure" (Pallotta, 2008). In other words, experimentation and trying new things are generally discouraged for being considered a waste of money. This in return gives birth to the continuous education sector as a business, making higher quality education less accessible to those with less financial means, widening the gap between the rich and the poor.

## 3. Unequal access to education

By being available only in institutions or tied to a specific physical location, access to education becomes a big issue for people living in remote

areas or coming from lower economical backgrounds and cannot afford travelling to where the educational institution is. However, equal access to high quality education is one of the pillars to achieve the UN Sustainability Development Goals (UNICEF, 2019). It must be mentioned that equal access here doesn't only refer to being able to go to school, but also have easy access to educational facilities, less possible for rural and remote areas.

## 4. Lack of learning tools, not of information

At the same time, in the information era, information availability is not a problem anymore, unless people don't have access to the internet. The problem is information overload and a lack of tools and awareness to filter the information that is most useful for one's individual situation. In other words, teaching information in schools becomes a less useful endeavor, as by the time that students graduate, the information itself might be already obsolete. However, by being equipped with the tools to disseminate what information to use and how (e.g. critical thinking), learners can better cope with information overload and become more adaptable to the inevitable changes that development brings. Although this might not reflect the situations in all educational institutions, it is an aspect that was considered in the Academy's research, as well as the solutions proposed.

## 5. Misconceptions about language learning

Based on the author's own language learning experience, one other issue identified was the inappropriate way foreign languages are taught in schools, the misunderstandings that it creates in learners' minds and how these limit academic performance. This is believed to be further rooted into a general misconception of how a nurturing learning environment should look like. It is this aspect that this paper will discuss more in detail.

Becoming aware of these issues, the Academy was created and developed on the basis of understanding the underlying elements that create a nurturing learning environment, both from a physical and social perspective, and creating

frameworks and methodologies that can be replicated in any space beyond geographical barriers. This way the learner will have the freedom to explore through personal experience what learning methods and environments they consider to be most suitable for the self and choose accordingly, without having to be labeled as a student with "special needs". For clarity purposes, a diagram was created to emphasize the elements considered in the author's work to shape an environment (see Fig. 1). This diagram is at the core of all the Academy's projects.
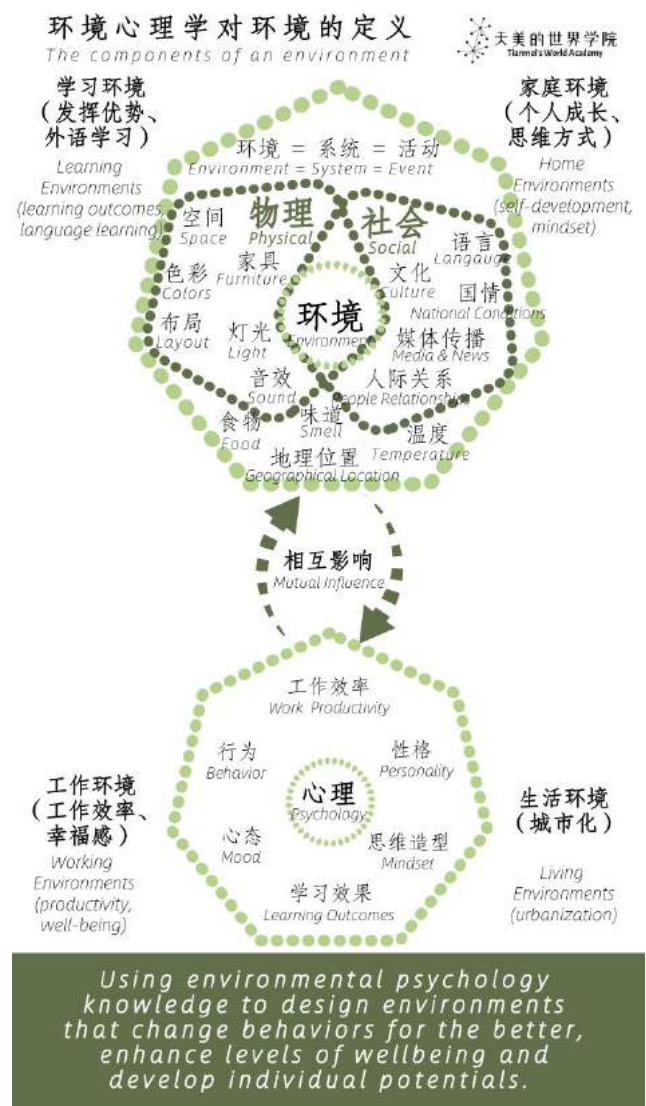


Fig.1 - Diagram explaining the definition of the environment as understood in the interpretation of "Tianmei's World" Academy

For paper length considerations, the physical elements discussed are Light, Sound, Furniture, and Layout. The social elements discussed are People Relationships and Language, even if other elements will have an influence on learning outcomes too.

# Physical Environment

From an environmental psychology point of view, learning happens in a physical space with other people around. This means that the elements that shape the physical learning environments should be taken into consideration both by educators and learners. However, for a very long time, the design of educational facilities has been the job of architects, with little understanding of how the physical environment design actually influences the learners' learning outcome and classroom behaviors.

## Light

The human body is directly connected to the movement of the sun. This means that humans are biologically programmed to wake up when the sun rises and fall asleep when the sun sets. In other words, due to the human body's circadian rhythm, it is very easy to feel sleepy if a room does not have windows or enough light (Walker et al., 2020). Not having enough light sends the human body the signal that it's time to sleep, as the human body cannot differentiate sun light from artificial one. To make an analogy, this is one of the reasons many people seem very tired during meetings when lights are turned off to watch a presentation screen. It can be safely assumed that the same will happen in a classroom setting if there is not enough light. Even if there are many more influencing factors for a student's behavior in the classroom, but the human body's biological functions should not be neglected when trying to encourage learning. Unfortunately, when this situation would occur in a classroom setting, a teacher's first instinct might be to assume that the respective student is not interested in learning or a student with "problems", not that the learning environment is improperly designed.

## Sound

Sound is another very important element of good learning environments. Better said, the overall acoustics of a space in general, a classroom in particular, is very important for speech intelligibility and for overall communication (Delhom, 2020). If educators are not aware of how a space's design will influence the way in which their message is received, it becomes easy to assume that students sitting in the back of a classroom, not paying attention to the lesson are not interested in the content, when the student actually might not be able to hear very well due to bad acoustic design. When teachers believe that students are not interested in learning, they might start subconsciously changing their attitude towards them. In a very short time, this situation could lead to the student being labeled as "not good at learning" and not receiving equal amount of attention from the teacher as other students, further influencing students' academic performance (Achor, 2010).



## Layout and Furniture

Depending on the desired learning outcome, the layout of a learning environment, as well as the furniture chosen are very important. For example, clustered layout will encourage students to have more conversations, brainstorm and boost their creativity as a result. It allows learners to engage in dialog, look each other in the eyes, and connect at a much deeper level (Marx et al., 1999).

In contrast, a row type of classroom layout will only encourage learners to listen to the speaker in front. It will discourage any type of group discussion, as it would be very uncomfortable to turn around in such a layout without experiencing physical discomfort. This is not to say that one layout is better than the other, but just to show the impact that the physical environment has on learning outcomes and the need to create environments adapted to the desired learning outcome (Simmons et al., 2015) to facilitate the desired learning outcome.

Furniture should be comfortable and flexible enough for the learner to be able to move it depending on their learning needs. This will make learners feel in control over their immediate environment and help them engage better with each other. Feeling in control was found to be an important element of human basic needs for wellbeing (Gabriel et al., 2020) and is believed to positively influence academic performance.
It is important to mention that these are generalizations and might not represent the situations in all the educational institutions. What the author wants to emphasize is that understanding how different physical elements influence learning outcome, any space that fulfills



these requirements can become a learning environment beyond the traditional setting of a "classroom".

By understanding all the physical elements that contribute to the creation of an environment conducing to learning, adapted to the biological functions of the human body and brain, it becomes easy to imagine how these characteristics can be extrapolated and reproduced in any other spaces. This way, the development of a "network of classrooms" becomes possible. By making available a set of guidelines for how the learning environments should look like, education can be brought closer to learners beyond geographical barriers.

# Social environment (context)

Having understood how the physical environment can be recreated beyond the premises of a traditional school to make nurturing learning experiences more widely available beyond geographical barriers, it is also very important to understand the barriers that might inhibit academic performance beyond the "one-size-fits-all" approach.

### Social Relationships and Language

These two elements are discussed together as language is considered by the author to be one of the binding elements for the creation of social relationship. These two elements mutually influence each other and are otherwise difficult to consider separately.

Throughout the research it was noticed that adults in general are expected to be much more confident and proactive in a social context, thus participate in learning experiences much more actively. However, that was found not to be the case in many situations.

Some of the elements identified to influence these social relationships are listed below:

**A** "Diffusion of responsibility" (Darley & Latane, 1968), i.e. not knowing who should make the first step, creating a long silence before someone actually gets to start speaking in a social setting unless participants know each other before;

**B** Lack of self-confidence out of fear of being judged, a layer aggravated once another language is involved (e,g feeling afraid to speak and make mistakes);

**C** "Learned helplessness" (Canino, 1981; Maier & Seligman, 1976), or a learner's belief they have no control on future outcomes of their overall learning experience;

**D** Self-perception of being or not a "talkative" person, or one's own explanatory style (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1986) of their identity;

**E** The mental association of the word "different" with being wrong (NLP - Neuro-linguistic Programming);

**F** Misconceptions about language learning limiting academic progress.

# Literature Discussion

### Diffusion of responsibility

This theory has been first investigated starting from the murder case of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964 in which 38 witnesses were supposed to have witnessed the crime without taking any action (Darley & Latane, 1968). Even if all the research that followed was based on a New York Times article that was later found to have had many inconsistencies (Takooshian et al., 2005), much more research has been done since to show

that diffusion of responsibility exists across different areas, including in restaurant tipping (Freeman et al., 1975), public safety (Scott et al., 2005), charitable donations (Wiesenthal et al., 1983), cooperative collectives (Forsyth et al., 2002), social networking sites (Martin & North, 2015), diminishing of altruistic punishment (Feng et al., 2016) and more. This means that the responsibility to take an expected action is diminished within a bigger group than when by oneself. For example, it is assumed that crowded places are safer, yet that was found not to be the case due to the diffusion of responsibility. If people get sick or attacked in a public space, help will delay in being offered if there are bigger crowds witnessing rather than only one person. But this can be changed through direct role attribution. If a victim directs their cry for help to only one person in the crowd, then help will be offered in a shorter time (Scott et al., 2005). In the case of academic performace, the expected action is for participants to be proactive and participate, ask questions, engage in conversations, express their opinions. However, based on the author's observations throughout over 3 years of organizing learning experiences, this seems not to be the case. Even though there was no evidence found in the literature to support the impact of the diffusion of responsibility on learning outcomes, this assumption was taken into consideration in the design of the interactions in the overall learning experiences. Through trial and error, this lead to the creation of an ice-breaker activity that can eliminate diffusion of responsibility and get participants ready for the overall learning experience. A more detailed account will be provided in the section describing the educational methodology developed, as well as the study case chosen.

### Lack of self-confidence out of fear of making mistakes

The research has been done in China, in a strong "face saving" culture (Hu, 1944). This means that making mistakes is generally not accepted and has a great influence on behavior. The result is the inhibition of different behaviors, including one's willingness to express their ideas in a public setting out of fear of making mistakes and being judged. This aspect becomes particularly obvious when

people are expected to express themselves in public in a foreign language (Noguchi, 2015) they don't feel very confident in using. However, this element is far from being a characteristic of Asian culture and was found to have an influence in other contexts as well. For example, it was also found to inhibit sports performance in relation to perfectionism (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009) in a Western context. This is an aspect that was found to be deeply rooted in the education system, with educators and parents at the core of it (Heath, 2009). By not being encouraged to make mistakes in childhood, the perception of making a mistake as being wrong is perpetuated in adulthood. It is then reflected in the behavior in many social situations, including in workplaces and ways in which businesses are run. There will be varied degrees to this fear of making mistakes depending on the cultural background, but Culture, as an influencing social environment element as described in Fig.1, will not be discussed in this paper.



**Learned helplessness (Maier & Seligman, 1976)**
This theory was first proposed by Maier and Seligman in 1976, through an experiment looking at how dogs react to electric shocks in different situations. After being exposed to the same outcome for a longer period of time, the dogs had learned that they have no control on their circumstances anymore, a state observed to continue even when the conditions had changed and dogs could have easily changed their behavior (Peterson, 2010). The theory was found to be applicable to humans as well, being directly correlated with high levels of depression and low academic performance (Alloy & Seligman, 1979). This could explain the recent findings that mental health issues are linked with education (Padget, 2020; Williams, 2020). It was also found to explain why some victims become numb and passive during and following different attacks (Peterson & Seligman, 1983). The most worrisome part is that learned helplessness was found to spillover across different areas of life, even if it was experienced only within a particular circumstance of one's life (Alloy et al., 1984). This means that people who are victimized at home, will exhibit low academic performance, as a result of their learned helplessness spillover. At the same time, students who don't fit in the "one-size-fits-all" educational approach might enter a "learned helplessness" state, thinking that no matter how much they try, they have no control over their learning progress and just give up learning entirely. It is important thus to understand the origins of learned helplessness, to be able to reverse the process for adult learners, but also start avoiding its' creation for younger learners.
There is evidence to show that learned helplessness is first developed during childhood and is directly related to teaching methods (Johnson, 1981), but also parenting. The author of this paper believes that learned helplessness is also one of the causes to the belief that one may or may not have the talent to learn, which will further influence their academic results, instead of their actual abilities. One striking example is that of memorizing words in a foreign language for a very long time, only to realize that after a while all the words would be forgotten if not constantly repeated. The first instinct of many learners in this situation is to assume that they don't have the talent or ability to learn a new language since their memorizing efforts have proven useless. They don't realize that the method they employed to learn is not helpful to achieve their desired learning outcome to begin with. Having adopted such beliefs like "I don't have the talent to

earn", "I can't do it" is later on reflected in all the learners endeavors making their progress very slow or even making them give up at some point, thinking that learning is not for them.

## Self-perception and identity

The perception that people have about the self will influence their behaviors (Bem, 1972), be it purchasing behaviors (Grubb & Hupp, 1968), or academic results, as Frisby and Tucker (1993) proved for African-American children. It was also found to be correlated with levels of depression (Gara et al., 1993), even if it is hard to assess which one comes first to trigger the other.

Individuals will form attitudes, emotions partially by inferring them from observations of their own behavior in relation to other people's reactions, as well as the environment (context) in which it occurs. This makes it safe to assume that environments can be designed so that people's self-perceptions could change and use this to drive academic performance in educational settings. One such example of changing students' self-perception about their own abilities was identified in the Marva Collins approach to teaching (Hollins, 1982). After having served as a teacher in several public schools and being discontent with the methods she saw applied, Marva Collins decided to open her own school where she worked with marginalized black children, usually perceived by society as doomed to failure (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990). Her methodology will not be explained in detail in this paper. What will be emphasized is the one common element found to be employed throughout her teaching, i.e. helping the children enter an "I believe I can (beyond what others think)" mental model (Collins, 1992).

In the book "The Marva Collins Way", before finally opening her own school, she is described as having worked with some of the most problematic children, with all sorts of behavioral problems that were often sent to her from other teachers' classes (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990). Throughout the book, in all the examples given about the children that she had been working with, the one common element was to instill in these children the idea that they can achieve great academic results, regardless of how others perceived them. The

success of her method was proven by the academic success of children that were otherwise condemned by society to become failures. The same intent to change self-perceptions of learners was developed also throughout the methodology tested by the Academy within the 3 years of continuous research through the "trial and error" method. The design of the educational methodology was done to include these elements. The results indicate that mental models indeed inhibit or encourage academic performance. These findings will be discussed in the outcomes section.

## Cognitive Dissonance

This theory was developed by Leon Festinger (Festinger, 1962) and states that people's beliefs tend to be aligned with their behaviors. As a result, when behaviors are changed, a change in beliefs tends to follow. For example, someone who continues to smoke even though they know smoking is bad for them might end up thinking that either smoking is so enjoyable that it's worth the health risk, or that they won't be able to avoid all the negative contingencies and still live anyway. In other words, the human mind will find explanations to justify behaviors, so that the alignment between beliefs and actions is kept consistent. There are many examples in which cognitive dissonance can be used to explain people's behaviors, including why people might engage in some pro-environmental behaviors and not in others (Blake, 1999; Cialdini et al., 1995). To give another example, some people might believe that they are entitled to use more electricity if they pay more for it, even if the initial measure of making electricity more expensive by the authorities was to discourage consumption.

When referring to academic performance, from a cognitive dissonance perspective, it can be assumed that performance will be directly related to one's perception of self, whether they see themselves as "good or talented at learning" or not. In other words, if learners' belief is that their efforts are not helpful towards their academic success because no matter how much they try nothing will change, then their behavior will become not trying. In this situation, it can be safely assumed that "learned helplessness" and cognitive dissonance are directly correlated. This

paper tries to emphasize the need to understand the mechanism behind this mental process and its' direct connection to the learner's environment.

The Academy's work in the research that this paper talks about is focused on using cognitive dissonance to create learning behaviors that will trigger changes in learners' perception of self. In other words, changing learners' perception of self to "I can", "I am good at learning" and ultimately, help learners unlearn their helplessness by building self-confidence.

## The word "different" being perceived as wrong

This observation relies on the author's growing up experience, as well as observations made in different environments in comparison. The first experience of different being perceived as wrong was during the author's bachelor studies, during a discussion held at the author's home between the author, born and raised in the Dobrogea territory, known for its ethnic diversity and a university colleague from the Northern part of Romania. The discussion revolved around a traditional dish the author had cooked in the same way as she always did, but perceived to have been cooked in the wrong way by the Northern Romanian colleague. The same attitude was then observed by the author in many other situations and was assumed to be underlying many conflicts, in which people are not aware of how their growing up environment has created this bias of "What I know is what is right".

This concept was also discussed by Mike Hulme in the sustainability area in his book "Why we disagree about climate change" (Hulme, 2009). His argument is that due to different understandings of what climate change means within different cultural backgrounds, disagreements are imminent. It is easy to assume that the same principles apply to many other areas as well. This phenomenon is believed to be rooted in the cognitive dissonance theory. If people are used to behaving in a certain way for a very long period of time, the assumption is that it becomes an involuntary bias to conclude that what they are doing is right. This might lead people to enter a

defensive mode to protect the beliefs that follow their behaviors when others might present different opinions or ways of doing things.
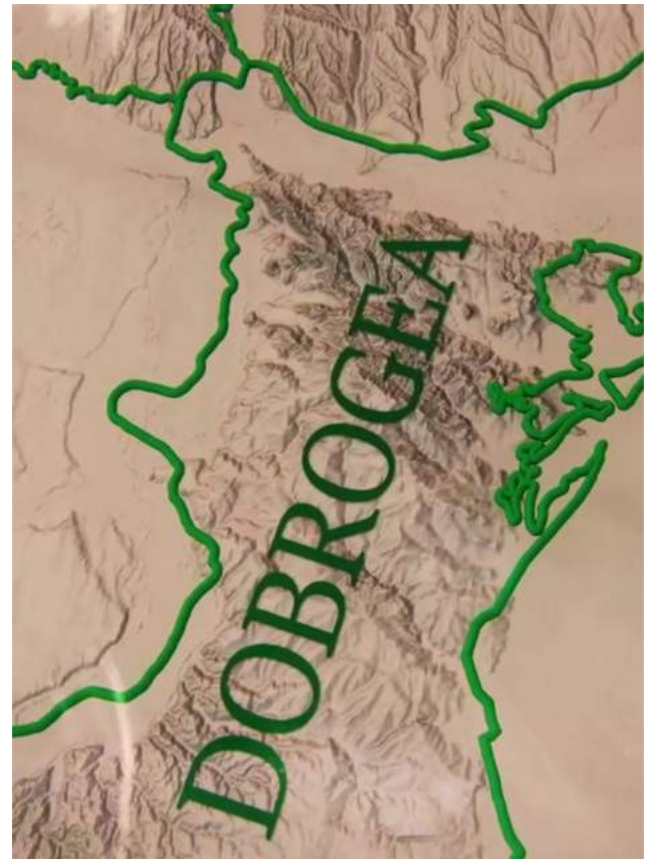


Although there is little evidence in the literature to support this statement, the author believes that this is due to the angle from which research has been done previously, not the phenomenon itself. In other words, there are very few known locations in which being different is accepted as different, not wrong, and it is celebrated rather than being a cause of fight. Dobrogea is among the very few places where many ethnic groups live in harmony and diversity is celebrated through different festivals every year (Centrul EUDivers, 2019). What's more, it is the only place in the Balkan Peninsula where this happens, compared to conflicts between other Balkan territories. This angle and view on diversity was also embedded in the educational methodology developed through trial and error in the 3 years of research as part of the Academy's work.

## Misconceptions about language learning limiting academic progress

Language plays an important role in mediating social relationships, both through NLP, as well as

the ways of thinking it created depending on one's native language. For this reason, additional layers of complication are added when communication in a second language is involved.

However, the complexity of language will not be discussed in this paper. What will be mentioned is some of the most often encountered misunderstandings, identified through a discourse analysis approach. The author's aim is mentioning them in the paper is to further emphasize the influence that cognitive dissonance might have on learning behaviors.

# 1 "I don't have a language environment"

In the author's experience of living 8 years in China, having achieved native fluency in the Chinese language in approximately 5 years of learning, many Chinese nationals were heard complaining about their lack of progress in English language due to improper language environments, even if they learned the English language in schools. The reference here was made to living in a native speaking country as being a good language environment. However, based on this assumption, every non-Chinese national living in China should be a fluent Chinese speaker and that was found not to be the case. Perceptions of not having a good learning environment were identified to distract the learner from other learning opportunities available, especially with information increasingly available online. The result of such way of thinking is the inhibition of academic performance.

# 2 "Living abroad will help improve language skills"

Although it would make sense for this belief to be a fact, the reason this is not always the case is believed to be due to low adaptability skills and to "different" being generally perceived as wrong. In other words it depends on personal willingness to "do as the Romans do when in Rome". Low adaptability will make many people stick to their comfort zones, eat the same food as home, speak the same language as back home etc., a reason for the existence of many Chinatowns around the world and many foreigner bubbles in Chinese cities. It is a different location, but it is the same environment according to the definition of an environment introduced in this paper (Fig. 1).

# 3 "There is no point to listen if I don't understand"

There is a general misconception that listening to material in another language that cannot be understood is a waste of time and not helpful to make progress in language learning. Thinking of newborns, they are exposed to sounds they don't understand every day, yet they have no concept of what not understanding means. They also do not have a choice to select what sounds to hear and what not. At the same time, depending on what sounds they hear, that is what they will be able to reproduce as speech patterns. Conversely, adults have the choice of blocking out sounds they do not understand for fear of wasting time, without realizing that the brain does record information subconsciously and it also needs time to get used to the sound, rhythm of the new language one is trying to learn. For example, it was found that listening to the language one wants to learn while sleeping is helpful with knowledge consolidation (Fenn et al., 2003). There is a general misconception that adults learn differently than children, but according to the author's personal language learning experience, that is believed not to be the case. The author's experience is backed up by recent discoveries in neuroplasticity (Costandi, 2016) that show that the adult brain also continues to learn, even if additional research is indeed needed to understand the exact mechanism.

# 4 "Learning a foreign language is hard"

When asked, many people believe that their lack of progress in language learning is given to the difficulty of the language they're learning.
However, the author believes language in itself represents an expression of culture and a way of thinking, so the difficulty was found to lie in the willingness of changing one's mindset, adapting to the culture represented by the foreign language, as well as willingness to get out of comfort zones. Focusing less on the language itself rather than the content was found to make the learning process not only easier, but also faster.

# 5 "I don't have the opportunity to "use" the language"

Throughout the whole research process many learners were heard to complain they don't have opportunities to use English language, so that is why their progress is slow. Taking a discourse analysis approach (Johnstone, 2018), it was concluded that what people actually meant by the word "use" was "speak" (output). However, without input, there cannot be any output. Input is a very important aspect of language learning, as such it can be "used" by listening to a audio material, by reading books or watching movies, for example. Language is an element of the environments people live, learn and work in, regardless of whether people are aware of it or not. Not having the opportunity to speak (output) a language should not be an excuse not to input information in the language wanted to be learned, even if understanding might be slower at the beginning.

# 6 "Only talented people can learn foreign languages"

This belief was found to be deeply rooted in learners' past endeavors of memorizing English words, only to realize that they don't remember. It is consistent with the "learned helplessness" theory as well. For this reason, it will not be discussed in further detail here.

# 7 "I need to finish English classes first, do fun stuff second"

Having heard many people mentioning this, the author assumed that many people consider learning as happening only in a classroom setting, which will deny learners the access to many other learning opportunities outside of it. Even though attending English classes is not the problem, relying only on the time spent in a classroom to learn, one will limit their academic progress.

# 8 "No native speakers around, so no language environment"

This misconception was found to be directly linked with the misunderstanding of what makes a language learning environment, as well as what the overall process of language learning involves.

As an example, even if native speakers would be around, if the English level of the learner would be too limited, not much conversation would happen. The parties involved in the conversation would just become very frustrated for not being able to understand each other. Frustration and anxiety were already found 30 years ago to inhibit academic performance (Horwitz et al., 1986). Having native speakers around could indeed help to have output (speak), but not without focusing first on as much input (listening, reading) as possible when native speakers are not around.

# 9 "I can learn English only from native speakers"

Depending on the language level one is at, this is not the case. For an absolute beginner to learn English from a native speaker who has never experienced learning a second language might be an extremely frustrating process. It might be argued that the native speaker may have specialized degrees in teaching, but without understanding the frustrations involved in language learning it is difficult to empathize with students and motivate them to learn. What's more, this only aggravates the negative outcomes that the "one-size-fits-all" educational approach creates, accelerating feelings of "learned helplessness".

Although the observations related to language learning were made on Chinese people learning English, it is believed that these findings are universally applicable for any learner of any language. Learning a foreign language implies the same psychological barriers and anxieties no matter the nationality of the learner and the language they are trying to learn. By understanding the underlying mechanisms a nurturing language learning environment can be created to allow for progress in the shortest time. However, the condition for this is for learners' mindsets to change.

The above misconceptions support the author's belief that there is a general misunderstanding of what a proper nurturing learning environment should look like. One of the reasons believed to trigger the above misconceptions is the disconnection between disciplines, discouraging a systems thinking approach to learning.

For example, architectural design is taught in architecture school, the influence that architectural design has on human behavior is discussed in the environmental psychology field, and teaching methodologies are taught in the education field, when in reality, all these fields are interconnected in the outcomes they produce.
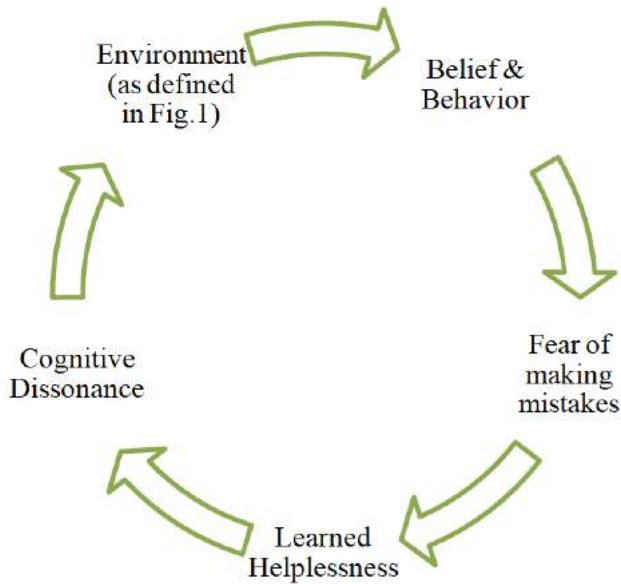


Fig. 2 - Diagram proposed by the author to explain the mechanism in which the environment affects academic performance, as a way to create change

# Educational Methodology

The educational methodology proposed by the Academy includes 4 stages (see Fig. 3)



Fig, 3 - Educational framework developed by "Tianmei's World" Academy Source: https://www.tianmeisworldacademy.com/events-1

## Stage 1 - Ice-Breaker, the importance of eliminating the fear of making mistakes in a learning environment

Based on the assumption that participants in a learning experience will generally not be proactive and engage in conversations with people they don't know in a social setting due to the diffusion of responsibility, but also taking into account fears of being judged, the first stage of any learning experience designed by the Academy is the ice-breaker. This stage aims to eliminate the fear of making mistakes, and make the participants feel they are in a safe environment. This activity is a short, but very effective tool to help participants relax, and feel safe to make mistakes and learn from them in the new environment they find themselves in. Before the actual learning experience starts, the participants are divided in small groups of 4 to 5 people and asked to share 3 words, including their name, and either star sign and hobby, or places they want to visit, or jobs. The actual information required from the participants during the ice-breaker is not the most important part of the activity. Its' outcome is. The condition for this activity to be effective, however, is repetition. Each person will have to repeat all the information they've heard beforehand from the other participants, and adding their own. The first participant in every group will have to repeat all the information of all the group members. From a neuroscience point of view, this activity will help group members remember all the names of their immediate group. By getting to know some personal details of their group members like star sign, favorite color etc, they will also bond and subconsciously understand that even if they are different people who may or may have not known each other before, they are more similar than they thought. This contributes to the creation of the safety feelings.

One interesting thing that happens during the ice-breaker is that people start changing their perception about their own abilities. The first instinct that was observed in many participants when they hear what they have to do during the ice-breaker is to verbalize their inability to remember new information: "I don't have a good memory", "I am not good at remembering names" etc.

"It's interesting that we always say how important freedom is and want the freedom to express ourselves, yet we get angry when others exercise their freedom not to listen. Freedom is just a matter of perspective."

有趣的是，我们每个人总是说自由是多么重要，想要有表达自己的自由，但当别人行使他们不听我们的自由时，我们就会生气。人人都是平等的，都有同样的自由。

天美的世界学院
Tianmei's World Academy
Psychology applied to environmental design

——Adina邱天美
天美的世界学院创始人



"If someone hates learning it's because they haven't figured out yet what are the learning environments and methods that are most suitable for their own learning style."

"如果有人讨厌学习，那是因为他们还没有弄清楚什么样的学习环境和方法最适合自己的学习风格。"

——Adina邱天美 | 天美的世界学院创始人

天美的世界学院
Tianmei's World Academy
Psychology applied to environmental design

However, through the repetition and the help of others group members in the end they are able to repeat all the information. This does not only help them remember names and change their self-perception of being someone who is not good at remembering things, but it also makes them feel that even if they have made a few mistakes during the exercise, nobody judged them. As a result, in just ten minutes that are needed for the activity, the participants would have remembered the information that their group members have shared, they would have started changing their self-perception about being someone who cannot do something to someone who can, they would have learned that they are in a safe environment where mistakes are allowed as a part of learning and not judged, but also bonded with group members by finding similarities in likes or preferences.

It may be argued that this works best for people who are not generally very confident, or whose self-perception is generally negative, not so much for the more confident participants. Even if this activity might not bring any additional positive change for those who exhibit a positive self-perception, the exercise is believed to be equally valuable due to the immediate connections that it creates, as well as the fact that it solves the diffusion of responsibility issue of not knowing who should start interacting.

## Stage 2 - Knowledge Acquisition (Input)

An important part of a learning experience is knowledge acquisition that can take the shape of a book sharing, a lecture, a movie screening or any other type of input. Input here is understood as the information that is consumed either through listening and/or watching. With the amount of information available with the development of the internet, the author considers that what learners are missing is not the information itself, but the tools and awareness to disseminate the information that is most suitable for themselves, as well as opportunities to engage with peers in more meaningful discussions. In order to promote the development of critical thinking skills, create more opportunities for learners to express their ideas and take ownership of the knowledge presented, the input stage is not designed to be very long.

Depending on the overall outcome desired from the learning experience, the input stage will not be longer than one hour, unless the input is a screening and the movie duration is longer than 60 minutes. The most important part of the learning experience happens in Stage 3, also called output, when participants get to express their thoughts on the information received during the input stage (see Fig. 4).
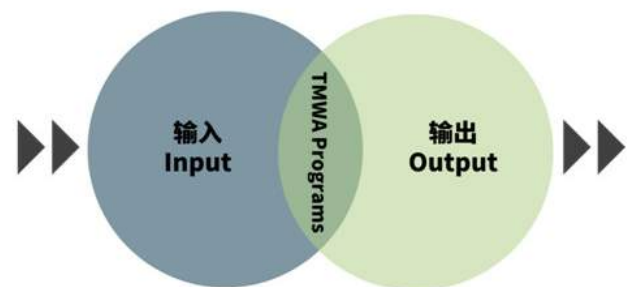


Fig. 4 - Model used by "Tianmei's World" Academy to design learning experiences

## Stage 3 - Knowledge Application (Output)

In the third stage, participants are asked to go back into the same group in which they did the ice-breaker activity and answer a set of questions previously prepared by the facilitator based on the content introduced in the input stage. Participants are then advised to answer each question in turns so as not to disrupt the flow of thoughts.

Depending on the time available the questions will be between 6 to 10 with half of them related to content understanding and the other half related to any similar personal experiences.

There were several reasons considered for this distribution:

**1** By being able to hear different answers to the same question, participants get to understand that different people from different professional backgrounds have different opinions and understanding of the same content, but different is not equal to wrong;

**2** By reflecting on the questions, participants get to express their opinions in a safe environment, thus further building their self-confidence and practicing language skills if a second language is involved in the learning experience;

**3** By having to answer in turns to the same question, every participant will get to feel included in the conversation without running the risk that the most confident participants monopolize the conversation and that the most shy ones will not get to express their thoughts, remaining in a listener mode;

**4** Even if participants don't manage to answer all the questions previously prepared by the facilitator, the fact that they were able to answer together a part of them is enough to create feelings of inclusiveness;

**5** By allowing participants to express any personal experiences that they might have had in relationship with the knowledge introduced during the input stage, they take ownership of the knowledge presented. This aspect is particularly important if any behavioral changes are expected as a result from such learning experience, e.g. adopting more pro-environmental behaviors, exercising more etc.;

**6** Such group discussions help create self-worth, helping participants to understand that the opinions and experience they share can be helpful for other people's growth too;

**7** It helps participants understand that even if they come from different backgrounds, there are many other people out there who are facing similar issues and thus get to feel more connected, extremely useful in dealing with depression issues, even if more research is needed in this direction. Even if it wasn't discussed in this paper, but this is the principle that AA meetings and other support groups function on;

**8** By questioning each other's ideas in relation to the knowledge received during the input stage, participants' critical thinking and communication skills are enhanced, thus further contributing to the build-up of their self-confidence;

**9** The learner behavior is created, thus allowing those participants who didn't consider themselves very good at learning or very "talkative" at the beginning to change their self-perception into someone who can learn, can contribute and can be "talkative";

**10** By answering the same set of questions, participants get to a common ground and working language even if they come from different professional backgrounds, further promoting mutual understanding.

**Stage 4 - Mindfulness Moment: The importance of self-reflection on the overall learning experience**

Before every learning experience is finished, 10 minutes will be allocated for the self-reflection, also called the Mindfulness Moment. In these 10 minutes, people are encouraged to take 1 to 2 minutes to reflect on their overall experience and think about their main take-away from the learning experience. To allow for the reflection to be more effective, participants will be given postcards to write on. After writing their thoughts, participants are invited to share their reflections in the same discussion group or openly to all the participants depending on the total number of attendees.

By doing so, participants will realize that even if everyone in their group attended the same learning experience and heard the same information their understanding of it is different. Their take-away from the learning experience is different, but not wrong. At the same time, by allowing participants to have such a reflection time, they are able to repeat and consolidate the knowledge they have gained during the learning experience, which is what will remain in their memory long-term.

The participants are encouraged to take the postcards home and these will act as a reminder of the overall experience. At the same time, by collecting several postcards, participants will be able to quantify their learning progress and reflect on their growth at regular intervals of time. The postcards will function as environmental cues to remind participants of the behavioral change even outside the setting of the learning experience with the condition that they are exhibited in a visible spot. For this reason participants are usually advised to create a learning board in their homes on which to add the postcards.

"Talent is not related to personal ability. it can be developed through the creation of nurturing learning environments."

"天赋与个人能力关系不大，
它是通过创造有养育的学习环境来培养的。"
——Adina 邱天美 | 天美的世界学院创始人

"Education should be a right, not a privilege if we want true equality and inclusion."

"如果我们想要真正的平等和包容，
教育应该是一种权利，而不应该是特权。"
——Adina 邱天美 | 天美的世界学院创始人

# Research Outcomes

The most striking outcome of the application of this methodology was to hear participants during Stage 4 sharing how they changed their self-perception and realized that they are someone who can talk and share ideas, even if they thought otherwise before attending the learning experience. As a matter of fact, it was such kind of feedback that triggered the author's additional research within the literature, trying to understand what had happened.

In the learning experiences in which the methodology has been applied, the retention of participants in a space is on average higher with at least 50% and longer with an average of 1 hour for those who decide to stay than any other events or lectures. The assumption here is that participants feel so proud of their achievements that they want to stay longer and communicate more with other participants.

Another influencing element for the decision to stay longer might be the choice of venues for creating the learning environments, which are usually coffee shops or co-working spaces and the fact that food and refreshments are always made available. Even if the above numbers are solely based on the author's observations on-site and additional research needs to be performed to understand the exact elements that play a role (e.g. who are those who stay, why some leave immediately after the learning experience has finished and others decide to stay, how is that correlated to self-perceptions, what role does food

play as an environmental element in the overall learning outcome etc), but these results, along with the existing empiric evidence, as well as the feedback received from participants are evidence that the methodology works and can be replicated in different settings, for different intended learning outcomes.

# Study Case

## " Not your typical book club"



This specific type of learning experience, apart from all the behavioral outcomes mentioned previously, also aims to help non-native English participants acquire skills for reading original English books so as to help them enrich their vocabularies in a more engaging way rather than just memorizing words. The learning tool is based on guessing the meaning of unknown words by employing questioning and critical thinking skills. The tool is embedded in the educational methodology as input.

accommodate up to 20 participants without compromising the overall learning outcome of each individual and lasts for 2 hours.

## The physical environment of the learning experience

In order for the learning to be effective, the physical environment in which the learning experience unfolds should allow for cluster type of furniture arrangement with soft and comfortable chairs. Given that it is a reading activity, there is a great emphasis on the presence of natural light or artificial light suitable for a reading activity, also needed to keep participants alert.

The spaces chosen for a reading activity should be semi-closed or completely separate from corridors and movement, so that the attention of the participants is not distracted throughout the duration of the learning experience.

The types of spaces usually chosen to create this type of alternative learning environments are coffee-shops and co-working spaces. Coffee shops are usually furbished with very comfortable seating and provide a cozy environment, suitable for both learning and working.

### The flow of the learning experience

In the first 10 minutes of the learning experience, the participants are welcomed by the facilitator in both English and Chinese to have joined and are invited to split in groups of 4 to 5 people. The reason for bilingual facilitation is to move participants' focus from the language itself to the purpose of using the language, i.e. knowledge acquisition. This decision was made based on the findings that the author made in relation to language learning while learning Chinese language herself, described in the in previous sections of this paper.

Once divided in groups, participants start the ice-breaker activity. During these sessions, participants usually go from a state of "I am not good at remembering names" to laughter and overall relaxation. They are usually reminded by the facilitator when they have one more minute left from the ice-breaker. When time is up, the facilitator asks bilingually who would like to volunteer to repeat all the details from their team members. As the number of participants in this type of learning experience is not more than 20, it is possible to allow a person from each group to repeat, thus allowing other participants to hear the information and get to know other participants outside their small group too. The volunteers are usually rewarded with symbolic gifts for their courage of standing up and trying to repeat the information regardless of their performance. The gifting is usually made of either candies or bookmarks. The important part is not the gift itself, but its meaning, as it further encourages participants to be brave and express themselves in public even if they have made mistakes. It also sets an example for those who did not volunteer to answer.

After the ice-breaker session is finished, the facilitator will introduce the beginning of the second stage, defined in the methodology as input in which the content of the book will be shared briefly. The facilitator will then give handouts to each participant with the book content to be read and instruct them to use the pens available on tables to underline the unknown words to be explained after the reading part is finished. The facilitator will then start reading two or three sentences from the text previously prepared.

Each participant takes turns to read out loud two or 3 sentences from the text until all the text on the handouts is finished reading. This part allows the facilitator to help all participants correct their pronunciation in English when and where needed. Once the reading part is finished, the facilitator first explains the steps for the guessing method (see Annex 1 for full description) and then invites participants to share words that they do not know so that they can be guided through the guessing process. The reading part usually takes up 20 minutes and the guessing time takes another 30 minutes including the explanation of the unknown words. Since the purpose of the learning experience is to familiarize the participants with the guessing method and encourage them to read more original English books in daily life as an alternative to just memorizing English words, beyond just a "classroom" setting, there is not so much emphasis on guessing/explaining all the unknown words. The rest of the time is dedicated to group discussions based on the read text. Usually the facilitator will prepare between 6 to 10 questions, with half of them focused on text understanding and half of them focused on personal experiences in relation to the read text that the participants will have to answer in the same groups as for the ice-breaker.

"Diversity goes beyond just skin color. Only when we would have learned to accept that different does not mean wrong is when true diversity will exist."

"多样性不仅仅局限于肤色。只有当我们学会接受不同并不意味着错误时，才会有真正的多样性存在。"

天美的世界学院
Tianmei's World Academy
Psychology applied to environmental design

——Adina 邱天美 | 天美的世界学院创始人

"Everybody is a lifelong learner, as we are learning every second of our lives ever since we learned how to take our first breath at birth. It is only our perception of what learning is that changes over time and makes us feel we stopped learning or that learning is hard."

"每个人都是一个终生的学习者，因为自从一出生就学会了第一次呼吸，我们在生活中的每一秒都在学习。只有我们对学习是什么的看法随着时间的推移而改变，使我们感到停止学习或学习很难"。

天美的世界学院
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——Adina邱天美
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Lizhi | 荔枝微课: @环境心理学专家 邱天美Adina
WeChat Video Channel | 微信视频号:

Video | 视频号

WeChat | 公众号

By answering the questions in groups, the participants can support each other and practice peer learning, while deepening their understanding of the read text. By answering the questions related to their personal experience, participants get to further practice their language and critical thinking skills, while understanding that different people have different opinions and experience, but that doesn't make them either right or wrong.

10 minutes before the learning experience should finish, participants are reminded to finish up their discussions and are handed the postcards on which to write their reflections. They are advised that they are the only ones to see the content, so that they don't feel discouraged to write and that they will be able to take the postcards back home with them as a reminder of the overall experience. After they have had 2 minutes to reflect by themselves on the overall learning experience, each participant will have to share out loud their thoughts. Through this step, participants have the opportunity to repeat one more time some of the knowledge that they got during the learning experience, thus deepening the learning outcome, but also strengthen the idea that different people will experience the same content differently depending on their background, but that this is not either right or wrong. It's just different.



# Participants Feedback

The feedback of 5 different participants in different "Not Your Typical Book Club" learning experiences were chosen as an example. Even if more feedback is available, the author's aim is to showcase the changes experienced by participants during the learning experience, as such some of the most representative comments were chosen. In order to help the reader better understand the feedback gave by the participants, it must be mentioned that participants often call the learning experience as an "English reading activity" and that Tianmei is the author's Chinese name. As the author also played the role of the facilitator in the learning experiences, she is mentioned often in the feedback. The translation of the feedback from Chinese to English was also done by the author of this paper.

### Participant 1



第一次参加英文读书会，全程下来感觉非常好！不仅认识了天美老师和众多有趣的伙伴们，还学到了英文阅读的干货，更重要的是在现场大家的交流中了解到很多有趣的事情，看到了很多可能性，每个人都很优秀，为我提供了积极向上的动力。宽敞的空间环境很舒适，天美老师的小礼物很贴心。可是，这么多有趣的灵魂在一起为什么没有一张合照？难不成是下次再聚的节奏？期待天美老师后面的活动！

Translation: "*This is the first time to attend the English reading activity. I believe that the whole experience was great! I didn't only have the chance to meet Tianmei and many interesting friends, but I was also able to gain a great tool for reading English books. The most important is that during the event all the participants discussed a lot of interesting things, saw many more possibilities. Every person is excellent and provided me the motivation to further improve myself. The physical environment was very comfortable and the small gifts that Teacher Tianmei prepared were very warming. [...] I am looking forward to attending following events.*"

## Participant 2



善***生　善卡会员
★★★★★

每次的读书会都有新的惊喜。这次的活动场地阿灿花园与主题小说《garden spells》高度契合，如同置身热带雨林中的花园小屋，使人心情舒畅。通过对小说内容的理解和大家对各种问题的深入讨论，我对于不同生活方式的追求有了新的理解。感谢这次相遇，感谢天美的分享和大家的倾心交谈，让一个下午变得短暂又富有意义。



Translation："*Every time I attend the reading activity I experience new surprises. On this occasion, the location for the event was "Arles Garden" Restaurant, whose atmosphere was in total harmony with the content of the book "Garden Spells". Being in such an environment makes people feel extremely comfortable. By reading the content of the novel and discussing with other participants, I got to better understand different people's lifestyles. I am very grateful for this encounter, as well as for Tianmei's sharing. It made a very short afternoon become extremely meaningful.*"

## Participant 3

青岛一个很好的读书会，首先说一下我是个慢热的人，参加这种线下的活动一般都不太说话，但是今天的活动让我一开始就感觉很舒服很健谈，天美是一个很爱交朋友，很喜欢分享自己的思想和经历的人，我们四个人从十点聊到了下午两点多，要知道这个活动最开始限定的时间是到十二点半的。
然后大力表扬咖啡店老板做的的布朗尼！用料扎实的布朗尼上面加上刚做的无糖轻盈奶油，真的超级好吃！！很多人会感觉读书会60的门票太贵了，但是这家咖啡店的点心和环境就已经值回来了，更不用说还有读书会带来的新的视野和不同思想价值观的交流以及会认识有趣朋友的机会，参加完这次的读书会，以后每一期的读书会都想参加😘

Translation："*Qingdao has a great reading activity. First, I need to say that I am a slow-moving person and every time I attend such offline events, I don't talk too much. But today's atmosphere made me feel very comfortable to talk. Tianmei is a person who loves making friends and likes sharing her thoughts and experience. All 4 of us talked from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm, even if this event was supposed to finish at 12:30 pm. […] I am looking forward to attending the next event.*"

## Participant 4

不一样的读书会，我很高兴参加天美组织的不一样的读书会。英文原版阅读，完全采用轻松的模式，边吃边聊，完全沉浸在语言的环境当中，并且采用双语学习，感觉特别棒，我很喜欢，英文在我的理念中学习英语不需要有意识的记单词，不需要有意识的背一下东西，而是读更多的原版书籍，学更多的知识。天美让我们意识到学习语言不仅仅是为学而学，而是让我们把语言作为一种工具，通过学习人文，地理，数学，科技等等，读更多的英文原版书，能够连接我们的生活，。学习他们的西式思维方式，开拓我们的眼界和视野的。这样不用记单词，无形中学会地道表达。非常感谢认识天美。
I am very glad to join the different reading club organized by TianMei. Reading original English, fully using the light pattern, chating with eating, totally immersed in the environment of language, and use the

Translation："*I am very happy to have attended "Not Your Typical Book Club". I loved reading an original English book in a completely relaxing way, both eating and reading at the same time, being completely immersed in a language learning environment. […] My idea of learning English is not to intentionally memorize English words, but reading more original English books, learning more knowledge. Tianmei made us understand that language shouldn't be learned for the sake of learning a language, but to let it become a tool to learn other disciplines. By reading more original English books, one can link the knowledge to their own lives. Through this event I was able to better understand Western ways of thinking and broaden my horizon. This way, I don't need to memorize English words, but I can remember them through conversation. I am very grateful to have met Tianmei.*"

### Participant 5

天美的世界～我的能量加油站🔋，学习无处
不在😊相逢不必太早，只要刚刚好[爱心]
我是从2017年开始参加的天美的世界，最
主要是对心理学感兴趣，同时环境氛围很轻
松，很喜欢那种大家畅所欲言的感觉，英语
当然也能得到锻炼提高，每一次去都能有不
同的收获，感觉重新认识审视自己一次重新
上路，说来也巧每次参加完后都能给我迷茫
的生活带来一点触动发生一些大的改变。真
的可以说，天美的世界～我的能量加油站🔋
感恩遇见🌸🌸

Translation： "Tianmei's World" is my energy station. Learning happens everywhere. […] I came across this organization in 2017. I was mainly interested in psychology, but at the same time I found the environment to bevery relaxing. I love the feeling of sharing ideas with everyone. Of course, English skills can also be improved. Every time I attend an event, I will have different take-away. It feels like I see myself with new eyes every time I attend an event. It is also a great coincidence that every time I attended an event it has helped me understand how I could solve some big problems I was facing in my life that would otherwise make me feel very confused. I can honestly say that "Tianmei's World" is indeed my powerbank."

# Impact

• By understanding the underlying elements that create a nurturing learning environment, and replacing any one of them, the learning experience feels completely different and novel on behalf of the learner, yet the methodology stays the same regardless of the content. This gives participants enough flexibility and control to explore by themselves the learning environments and methods that are most suitable for themselves without adding extra workload on the facilitator;

• The flexibility of the methodology allows its application in any contexts and promotes a holistic approach to the development of many skills at the same time, while promoting diversity, inclusiveness and mutual understanding. It could be argued that it is similar to the PBL methodology, but additional research is needed in this regard to see the exact common points;

• There is evidence to show that the methodology is useful in dealing both with conflict management (Tait, 2020), as well as dealing with mental health issues (Padget, 2020), but additional research is needed within these areas;

• With the proper guidelines and limited amount of training, it is easy to train new facilitators and make high quality learning opportunities available beyond language and geographical barriers.

• It can integrate language learning in the development of many other soft skills, thus making learning much more effective and promoting systems thinking skills.

• Following research performed by the Academy, the following working model was developed to showcase the reliance of individual performance on the creation of a nurturing environment (see diagram below).

## Annex 1 - Guessing Method

1、 Look at the root of the word (e.g. computational, root: computer; computational = something computer related)

2、 Look at the context (sentence) in which the word appears. Try to see which words you know and which ones you don't and try to connect them in a logical sequence, so as to guess the meaning of the word(s) you don't know.

3、 If looking at the sentence is not enough, read the whole paragraph and try to understand what the word means.

4、 If none of the above are possible (which sometimes can happen), then try to look into an English-English dictionary for a definition (www.dictionary.com).

5、 If none of the above methods work, then you can look the word up in an English-Chinese dictionary. The condition is to check more uses of the word and learn it in a context.

Remarks: Depending on each learners' language level, it is recommended that the method is used gradually starting from novels that have more dialog and leave more room for imagination, and later on move to more descriptive literature.

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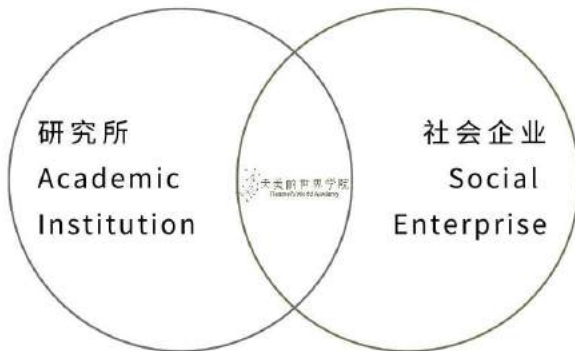
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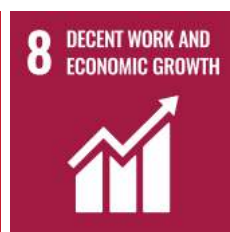
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