



drift for transition

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Seven years of Transition Academy at DRIFT

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Seven years of Transition Academy at DRIFT

*by Marijke de Pous and Flor Avelino, co-founders of the Transition Academy
cover artwork by Marijke de Pous*

Seven and a half years ago, we co-founded the Transition Academy as a platform to empower people to think and act for radical change. Together with DRIFT colleagues and other partners, we organized dozens of courses reaching thousands of students across the world. The close of 2020 saw both of us moving on to other challenges and the Transition Academy is about to enter a new phase. Time to take stock and reflect on what has come so far. In this reflection piece, co-founders Flor and Marijke contemplate the becoming of the Transition Academy, tease out its radical core and transformative ambitions and close with some questions for the future.

1. Where did we begin? A story in two voices.

Flor: The way the Transition Academy started, was in a typical DRIFTy spirit of (co-)creation, experimentation and learning by doing. There was an urge within DRIFT to share and teach transition thinking and approaches, an observed need in society for transformative thinking and a concrete demand for (more) transition education. I fantasized out loud about a Transition Academy and Derk and Jan and other DRIFT seniors constructively supported the idea. Very soon after Marijke joined us as 'Transition Academy coordinator.'

*Marijke: On a very personal note it was this amazing synchronicity. After having graduated and worked as an artist and then studying philosophy, I found myself hungry for something quite different. I imagined a working environment with smart and creative colleagues, collectively working on something that was socially relevant and concrete. When I came across the vacancy to help start up an Academy at DRIFT, it instantly sparked a flame. I remember just how thrilling the interviews were and how determined I was to be the one to take this position. For me the flame at that very beginning was one of **creative potential**. I carried that forth into my work at DRIFT and still see it as a defining characteristic of the Transition Academy.*

Academic Social Entrepreneurship

Flor: Amongst the increasing demand for transition education, was a particular social entrepreneur's request to attend a course paying for it 'in kind' by bartering. Not being able to respond to that request within the existing educational structures of the university, further fueled our desire to be able to offer 'our own' education, on our own terms.

This desire was also grounded in DRIFT's trajectory within the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. After having had to leave the faculty in 2011 and several failed attempts to collaborate on education, it seemed near impossible for DRIFT to be integrated in the accredited education system. The Transition Academy was a way to start our own education in the spirit of academic social entrepreneurship. In other words, the ability to combine education with academic research, entrepreneurship and activism.

Think Act Change

*Marijke: Starting the Transition Academy was about being able to include and support people wanting to learn for and about societal change. We aimed to create enabling learning environments that would allow people to learn from and with each other, and gain new competences for tackling transition challenges. There was also a sense of urgency: these skills and competencies are important, they are needed and they are often lacking. Thus our tagline and learning philosophy was born: "**empowering people to Think and Act for radical Change**".*

Transdisciplinary collaboration

*Marijke: When we founded the Transition Academy, it was also very much about creating a place or platform that could bring together experts and practitioners in the wider field of transitions. We started out with a separate visual identity and website from DRIFT in order to open up that space. Over the years, it became clear that being an integral part of DRIFT was in fact a core strength of the Academy, as well as for our partnerships. That is why we **choose***

to integrate the website and visual identity of the Transition Academy into DRIFT's in 2018, highlighting the strong interconnections between our action research, education and consultancy work.

*Flor: Transition Academy's mission and philosophy are intimately intertwined with DRIFT as an institute for action research. In a way, we invite each of our **students to become action researchers** in their own fields. Here reflection and knowledge are not merely instrumental for action. By being involved in what we wish to study, experiencing in addition to merely observing, we can greatly improve and deepen our understanding of each other and the world.*

Nurturing potential: the co-evolution of people & organisation

Flor: Working with the enthusiasm, passion and inspiration of others was core to the development of the Transition Academy. Every time somebody was passionate about transition learning, whether it was a teacher, a facilitator/organizer or a student, before, during or after a learning trajectory, they were shaping and making the Transition Academy.

Marijke: I totally agree. For me the Transition Academy has always been about working with the ideas, capacities and talents of others and creating a place in which these could take shape in learning environments. In my role as director, I sought to align the strategic development of the Transition Academy with the interest, passion and ambition of my colleagues as much as possible. From the start people have been at the heart of Transition Academy's becoming.

Trust & tension

Marijke: I remember how excited I was about being able to work with Flor. Her passion for teaching and abilities as a teacher were very tangible to me, especially in those first years when we worked closely together. From my studies in philosophy I knew the magic of being stirred and changed by new insights and learning, and could see it happening in myself and others during her classes. This certainly was an inspiration to me when developing the Transition Academy - something that I could count and build on. In a similar vein, Mees Schouwenaar, who was a part of the core team for many years, was hugely influential in shaping our practice with regard to hosting learning journeys. She brought a deep engagement with participants and all aspects of their learning process and a keen eye for the well-being of colleagues.

Flor: Looking back, I would say there has always been a certain tension between the creative energy that drove Marijke and myself on the one hand (including a desire for aesthetics in language and visuals), and the need to make the Transition Academy viable within the overall business logic of DRIFT on the other.

Basic trust and shared values made it possible to navigate professional insecurities and organizational tensions encountered along the years. While not always comfortable, it might in fact be one of the flames that kept the Transition Academy going as part of the social enterprise that DRIFT is. The continued presence of some tension and of basic trust may have propelled us forward and I think it continues to give energy and inspiration.

2. Transition Academy's radical core

The dialogue above contains much of what we feel lies at the core of Transition Academy's becoming. It being embedded in DRIFT, our Think Act Change learning philosophy, our academic social entrepreneurship, a strong focus on learning by doing, transdisciplinary collaboration and the co-evolution of people and organization. In what follows we delve deeper into some of these aspects.

From day one, the main mission of the Transition Academy has been to increase the capacity of changemakers, civil society and organisations to contribute to more just, sustainable and resilient futures. Launched within DRIFT in 2013, we have been making this happen by offering academic and professional education on the theory and practice of transformative societal change. Our courses and other learning activities have gathered transition thinkers and doers across many different fields and organisations.

Besides learning *about* innovation and change, the Transition Academy also aims to *be* innovative and (re)invent itself, by experimenting with new and alternative ways of thinking, doing and organizing in education.

- In its **thinking**, has a unique focus on transitions, i.e. long-term processes of societal change and innovation towards more just and sustainable societies. Our conceptual reflection on big and complex societal challenges is combined with a radically pragmatic approach to small and concrete interventions and methods.
- In its **doing**, Transition Academy is deeply experimental. Rather than working with fixed curricula and learning goals, we have mostly been doing by learning and learning by doing, constantly reinventing and redeveloping the formats and contents of our courses.
- In its **organizing**, Transition Academy creatively navigates a hybrid and turbulent institutional context. Being part of DRIFT, under the Holding of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, means juggling scientific research and applied consultancy with diverse forms of education for multiple audiences. This also entails different (and at times conflicting) business models, logics and funding schemes.

2.1 Transition Knowledge

At the core of the Transition Academy is a shared urgency for transition knowledge. The starting point for transition thinking is that technological innovation and social innovation are both *necessary* to address societal challenges, but not *sufficient*. To tackle the social, economic and ecological challenges of our times, we need systemic, transformative change. Even if we cannot agree on what a just and sustainable future should look like precisely, we can agree that many existing societal systems are unsustainable and unjust, and that changing those systems requires radically different ways of thinking, doing and organising.

These fundamental shifts towards more sustainable, just and resilient societies are what we call sustainability transitions. Transition knowledge enables all sorts of actors to gain an understanding of societal change dynamics and how they can and cannot be influenced.

The object of a societal transition, by definition, is never a single actor, place or organisation, but always a broader societal system. As such, understanding transitions requires complex systems thinking as well as interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge from different scientific disciplines and multiple fields of practice. In each of our activities, whether it's a short lecture or an extensive course, we introduce concepts to unpack the complexity of non-linear long-term change, and heuristic lenses to recognize multi-level and multi-actor dynamics.

The core parts of our curricula build on the insights from the fields of transition research and transition practice. These fields are vast and highly diverse, both in content and geographic spread. On the one hand, there is a somewhat delineated community of practice that meets and communicates through platforms and venues like the Sustainability Transitions Research Network (STRN) and the Network for Early career researchers in Sustainability Transitions (NEST), the annual International Sustainability Transitions (IST) conference, and the journal of Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions (EIST). On the other hand, there is increasing overlap and collaboration with other fields of research and practice, like social innovation, socio-ecological resilience, urban studies, environmental justice, social economy and enterprise, and many more.

Over the years the Transition Academy has increasingly become a place to explore and harvest the synergies, the differences and commonalities, across different fields of research and practice. Nevertheless it has to be said that so far, the core part of our curriculum has remained quite close to ongoing transition research and practice. It is what sets us apart and what people continue to value in our courses.

2.2 Our Think Act Change learning philosophy

Transition Academy's mission and philosophy have been intimately intertwined with DRIFT as an institute for **action research**. In a way, we invite each of our students to become action researchers in their own fields. Here reflection and knowledge are not merely instrumental for action. By being involved in what we wish to study, experiencing things in addition to merely observing them, we can greatly improve and deepen our understanding of each other and the world.

Our mission and learning philosophy can be summarised as “empowering people to think, act, change”. We hold that action and reflection imply and reinforce one another. In every learning context that we create, regardless of its exact format or audience, we aim to combine:

- critically reflecting and questioning (THINK)
- applying insights, tools & methods to real life contexts (ACT)
- challenging ingrained patterns both in society and one’s own ideas & behaviour (CHANGE)

We also hold that empowerment is not something that anyone can bestow upon another. By definition, empowered people empower themselves. As such the Transition Academy aims to create an enabling context for such self-empowerment. We do so by providing concepts, tools, examples and critical questions and challenging participants to apply these to their work. In this way they gain new insights and competencies for tackling transition challenges.

Knowledge about transitions is in itself constantly and inherently ‘in transition’. As such, we never saw the Transition Academy in terms of a one-directional relation where experts from our institute “teach” and “transfer” ready-made scientific knowledge to our students. Rather, we see it as a learning context where transition knowledge is co-created and constantly adapted and refined by students, professionals and researchers alike.

2.3 Learning-by-doing, a radically experimental approach

From the start our way of working and the development of our offer could be characterised as an iterative process of learning by doing. Rather than working with fixed curricula and learning goals and getting these accredited, our approach has been one of iteratively learning by doing: constantly reinventing and redeveloping the formats and content of our courses. From the start a big part of the work has been around experimenting with new courses, learning formats and partnerships, while at the same time also consolidating the courses, tools and methods that have a clear impact and steady following.

Of course, we didn't start with an empty slate. Our experimental approach was done in the awareness and confidence that we could build on a unique and solid basis with regard to the content: the theory and practice of DRIFT within the larger field of sustainability transitions and transition governance. As the academic field of transitions studies was taking shape, DRIFT was at the forefront of developing the conceptual frameworks and participatory tools of transition management through action research. The experience that was gained through the many different projects and settings DRIFT had already been involved with, formed the starting point for our curricula. It is no surprise then, that the iterative, experimental character of DRIFT's action research would spill over into our learning approach and way of working.

In order to give a better understanding of our approach, we would like to give a few examples below.

Throughout the years we have developed and experimented with **a variety of course lengths**. Our masterclass Transition Management for instance, is an example of a 3-5 month course that is taught by many experts and involves a significant amount of theoretical input, applied learning through in-class and homework assignments, combined with several rounds of individual and peer feedback. A completely different format can be found in our learning relays, which start with a full day in-person kick-off meeting, followed by several rounds of peer-learning activities spread out over a longer period, including online meet-ups, feedback and webinars. A third example is a tailor-made course that we did for the municipality of Rotterdam, which combined a short course of 3 days with a longer period of coaching and reflection to a small core team, with the aim of building the internal capacity for the continuation of learning within the organisation.

Examples with regard to **diversity in learning formats** can be found in the various ways in which we experiment with combining theoretical input with more physical and/or experiential learning formats. Take for instance collaborating with an expert of the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology in the design and delivery of a course day in combination with lectures and workshops on power in transitions. Other examples of creative interventions and workshops by social entrepreneurs, local chefs and creatives in our courses are: interactive installations and food interventions by the Eat Art Collective, a permaculture walking tour by the Moestuיןman, a vegan cooking workshop by the Food Hub, a role-playing workshop by Metabolic, working with clay and lego to find a different way of communicating and experiencing transition concepts and struggles, and many more.

The examples above already give a taster of our practice to collaborate with practitioners and experts that can bring in complementary relevant knowledge and ways of learning for specific modules or course days. We also **experiment with partnerships**: we very often collaborate with partners to develop a new course offer. Examples of this are our longstanding collaboration with Impact Hub Amsterdam (Masterclass Societal Transitions), Erasmus Academy (Transitiemanagement, Transformatieve Sociale Innovatie, Reflexief Monitoren), the Robert Bosch foundation (Postdoc Academy) and Forum for the Future's School of System Change (Basecamp), Meneer de Leeuw (for example Transities in de Praktijk), de Schaal van Kampen (Voedeltransitie). And more recently Bopro (Ruimte in Transitie), Sustainable Motion

(Transitiemaker Academy) and Beter Geven (Fondsen in Transitie). Each of these collaborations have involved exploring and establishing unique agreements with regard to organisation, budgets and collaboration.

With such a strong tendency to experiment and innovate, it is very important we consolidate our learnings. An important factor in this part of the process has been the active participation of a small and consistent core team of the Transition Academy. Both in the development and in the execution of new courses, content, formats, learning approaches and partnerships. In-depth and recurring evaluations with participants, partners and an overall 'action-learning mindset' of everyone involved have allowed us to discern which elements to keep, what to redesign and discover which learning goals are attainable in which context. One of the interesting things we have seen over the years is that a certain amount of confusion due to diversity of perspectives and difficult to grasp concepts, will actually aid in developing a critical and reflective attitude.

2.4 Operating as a social enterprise

Transition Academy creatively navigates a hybrid and turbulent institutional context. Being part of DRIFT, an enterprise under the Holding of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, has meant juggling scientific research and applied consultancy with diverse forms of education for multiple audiences. This also entails different (and at times conflicting) business models, logics and funding schemes.

Being part of the holding means that we do not receive any core funding from the university, state or other funders. On the one hand, this provides us with the entrepreneurial freedom to be able to bring our transdisciplinary approach and activist learning-by-doing orientation to fruition. On the other hand it also means we need to generate a reliable profit on some of our learning programs, in order to cross-finance activities that are not financially viable on their own, yet are key activities with regard to our social mission. Courses such as the Masterclass Transition Management and tailor-made programs allowed us to keep doing activities such as our minors, the Postdoc Academy and experimental learning formats. Like the more applied research and consultancy at DRIFT, the profit made through some of our courses also co-finance EU and nationally-funded research projects. In addition a substantial part of our courses were developed and offered in partnership with other social enterprises. The result was a big variety in budgeting and funding schemes between our activities.

The different business logics of our activities certainly brought some challenges and tensions throughout the years. Ways in which we've sought to strike the right balance is to always include free events and affordable courses as part of our portfolio and to work with differentiated tariffs, bartering and wild cards.

Besides the quirky business logic of operating as a social enterprise, another important characteristic has to do with not just talking the talk, but also walking the walk. In other words, that our organisation and way of working reflect what we aim to bring about in society. A few examples of this are:

- In our experience, teaching about transitions and transition management should be closely connected to an active practice of facilitating, advising and/ or consulting in sustainability transition projects. In other words, in order to help someone become an action researcher, one needs to know what it is like to be one. Being embedded within DRIFT, this was almost a given, although it does require continued engagement and reflection.
- Issues of exclusion, marginalization and inequality should be part and parcel of transition education. We are addressing these issues in our courses and strive to pay more explicit attention to racial injustices and other intersections of oppression where this has been wanting. We recognize that improvement is needed when it comes to diversity in terms of education, income, political preference, culture and ethnicity with regard to our lecturers and participants. DRIFT as a whole is seeking to develop new strategies and partnerships to help us move forward in this direction.
- Walking the talk also extends to placing value on personal sustainability and well-being within the organisation and making that explicit. One of the shared values within the Transition Academy has been to care for ourselves and each other by safeguarding time for reflection, creativity and attention in our work. Given the nature of our business model and our 'DRIFTy spirit', it has been an ongoing challenge to make this work and we recognize that there is room for improvement in this regard as well.
- The Transition Academy aims to minimize the carbon and environmental footprint of our courses and partnerships. Lunches and dinners are vegan or at minimum vegetarian. Air travel is avoided as much as possible by choosing other forms of transport or taking part virtually either in-person or by means of high-end digital (video) content.

3. Transformative ambitions

The Transition Academy has always challenged participants to critically question the transformative potential of their initiatives and organisations. Even if something is innovative, to what extent is it really transformative? How does it contribute to transitions towards more justice and sustainability? How can this transformative potential be increased? In our curriculum,

we also emphasize that answering those questions about transformative potential requires a sharp understanding of the problematic structures and institutions that need to be transformed.

So it is interesting to take this core question of our curriculum and turn it around to question Transition Academy itself. What exactly are the transformative ambitions of the Transition Academy? Which structures and institutions are being challenged, altered and/or replaced by it's activities? And how can we galvanize it's transformative impact?

An important aim throughout our activities has been to transform ways of thinking and to challenge the dominant foci of how people in our society *learn* and *teach*. In that sense, the activities of the Transition Academy have 'taken on' existing education systems, even though it was never our primary aim.

Although existing education systems have reached high levels of professionalisation over the past decades, there is far too much sole focus on specialized optimization, which tends to reproduce current systems and their many challenges. We can argue that Transition Academy's transformative aspirations in this regard are being realized to a certain extent. In our classes, for instance, we managed to challenge frames around efficiency, profit and short-term solutions, replacing these with more critical transition thinking about underlying and long-term challenges and reframing ideas of success in terms of learning and resilience rather than growth.

Given the relatively small size of DRIFT's Transition Academy team, our reach has been impressive, with over 500 people participating each year in our courses, masterclasses, classes and other learning events. Yet for each "transition thinker" that the Transition Academy manages to educate, there are many thousands that continue to learn and reproduce knowledge on efficiency, profit and growth. To speak in transition terms, the Transition Academy still operates at the level of a niche. Especially when we talk about the education systems as an object of change, the Transition Academy has had little impact in formalized and accredited education. We have yet to see this type of impact within the Erasmus University Rotterdam, of which we are part, let alone at the national or international level.

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that when we founded the Transition Academy, we didn't launch it with the aim of transforming one particular system. We purposely took a more indirect approach, focusing on empowerment and capacity building for transformative change *in any system* with inherent unsustainability and injustices – e.g. in energy, food, agriculture, transport, education, urban planning, etc.

3.1 Galvanizing Transition Academy's Transformative Impact

Whichever approach to transformative change the Transition Academy takes, the indirect way or the more direct one, both approaches present us with a question for the future regarding our scaling and mainstreaming strategy. In the past years, we have often faced our own limits to

develop further, as DRIFT simply does not have sufficient capacity to respond to all opportunities and demands for transition education. While we already manage to mobilize DRIFT's network of transition experts in academia and practice for delivering content, there is a real challenge when it comes to how we might go about achieving education at scale.

Throughout the years, our core team has worked on a horizontal growth strategy in which we developed proposals for multiple Transition Academy hubs across the world, connected in a translocal Transition Academy network. In relation to this we developed ideas for courses that could reach many more people (through e.g. MOOCs). We also developed concepts and content for train-the-trainer programs, with the aim to build capacity for transition education around the world, rather than trying to grow Transition Academy's sole capacity to offer such education. So far these efforts have not yet materialized at the scale we had hoped. In part due to the many institutional barriers faced by aspiring hub partners and ourselves, in part due to the limitations inherent in our current organisational model. Our careful conclusion from all this experience is that this type of scaling might require a different approach and business model all together.

3.2 A question of transition?

The question of scale relates to an equally important question of conscience: to what extent should the Transition Academy hold on to transitions and the field of transition research as the core content of its learning trajectories?

So far we haven't steered very far from it. Yet it has always been our intention to also teach knowledge *for* transition. As transitions unfold out there in the real world, different types of knowledge become more necessary, from social innovation and social movements to behavioural change and heterodox economics. From regenerative farming and indigenous knowledge, to expertise in addressing racial injustices and other systemic exclusions and intersections of oppression.

If we really want to build capacity for transitions, we need to keep asking ourselves which knowledge is the most relevant and likely to have an impact? The question thus becomes how the Transition Academy might go about exploring and integrating these topics more thoroughly into its curriculum, rather than sticking too closely to its own expertise.

Given that transition thinking has been an integral part of our identity up until now (both in terms of content and walking the talk), this is not a trivial question. We can at least imagine the rough contours of a bolder approach. One in which the transition perspective is used as a guide for curating and developing relevant content and partnerships, beyond our current expertise and comfort zone, while also functioning as a ground. Expanding Transition Academy's outreach and scope in this way could allow it to remain close to its core even as it is transforming through and with others.

3.3 Passing on the flame

As we pass on the flame to those leading the Transition Academy into the future, we also hand over the re-articulation of its transformative ambitions and routes to achieve them. Above we have shared what we think is the radical core of the Transition Academy and reflected on its ambitions. We would like to close with a final word of thanks to all the people and organisations we have worked with over the years and those that will continue to shape the Transition Academy.

We are grateful to our colleagues and our network of affiliated lecturers and expert practitioners for bringing in their passion, expertise and experience. To all our alumni who have been at the core of all our activities and continue to challenge and propel us forward. To the organisations we have had the pleasure of partnering with for many years, including Erasmus Academie, Impact Hub Amsterdam, Meneer de Leeuw, de Schaal van Kampen, Viatore, Urgenda, Forum for the Future and the Robert Bosch Foundation.

Thanks also to Jan Rotmans and in particular Derk Loorbach for supporting and challenging our endeavours throughout the years and for providing us space to be our entrepreneurial, creative, stubborn and independent selves.

We would like to close with the future of the Transition Academy, by expressing our gratitude and very best wishes to Marieke Verhagen, who will be stewarding it to new directions and has been a dear and longstanding colleague, and to all the (new) DRIFTers, participants and partners, who will continue to shape the future of the Transition Academy.



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