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The Netherlands

Time pressure and teamwork: a quest for quality improvement in hospitals

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Citation

Harten, A. van. (2026, February 5). *Time pressure and teamwork: a quest for quality improvement in hospitals*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4289434>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Illustration 5. Dead end path

Intermezzo

Pade Crom ende Menich Foude¹

¹ This phrase, meaning “the manifold crooked paths”, is taken from the Flemish version of Reynard the Fox, and is mentioned in the prologue of this dissertation.

We—six women of varying ages, and no doubt differing degrees of artistic ambition—spent five days in a small, wool-strewn room, each of us working towards a grand goal: creating a tapestry. In my case, it was about the crooked path of doing a PhD trajectory. Now, some might say that five days isn't nearly enough time to master such a craft. But I, ever the optimist, secretly thought, 'Why not two tapestries: one of the crooked path and another of a murmuration of starlings? How difficult can it really be?' Our workshop leader, with years of scientific, practical, artistic and educational experience, sets us off on our creative journey. First, we design our tapestries on paper, we calculate how much it will shrink, and we produce a trial run on a small scale. Special techniques are practised, materials are collected.

I had no idea that there was so much to know about wool. My workshop leader suggests we use needle felt (thin layers of fine haired merino pricked together) as a base layer and then 'paint' the tapestry with fine merino wool top in the perfect shades for our design. I, however, had other plans. I'd come to the workshop armed with boxes of wool from sheep that had lived charmed lives in my own neighbourhood. It seemed a shame to use anything else, and besides, why take the easy route when you can challenge yourself, right?

By day three I was still experimenting with my materials, but time was ticking. So, I started to lay down all wool for the tapestry discovering that I had too little wool of certain structures or colours. Improvisation was my only option. I had a sudden flash of inspiration and switched up the design entirely. With all areas covered, I stepped back and realised that large parts of my masterpiece looked rather... dull. I searched for additional materials and threads, picked up some snips of organza from the floor, borrowed fleece from my fellow artists, and in a state of frantic flow I finished the design just in time.

The next day arrived, bringing with it the soap-sudsy ritual of felting. This was the hard labour part. I was hoping for a smooth ride, but of course life had other plans. The golden circle I had painstakingly crafted refused to stick to the background. I tried again and again, noticing that some colours started to fade, and the background wool was coming to the front - the consequence of not using needle felt. Thus, I decided I would sew the rebellious golden circle onto the tapestry later.

On the final day, we made the last-minute tweaks and just after lunch, we gathered to view each other's creations. Some tapestries were finished; others still needed work. We had all discovered, that despite all the meticulous planning, the final outcome was far different from what we had envisioned. But there we stood, each of us content and having learned the true lesson of tapestry-making: the learning evolves in the chaotic process of the doing.

This lesson is also applicable to learning how to conduct research. In the first study, I felt lost at the start. There was a lot of ethnographic material, but where should I focus? Gradually, the theme of time pressure emerged from the chaos. And as I began to write my article about it, the message of the article started to take shape. Despite my mentor encouraging me to stick to the description of a slice of life, and despite my knowledge of complexity theory, my mind kept searching for causal relations. When analysing with theory on mindful organising, I concluded that changing the 'war stories of leaders' might foster heedful relating and mindful organising. The logical next step seemed to be to design a study in which, following an incident, all participants would exchange their 'war' stories and lessons learned. By facilitating the conversation, a new type of war story might emerge. However, it became a dead-end path for several reasons. One of these was that it required considerable time from all participants, which created a barrier to qualifying and reporting events as an incident. I had to explore other paths.

Around that time, I happened to mentor a student willing to conduct an observational study on distractions in the operating room. I didn't yet know how to connect it to the theme of time pressure, crew resource management, or teamwork, but intuitively I organised the data collection in such a way that it might be used for a scientific publication in my PhD trajectory. It appeared that periods of low workload (idleness), teamwork, and distractedness were closely connected.

However, it seemed that I had no talent for academic writing; the first article was repeatedly declined, and halfway through the process, I fell into the trap of a predatory journal. With help from the legal department, I was able to free myself from that. Furthermore, I saw no possibilities for additional studies besides my full-time job. I felt lost. I informed my supervisor that if I did not find financial resources, I would finish the articles but stop the PhD trajectory.

Having just returned from my holiday, a colleague-friend drew my attention to a ZonMw grant on Safety II, which had its closing date less than a week away. This was the opportunity I had been waiting for! I took immediate action, and together with a paediatrician and a hospital quality advisor we managed to submit the proposal just in time. Once again, I had seized the opportunity that Fortuna had offered me.

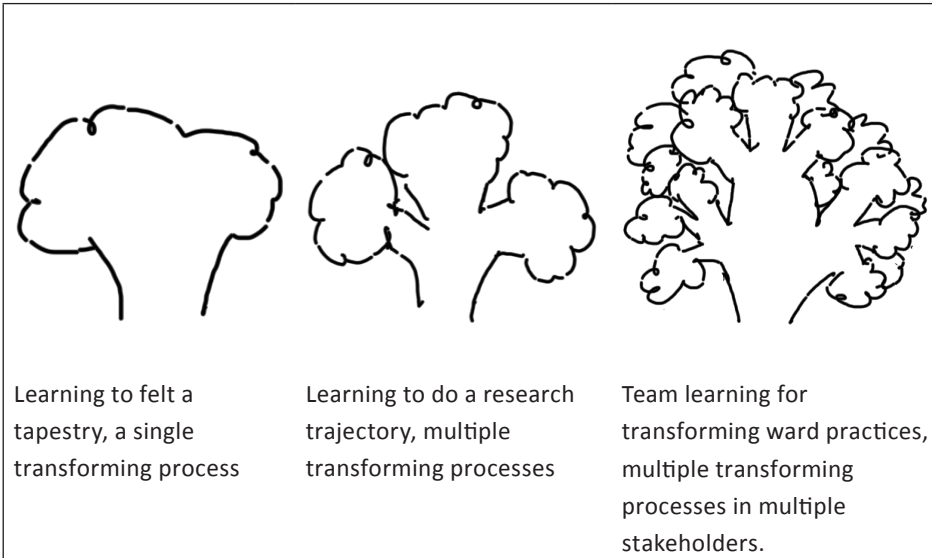
Up until then, I had not made it easy for myself. I deliberately chose a supervisor I knew for her responsive evaluation approach and her expertise in action research, both unfamiliar concepts in the medical world, and I started without a budget. I persisted on this path because I believed that this type of research would provide insight into the real lived experiences of professionals and produce results that would benefit them. In my search for control during uncertainty, I sought new concepts that opened fresh perspectives fitting the situation. These new concepts changed my perception of reality and fuelled transformative learning. This learning was accelerated during writing. Scientific writing required me to

search for other studies on the topic. It also forced me to present my insights in a structure that was recognisable to others and that articulated the knowledge more clearly for myself as well. At one point, I tried a different format, an auto-ethnography, but I had to return to the code of conduct.

In the story of Reynard the Fox, the dark, bushy world with many crooked paths that houses his den is ambiguous, in contrast to the straight, broad paved streets where King Noble travels and holds his court. It is an unsettling environment, full of holes, barriers, and dead ends. It is a liminal space that medieval pilgrims must cross before they reach places of serene natural beauty or the house of God. Right or wrong are on the side of both the Fox and the King, with his greed and vanity, but in the end, the Fox embarks on a pilgrimage, while the King heads towards a pot of gold.

In medieval philosophy, the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm and vice versa. All elements of the physical world are signals of the larger spiritual world. In theory on fractals and complexity, the repetitive patterns in the physical world are visualised and mathematically described, both at the level of the macrocosm of the universe, city structures, and plant forms, as well as in the microcosm of molecules. This is visualised in the well-known animation *Cosmic Zoom* (1968) by Eva Szasz. Contemporary theory on social complex adaptive systems describes the regularities in transformative processes in communities, organisations and groups.

In this intermezzo, I have sketched the similarity in the transformative processes of felting a tapestry and conducting a PhD research trajectory. In the second part of this dissertation, the reader may notice that the process I described in this intermezzo, also occurs in the participatory research team and at the ward when they learn to transform their ward practices and learn how to learn.



In the studies done at the ward I grew gradually to live in the complexity more and more. My mind no longer aims to discover causal loops, but tries to sense the patterns and connections, to participate in them and seize the occasions to the benefit of all. I still experienced every now and then despair and not knowing, but also more and more trust that that is a temporary phase before attaining the next level of understanding and skill.

By taking the fragment about the crooked path from Reynard the Fox in the prologue, illustrating the way of not-knowing and liminality, I honoured my background in Dutch Language and literature besides psychology and business administration. By giving shape to my intuitions about transformation into a tapestry I connected head, hart and hands and gave form to tacit knowledge. And by writing this intermezzo I foreshadow the second part of this dissertation, in which I learned to live with a social complex adaptive system, instead of observing it.