

# Using 'derive' as a learning and assessment tool

## introduction

These notes provide a theoretical explanation of the assessment task called 'the Derive'. They are intended to provide a theoretical introduction to the process, they are not instructions about how to conduct or complete one. The Dérive is based on the work of French sociologist Guy Debord. It combines theory and practice as a learning and assessment tool.

## What is 'derive'?

Information usually provided to participants in a Derive introduces the task in this way -

A *dérive* is a special type of walking. In a *dérive* you 'drift' through a particular terrain to "notice" your surroundings in the widest possible terms. You *experience* the area as it happens. There are links in MyCourses to the philosopher Debord's definition of the *dérive*. There is also more detail on the importance of this learning approach.

The *dérive* (French: [\[de.ʁiv\]](#), "drift") is a revolutionary strategy originally put forward in the 'Theory of the Dérive' (1956) by [Guy Debord](#), a member at the time of the [Letterist International](#).<sup>[1]</sup> Debord defines the *dérive* as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances."<sup>[2]</sup> It is an unplanned journey through a landscape, usually [urban](#), in which participants drop their everyday relation and 'let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there'. Though solo *dérives* are possible, Debord indicates that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness, since cross-checking these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions.<sup>[3]</sup>

The *dérive* goals include studying the terrain of the city (psychogeography) and emotional disorientation, both of which lead to the potential creation of Situation.

## Purposes

Using derive is a means of helping individuals to -

- see things differently
- see new things in familiar places
- consider what the differences might tell them
- explore how and why such differences have arisen
- have fun collaborating on a joint report on the nature of what emerges from a joint exploration

As Debord notes in his work, a *dérive* works well when conducted as a joint activity. These general purposes, underlie a further set of more specific intentions informing use of the *dérive* and include providing an opportunity to -

- draw on group experiences to address and solve an ill-defined problem
- consider how personal frames of references shape and inform routine activities
- build a short-term task-based team with time to develop a shared understanding based on exploration of a setting that may be 'familiar' [or not] and which can be seen in new ways because of the sharing of different perspectives
- consider how personal perspectives inform current actions and beliefs, and whether - and how - these are amenable to change
- contribute to a 'leaderless' team which nevertheless requires exercise of intense leadership skills if the task is to be achieved
- enact personal leaderships attributes as related to the team and the task and observe how these are received and perceived

Since there are no 'pre-defined' *solutions* to such a walking-based task it falls into the "Complex" domain of the 'Cynefin Domains' model of knowledge management thus providing direct and immediate experience of working through the 'sensing/analysing/responding' sequence which that work recommends. This model is often included in Leadership studies, so the assessment task provides a culminating experience for the learning process. While the *dérive* is given the widest possible scope, there are clearly prescribed outcomes. However, this does not reduce the 'Complexity' of the task as the outcome remains undefined, even incoherent until completed. Combining a clear 'end point' with a vague/ill-defined route to completion is a valid metaphor for the rapidly changing environments of modern business, social and community activity and the consequent requirements for effective leadership within each environment.

## Context

Completion of the 'dérive' is the final assessment task for students enrolled in the Leadership elective in the BScBA on the Mikkeli campus of Aalto University School of Business. In this degree program students undertake intensive study of subjects in three week modules. The subject is supported online and an extensive explanation of all assessment tasks is provided prior to the beginning of the subject.

The Leadership subject involves students in two distinct teams and they must become able to move flexibly between their teams and tasks, on an almost daily basis - after the first three days together. Teams are also assigned specific tasks, of which the 'dérive' is the final one to be completed, and therefore the last one begun. The other two tasks focus on theory (and putting theory into practice) based on personal study of an assigned text book, class lectures and activities plus team focused collaboration.

## Other users

On a visit to colleagues at City, University of London - <https://www.city.ac.uk> - I was invited to attend student presentations reporting on their recent experience of completing a dérive in the inner city of London. Their work was immensely varied, demonstrating how leadership in such groups is exercised. The information provided to these students informs the materials now provided to students at Mikkeli.

An internet search shows the 'dérive' concept is also used in sociology subjects, to introduce sociology concepts including 'psycho-geography' and locative media - e.g.

<http://layofftheland.net/archive/artEdVideo/artEdVideoJJ/pdf/Gladdys-lesson7.pdf>

<http://dc-mrg.english.ucsb.edu> (digital cults project UC Santa Barbara)

## Why use it?

Traditionally assessment is often a 'test of memory', in which the focus is on what can be recalled and reported using the written word (multiple choice quizzes, essays etc.) It seems that once relevant theory is 'understood', associated practical skills are assumed to have been acquired. However leadership is a skill around which a good deal of theory has been built and requires enactment if what is 'understood' is to be successfully enacted.

In contrast with text-based assessment a 'dérive' involves the whole person mind and body, perceptions and observations, interactions and reflections. Depending on how it is implemented as a learning and assessment task, a 'dérive' can provide individuals and teams with extended experience of being both a leader and follower, as well as theorist and practitioner.

## Why use it in the Mikkeli BScBA context?

The BScBA is an innovative undergraduate course available in Finland. This has not happened by accident, but is not the subject of this work. The Leadership elective is offered towards the end of the two year intensive study program. Use of innovative teaching strategies and associated assessment tasks is encouraged in the program, and students learn quickly to be flexible in their adaptation to regularly changing academic staff and subject content.

At this point in their study program BScBA Degree students are approaching entry into workplaces around the world, and thus beginning to transition from theory based study to practice oriented workplaces. The 'dérive' bridges this transitional phase by enfolding theory and practice into a tightly framed activity within which they need to trace how theory informs practice and vice versa, while engaging closely with a small group of fellow students all on the same 'path'.

## Underlying principles and teaching approach

### Course Description

The course description states that -

This course provides a framework for understanding leadership from three perspectives: a) theoretical models of leadership, b) self-assessment of leadership, and c) being led. Particular focus will be paid to effective leadership, including formal leadership and peer leadership. Through case studies, team exercises, assessments, and developmental activities, students can expect to critically analyze their own and others' leadership styles, and learn tools specifically designed to improve their personal leadership potential.

## Learning Outcomes

The associated learning outcomes fall into two distinct categories of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ as described in the table below. In effect the principles underlying the use of a *dérive* can be described as intending to provide a learning space where theory and practice interact at every level of learning and behaviour. Students are invited to identify leadership theories, and then apply them in action as they complete the activity together.

THEORY	PRACTICE
<i>Understand</i> core competencies of effective leadership	<i>Apply</i> theories of leadership in contexts where their actions contribute to better understanding how and why leadership works
<i>Understand</i> the importance of motivation, power, and team dynamics for effective leadership	<i>Engage</i> in situations where power, motivation, and team dynamics [collectively and/or separately] are in operation
<i>Understand</i> the roles of decision-making and delegation in developing leadership style;	<i>Exercise</i> decision-making and/or delegation in the completion of relevant tasks
<i>Recognize</i> situational demands for specific leadership styles,	<i>Demonstrate acquisition</i> of skills related to leading in asymmetric or uncertain contexts
<i>Self-analyze</i> leadership strengths and weaknesses	<i>Set and evaluate</i> personal leadership goals within the context of the course environment

## Information provided to students

Students are provided with information about the *dérive* process, but because of the emergent nature of the task it is acknowledged that there will never be ‘enough’ information for those expecting to ‘be told exactly what to do’. There really is no ‘certain and predictable’ outcome but students must not consider the academic as available for other than providing neutral support. Students struggle to define the scope of the task and begin to experience the freedom of creating something that is entirely of their own devising.

The 2017 cohort were introduced to the Cynefin model in regard to their perceptions of how learning and knowledge are developed and encountered in differing contexts Emergent problems. Issues of trust, collaboration, coordination, completion and managing uncertainty are all involved in the overall approach the subject, and nowhere more so than in the *dérive* task teams.