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Teaching Project Management Effectively: The Direct Path from Class to Work

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Abstract

Many adult learners approach higher education as a career strategy to increase applied skills as well as achieve a recognizable credential. Through clear and early disclosure of a carefully designed course path that includes individual and team objectives, assignments, and expectations, the instructor can fulfill the obligation to create a learning environment in which students prepare for the workplace. Maintaining awareness of the students'

needs for an efficient, effective and workplace-complementary learning environment also contributes to how the instructor operates in either the online or face-to-face classroom. Students of project management particularly require coursework that demonstrates, as well as defines, the discipline and pathway to work.

Introduction

Teaching working professionals begins with several key assumptions:

- Instructors collaborate in the learning process with students.
- Students invest in applied learning with the intent to use new knowledge in the workplace either immediately or in the near future.
- Instructors deliver information in an engaging and absorbable manner, relating the content and learning experience to how the knowledge will be applied.
- Students apply adult decision making to their dedication of time and attention to class participation.

These assumptions establish the paradigm whereby the instructor supports the self-directed learning journey of the student. The requirements of the course experience mimic requirements for information exchange and performance management in the workplace, including clear expectations, effective and efficient communication of information with frequent checks for understanding, a fast path from learning to doing, and expectations of accountability.

Even more than other management-related disciplines, project management coursework requires a specific balancing between theoretical concepts and actual practice and between individual and team activities. Managing projects is not an individual activity; instead, group results define project success. Practice of project management concepts therefore requires team application, both online and in the classroom. Each project management student

also requires individual support and opportunities for enhancing his or her skills as a project participant and as a leader.

Understanding the Expectations of the Workplace

The assumptions under which instructors operate now must acknowledge students as peer adults. "...The vast majority of college and university students are "non-traditional"—largely working adults struggling to balance jobs, families, and education" (Stokes, 2008, p. 1). These students are engaging in the shared objectives of the class and are collaborating with the instructor to create the learning environment. The needs adult students have in their educational environment mirror the needs employees have in their professional environments, including the ability to work collaboratively.

The processes and behaviors in a well-performing working environment can be characterized by the presence of feedback mechanisms; active engagement with workers to manage performance; and accountability for the effectiveness of how performance is managed and achieved.

In effective organizations, managers and employees have been practicing good performance management naturally all their lives, executing each key component process well. Goals are set and work is planned routinely. Progress toward those goals is measured and employees get feedback. High standards are set, but care is also taken to develop the skills needed to reach them. Formal and informal rewards are used to recognize the behavior and results that accomplish the mission. All five component processes working together and supporting each other achieve natural, effective performance management" (U.S. Office of Performance Management, 2011, para. 7-8).

Setting goals and communicating expectations contribute to employee performance by providing clarity and direction. Individual goal setting in the form of the job description is the

professional equivalent of a course syllabus, providing the educational path to performance success. "At its most basic level, preparing job descriptions can help an organization clarify what it really wants to accomplish and how it wants to go about it. At the same time, employees understand what is expected of them" (Marino, 2005, para. 7). The role of the job description is not limited to just performance standards, just as the course plan is not just about class assignments. Job descriptions "can be extremely useful in delegating work and documenting assignments, helping to clarify missions, establishing performance requirements, counseling people on career and advancement opportunities... suggesting ways to enrich the work experience" (Marino, 2005, para. 2). Similarly, students expect instructor-provided course tools to include details and context about the learning environment to be effective and to stimulate learning.

Workplace goal setting does not stop with the individual and neither can the classroom experience. The nature of work, as a team activity, must also be taken into account. According to Peter Senge (1990), "...Almost all important decisions are now made in teams, either directly or through the need for teams to translate individual decision into action" (p. 236). The trend toward teamwork also extends to how organizations are structuring themselves around that work. "Organizations are becoming more and more project-based. Flat, flexible organizational structures are becoming the norm, replacing the hierarchical, bureaucratic structures of the past" (Flannes & Levin, 2005, p. 9). Because workplace expectations now often require the skills and ability to participate effectively on teams to execute project objectives, course design and the management of the learning environment should also include group-based learning and practice.

Creating a learning environment for working professional students that reflects the combined team and individual performance expectations in the workplace requires a holistic understanding of what is needed to create that environment. Comparing Billington's (1996) seven key characteristics of highly effective adult learning programs and Lewis' (2007) five conditions in which project participants can control their own work, reveals alignment between the learning and work environments on the basis of the three char-

acteristics of effective performance management: a feedback system; a participative and engaging environment; and ownership and accountability for the outcome.

Characteristics of Highly Effective Adult Learning Programs (Billington, 1996):	For a team member to have self-control, five conditions must exist (Lewis, 2007):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students feel safe, supported, recognized for uniqueness, abilities and life achievements. • Experimentation, creativity and intellectual freedom are valued. • Faculty members respect students as peer adults. • Self-directed learning and student accountability for defining and meeting learning needs are part of the learning program. • The program maintains "optimal pacing" to stimulate and challenge. • Active interaction and practice support theory. • Feedback mechanisms allow collaboration between students and faculty to make ongoing adjustments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The team member has a clear definition of the work and its purpose on the project. • The team member has a plan for how the work will be done. • The team member has the required skills and has been given the required resources to be successful. • The team member receives timely feedback to measure and adjust performance. • The team member has enough authority to take action to correct deviations from the work plan.

The commonalities of feedback, engagement, and accountability are the basis of aligning the classroom with the workplace. For the project management students in particular, the classroom needs to reflect workplace expectations of being a performing

team member and a performing leader as well. “As organizations become flatter, the project manager’s interactions with internal and external stakeholders increase, calling for an enhanced ability to apply people skills to a greater variety of people and personalities” (Flannes & Levin, 2005, p. 9). An additional workplace requirement for a project manager to serve as a leader requires that this also be met in the learning environment by preparing a student to serve in that role.

For project management students, the three core workplace environment characteristics are joined by a fourth, a focus on adaptable leadership. These form the foundation upon which the instructor teaches the techniques and practices of the project management discipline.

The project manager’s two major functions are to integrate all elements of the project system and provide leadership to the project team. His or her effectiveness will depend on conceptual, human, and negotiating skills as well as, to a lesser extent, on technical skills (Goodwin, 1993, para. 1).

Teaching the connection between adaptable leadership and specific project management skills, processes and practices is an important aspect to enable students to fully practice as a project manager. The Project Management Institute (2004), as a recognized source of standards for the project management discipline, articulates the need for managers to be able to analyze a situation and respond with project management tools and techniques in a way that meets the unique needs of that situation.

The increasing acceptance of project management indicates that the application of appropriate knowledge, processes, skills, tools, and techniques can have a significant impact on project success... “Good practice” means there is general agreement that the application of these skills, tools, and techniques can enhance the chances of success over a wide range of projects. Good practice does not mean the knowledge described should always be applied uniformly to all projects; the organization and/or project

management team is responsible for determining what is appropriate for any given project (p. 3).

Aligning the Classroom with the Workplace

For project management students, the four central learning environment requirements—presence of feedback mechanisms, active engagement, accountability for results, and opportunity for adaptable leadership and practice—are similar to the expectations of other working professionals. Workplace learning is aimed at efficient skill augmentation, measuring the knowledge employees gain against the time and cost the company invests. This is the same analysis adult learners apply to their own education, measuring career value against the cost in time and tuition.

For instructors to be able to collaborate with project management students to create the learning environment they need, one additional workplace element needs to be applied, this time for the instructor. The management concept of “servant leadership,” with its focus on service-oriented leading versus power-oriented leading, provides the construct for how to teach for value in this adaptive and responsive environment.

The seven key practices of servant leadership are self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing colleagues, coaching, not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight (Keith, 2010, para. 6). Self-awareness and listening refers to the instructor’s investment in feedback and engagement with students, including bringing a personal connection to the class and the content, adapting as needed to enhance the student experience, and adjusting to student expectations of the class. Changing the pyramid and developing colleagues remind an instructor to view students with respect as peer adults and developing professionals, maintaining the parallel with the workplace, and remaining mindful of the exchange of value for time and cost.

Coaching, instead of controlling, and unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, points to how the instructor designs

courses to take the four required project management learning environment elements into account. In particular, creating a learning environment fostering adaptable leadership and application of project management techniques requires creativity to replicate the challenges of a workplace equivalent while fostering team and individual learning.

Instructors serving as collaborators with their project management students focus on how to meet the four core requirements of effective feedback, active engagement, accountability for results, and the opportunity to practice adaptive leadership and application of project management skills and techniques. The instructor puts this into practice, starting with course preparation and clear communication between students and the instructor, moving on to assessing and supporting learning of course material and then on to putting learning into action.

Setting the Stage with Open Communication

Beginning with the course materials, the instructor prepares the course plan, including learning objectives, reading and assignment schedules, grading rubrics, and applicable course policies and instructor expectations. Just as the workplace experience begins with goal setting through job descriptions and performance expectations, in class the instructor begins by giving the roadmap for the course. Opening feedback loops early, the instructor also solicits student input from the class, allowing the opportunity to refine both expectations of students and course details.

Clear communication in both language and form is a requirement in the working world and a core element of effective feedback. Course tools prepared in a way that meets workplace standards for clarity also reduce barriers to student learning and achievement, increasing the effectiveness of the course itself. Communication style drives learning efficiency as well and can provide clear feedback and contribute to effective engagement. The manner in which instructors use language to communicate

with students can either enhance the learning process or slow it down. Heavy on experience and light on theoretical narrative, example-driven lectures and discussions create immediacy and enhance absorption. Using an approachable narrative style also communicates respect for students.

For project management students particularly, clarity in explaining concepts and examples demonstrates as well as instructs. Project management as a discipline requires that project managers teach team members how to participate on the projects they manage as part of the fourth workplace requirement to adapt leadership and project management technique.

The project management requirement to have the opportunity to practice adapting leadership drives more than just the way to present lectures. It drives how to design the course schedule. As expectations are set, course reading about theory needs to happen early so that application can follow. Team forming also needs to happen early so that the team can begin to function in advance of the due dates of team assignments. Setting those expectations at the outset of the class meets objectives of preparation and clear disclosure. This is also the time to confirm learning expectations from students and to meet them, if possible.

The course schedule in Table 1 is an example of communicating class expectations and displays a distillation of reading expectations, team and individual assignments, course schedules, and a grading schedule. Students appreciate a customized schedule, reducing confusion about deadlines, the simplest of barriers to course success and engagement.

All assignments are due Sunday night no later than midnight PST of each week.

Session	Dates (Bold is due date)	Text reading timing	Assignments (In addition to weekly participation)	Individual Assignment Points	Team Assignment Points	Participation Points	Total
Week 1	1/10-1/16	Part 1 Schein Part 1 DeLuca				1	1
Week 2	1/17-1/23	Part 2 Schein				3	3
Week 3	1/24-1/30	Part 2 DeLuca	Individual-The importance of org culture to project management	10		2	12
Week 4	1/31-2/6	Finish DeLuca	Team-Project Summary and Stakeholder Map		10	2	12
Week 5	2/7-2/13	Finish Schein				3	3
Week 6	2/14-2/20					3	3
Week 7	2/21-2/27		Individual-Political Savvy for Project Managers	20		2	22
Week 8	2/28-3/6					2	2
Week 9	3/7-3/13		Team-Definition of PM Approach to Stakeholders		20	2	22
Week 10	3/14-3/20		Final Course Distillation	20			20
				50	30	20	100

Table 1: Example of customized course schedule

Working in Teams

The core of projects is team work, and the core of teaching project management is teaching in teams. In the classroom environment, forming into learning teams as an early exercise establishes group expectations and relationships. Team members learn from each other and immediately experience team dynamics.

The instructor has a key role in facilitating team work. He or she needs to define assignments at the start of a class with an emphasis on clarity, but the job includes making sure teams can form around their project as an anchor for the rest of the class material, meeting requirements for feedback mechanisms, active engagement, and opportunity to adapt leadership. For the seminar or in-class environment, periodic team work, interspersed with lecture/discussion, allows the teams to apply each discussion topic on the spot. These intervals include working with each team individually to confirm understanding and to monitor the team dynamic as it develops. Each member of the team is studying to be the project manager, but in the classroom, leadership needs to be shared so that it can be part of the lesson for all students. Helping with guidelines on how to rotate leadership, close monitoring of how the team works, and providing for frequent delivery of results are ways that the instructor supports effective team behaviors.

The team assignments themselves encompass self-determination, creativity, fair distribution of work, and written and verbal communication, aligning with the objectives of the working environment. Teams should choose their own case for the course assignments, either a published fictional case or an actual project from a team member's workplace. The assignments might include creation of project management artifacts, preparation of written reports, and presentations. Such work has enough content to require each team member to contribute fully, sharing in accountability for results, and enough scope and range to require creative adaptation of course content to the team's chosen project.

As a strategy to support team effectiveness, the instructor should conform grading to the performance measurement standards in the work environment. Setting clear expectations includes the distribution of grade points between team work and individ-

ual work and team grading that earns team members the same grade with appropriate exceptions. This also reinforces the intent to match workplace measures of shared accountability.

Online or virtual teams are a reality in the workplace and are also an appropriate structure for online project management courses. The use of electronic team workspaces and collaboration tools contributes to making online teaming in class an effective learning environment. The instructor observes interaction in online team rooms and can give feedback as needed.

Evaluation and Feedback

In the workplace clear expectations and collaboration are part of project management, and team products are meant to be shared. In the project management classroom, students can learn from each other by reviewing assignments posted to a common online forum. Individual and team analyses or papers make excellent learning tools, as each student can see how his or her work compares to efforts of other students. Writing quality, analytical maturity, and overall level of work appear to rise once students can see what their fellow students are producing. While students can be initially resistant to this approach, they quickly see that the work of fellow students can foster great discussion and growth.

The instructor can support the feeling of student safety in the classroom by grading assignments and giving feedback privately. The varying quality of student work visible in open team spaces is self-evident. The instructor can provide general announcements about that quality, offering suggestions or tips and techniques about the subject matter, but actual grades and specific feedback to each student are private. Once again, this aligns with the workplace, where work products and team performance feedback are reviewed publicly but individual performance feedback is usually discussed privately.

Conclusion

Working adult students use their education as a career tool to advance their skills and abilities in the workplace. Adult students come to the classroom to learn the methods of their discipline in a safe environment that reflects what they experience in their jobs, including the core workplace requirements of feedback mechanisms, active engagement, and accountability for results. Project management students also have the additional requirement of a learning environment that supports their practice of adapting leadership and application of their project management discipline in preparation for the demands of their workplaces.

Instructors who follow the guidelines of servant leadership teach with clarity and responsiveness to frame the class and then focus on empowering self-directed learning and adaptation through team and individual work. The collaboration between instructor and students is based on respect, an understanding of the demands of the working world, and a willingness to engage in an exchange of ideas to add value to the learning.

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