

Project Management and Developing our Future Generations

By Mark Reeson

Introduction

It has been recognised for many years now that children learn better and faster through an interactive approach far more than they do within a stale classroom environment that dulls or stifles a child's development. With this in mind, in March 2010 I set about trying to understand the capacity of learning by children and adults alike and then with the assistance of family, friends and colleagues who have had experience of the schooling system developed a programme that I called 'Living Learning' and then over the last two and a half years, created a programme with them that has resulted in what it is hoped will fundamentally change how children learn the topic of project management not just now but also for the future.

From the early days of preschool and kindergarten children were challenged to learn but this was always about learning and developing through play. Children would spend their day moulding materials, dressing up, and charging around and falling over each other outside.

Somewhere however, over the past few years early school years have become the new first grades where the focus of the school day has turned to results orientation and passing tests to meet targets with much more time being spent solely around the preparatory work, but although the fundamental skills of reading and arithmetic are still valuable and essential parts of learning, the practical demonstration of how and when these skills can be used has been lost, so when did interactive learning suddenly become a dirty word?

What seemed to happen was that schools suddenly started to cram more and more into their curriculum to ensure that they fit the targets set by organisations, trusts or governments; something had to give somewhere and it was often the aspect of 'playtime', the arts, and the other non-academic pursuits that they had valued for so many years. Many of the schools at this stage argued that this then set the precedence so that the further a child went through the schooling system; the more they were directed towards targets and less about practical application of the learning and real life skills that would be used for the future. It was becoming a case of putting a whole lot more into school curriculums, but with nothing really coming out as a result, leading to a child's time in school gradually being eaten away.

Many experts warned that by removing the interactive learning out of a child's school day was not the answer and that it was damaging in the long term. "Interaction is important because it helps to build social and personal skills that everyone is looking for in 21st-century learning. It doesn't take away from their learning, if anything it enhances it," stated

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a professor of psychology at Temple University and co-author of *Einstein Didn't Use Flash Cards* (Rodale, 2003).

Quite simply, by allowing our children to develop in an interactive environment, is far more natural as it is far more consistent with how the human brain works. By interacting, the basic truth is that this is the way children develop more thoroughly. By giving a child a challenge, a new problem to solve or topic to discuss and share, it sparks their creativity and critical thinking map helping them to make sense of their world and how they fit into it. By allowing children to carry out the exercises where they solve the problems, where they feel empowered to make a decision demonstrates through their actions how they can make a real difference and learn those essential social and technical skills needed in life.

This is where the idea came from and so the development of 'Living Learning', the simplest of concepts was born. Through my time in project management and by speaking to some highly prestigious people in the project community, I soon discovered that with the adult training that is done, the focus was around the results and not about the user ability of the information being taught. Hence the concept of 'Living Learning' started and from this has developed a programme or curriculum that it is hoped can generate the interest back into children whereby learning is no longer about passing a test, or learning a passage of text to be regurgitated in a test in the future, but instead to blend the knowledge being offered by the teachers, creating this as a foundation and then developing this into a new approach to learn, from their peers, in the act of doing and working in the safe environment of school rather than the same predictable learning from the text book generating results that although useful for statisticians and for boards and bodies, do not really aid the child in their personal development.

Living Learning

Within the global community there are now more qualified Project Managers than ever before. With this fact, surely projects should now be booming and the success criteria to which they are measured are now being met with consummate ease. This is however not the fact and the basic training that is on offer alone is not improving the standard of Project Management technique nor project managers and so we are not aiding in the process to remove the high number of failed projects worldwide. There have been a great number of suggested methodologies, each one slightly different from the last, each one with their own strengths and weaknesses but fundamentally the projects have continued to be run the same way for the last thirty years.

With the world currently in a recession, the importance of making the most of any expenditure has become more prevalent than ever before. The project management industry covers all industries and can be as diverse as well digging on a charity project in Central Africa to the organisation and arrangements for an award ceremony. This spread of skills and disciplines covers a multi-billion dollar industry meaning that all the training and investment in the future is being spent on projects and therefore Project Management. With such a huge amount of investment being made in the project world and with the

continued developments in the construction industry and within IT for example, why is it then that project managers are still making the same mistakes, although we may now call it something different and projects are still failing to deliver for the same reasons as they did thirty years ago?

So, let's take a look at why projects fail. After a number of years of study, it has been discovered that predominantly, the main reasons for project failure have never changed over time. Listed below are the top ten reasons and where they fall within the project lifecycle.

Project Initiation

1. Unrealistic expectations of the customer or the project team
2. Requirements that are unclear or inadequately expressed by the customer or misunderstood by the project manager
3. Lack of senior management support towards the project manager and his team

Project Planning

4. Insufficient or excessive planning of the project
5. Lack of or poor management of resources

Project Control

6. Poor or no change control leading to ill-considered changes to the project scope
7. Little or no end user input
8. Insufficient or excessive monitoring and controlling of the project activities
9. Poor delegation or supervision of tasks and personnel

Project Handover and Closure

10. Poor or non-existent project closure structure

Armed with this information, the way ahead for future development of the project discipline and the project community is to try and eliminate the errors and faults that we have been consistently suffering from for as long as we can remember.

This is not to say that ensuring the project managers are rightly qualified to do the job properly is not important, that is paramount, but we must ask a question that we already know the answer to, does any qualification in project management alone actually make a project manager? Training is important, but it is only the embryonic step in ensuring that project management and the project managers can develop through knowledge and experience in a manner that remains stable and sustainable for future generations.

The proposed 'Living Learning' will go beyond training as we know it at the moment and that through its interactive nature, it is my hope is that the PMI, APM, APMG and all other associations and groups under the banner of the IPMA would look to become actively involved in the full development and maintenance of this programme giving it their full endorsement.

The solution to the project management problem is simple, note I said simple, it's just not easy.

The thing that needs to be done is to identify a calm simplified approach to the solution, set your vision in place of what has to be achieved and then believe it will work. Having people with a competency not just an ability to pass examinations is essential to making the project management community grow and to demonstrate to other industries that project management is not simply another task that they can do on top of IT or engineering, but is in actual fact, its own discipline and a career for future generations.

This cannot be done with one individual, one company or one organisation; this is a real matter of teamwork at its best. A connection of people skills and technology will be the only way this can be truly successful.

The way ahead will involve the companies, organisations and businesses doing some things that they don't want to do and in some cases just don't like to do. The key part of getting the companies involved is to educate them from the top, understanding why they need to change their approach and what differences it will make is the only way to get a 'buy-in' from the boards that control the finances. By winning over this area of the business and delivering to them the right message, it will allow them to realise the benefits available to them in the long term and we can then establish a solid foundation on which to build for the future. Yes, there may be one or two early achievements and benefits to the businesses, but this training standards approach will be long lasting and will deliver repeatable benefits.

Project Management needs to be recognised as a true profession that goes without saying. In addition, those project managers that delivers well and holds the standards that the associations or institutes adhere to deserve real recognition. Too often now we hear of people being labelled as project managers when they are little more than a task team or work package leader. This is not to say that they do not do an important job, but 'real' project managers doing 'real' project management deserve to be rewarded and treated as such.

The other part of the equation in the 'Living Learning' approach is the cultural and behavioural changes that need to be identified. I believe that the 'Living Learning' approach should provide this for all its candidates and that then will over time, become the norm. Understanding what makes a good project manager and then nurturing those skills and enhancing the individuals has to be the way ahead. It is time that the entire project associations and institutes make the difference and work together in understanding the makeup of a good project manager. Whatever it takes to achieve such a task, that time is now.

Quite clearly this is far from being a small task, a large step beyond the status quo, but using the phrase used by Barack Obama, in his ascension to the first term of his presidency and

now something that has been written into the annals of history, “We need to change, so can we do it, yes we can!”

The main reason why this ‘Living Learning’ approach will work is because we have people in the industry that believe it can.

So, if this approach is so good, how does it work and how can ‘Living Learning’ help what we are doing now and also children for the future?

Implementing the Approach

After almost ten months of collaborative work with schools and with learning institutes and establishments from five different countries, we have been developed a curriculum for use in schools or colleges to ensure that the learning and behavioural aspects on project management are introduced to children at an earlier age than most organisations have ever deemed possible.

The main organisation behind this collaboration is the Reeson Family Network (RFN), with a quality assurance role for the material content and delivery being provided by the five nations that are currently interested in assisting and then delivering this programme. The programme is expected to be prepared for roll out and delivery in early 2013 and will be named SMART Project Management.

The keys aims of the programme are to encourage parents, children and educators of various establishments to understand and promote the value of this. One early development within this has also been to discuss the possibility within the USA, of Project Management Summer Camps, giving the experience of project management to children whilst aligning it with the adventure and learning of a summer camp environment.

Early indications of what may be gained by undertaking this programme are that it will increase the learning style and application of children and that the children will appreciate the ability to plan and deliver on work such as homework or additional curricular materials. This is further supported by an appreciation of the students understanding of responsibility, that once they have signed up to complete a piece of work, they deliver on that promise. In addition, the softer skills found within project management such as teamwork, leadership, appropriate communication and conflict management allow children and adults alike to understand how to overcome personal differences and related problems.

One final element of this learning programme is that by integrating a ‘real’ project for the children to deliver ensures that they gain the full appreciation of achievement and what that feeling can do to motivate them both in their school studies and also for future endeavours and careers that they will pursue.

So how does this work in practical terms?

The curriculum that has been designed by the RFN team has created fourteen sessions of learning, each one that brushes the fundamental teachings of project management. All fourteen sessions consist of a theory lesson with a practical aspect that includes discussions and exercises. As the sessions progress, the students learn by layering new knowledge and experience upon the previous lessons, creating a growing picture of both the technical but most importantly, behavioural aspects needed to work on a project in a team and when tasked to lead a group.

Each session has been designed to last approximately 45 – 60 minutes so that the learning does not limit itself to the classroom in long drawn out sessions meaning that the learning experience is maximised in the shorter time span. This ensures that the student's concentration can be maintained well with the mixture of theory and practical discussion and task orientated exercises in each session. By giving the children a task each and every time in the session, this means that they cannot sit back and allow the learning event to occur without being fully involved and therefore grasping the practical uses of what they are learning.

The course has also been designed with the help of teachers and teaching assistants purposely so that the class is not prescriptive, but instead the lesson plan or curriculum becomes dynamic, being controlled by the school but being paced by the teachers, parents and the students alike. In this way, the classroom is where the learning begins and not ends, as each curriculum also advises that a practical project is also ran in parallel with the learning. This develops the project environment just as in any normal project, creating and producing documents, planning the next phases and most importantly as part of the learning, to gain the feeling of teamwork and achievement that can then be transferred into other areas of the student's studies and their future life.

This is where 'Living Learning' develops the child further. The idea of the 'Living Learning' approach and for SMART Project Management would be to establish a 'home' for project management within each school or district that chooses to adopt it. One suggestion that has already been voiced was that once approved, within the USA, they may choose over time to develop this under the wing it currently has of regionalised PMI offices.

There are no bounds to this approach, the only limitations on how successful this can become are the people implementing it themselves. The roll out plan would be to have a number of trial selected sites that cover a number of countries, allowing this to be reported back upon and then using these plans to gain greater attraction and hopefully adoption from the PMI, APM and APMG amongst others.

The approach would be to have the schools or colleges to come from different areas and backgrounds to register with a hosting University to become part of the SMART Project Management programme and the 'Living Learning' approach to learn the skills and the culture of 'Modern Project Management'. Here they would learn the basic skills involved in doing the job the right way through a mixture of classroom theory and practical classroom and project activities. After the initial training, they would then become mentors for other

students in their institutes or schools so that they can give support to the programme and return this learning they attained back into the environment demonstrating their knowledge alongside the teachers and lecturers experience to help deliver future courses and projects within their organisation.

The hosting University can then track the learning performance of the students taking part in the scheme to see if there is any direct or indirect correlation to the learning aptitude and ability now that these new skills have been learnt and that are now being shared. These learning achievements can then be documented to evaluate the change in the students' approach, to see if this can then be further introduced into the school programme or project management curriculum to further improve the learning experiences for teachers, parents and students together.

It would therefore become the responsibility of the 'Living Learning' and SMART Project Management programme to follow up and call in on the students and teaching institutes to check up on their progression.

The more that the teaching institutes practice the improvements and assist their student project managers the better and more natural they will become. Much as a sportsman learns their trade, they start with the basics, they practice until it becomes second nature and automatic to them, like muscle memory. Think about those games of catch or keep up you used to play. You learned the skills required without realising it. Once you had developed the fundamental skills in the back garden, you progressed to the park where you picked teams, agreed the rules and then played as agreed in a fair manner. All that learning and interaction translates into valuable life skills that can help children and adults alike in core subjects such as reading, maths and science.

It is essential that any changes identified are made to be as simple as possible. The more simple a solution for change is, as long as it is the right change, the more likely it is to be accepted by the institutes that implement them. The next step to the programme would be to have the students and teachers return to the 'Living Learning' Academy based either fixed or virtually to learn further skills in their development and to enhance the ones that they have been using. This would work like an intermediate level of training ensuring the future project managers have a developing career path and that they understand the value of the learning rather than as many are, placed on a training course either before they are ready for it, or on a course they do not even wish to attend.

This process could be repeated and they would return to work or further education with the new skills and ethics and would have the opportunity to revisit the hosting University one more time for an advanced level of practical skills. On the way through the programme, the delegates would also be offered and encouraged to take the opportunity for the formal recognised qualifications to support and develop their careers further. In this way not only will we be educating the students but also rewarding them with future qualifications as well.

By developing the teachers and students over this time and by encouraging the new learning practices, it will educate a new generation with a new culture to the best approach to project management and teaching for the future. The three areas would be to teach how to correctly identify the Right Projects, which would bring about a more formal Governance process and structure for each teaching environment, training for the Right People, by using not only project management skills but many of the behavioural characteristics needed to lead and develop a group or team and finally, training to use the Right Methods, as stated throughout all the Bodies of Knowledge books found globally and also to meet the social acceptability standards asked for by our communities.

As well as the training for the future of the industries around the world, it would be important not to lose the knowledge and experience that already exists. To do this the companies and teaching establishments that choose to sign up to the SMART Project Management programme would meet on a frequent pre-defined basis to discuss best practices and what is and is not working within their environments by the use of open discussions and forums. These learning circles with industry specialists and teaching and training organisations would lead the developing regions and organisations using their experience through networking amongst the other companies that sign up to the programme. In this way the hosting Universities and industry specialists will be able to benchmark the processes and skills allowing the 'Living Learning' approach and Academy to learn from the industries using a reciprocating method. In this way I feel that not only the message for the future of project management will be amplified and shared globally and not as it has been in the past, but also that the future generations will learn the technical and social skills needed to improve the environment we live in now and for many years into the future.

In summary, the 'Living Learning' approach and SMART Project Management Programme is not a methodology, but instead it is a new vision for the future of the profession and for our children in so being become a permanent solution to an old existing problem. The 'Living Learning' approach is a completely new way of looking at project management training and development for the future of the profession and our children. I hope that the associations and institutes throughout the world see this vision as I do and that this is the start of a new era for project management. The future of project management is not in one person, one association or one group's hands, it is all our responsibility.

Summary

In a time when we all look to the future for a chink of light or some sign of encouragement, we stand ourselves at a crossroads, wondering which path to take and wondering where that path might lead to. We consider this path for ourselves and what may stand in front of us, but also ask what this path might mean for our children and their development; now at least we have an opportunity that with the right direction and good guidance, our future generations have the hope that for so long has seemed diminishing. One recent study showed that children who attended the more academic preschools had no long-term academic advantage over children who had attended a more interactive play-oriented

environment. In fact, children in the more academic schools appeared to be less creative and less enthusiastic about learning in the long term.

The added emphasis on testing and targets has taken its toll on interactive learning in schools and colleges, perhaps now is a time to realise that it is our children behind those targets, that have so much more to learn and to achieve than the results of a spreadsheet or faceless society statistic. Teachers never used to feel so pressured if a child developed slower than another as they knew that some take a little longer to get it than others, now the teachers are placed under the microscope and challenged in these testing environments removing the joy of learning from the children.

Ask any employer, would they rather have an employee that can produce a certificate or one that has the competency and aptitude to produce results; it is generally the same answer every time.

The way that children now interact with each other and how they communicate has changed. Children used to go home after school and meet and interact whether it was to play football or climb trees, now however we pay to create these environments for them, signing them up for a sports team or for summer camps. Children are far more advanced than most adults give them credit for, telling them what they can and can't do without giving a real reason why, when in actual fact the future generations we create are already prepared for the future, much younger than we ever dreamt of them being.

By denying children this opportunity to learn in an environment that best suits learning, we, without realising it are stifling the growth of our off spring. Children don't learn those social skills that will help them as they grow older by interacting with computer screens or the television, but instead they need to be able to share their experiences and communicate in a constructive and structured manner, letting them make the decisions and then seeing, under the guidance of a safe learning environment, what the results of these decisions are and what impact these have on themselves and those around them.

Schools are being challenged more all the time to develop and create our future managers and leaders, however if children don't get opportunities to learn through engagement in a structured social environment we will only create children that lack in imagination and innovation.

Children need to be around children in a challenging environment, it has been proven they learn better from each other through talking and interaction. These tools that we teach our children at the youngest of ages so that we can communicate with them are still the most powerful tools in the classroom, the only problem with that is, you need time to achieve this. By placing two children in the same situation they can sit next to each other, use the same tools and receive the same information but still learn at different levels but most importantly, learn from each other. Have you ever watched a child turning a simple paper cup or cereal box into a rocket ship or a boat? This ability to think imaginatively is a valuable skill for future generations, after all Steve Jobs thought of things no one else

thought of, if he had been stifled or restricted in his learning and innovation, would you be holding your iPhone or iPad today?

It is just as equally important though to have an adult to observe, guide and expand on a child's development. Children learn more when an adult interacts with them, not controls and takes over but interacts. Having this new learning approach incorporating the SMART Project Management and 'Living Learning' will allow the adults to learn just as much from the students as the students will learn from their teachers. Where can the harm be in learning from younger minds? Children and adults alike can learn more successfully when lessons are active, engaging, and meaningful and not just an exercise in memory retention and worksheets.

Learning is about the classroom and beyond, it starts at the desks and with the theory, but just how far can open and honest education and learning really take us?

About the Author



Mark Reeson

United Kingdom

Mark Reeson is a project management specialist with twenty nine years' experience, is a Fellow of the Association of Project Management (APM), and has been involved in many project and programme consultative roles. He has recently been appointed a Registered Project Professional with APM and is a recognised Sustainability Management Global Advisor. Having started his career in the Royal Air Force, Mark has continued to develop by working and delivering projects in the nuclear, training and international sporting field.

Mark has developed his role through further experience with the nuclear industry and is now the owner of M R Project Solutions and fulfils the role of Project Management Advisor. His role is very much client facing and Mark now regularly travels the world meeting clients and training and developing their project families for the International Institute for Learning. Mark's main role is the development and the consultation with many organisations on ensuring they choose the right approach or methodology to deliver their projects and then follows this up with the correct bespoke training programmes for how their company wants to share this learning with their staff members. Mark has been very successful in the public sector particularly with the County and City Councils, already having developed a number of methodologies and recently has just launched two training programmes with an insurance company and another nuclear organisation.

Mark recently was asked to take a temporary role within a financial company to assess how they would best introduce a project methodology to improve their turnover and delivery efficiency. Mark has also had success with his new unique approach to training and mentoring project managers and has recently authored and has become the advocate of 'Living Learning in the Project Management Community'.

Mark is hoping in the future to develop this further to spread the knowledge and competency available through this approach to many more organisations worldwide. Mark's latest success has been the introduction of Project Management for Future Generations which has gained great acclaim already within Africa, Europe and the United States. In Mark's own words, "Long may the development of our children continue and project management has a role to play in that."

Mark Reeson can be contacted at mark.reeson@btinternet.com.