

IPMA Education and Training Series¹

How acquired knowledge is transformed into competencies

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This article describes the great learning potential of IPMA® Certification – because the certification process provides a new overview, increases the consciousness of knowledge and experiences, and promotes the ability to reflect, scale and maneuver.

The learning potential of IPMA® Certification

This is common knowledge: It is one thing to gain new knowledge on good project management through a course. However, it is something quite different to transform that knowledge into applied competencies.

Having knowledge might mean that you can pass a written exam. Being competent is about being capable of initiating and applying the acquired knowledge in situations where it could be useful and to practice that knowledge with participants and with project parties.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the fact that participation in IPMA® Certification – according to experience in the Danish IPMA Association – is a unique learning process, which in itself promotes the transformation of knowledge and experience into applied competencies.

The value of participating in the IPMA® Certification is not just to gain a ‘piece of paper’ on your knowledge and capability when you begin the certification. According to our experience, the value is just as much that the participation in the certification process makes certification candidates more competent.

In that way, IPMA® Certification differs fundamentally from other certifications in project management, in which the main achievement is to pass the written exam.

Adjusted view of learning

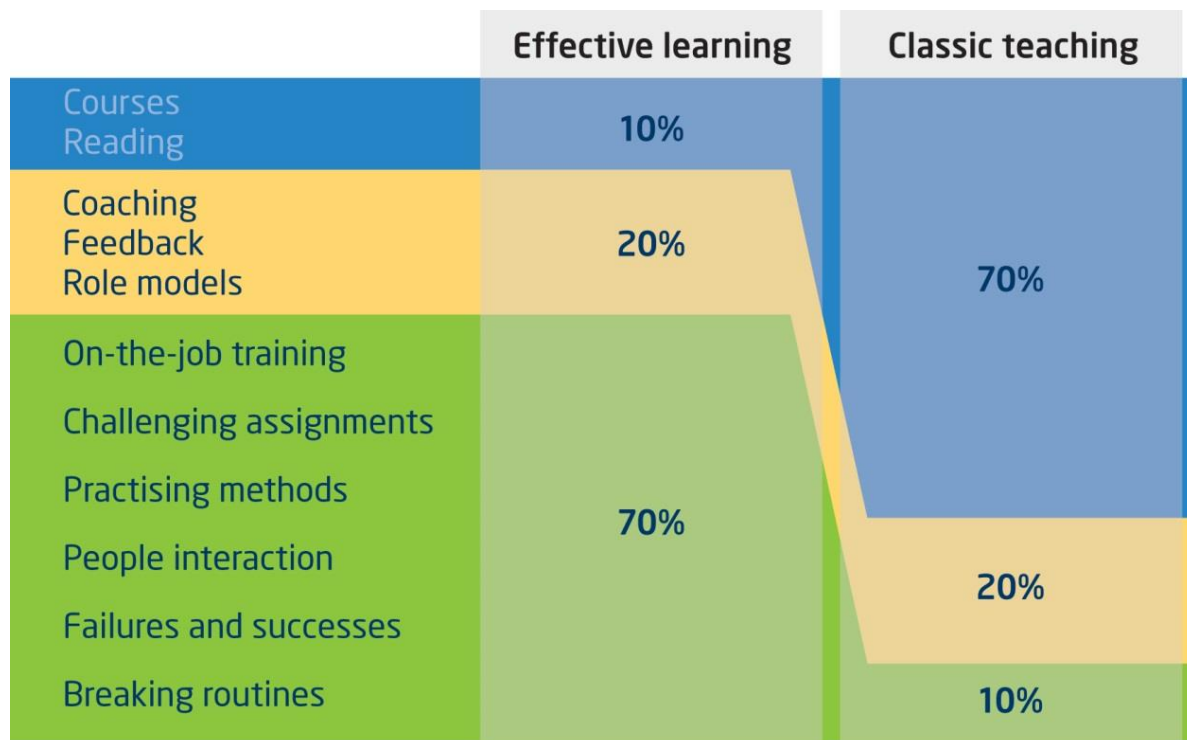
Recent years have shown that a change in concept is necessary to achieve full value of the many resources that are invested in education, not least in postgraduate education. This is especially the case of education in project management where

¹ This series of articles is by members of the IPMA Education and Training (E&T) Board or other IPMA leaders on the subject of project management education, training, careers and related topics. More information about the IPMA E&T can be found at <http://ipma.ch/education>.

knowledge of methods is not sufficient. It is just as important to develop skills in leadership behaviour and to learn from acquired experiences.

The classic approach to education could in brief be characterised by applying 70% of the time spent on participating in courses combined with reading, with 20% spent on follow-up by coaching in knowledge application and only 10% on 'getting the knowledge to sink in' – see Figure 1.

Figure1. Comparison of learning approach and teaching approach



The recommendation is – again in brief – to achieve effective learning by turning the percentage distribution upside down and to spend only 10% on courses and reading, and instead to spend 70% on transforming the gained knowledge into applied competencies.

However, such a shift or re-organisation is not easy. Time off for courses, reading, and to some extent for coaching, feedback and role models could largely be organised and structured to take place. It is much more challenging to ensure that 70% is spent on practicing and re-thinking.

Here IPMA® Certification comes in as a powerful contribution to the 70% of the time of 'Effective Learning' to achieve a real competence boost. This has been verified at the closing ceremonies with the IPMA Certified project managers in Denmark, where they tell about the benefits of the certification process. We have similar statements from the start of the re-certification five years after the first certification:

“Have become more reflective”. “Have an improved view of the role”. “Act more proactively”. “Conscious of the need also to lead the project management process

itself". "Apply more methods that I have learned earlier". "Now more dialogue on challenges with other project managers".

In other words, experience shows that IPMA® Certification helps the candidates to benefit more from their previous knowledge, and from experience gained previously.

To illustrate this with an analogy from the animal world: Participating in an education is like a cow, which has been eating grass for several hours and has filled its first stomach. Attending a subsequent IPMA® Certification is like the same cow lying down and ruminating on what it has eaten, and transporting it to the second stomach where it is transformed into energy.

Levels and steps of the IPMA® Certification

To support career development within project management, the IPMA® Certification programme consists of four levels with increasing requirements for proven competencies (see Figure 2). At the same time, the requirements for the extent of experience are increased: Level D 6 man-months is recommended, Level C 36 man-months is demanded, Level B 60 man-months and Level A 84 man-months.

Figure2. Levels of IPMA® Certification



The following pages give a description across the Levels D, C, B and A of the learning potential from the certification process, divided into the three main steps, of which Level D is only including Step 1.

Step 1: CV, self-assessment and written exam

The certification process is launched by an **introduction session** per level where the entire process is explained, and training in applying the self-assessment tool takes place. The aim of the session is also to draw attention to the learning potential in the process – and to create study groups as learning forums throughout the certification process.

The next step is to **develop a brief CV**, which provides candidates with an overview of previous educations, courses and literature. It serves as a reminder, which is further strengthened by the fact that the three most important gainings from each education, course and literature are described. In other words, previous learning is revived, and new learning will take place.

The **self-assessment** is undertaken by applying the tool 'Competencies in project management', which is the Scandinavian 'National Competence Baseline' (NCB).

First, an overview of experience is established by a **survey of previous projects** undertaken and of their complexity, which in itself is a useful journey. Furthermore, **experience from managing** projects is extracted from one or two projects, with a focus on gained learning.

The next step is for the candidate is to assess own **competencies in applying methods** or techniques related to the 34 competencies with approximately 180 sub-competencies. The learning takes place when the candidate is required to refer to the source of his/her best knowledge for each of the 34 competencies and to the project where the method or technique has been used most profitably.

The self-assessment finishes by assessing the candidate's level of **competencies in leadership behaviour** – related to 12 competencies with 44 sub-competencies. Here, the learning is about becoming more self-aware and about gathering feedback from others in relation to the behavioural competencies.

Incidentally, some of the effective learning, which the IPMA® Certification provides, can be achieved using 'Competencies in Project Management' for self-assessment, independently of participation in the certification, either individually or as a group in a company.

Step 2: Planning session, behaviour feedback and project report

At Level C, Step 2 consists of participation in an all-day assessment workshop – called a **planning session**. At the session, the candidates work in groups planning a case project. This provides good opportunities for exchange of experience of method applications and reflection on the value of the methods.

For Levels B and A, the step includes collection of **feedback on leadership behaviour** from four referees. The feedback is only for the assessors, who apply it for their assessment, and later for feedback to the candidate.

The most significant boost at level B is achieved during the **preparation of the report** on the candidate's management of a complex project – and for level A on management of complex programmes, portfolios or project-based organisations. A number of management challenges are analysed – with focus on achieving learning. For the assessors, the report is an important tool for assessing the level of performed competencies in project management. For the candidates, the work preparing the report is an extensive reflective process.

Step 3: Interactive session and interview with feedback

For level B, the interview day begins with an **interactive session** where the candidate will have a one-hour dialogue with a project manager and his/her project owner about managing their topical project. The candidate has one hour beforehand to study documents relating to the management of the project.

For the assessors, the session is useful to observe demonstrated experience, the application of methods and leadership behaviour. For the candidate, the session puts him/her under pressure and establishes an opportunity to demonstrate one of the most important competencies, that is, the ability to create managerial value through interaction.

The process for level A is identical; however, the management of programmes, portfolios or project-based organisations is the focus during the interaction with managers operating at that level.

At Levels C, B and A, the process **concludes with an interview** of one to two hours. For the assessors, the interview presents a last opportunity to check those competencies that have not been sufficiently demonstrated through the previous steps. The candidate gets on-going feedback on what the assessors have observed during the entire process.

However, what many candidates say makes the entire process worth it is that the assessors use the last part of the interview to **highlight where the candidate** has been seen as especially competent in relation to experience, methods and behaviour. Recommendations on how the candidate can improve his/her competence are also provided, again in relation to experience, methods and behaviour. What makes the feedback unique is that the two assessors have spent between 6 and 12 hours per candidate on assessing the candidate's competencies!

The perspective for IPMA® Certification

15 years ago, when Danish Project Management started to introduce IPMA® Certification, we focused – like all others - on creating the perception that the certification is a matter of “getting a piece of paper” on the competencies that up until now have been built up through practicing. Just as other certifications, which primarily are based on a written exam.

Part of the purpose for participating in the certification is still to achieve a certificate on own competence level, but the longer we have delivered IPMA® Certification – the more attentive we have become on the unique learning potential which the programme implies.

The competence boost, which the participants in the certification achieve, is in my opinion the most important contribution from Danish Project Management Association to promote a position of Denmark in the final round about a world championship in project management project.

So, we might consider changing the term from IPMA® Certification with a great possibility for further learning – to IPMA® Competence Boost with a side-effect as a formal certificate.

About the Author



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Morten Fangel is Managing Director and Chief Consultant of Fangel Consultants Ltd. and one of the founders of the Danish Project Management Association, (IPMA Denmark) of which he today is the Managing Director. Morten is also member of four other Nordic PM Associations, the International Project Management Association (IPMA), the Project Management Institute (PMI ®) and the Association of Certified Management Consultants (CMC). He is former president, past Chair and an Honorary Fellow of IPMA, and an honorary member of the Icelandic Project Management Association. Morten is also a global advisor for the PM World Journal.

Morten Fangel holds a Master of Science degree in Civil Engineering, and Ph.D. in industrial research from the Technical University of Denmark and a Diploma in Economics degree from the Copenhagen Business School. After years in consulting Engineering companies, he founded Fangel Consultants Ltd., from where he has more than three decades of experience in management consulting.

Morten Fangel has introduced and is a specialist in methodologies for project preparation and start-up, and for planning and evaluation of project management. He is the author of the book *Proactive Project Management: How to Make Common Sense Common Practice*, published in 2013. He organizes and teaches the annual IPMA Advanced Courses. Morten can be contacted at morten@fangel.dk