

Life is a Project¹

Project Skills for All

Neil Robinson

Why? The niggle – intrinsic motivation and making a difference.

Managing Global Projects. For some, this vocation conjures images of business lounges, luxurious hotels, exotic destinations and well-organised project operations all orchestrated by an immaculately composed Project Manager, with just a laptop and wi-fi connection from the shade of a coconut palm. For most of us, reality “in the trenches” couldn’t be more different, as we spend our waking moments engaged in a never-ending series of races against time, scope, cost and quality constraints trying to cajole thinly-stretched team members to achieve exceptional targets promised to expectant and often incensed stakeholders in culturally and geographically diverse regions of the world.

Occasionally, during moments of recuperation, our thoughts might turn to the question of “Why?” We may dimly recall those inspiring case studies glimpsed in the pages of project management publications, outlining the intrinsically-motivated pursuits of fellow Project Management practitioners, brimming with the motivational joy of Maslow’s self-actualisation as they share their skills and expertise with incredibly receptive, respectful and appreciative stakeholders across the globe. “One day...” we tell ourselves as we smack down our coffee, snatch the latest Issues Log, pick ourselves up from the Data Centre floor and return to the fray.

A chance conversation. The seed is sown.

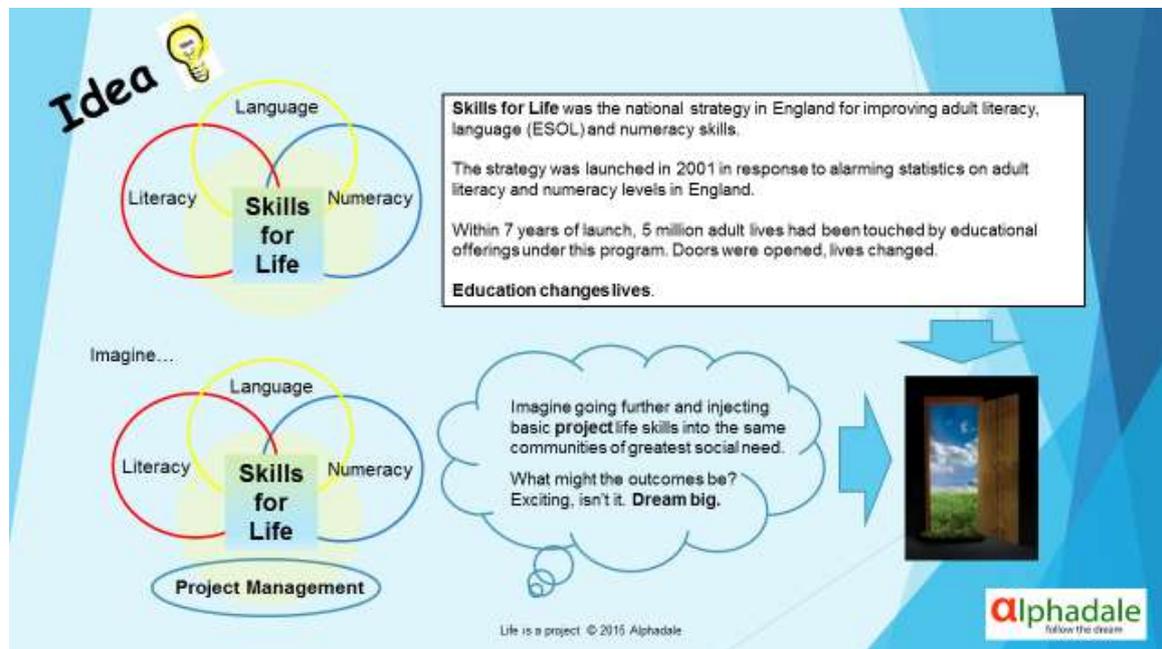
In March of 2015, attending the PMI EMEA Congress in London, UK, a chance conversation ensued with an interesting US gentleman by the name of Jim Snyder.

Having recently returned from a sabbatical (parental health issues) in Australia, I’d taken the opportunity to get involved in a few community projects such as teaching English to migrants and promoting the concept of volunteering within the City of London. The UK Government had invested in a substantial national literacy and language initiative aimed at supporting the skills capability of “at-risk” community groups. The programme was titled *Skills for Life*, which sparked an excited response in the eyes of Jim Snyder who ushered me aside and thrust a booklet in my hands – *Project Management for Social Good*.

Jim spoke about the concept of *Skills for Life* in a project management context and the initiatives of the PMI Education Foundation who were developing simple, intuitive methods for teaching project based “life skills” to school children, particularly in developing countries.

¹This is the first in a series of articles by Neil Robinson, author of the award winning paper “[Life is a Project: Enabling Life Skills in Cross-Cultural Transitions](#)”, first presented at the 6th Scientific Conference on Project Management in the Baltic States, University of Latvia, April 2017. The paper was selected by the Project Management Institute (PMI®) for the 2017 James R. Snyder International Student Paper of the Year Award for the EMEA Region. The paper and this article are inspired by the outcomes of the Life is a Project (LIAP) education initiative launched by the author to teach project management life skills to a group of ESL (English as a Second Language) adults in London.

So if we can successfully teach Project Management “lite” to children, teachers and charity workers...why not migrants, refugees and other “at-risk” community groups whose capabilities might benefit significantly from such skills? The seed was sown.



The concept – Life is a Project – project skills for all

The *Life is a Project (LIAP)* concept was defined in broad terms as a voluntary initiative:

1. To develop a volunteer-led, community-based program of project skills training for the benefit of minority community groups most at risk of social exclusion.
2. To target the same disadvantaged audiences as the UK National ESOL *Skills for Life* initiatives.
3. To deliver practical, relevant and digestible project skills for life training.
4. To inspire and open doors for others.

Proposal

In the same spirit as England's recent national ESOL skills for life initiatives and targeting the same communities of greatest social need.

"Life is a project" – using simple project management skills in everyday life.

PM skills - Life is a project
free
Knowledge is power!
EDUCATION

Basic skills for life

- ESOL learners (English as 2nd language)
- New immigrants and refugees
- Ethnic minorities

Social Inclusion

- Long-term unemployed
- Low-skilled workers
- Young adults

Economic Impact

- Senior citizens
- Other groups at risk of exclusion

Life is a project © 2015 Alphasdale

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Developing the concept

The high-level approach to developing the LIAP concept, framework, curriculum, materials and delivery plans involved:

1. Researching the existing body of knowledge of *Skills for Life* resources, case studies and course materials and assessing their suitability for the LIAP audience.
2. Discussing concept and approach with colleagues, PM practitioners and associations, trainers, ESL (English as a 2nd Language) teachers, and community organisations.
3. Designing and developing the ESL-focused, language-graded, five-module Life is a Project (LIAP) course, materials and lesson plans.
4. Preparing a pilot course for delivery in Ealing, West London. Negotiated support from the local Ealing Council Library who provided a no-cost training facility.



Delivering the programme

The LIAP programme was delivered as a proof-of-concept endeavour to test the feasibility and potential for realisable benefits of the concept. The programme, a 100% voluntary initiative led by a single volunteer with appropriate skills in both Project Management (PMP, PRINCE2) and English Language teaching (CELTA), included:

1. Delivery of the five-module LIAP course to a diverse group (ages 20-67, six native languages) of ESL adults, over a five week (once a week) period, January – February 2016.
2. Presentation of core project management concepts, processes, and tools using a highly visual approach, digestible language and relevant life-based examples.
3. Consolidation of participants' learning with concept checking exercises, and application of methods and tools to their own real life projects.
4. Each participant used the workshops to choose and develop their own real life project plans.
5. Supplementing the workshops with a cloud based Google+ space for participants to connect and share online

Result ✓

Location: Ealing, West London

ESOL communities coming together to learn **Project Skills for Life**.

6 nationalities, ages 20 - 67

Transcending boundaries with teamwork, action and project skills for all!

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The outcome

1. The five-week Ealing (London) pilot was deemed a great success.
2. The diverse ESL group engaged enthusiastically using project methodology and skills to plan their own real life projects such as learning a language, starting a business, career planning and planning events.
3. The pilot programme culminated with a real life community project, planned, managed and delivered by the group – a RefuTEA tea party in the Ealing Library in support of the British Refugee Council (NGO).
4. Participants left the programme with new skills, tools, ideas and confidence in their own abilities to plan and deliver all manner of life projects.

Celebrate

Location: Ealing, West London

Celebrating completion of the **Life is a Project** pilot with a real community project!

Event: RefuTEA party in support of the British Refugee Council

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Benefits Realisation

Approximately 6 months after the conclusion of this pilot programme, the potential of the concept was truly validated – with a surprise invitation to a business launch!

One of the pilot's attendees, Laura, an Italian ESL participant living in London, had used the graded project-based skills, methods, tools and templates to follow her workshop concept through to real life fruition – launching a “Biodanza” dance class business in September 2016.



<http://ealingnewsextra.co.uk/features/learning-the-language-of-success/>

What's next for LIAP?

The London LIAP initiative, concluded in March of 2016, was, in effect, a “proof-of-concept” conducted as a one-person voluntary effort to test the feasibility and potential benefits of the idea.

The success of the pilot and its potential for further application in the field of “social good” inspired further academic study and development of the research paper *Life is a Project: Project Management as an Enabling Life Skill in Cross-Cultural Transition* – the recipient of the 2017 PMIEF International Student Paper of the Year Award EMEA.

The LIAP concept now requires wider community support if it is to progress beyond its current status as a “feel good” story with potential.

Potential ideas for developing the concept include:

- Sharing LIAP materials with the Global PM community (via PM associations)
- Standardisation of resources for wider application (via PM associations)
- Translation to foreign languages for international use (possible volunteer activity)
- Adaptation and usage by local Councils, NGO's, business or community associations
- Extension of the concept to other “at-risk” community groups
- Global collaboration with like-minded others (we can achieve much more together)

The next step is very much dependent on igniting the interest and participation of others who see value in providing organisational, logistical or financial support to further the concept. If you are interested in getting involved or have some suggestions, please contact me at alphadale@outlook.com.

About the Author



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Neil C. Robinson is an experienced Business and Technology Project Manager, consultant and trainer with global experience delivering complex projects, transformation programmes, and business solutions in diverse geographic locations. His experience as a practitioner includes Senior Programme/Project Management, IT Services, and Operational roles in the private and public sectors. His domain experience includes IT Management and Project Delivery roles in the Aviation, Technology, Oil & Energy, Health, Government, Insurance, and Education sectors. His regional Project Management experience includes on-ground delivery in 20+ countries across the UK, Europe, the Middle East, Australasia, the Americas and Asia.

Neil is PMP and PRINCE2 accredited and is currently undertaking research and academic studies in a Masters (Project Management) programme at Salford Business School. He has a special interest in social project management and initiated the “Life is a Project” concept in London, teaching project management life skills to ‘at-risk’ community groups. His further research interests include the roles of motivation and cultural intelligence in international project success.

Neil can be contacted at alphadale@outlook.com and welcomes global collaboration from practitioners, academics and students in his field of interest.