

Life is a Project¹

“I want to...” Life goals: a project based approach

Neil Robinson

In January 2016 an ambitious pro-bono initiative, Life is a Project (LIAP), was launched in Ealing, West London – an exploratory series of five weekly workshops, teaching basic project management concepts and skills to a diverse group of ESL (English as a Second Language) adults. The aim of this initiative was to explore the feasibility and potential value of the concept in the context of personal capability building and life goal achievement.

Workshop approach – visual, practical, and language-graded

Providing skills training to a diverse ESL audience necessitated a visual, rather than textual, approach and set of learning materials. Text was necessarily language-graded as much as possible. In the world of English Language Teaching, skills are imparted, from a state of “ignorance” through to “active use”, via a cyclical teaching process of process of Input – Learning – Use.

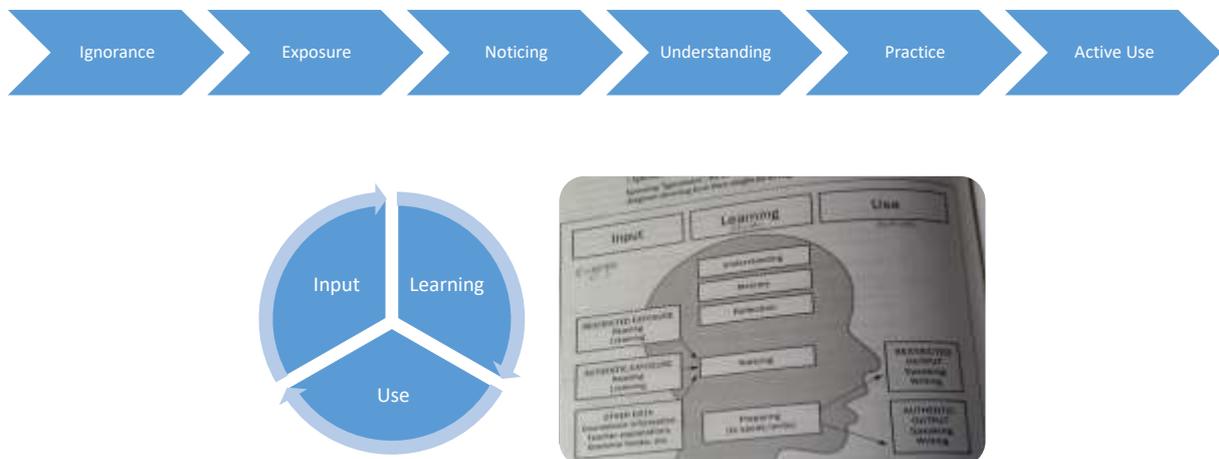


Figure 1: LIAP Teaching Approach (Source: Adapted from Scrivener, 2011, p.126)

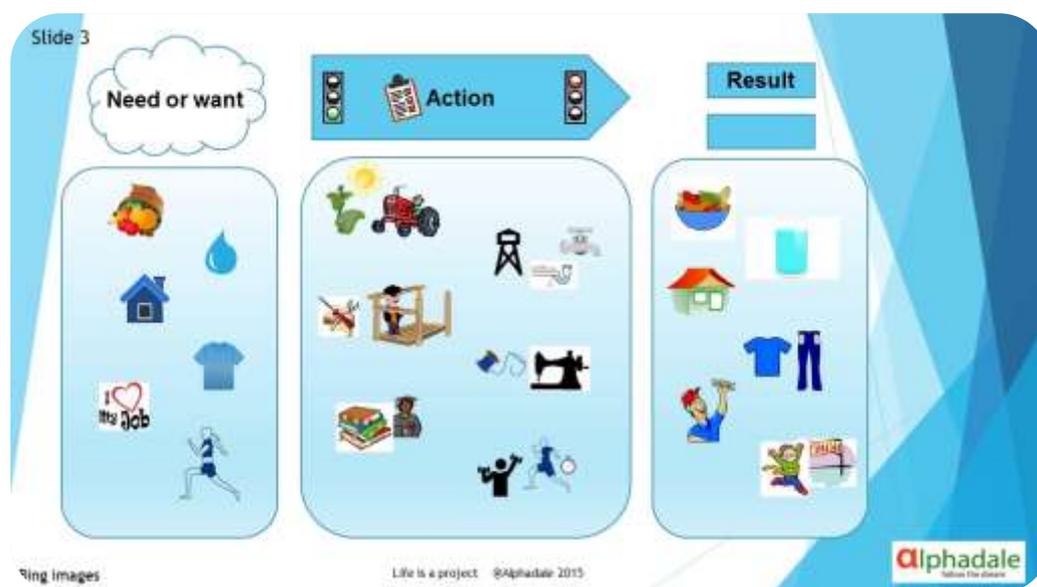
¹This is the second in a series of articles by Neil Robinson, author of the award winning paper “[Life is a Project: Enabling Life Skills in Cross-Cultural Transitions](#)”, first presented at the 6th Scientific Conference on Project Management in the Baltic States, University of Latvia, April 2017. 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 series of articles 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.

The LIAP workshops followed the same approach by incrementally eliciting and explaining new concepts, then checking understanding through structured exercises, controlled practice and finally active application to participants' real life projects.

So, what is a project?

As professional Project Managers, we generally think of a project as a temporary business undertaking with a fixed purpose, underpinned by a positive business case. Our leading professional associations define a project as “a unique, transient endeavour undertaken to achieve planned objectives” (Association for Project Management [APM], 2012) or as “a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result” (Project Management Institute [PMI], 2008, p.5).

However, according to Maylor (2010, p.3) “Life is one big project. The trick is in managing it”. Here we have the concept of Life being viewed as a series of related tasks which can be planned and managed as “one big project”. Is this a valid view? In the sense that Life is temporary, unique and has a purpose, Maylor's statement is absolutely valid. In theory, the tools, techniques and skills of project management can be applied with equal efficacy to any endeavour that meets the project criteria of temporariness, uniqueness and purpose, including “life projects”.



The first of five LIAP workshops introduced participants to the concept and definition of “projects” with an emphasis on everyday life needs and aspirations. Their comprehension of the concept was checked with an exercise on identifying valid project scenarios. A guided deconstruction of example life projects into logical constituent phases helped to elicit the simple model of a five stage Imagine – Plan – Do – Check - Achieve project lifecycle.

Everyday life goals as project objectives

A key outcome of the workshop was for each participant to have a solid understanding of typical life pursuits which meet the criteria of project endeavours. Participants were guided through the process of identifying and discussing real-world examples of life projects they have already undertaken. Each participant was then set the goal of defining their own life project to be developed as a practical example throughout the workshop series.



Managing life projects – the constraints.

The role of the Project Manager was introduced with a brainstorming exercise. From the outcomes of this process we were able to extract and highlight the key project management responsibilities of managing scope, time, cost and quality in every project.

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Exercise 6: Scope, Time, Cost or Quality?

Project: Camino de Santiago walk in Spain

What needs to be managed?	S/T/C/Q?
I have a budget of 2,000 euros for food, transport and accommodation	
I need to collect stamps from every village in my "passport" to prove I really walked	
I will walk from St Jean Pied de Port to Santiago (775km)	
I have 5 weeks of holiday leave from my work.	


Scope


Time


Cost


Quality

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A further “spot the constraint” exercise helped to check and consolidate participants’ comprehension. It became evident in group discussion that the management of these constraints is just as crucial in life projects as it is the business project domain. Practical examples reinforced the concept of “trade-offs” between competing constraints.

Imagine. “I want to...”

As is the case with business projects, the starting point for any life project is a clear definition of exactly what it is that you wish to achieve. Such a definition, or Project Statement, must address the constraints of scope, time, cost and quality. In the example above I might state:

“I want to walk the Camino de Santiago across Spain, starting in St Jean Pied de Port and finishing in Santiago de Compostela (scope). I must complete this walk within 5 weeks (schedule). I have a travel budget of 2,000 euros (cost). In order to prove that I’ve completed all stages of the journey by foot, I must collect stamps from the cathedrals of every village that I pass through (quality).”

Next Up: *Making it real. Ask, answer, write it down!* In the world of project management, we take our brilliant idea and make it real through the Initiation and Planning phases. The act of writing our project statement or charter gives life and substance to our idea – a project is born! The next article in this series takes this concept into the realm of everyday life projects.

References

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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 is the 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.

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