Chapter 79
Towards Effective Teaching in Project Management

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ABSTRACT

As a typical IT management subject, IT project management has existed as a core subject in universities for a long period. Unlike other subjects, project management requires solid experience to fully understand its concepts and methodologies. Reluctantly, many academics often face the situation that their students lack such experience, and how to ensure the teaching/learning quality becomes an important issue to solve. This chapter first identifies some typical issues with project management students and the corresponding challenges to effective teaching. Some teaching methods are also introduced together with the sharing of the author's experience in applying them in class. The effectiveness of the methods is evaluated according to the teaching improvements in terms of student feedback and satisfaction statistics.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed that IT projects are increasingly started as a main means to realise various business goals. This trend clearly shows a solid demand of IT project management skills on the job market (Kloppenborg, 2011; Marchewka, 2012). Aiming to fulfil this demand, IT project management has been and continues to be one of the most popular subjects in many IT/IS departments across the world to produce the future professionals of IT projects. However, the transfer of knowledge on project management has also experienced challenges over years, due to the inherit nature of subject and students (Ojiakoa, Ashleigha, Chipulua, & Maguireb, 2011; Reif & Mitri, 2005). Such ineffectiveness results in the reluctant situation that students complain about the distance between teaching content and practical use, lecturers are frustrated about students' engagement and enthusiasm, and the industry still expect the university graduates to be more work-ready (Mengel, 2008; Wysocki, 2009).

This chapter particularly focuses on the teaching/learning issues of project management subject at university campus, based on the practical teaching experience of Unit 7173 System Project and Quality Management at University of Canberra. The chapter is organised in the following manner: Firstly presents

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the identified shortcomings of current teaching in Project Management; secondly explores the impacts to students' knowledge creation and consolidation; Thirdly introduces some new teaching, assessing methods of enhancing the student learning effectiveness and experience; and lastly briefly discusses the results and evaluations of the introduced methods. The chapter is to share some experiences and insights obtained from practical teaching, and thereby help academic staff to improve the teaching quality of project management related subjects. The expected impacts also lie in developing a more effective teaching scheme and knowledge consolidating mechanism for inexperienced students.

CURRENT ISSUES IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT TEACHING

State of the Art

Project management has been ranked as the single most important management skill as indicated in a survey to senior executives by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in 2008(Zhao, Liu, Yang, & Sadiq, 2007), and 1/5 of the world's GDP (US $12 trillion) is being spent on projects this year (Zhao & Liu, 2010). According to such strong industry need, project management has been set up as a popular unit in universities globally.

Typical project management teaching, particularly to university students with no real project experiences, covers project planning, controlling, reporting, etc., which involves some typical project documents and estimating/planning methods. Traditional project management teaching is just introducing the concepts and methods with illustrating examples (Abernethy, Piegari, & Reichgelt, 2007). Since such concepts are far away from students' everyday life, such teaching meets a lot of challenges in effectively engaging students, transferring knowledge to students, and practising related soft skills (such as communication, team management, etc.) Recently, many educational institutions run simulations in project management units to give students an opportunity to practice the introduced conceptual knowledge in a nearly real environment (Krause, 2010). Role play of project team positions, hands- on work for project, and professional tools are widely used in class to build up practical skills of students. These changes make project management unit very different from other theoretical units or the pure practical units (such as internship). Many efforts have been put to exploring and establishing an effective learning/teaching method of project management content to inexperienced students (Divjak & Kukec, 2008), yet the road ahead seems still a bit distant to the desired point. How to seamlessly integrate the aforementioned things into project management teaching without compromising the focus and quality of learning remains a big question to all project management teaching practitioners.

This chapter is to discuss some identified issues based on the practical experience of teaching unit 7173 System Project and Quality Management (SPQM) at University of Canberra (UC), Australia. In the course/degree roadmap, this unit is designed to be concept/methodology oriented, and is followed by a practice-oriented unit (7164 IT Project). Though the observation is within UC campus only, the identified problems seem very typical to the teaching in other campuses and countries.

Background of Project Management Teaching at UC

Unit SPQM is a typical face-to-face unit open to the third year bachelor students. The student cohort is a mixture of domestic students and international students, where most students have no professional work-