

Leveraging Personal Networks to Support Authentic IDPT Project Management Experiences for Online Doctoral Students

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Abstract: Project management in IDPT relies heavily on interpersonal communication skills and theoretical knowledge of agile project management principles to meet shifting client needs and expectations. How can these skills and requisite knowledge be taught for effective and appropriate future use in any modality within a fully online doctoral course? Panel presenters share successful strategies used by leveraging personal networks to connect IDPT students and IDPT professionals for mentored project management experiences solving real-world client needs, producing beneficial deliverables for clients, and using a generalizable “paying it forward” approach embedded into a program course.

Introduction

The need for project management (PM) skills in the instructional design and performance technology (IDPT) field has shown consistent growth (Allen, 2020). Much like teaching preparation programs incorporated the increase in technology use through stand-alone teaching-with-technology courses or incorporating technology use into existing coursework, IDPT programs vary in how to address the need to acquire project management. In the IDPT field, the maturation of intra- and inter-personal skills is considered imperative for solving novel and complex design problems encountered in practice (Henricksen et al., 2021; Tracey, 2016). These people skills are also essential for successful project management, yet access to learning activities supporting multiple levels of personal interactions is significantly lower for those taking online courses (Paulsen and McCormick, 2015).

Within the existing field of project management, there has also been an increase in project complexity, where teaching the PMBoK linearly with assumptions that the tools and knowledge will be sufficient to succeed with most projects is no longer sufficient (Thomas & Mengel, 2008). Project failure rates overall are high, and IT-related projects targeting digital transformation for increased efficiency have failure rates approaching 90% (Ramesh & Delen, 2021). The Agile Manifesto (Beck et al., 2001) was an early attempt at creating a more flexible PM methodology appropriate for technology projects. However, Agile methodology implementation was originally designed for a fully face-to-face environment. For those teaching PM in IDPT programs, much of the existing PM resources, such as the industry standard Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBok), need to be adapted for use in the IDPT field.

Given the lack of researched and tested PM methodologies appropriate for use in the IDPT field or established for preparing fully online doctoral students, designing a relevant, quality, and transferable IDPT PM course might appear impossible. Fortunately, the IDPT field has roots in making what once seemed impossible become possible. For the 7-week, compressed online doctoral PM course described during the panel presentation, the instructor pulled from her extensive IDPT and arts-based school reform background to incorporate an authentic PM micro-internship, the Innovation iHub.

Application

The Innovation iHub micro-internship projects retain the original foundational and theoretical knowledge required for the course while providing opportunities to develop the people skills needed for IDPT PM in practice (Mowreader, 2023). An individual, reflective personal project was completed during the first three weeks of the course to establish the appropriate course culture (Boling, 2017) and teach foundational knowledge needed for the Innovation iHub. In week four, students applied for available projects (or submitted their own), completing their client-focused iHub project in the last three weeks of the course. This panel focuses on the experiences of students, clients, and the instructor during the second and third iterations of the iHub.

Iteration 1

In fall 2022, the instructor used the first iteration of the Innovation iHub with a cohort of seven students. Students were presented with a general outline of the iHub concept and expectations, along with projects to select from if they did not already have a project in their professional context. As in many PM courses, some students already have strong PM skills, while some have little experience in this area. The experiential, service-learning approach of the iHub promotes opportunities for each student to grow in areas of their choice while mentoring and providing support to each other in areas of personal strength.

In iteration 1, three students chose projects that could be accomplished within their professional context. The remaining four students selected an instructor-provided project where the instructor was also the client. No outside “clients” were given as an option. From prior experience designing experiential learning opportunities, the instructor wanted to ensure students would have sufficient scaffolding for success while piloting this approach in a compressed, online course setting.

A variety of formal and informal technology tools were used to facilitate positive communication among all participants. The informal communication channel selected for the online version of LEAN-inspired huddles effectively provided students with a place to express their feelings. “Clients” could have a team of IDPT students working on projects where outside expertise was beneficial, resulting in quality deliverables that met expectations. From an instructional viewpoint, the students demonstrated the same criteria on the original course rubric, along with numerous additional valuable PM/IDPT skills.

Feedback from this first iteration included comments about how much was learned and the feeling of being much more prepared to apply lessons learned in the future. Students voiced how they felt a course like this in their undergraduate years would have helped them succeed more easily. Areas needing adjustment included increasing the amount of time spent addressing the students’ emotional safety in the first week of the iHub to promote their comfort levels with tackling an unknown design challenge.

Iteration 2

In summer 2023, the instructor used the second iteration of the iHub with a cohort of four students, following essentially the same steps with additional mechanisms in place to facilitate emotional safety and easier resource planning. Artifacts from each step of iteration 1 were shared from different completed projects as examples, making it easier for students to grasp the possibilities of this approach. The same communication blend was used with informal bi-weekly huddles to share updates and quick questions, along with the formal Moodle tools for targeted discussion of project management topics and student assessment.

Like the first iteration, no potential project options involved external clients, and all students selected instructor-provided projects. Of the six options in this second iteration, the students were asked to work on separate phases of a course website development project. As a small cohort, the students had developed a strong, collaborative work style in previous projects and felt they had learned more by sharing multiple perspectives across one larger project.

Course feedback from iteration 2 was extremely positive, and the quality of the student work submitted continued to meet or exceed the established course expectations. Two members of the cohort, Michelle Knight and Amanda Young, shared during the panel examples from their professional work where they had implemented lessons learned from the iHub’s micro-internship approach, such as the design and development of a teacher professional development session (see Figure 1), a school renewal application, and the sharing of strategic directions for action.

Figure 1

Cover slide with QR code and bit.ly information for accessing work created using the IDPT PM skills first learned during the Innovation iHub.



Iteration 3

Following the refinement of key teaching and implementation elements, the iHub was expanded before iteration 3 to include external client projects. In spring 2024, the Innovation iHub was used with a larger cohort of 13 students. Feedback from iterations 1 and 2 was reviewed to ascertain areas potentially impacted, such as communication and instructor scaffolding. Incorporating external clients provided additional project options, creating realistic PM experience contexts, and eliminating the instructor's role as "client" and the extra work of providing client feedback. The short timeframe and range of student PM experience would require flexibility in final deliverable expectations. Micro-internships, a five-to-40-hour, project-based professional assignment providing students with firsthand experience and networking opportunities (Mowreader, 2023), suited the parameters of iteration 3.

The full process of reaching out and vetting clients for a similar micro-internship was beyond the scope of this panel.

For this course iteration, the instructor's personal network was successfully leveraged. One client, Katherine Ellis, shared her experiences during this panel. She hired four of the teams for a series of improvement projects that lacked the time and resources to complete. Students provided Katherine with a range of deliverables to better serve her stakeholders, like design sample boards (see Figure 2 below), information architecture diagrams, and implementation instructions for a Moodle resource hub. Students learned to navigate client discussions with ambiguous objectives and shifting expectations, requiring the application of agile PM principles.

An unexpected challenge arising from the inclusion of external clients involved the balance between informal and formal communication tools. For previous instructor-provided projects, communication remained between the instructor and students, regardless of the tool used. Student-initiated projects during the first iteration did not add additional communication channels either. After the expansion, selecting external clients resulted in logistical challenges for students and the instructor from additional people in the communication mix. For example, clients and students contacted the instructor at various times during the projects to ask for clarification or guidance with project management steps. This type of communication in the first two iterations was addressed within the client meetings, as the instructor was also the client.

Figure 2

Slide sharing key elements of the micro-internship experience from a client perspective.

What impact did you see from this experience? - Moodle Makeover

**Look and Feel:
Canva Mood Board, Graphics,
and Instructions**

Deliverables

- Mood board and color palette
- Customized graphics and banners for the Moodle hubs
- New design elements migration into the Moodle sandbox
- Project documentation, including the design process, maintenance instructions, and implementation training

Project Timeline

Week 1 Apr 8-15 Week 2 Apr 16-22 Week 3 Apr 23-29

Portfolio

Policies and Procedures

OBJECTIVES

Execution & Closure

- Finalize deliverables
- Client feedback
- Close meeting
- Documentation

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Conclusions and Next Steps

Course and anecdotal feedback across all iterations was similar, putting a high value on the micro-internship approach. Across the three iterations, adjustments were made to provide additional student support via structural elements and pre-planning. Most of the Innovation iHub components have remained consistent, such as:

- Serving as a team leader on one project while being a support person on another
- Providing a student choice process for the project options
- Requiring authentic artifacts produced

An iHub element still needing refinement is the balance of formal and informal communication within teams, clients, and the course. In the larger cohort of iteration 3, the initial informal communication strategy to mimic Lean huddles was unsustainable. This may be an area where new developments with AI tools can be explored for support.

The structural elements produced to facilitate student learning during the micro-internship and facilitate the teams working with clients external to the course need minor adjustments, but are sufficient for sharing with others wishing to replicate this approach in their contexts. Recommendations for implementing this approach in other contexts are to develop a guide for potential micro-internship clients and to ensure students have prior understanding and experience of working collaboratively on projects. The Innovation iHub micro-internship experience took place in the students' second course with the instructor.

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