INTRODUCTION - PROJECT WORK: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Getting started

No doubt you have undertaken many projects in the course of your life, whether as an adult, a youth or in your childhood. Some of them were successful, others only partially so, while still others were abject failures! At times, you functioned on your own and at other times, you worked as part of a group. You thoroughly enjoyed some of the projects you engaged in, but others were simply a necessary task that you had to force yourself to complete. Some of the projects were based on your own ideas while others were not; probably a teacher, parent, club leader made that decision.

This course is about project work in a formal education setting. Nonetheless it is worth remembering that, regardless of the circumstances under which projects are carried out, there are certain features common to all of them. As we lay the groundwork, we first take a look at attributes that are common to all projects, then hone in on those that are of particular importance to projects in a formal education setting.

Learning Objectives

❖ *Summarise your own project-work experiences*

❖ *Identify and describe the key attributes of project work in general, and in a formal education context in particular.*

❖ *Specify the type of project that will be the focus of study in this course.*

❖ *Clarify and plan for your role as the one responsible for your own assessment in the course.*

0.1 The project: general features

There are a few general features that we should come to some agreement on before embarking going further.

0.1.1 A clearly articulated goal; having a plan

One thing that is common to all projects is that they are done with a clear goal in mind and their success or failure is hinged on the extent to which that goal is or is not achieved. One should not really apply the label 'project' to an ill-defined activity that is not aimed at reaching a clear outcome. To achieve that goal, there is a plan. One may not necessarily stick to the plan throughout, as there may be need to make changes along the way. Nonetheless, functioning with a plan in mind can serve to keep one's focus on intended outcomes.

0.1.2 Duration and tasks

A project entails work carried out over a period of time ranging from a few weeks to a few months or even an entire year. In the context of a formal education setting, the duration may be a semester (term) or even an entire academic year. Regardless of the duration, every project comprises the same elements and it is expected that the entire exercise will be completed within the allotted timeframe. Project work involves interrelated tasks and participants must undertake them in a coordinated manner (hence the need for a plan) to ensure that intended goals are achieved.

0.1.3 Individual or group activity

A project may be either an individual or a group activity. If individual, then that person will be responsible for undertaking all the project-related tasks. If it is group-based, then care must be taken to ensure that all tasks are equitable distributed among all group members.

One often hears the complaint that not all group members are pulling their weight and that all the work is left up to one or two. While several factors may contribute to this situation, it is my view that the main one is that not all group members may be equally capable of undertaking the tasks required for engaging in project work. Whether working on one's own, or in collaboration with others, all participants must have the requisite skills to undertake all aspects of the project activity.
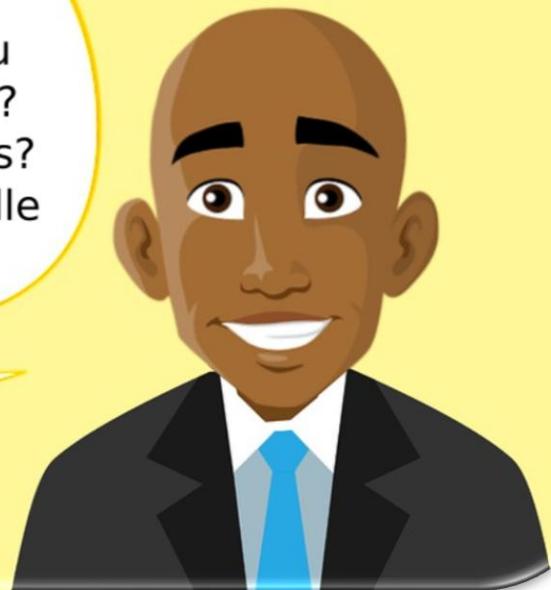
1 **Something to think about**

0.2 The project in a formal education setting

In addition to the above, the following are seen as being of special importance in a formal teaching-learning environment.

0.2.1 Student-directed activity

Unlike other areas of study that entail substantial teacher guidance and/or control, it is you, the student who are in charge when doing a project. That does not necessarily mean that the teacher/lecturer is totally removed from the exercise. Rather, that person will typically take on a facilitating role, providing assistance from the side, either through periodic, carefully-planned interventions or when asked by a student or students.

While that may appear straightforward, in reality it requires a fair amount of negotiation between teacher and student to ensure that you maintain control of the process even as you have access to assistance from the teacher. Moreover, for this type of exchange to be meaningful, it is important that both feel comfortable and confident in their respective roles. Indeed, even as you will need to seek assistance from time to time, it will help that you are doing so from a position of 'knowing what you do not know' and for which you are asking for help. Overall, you the student must be capable of being an autonomous learner.

0.2.2 Two types of knowledge

One important aspect of project work that can easily be overlooked is that it involves two types of knowledge. One is content knowledge, that is the knowledge out of which the project topic and its related themes, concepts and ideas are derived. The other type of knowledge is more typically referred to as skills or competencies and refers to the know-how that you must possess and utilise in order to undertake the project. When you engage in project activity, you are using the relevant skills to work on, examine, explore and manipulate content in order to achieve the project goals. It is important to be aware of the two types of knowledge that you are bringing together when you are doing a project.

With regard to content knowledge, it is likely that, in the first instance, you will be focusing your attention on the content of a particular course. However, it is highly unlikely that you will be able to access all the information required from that course. Indeed, even when closely associated with a particular course, a project will typically require you to access information outside of the course.

Doing a project is a test of how well-informed you are in a general sense and not just in relation to the content acquired in the course of your formal studies. It also tests your capacity to make appropriate linkages across those various areas of knowledge in keeping with the goals of the project that you are undertaking.

0.2.3 Project skills applicable across different content areas

The basic premise of this course is that the skills for doing a project are not specific to a particular programme of study, that they are generic and may be applied whatever the knowledge area in which the project is located. While acknowledging the importance of content knowledge, our focus is on assisting you to develop these generic skills or competencies. At the same time, we cannot do that in a vacuum. Thus, we use topics drawn from a range of content areas. While you may not be familiar with all of them, we are hoping that your own knowledge base is wide enough to allow you to deal with the relevant information and in the process, deepen your understanding of the competencies required for undertaking project activity.

0.2.4 A vehicle for solving real-world problems

Even when we zero in on the educational sector, we will find examples of different types of projects. It is therefore important to establish at the outset that in the context of this course, we are focusing on the project as a vehicle for solving real-world problems. That understanding applies whether we choose to use the term *project* or any of its variations, such as *project activity, project work* or *project-based learning*. A more in-depth discussion about problem-solving will follow in Unit 1.
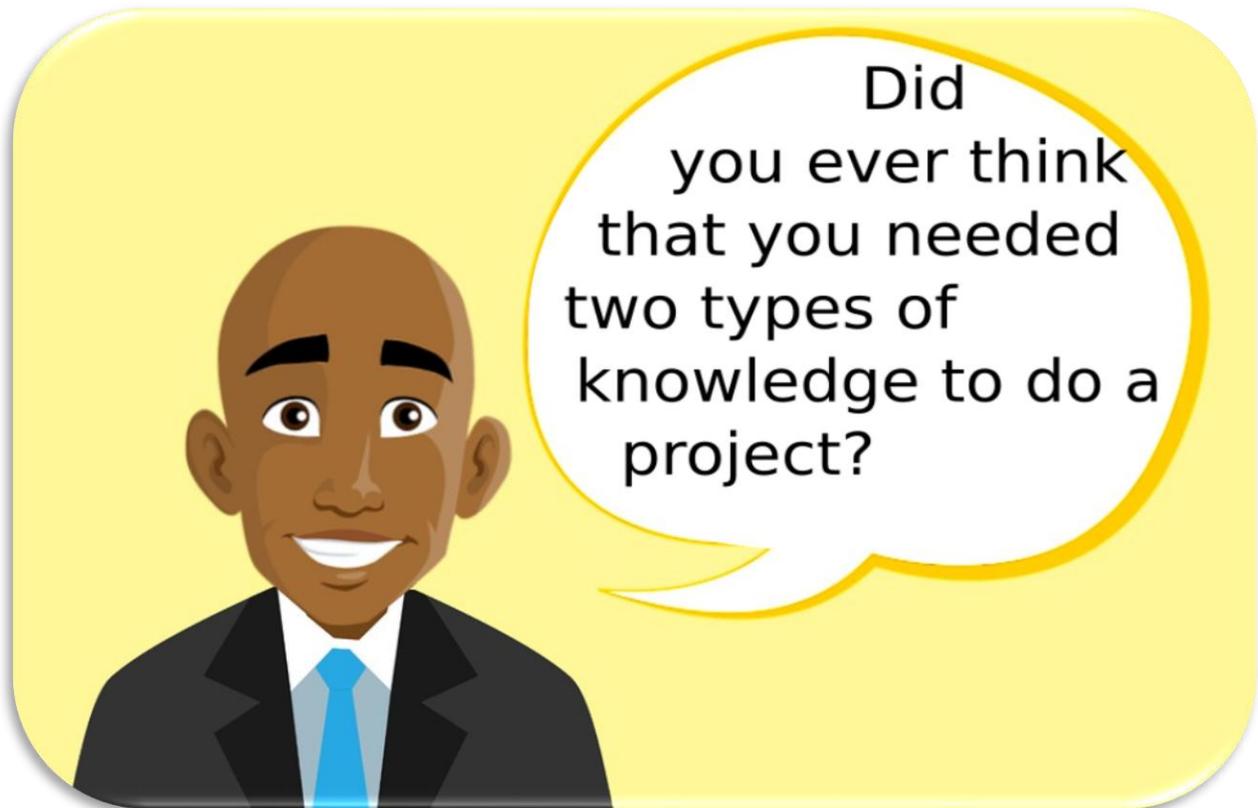
2 Something to think about

10.3 About the course

This course is intended to assist tertiary level students to develop the skills required for project work, that is projects that are specifically aimed at solving real-world problems. It has been designed to support individual self-study. Even if, eventually, you are undertaking a project in collaboration with others, the success of the group effort will depend a great deal on what each participant brings to the activity, hence the rationale for ensuring that all who attempt this course are given the opportunity to develop all relevant project-related skills.

As noted earlier, a project may last a few weeks, a semester (term) or even an academic year. This course has been designed to facilitate a project that is limited in scope and intended to be implemented over a shorter rather than a longer period. At the same time, it is envisaged that students would be able to transfer the skills developed here to a project activity of any size and/or duration.

There will be no assessments that yield a right-wrong answer. That is impossible in a course like this. However, there will be opportunity throughout, through self-assessment exercises (SAEs), for you to demonstrate your own ability to undertake the various aspects of the project activity. Where appropriate, there will be some limited feedback to some of the SAEs to give you some measure for evaluating your own responses. I strongly recommend that you identify some formal space, whether on your computer/laptop, or in a hardcopy notebook to record your responses to the SAEs for review and even updating at a later date. You need to be actively engaged if you are seeking to build or improve your own skills in this activity.

In addition to the SAEs, there will be opportunity for brief reflection, when you will just pause for a while to think about some aspect of the project work exercise. Even though there may be no one to share these thoughts with, I am sure that you will benefit from interacting with yourself for a few moments.

Finally, as the course developer, it is my responsibility to assess the course itself. To do this, I will like your feedback. I will therefore appreciate if you could complete the short questionnaire at the end. Further instructions will be provided at that point.

Enjoy the course.