

The Project Management Process

Chances are you've seen this scenario before. You give your students three weeks to work on a collaborative project. You start out with total buy-in. They're excited about what they will create. But a week later, you run into issues. Students aren't making any progress. One group has barely even started. Another has had fifteen false starts and they keep changing what they are making.

You think about extending the time for this unit but there's no more time in the curriculum map. For all the talk of letting kids work at their own pace, you're not finding this to be true. Half the groups are way behind and you're wondering if you need to set rigid deadlines.

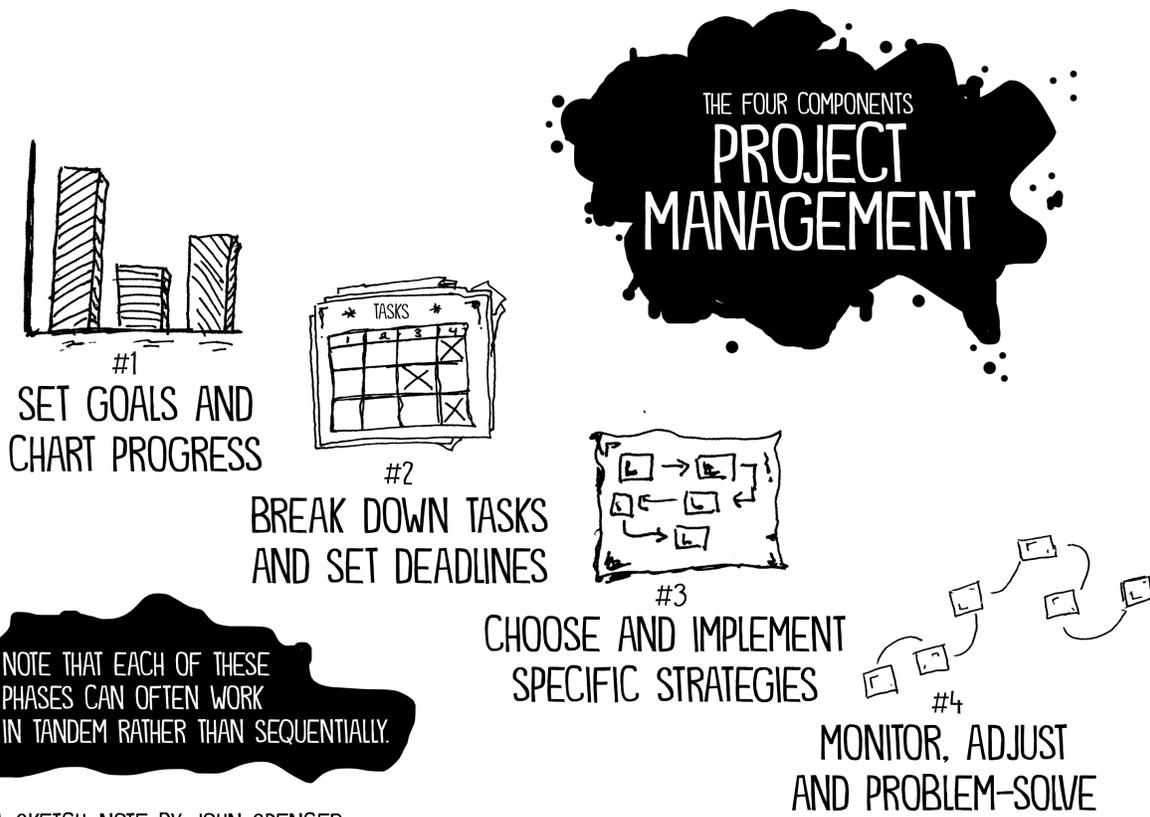
I lived this scenario for years. And here's the bad news: sometimes you need deadlines. When groups are fizzling out, you need to have a difficult conversation about meeting deadlines. I spent years running a project-based, design-oriented classroom. However, my students were still middle schoolers and sometimes it was hard, even in the midst of a great project, for them to persevere.

For the longest time, I was the project manager for 30 different projects. I would chart their progress and nag them about getting tasks done. Or I would set specific deadlines for the entire class. Over time, though, I realized that my students could learn how to manage their projects on their own.

This is also why I believe in guiding students through a project management process. It's not perfect. Kids will still struggle to meet deadlines. Procrastination will still occur. But project management is a skill that improves over time. As students learn how to break apart tasks and chart their progress, they begin to think differently about their work. In the end, it becomes one of those life-long, transferable skills.

A quick caveat: students who struggle with executive function might need additional reminders and support through the process. However, I was talking to a special education teacher recently who shared how project management actually helped her students improve in executive function skills, because of the visualization, anticipation, and task analysis they were practicing.

Project management is about more than just setting a schedule. It's the idea of following through on your plans and continuing with tasks even when nobody is looking over your shoulder. This is the part that's often described as a "grind" by entrepreneurs. However, it's also where we get the chance to see our results and meet our goals. It's where the real work is found in creative collaboration.



A SKETCH-NOTE BY JOHN SPENCER

The Four Components of Project Management

If you do a quick search online, you'll see tons of different project management models, apps, and programs. I've seen people who swear by one particular approach. However, it's more of a personal preference. While the frameworks and programs vary, the important thing is that students are engaged in the project management process. Here are four key components to project management.

First Component: Set Goals and Chart Progress

Project management begins with a sense of awareness regarding what you are doing, where you are going, and what you plan to do next. Students with this sense of awareness understand not only what they are doing, but why they are doing it. This sense of purpose will drive their goal-setting.

With a strong sense of what they are doing and where they are going, students begin to set goals. These might be learning goals or project goals. But it doesn't end with the goal-setting. Students also need to track how they are doing at accomplishing their goals. As they monitor their progress, they are able to determine what to do next in order to improve. So, this first component occurs at the beginning of a project, it continues throughout the entire process.

Second Component: Break Down Tasks and Set Deadlines

Project management involves taking a larger task and break it down into sub-tasks and eventually deadlines. Students can think realistically about what is needed in terms of time, resources, and concrete actions. This is a critical piece of project management. It requires students to see the big picture, the details, and the complex relationship between the two.

Often, teachers will set up external deadlines for various phases in a project. But this can actually shortcut the vital skill of project management. When students are able to break tasks down and set realistic deadlines, they are able to turn a project from an idea into a reality.

Third Component: Choose and Implement Strategies

Project management also involves choosing the specific strategies that connect to the tasks. Self-directed groups are able to determine what strategies they will use in order to complete their tasks. They can select the resources and materials while also deciding on the processes that will work best for them. So, when doing research, they might use notecards or a spreadsheet. When managing their project, they might keep their tasks on a shared document or on a shared calendar. But in these moments, they move from using strategies because the teacher told them to do it and toward choosing strategies because it helps them accomplish their goals.

Fourth Component: Monitor, Adjust, and Problem-Solve

While tasks and deadlines are vital to project management, things will not always work according to plan. Students can have the best-developed plans in the world, but ultimately life will happen. But then the internet goes down for a day. A group member gets sick for two days. You have a fire drill and then an unplanned assembly. A few students hit a creative block and suddenly feel stuck.

In these moments, students will need to solve problems and deal with issues as they arise. Things will break. Plans will change. This is the frustrating side of student-centered learning. It's messier than a tidy worksheet. And yet, when students are able to tackle these challenges, they grow into problem-solvers and critical thinkers. They are able to monitor their progress and adjust their approach as they go.

This Requires Real Projects

You can't learn this type of project management with packets of worksheets. If we want students to develop this skill, they need to work on projects.

Real projects.

The kinds of projects that matter to them. The kind where they are in the driver's seat. And that's why students need to own the creative process and embrace creative collaboration.