

Review – Certified Product Owner course, Cambridge 28-29 June 2006

Have you ever had the experience of arriving, several hours too late, at the perfect put-down response to a cheeky upstart? For many folk, our minds need that slack time to allow all the niggling details to coalesce into a coherent whole with its strengths and weaknesses clearly visible. This allows us to zero in on the weakness and create the perfect riposte.

This course is good. It has the potential of being excellent, but it isn't there yet. Remember this summary now, because I want to concentrate on areas of concern, and I don't want folk leaving with a negative picture.

I didn't know what to expect when I arrived. Perhaps this is a topic to be addressed; I wasn't disappointed but given the price tag there is potential for disappointment. I have a better picture of what to expect from an upcoming CSM course, though I cannot yet report on whether that will meet my expectations.

During the introductions, it became clear that there were three members from a development background, one from a management background and three from Denmark. I never did really work out what their roles were. Somewhat surprisingly, and it didn't dawn on me completely until I was travelling home, I seemed to be the most experienced person of the attendees, probably including the tutors themselves, at working in requirements roles. Yet I don't regard myself as a 'requirements' person, otherwise I may have been quicker at addressing the deficit.

So here we have the two key areas that keep this as a good course rather than an excellent one. Shortage of time for reflection means that many of the lessons that could have been learned will have to depend on individual reflection after the end of the course. Shortage of time combined with shortage of experience of requirements techniques meant that conflicts of the sort that will arise during work were not adequately addressed.

A classic example of the problem arose during the 'sizing the dogs' exercise. By the rules of the game, a conflict between height and weight was detected but not resolved on a final vote. Fair enough, but when a second opportunity to address the conflict appeared later in the exercise, on an initial vote, the opportunity to explore and resolve the conflict was quashed. Timeboxing the debate is a tool to train people to be concise, but that opportunity wasn't given. We may assume the decision to favour height or weight was done for a reason, but unless these reasons emerge, how can the team reach consensus? A good requirements facilitator would ensure all sides get the chance to state their view. Surely this, if anything, was the purpose of that particular exercise? Partly to demonstrate that different people have different knowledge and requirements, partly to show how these problems are resolved. It failed the latter goal.

The 'buy a feature' exercise could have done with more forethought. It is easy to be wise after the event, but the team dynamics might have displayed the desired behaviour better if only 4 roles had been used between the 8 people; 2 instances of each role. The only duplicated role we had was shared by people who knew each other well prior to the course, so most other participants were marginalized. Again, a real requirements person would have expended more effort to ensure that all representatives got a chance to make their views heard. Perhaps this was a goal of this game – to show that without requirements facilitation, the people who shout loudest, wave the most money, form their own pressure groups are the ones who get what they want. All others go to another supplier. This is a very interesting game; I expect its outcome will vary and there are many lessons that may be learned, but never all in one play of the game. Perhaps there is no single target lesson to be learned?

So – summary.

Was it what I expected? Not really.

Was this a problem? No, but it might have been.

Was it well focussed? There might have been too much stuff that wasn't about the PO role.

Was it well put together? Still rough round the edges, but yes.

Did it follow a plan or adapt to change? It did a good job of getting that balance right.

Was it time well spent? Yes.

Was it money well spent? Time will tell.

Would you recommend it to others? With care.

Where were all the real POs? Don't ask me!