"Alice in Projectland: The Adventures of a Curious Project Manager"

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Abstract

Popular wisdom has given curiosity a bad reputation: from the famous "*curiosity killed the cat"* to the evergreen "*what you don't know can't hurt you",* we are often warned against the danger of excessive inquisitiveness.
The origins of the word itself however suggest another interpretation: it derives from the Latin "*curiosus"* also meaning "careful, diligent" and is related to *cura*, "care".
Recent studies have revaluated this latter aspect and assigned to curiosity a critical role in Knowledge Management Models, Complexity Theories and, in more general terms, defined curiosity as the driving force behind research, innovation and… survival.
Although curiosity and/or being curious is not explicitly mentioned in any of the current PMI® standards, in the Performance Criteria of the Personal Competences in the PMCF® we often find close synonyms such as "*observe, seek, look for*", signifying not only the need to uncover and use valuable information and different kinds of data, but also the skill to extract meaning from the natural redundancy, diversity and serendipity of the project environment.
The discovery of curiosity among the Project Managers' personal skills should come as no surprise: curiosity is at work whenever we face novelty, it motivates us to move outside familiar grounds, it helps us to "embrace" and exploit uncertainty and is defined as "*the heart of resilience*".
Drawing on scientific evidence and direct experience of the project environment, this paper proposes a comprehensive definition of the many aspects of curiosity, its advantages and practical uses in our personal and professional life. Through the metaphor of Alice and her adventures in Wonderland, it provides clear strategies on how to become a Curious Project Manager and to apply these to inspire and motivate others.

Introduction

It was early in the summer of 1862 when Charles Lutwidge Dodgson took the Liddel children to a rowing trip near Oxford.
Dodgson was a charming and ambitious thirty-year-old. His brilliant mathematical mind had won him a Mathematical Lectureship at Christ Church College but his scholastic career was mostly a background for his many other interests, such as photography, quaint inventions, story-telling and writing.
A few years before that summer afternoon a new dean, Henry Liddell, had arrived at Christ Church, bringing with him a young wife and four children. Dodgson became a close friend of the family and particularly of the three girls, Ina, Alice and Edith. Taking the children to picnics on the river was a regular event but that day the outing was not a success. Alice in particular was bored and to amuse her he recounted the story of another little Alice.
The children utterly loved the story and the real Alice begged Dodgson to write it down. In 1864, he finally presented her with a handwritten and illustrated manuscript, *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*. He also took the manuscript to a publisher and the following year "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*" was published under the pen name we now all know, Lewis Carroll.
"*Alice's Adventures"* was an immediate success with children and adults. The book and its sequel, "*Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*", have never been out of print. They have been translated into 125 languages and inspired several stage and screen adaptations.
While a social and literary analysis of curiosity falls outside the scope of this paper, we should note that at the time the "*Alice books*" were published, curiosity was not always viewed positively. During the eighteenth century, literature as well as the widespread distribution of periodical and pamphlets and interest in collecting "*curiosities"* had led many to see curiosity as a feature of "*those whose intellectual ambitions objectify the world and lift them above the mob*" (Benedict, 2001, p. 92).
Carroll's was a time of rapid changes, advances in science and the Industrial Revolution were rapidly transforming Britain and the rest of the world. However, Victorian morality still imposed strict rules and, although Queen Victoria was said to enjoy immensely "*Alice's Adventures"*, inquisitiveness was encouraged almost exclusively in terms of scientific research (and unfortunately often used merely to acquire dominance over the object of study, i.e. other cultures) and then entrapped in museums, so called "Curiosity Cabinets", mystery books and children stories. Curiosity in women was considered a particularly "*unbecoming*" trait that was almost dangerous.

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However, Alice is a curious, inquisitive, observant and candid child who is frightened at times but more often very sensible in the face of a world that along with all the adults in it has been turned upside down. Her greatest challenge in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass seems not to be how to return to her world, as might be expected, but how to remain uninfected by the dangerous and surreal logic of the adult "*Wonderlanders*" she encounters.
These powerful and often absurd adults include, famously, a time-obsessed White Rabbit, a grinning Cheshire Cat, a Mad Hatter and at least two Queens who behave in a very peculiar way.
Alice's is a journey into the unknown and, as has been frequently noted, from childhood to adulthood where curiosity would ultimately be harnessed by social customs. In Wonderland her curiosity and adaptability is necessary for success and she is able to deal with all the challenges faced despite an ever-changing environment and logic. Without prior experience to teach her what to expect, she manages to get through each bizarre encounter, ready to face new situations that will challenge and re-challenge her assumptions and her ability to know and understand.
During all her adventures, she remains polite and self-contained while continuing to ask countless questions to the strange characters she meets and most of all to herself. Thanks to her constant questioning and resilience, she becomes self-aware and able to hold her own against the most baffling Wonderland logic. If curiosity got her into Wonderland and potentially into trouble, curiosity also marks her growth and her success.

A Case for Curiosity

The Free Dictionary (www.thefreedictionary.com) defines curiosity as
1. A desire to know or learn;
2. A desire to know about people or things that do not concern one; nosiness;
3. An object that arouses interest, as by being novel or extraordinary;
4. A strange or odd aspect;
5. Archaic for fastidiousness.

Although popular wisdom often warns us against the danger of excessive inquisitiveness, the origins of the word itself suggest another interpretation. Curious and curiosity both derive from the Latin *curiosus,* also meaning "careful, diligent", which in turn derives from *cura*, meaning careful attention and its application to any object and or task. In old English, the word "*cure*" retained this wider meaning in the word *cure,* whose origin we can also find in accuracy.
Recent studies tend to highlight this latter meaning and in particular, both physiological and cognitive theories can provide a better understanding of the role of curiosity in our lives.
From a physiological point of view, brain research has shown that "*our brain responds with more intense and longer-lasting pleasure when we are exploring and growing.*" (Kashdan, 2009, p. 13). This response is linked to dopamine, a neurotransmitter that carries information from one nerve ending to another. What triggers dopamine and what actions it stimulates is still under debate but it is certainly related to various brain functions, such as cognition, motivation, attention, working memory, learning and most of all reward.
In general, we can say that one of the functions of dopamine is to provide feelings of enjoyment to motivate us to perform certain activities by focusing our attention on the present and the source of potential rewards.
The part of the brain that houses most dopamine receptors is referred to as the "pleasure center" of the brain and is located in a primitive part known as the ventral striatum. The evolution of our brain shows that our primordial ancestors' legacy is twofold:

- On one hand, we are designed to be able to constantly alter potential threats and to react quickly to them. This "*negative bias*" and the *fight or flee* reaction were crucial to survival, and still are;

- On the other hand, when we feel safe and rested, we feel the need to explore and seek new experiences. This "*positive offset*" is linked to what must have been an unavoidable series of trial-and-error and was the only way to acquire new knowledge and skills, as it still is.

"*In an unforgiving environment (...) to be motivated to seek out the new, our ancestors needed a hard wired system that would cause them to eagerly anticipate rewards. (...) This anticipation and seeking is all about being curious, it is evolutionary adaptation at its best*". (ibidem, p. 47).
Brain scans have shown that dopamine is released before we act, thus preparing our body to take action and capitalize the reward. "*Dopamine (...) in the stratum is central to curiosity and explorative behavior. If you eliminate it, you become an apathetic, lazy lump. If you increase it, you become fully engaged in the world,*

searching and discovering new things. The peak dopamine activity in our stratum occurs before we act on our curiosity, when we are still eagerly deciding whether and how to capture rewards that beckon us." (ibidem, p. 55).
It would therefore seem that curiosity is "embedded" in our brain and its specific function is to move us to explore, learn and grow, expanding our knowledge, experiences and skills:
The greatest advantage of curiosity is that by spending time and energy with the new, increased neurological connections are made possible. Facts and experiences are synthesized into a web, paving the way for greater intelligence and wisdom. We become more efficient when making future decision. We become better at visualizing the relativity of seemly disparate ideas, paving the way to greater creativity. It is the neurological equivalent of personal growth. (ibidem, p. 57).
However, other factors come into play when we move beyond our usual boundaries. Various emotions and feelings, such as fear and anxiety, are often blended with excitement and joy when we face something new.
A moderate dose of worry and anxiety keeps us alert and focused but when anxiety becomes too intense and/or frequent, our energy and mental resources are drained, our outlook narrows and our efforts to control anxiety actually worsen the situation. Furthermore, several studies have shown that intense self-control makes us less effective and prone to compulsive and harmful behavior: the effort made to control our feelings in a new situation weakens our ability to perform in normal circumstances.
For curiosity to work at its best, we need to perceive and judge an event not only as surprising and challenging but also as potentially under our control. This is where different personalities also come into play: although we are all naturally curious, the degree of curiosity we possess varies, influencing our behavior in various stages of our life, from career choices to relationships and hobbies.
While curiosity is a *state* commonly experienced by all people, and there are some events that arouse curiosity in almost everyone, it is also a *trait* that is much more typical of some people than others. The cognitive theories may help us to better understand how curiosity is linked to our behavior.
From a cognitive point of view, curiosity can be described as "*a process of creating, maintaining and resolving conceptual conflicts. Such conflicts arise from a lack of fit between an incoming signal or stimulus and a cognitive map or category system which represents the world from past experience*". (Beswick, 2000)
Some of us will perceive the signal (i.e. an event, piece of information etc.) and modify it to match their map, assimilating it to what is already known. Others are more likely to perceive a signal as unique and peculiar and will try to accommodate it to their cognitive map, changing it. In order to do so, they will need more information until, through questions and imagination they will be able to solve the cognitive conflict.
It must be noted that what triggers curiosity is actually a combination of two apparently contrasting traits: openness to novelty and orderliness. Without a "taste for novelty", discrepancies and new stimuli would be disregarded. Without a desire for orderliness, there would not be the need to process and retain new information. In other words, "*the result of combining openness to novelty and orderliness is a propensity for that careful attention we have called curiosity*." (Beswick, 2000).
There are also times when curiosity is not enjoyable but "*an intense craving to know in the hope of relieving the tension bubbling inside us*" (ibidem, p. 13).
Finally, curiosity has its dark side: "*Depending how it is expressed curiosity can be perverted, annoying, meddlesome, impairing, and even deadly. Too much curiosity can lead to obsessive behavior, dangerous thrill-seeking and detrimental nosiness."* (Kashdan, 2009, p. 209)
There is a thin line between healthy and unhealthy interests, desire to know and morbidity, sharing and gossiping. Putting to one side physiological and/or psychological pathologies, whether to cross or not the line is largely matter of choice. Curiosity thus raises ethical questions, both at personal and social level.

The Curious Project Manager

If our evolutionary roots seem to suggest that the individual who worried more had higher chances of survival than his/her positive thinking peers, the situation today is somewhat reversed, particularly in the project environment. Although still far from advocating a carefree attitude, in recent years the preventive nature of Project Management models and standard has been extended to include skills and personal competencies that focus on flexibility and the ability to change often very quickly, thus combining the two cognitive aspects of curiosity: openness of mind and conceptual orderliness.
In times of rapid social, cultural and organizational changes, accompanied by continuous innovations, Project Managers are called to fulfill a role that eludes a homogeneous classification and can be better defined as a "*profession*" than an "*organizational role*".
The hallmarks of any profession can be summarized in four areas:

- standards which serve as compasses across industries;
- certifications which validate competency;
- personal skills which enable effective relationships;
- adherence to a code of ethics and professional conduct, which align values and behaviors.

While curiosity and/or being curious is not explicitly mentioned in any of the current PMI® standards, in the Performance Criteria of the Personal Competences detailed in the PMCF® we often find close synonyms such as "*observe, seek, look for*", signifying not only the need to uncover and use valuable information and different kinds of data, but also the skill to extract meaning from the natural redundancy, diversity and serendipity of the project environment.
We have seen that "*we are hardwired for curiosity"* but the hardware is not enough "*to be curious*" in general and, for the purpose of this paper, to be a Curious Project Manager. Although well-defined metrics to gauge curiosity do not exist, a possible taxonomy would include at least five qualities that could help us to identify the mindset of the Curious Project Manager. These are:

- **Intensity**. Curious Project Managers prefer novelty and variety and they remain open to new experiences even if and when familiar ideas are challenged.
- **Frequency**. Curious Project Managers are easily moved to explore and investigate any event, information or idea that comes their way. Their daily life is marked by questions and wonder.
- **Durability**. Curious Project Managers are able to sustain (and enjoy) uncertainty longer. Working in an unstable and uncertain environment, they have developed investigative skills and a sufficient sense of security in their own "cognitive map" to dare to expand it each day.
- **Breadth and Depth**. Curious Project Managers are interested in every aspect of their lives, including introspection. The way in which new interests and experiences are integrated into identity is related to the depth of curiosity in life.

We could argue that all these five qualities are essential to project work and indeed, they are. Without a doubt, Project Managers need to be curious and curiosity plays a great part in making project management a rewarding and successful experience. The question remains "can curiosity be learnt"? Moreover, "what are the advantages of being a Curious Project Manager"?
The answer to the first question is yes, curiosity is an action first and it can be exercised to become a habit. Although studies have shown that being open to new experiences decline considerably after the age of 30, we can become more or less curious at any age. The more curious we are the more curious we become, leveraging the natural curiosity we all possess in order "*add to our existing knowledge, skills and competency. These additions help us to better understand ourselves and the outside world, cope with the challenges of everyday life and improve our ability to handle chaos*" (Kashdan, 2009, p. 7). This positive spiral of curiosity is illustrated in Exhibit 1:

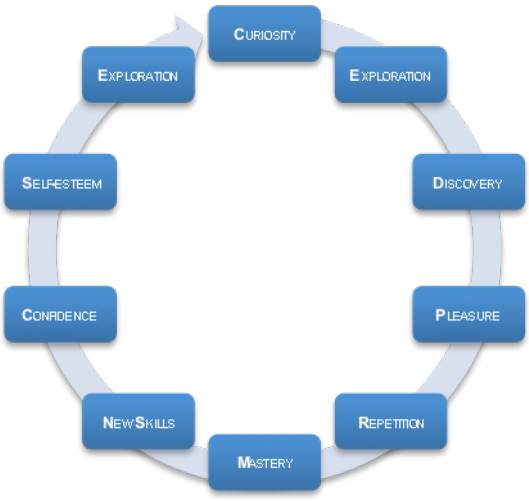

Exhibit 1 – The Spiral of Curiosity

The "Spiral of Curiosity" outlines the ideal process for personal growth and continuous learning and is related to the "Spiral of Knowledge" defined by Nonaka-Takeuchi as the four different modes to create new knowledge within an organization.

The so called "SECI" model (**S**ocialization, **E**xternalization, **C**ombination and **I**nternalization) aims to integrate the two types of knowledge (Explicit Knowledge which "*can be articulated in formal language including grammatical statement, mathematical expression, specification, manuals and so forth*" and Tacit Knowledge defined as the *"personal knowledge embedded in individual experience and involves intangible factors such as personal beliefs, perspectives, and value systems*" (Nonaka - Takeuchi, 1995, p. viii).

Although the SECI model outlines a continuous organizational process its "engine" is Tacit Knowledge, which, in turn, is dependent on personal experience and ultimately … curiosity.

Curiosity is therefore relevant to all the four stages of implementing the Spiral of Knowledge. However *"to unfold curiosity's potential, the use of cognitive tools (...) has to be embedded in cultural practices and anchored in social structure. The human brain and its capacities are unique, not so much because of their biological development (which is not unique) but because of the human capacity to create and assimilate culture and pass it on to the next generation. (...) The source of experience may be initially individual, but for experience to be usable, it must be processed by culture and the synergies that result from interaction among many other human brains."* (Nowotny, 2010, p. 25)

In recent years, several studies and publications have emphasized the need to capture knowledge as a strategic factor in successful project management. However, according to Ajmal and Koskinen, project-based organizations are still failing to manage knowledge efficiently for reasons that span from organizational to cultural. In addition, Nonaka and Takeuchi emphasized the need to create the proper environment for knowledge creation (called "*ba*", a Japanese term meaning *"a shared space of interaction"*).

We believe that "*personal awareness and commitment to creating and sharing knowledge will enhance project success in terms of better solutions, increased motivation and individual and collective learning*" (Meloni, 2008, p. 2). Project Managers willing to become Curious Project Managers, and thus explore and extract meaning from the natural redundancy, diversity and serendipity of the project environment will find themselves rewarded with unexpected opportunities, innovative solutions and increased performance levels during their projects and in their personal life.

Openness of mind is the first and most important trait of a Curious Project Manager. "*Curiosity aims to explore a space that must still be furnished for us. With questions and gestures more spontaneous than goal-oriented, curiosity explores what it does what it does not know and what seems interesting and worth knowing often for reasons it cannot name*." (Nowotny, 2008, p. 3)

To regain the boundless curiosity of children, we must learn to withhold our judgment, avoid easy labels and find the right balance between Novelty and Coping Potential. Novelty Potential is the recognition of a new and challenging event/idea/task as a potential source of growth while Coping Potential is deciding whether we have the skills and ability to deal with it.

We have seen that worry is the "*neural twin*" of curiosity, and that we seldom experience one without the other. However "*if anxiety overwhelms our curios system, dictating what we do, than our plan for the future get hijacked*. (Kashdan, 2009, p.169). While, on the other hand, if we recognize anxiety as a natural reaction to uncertainty, curiosity becomes an "*anxiety antidote*".

The first step in the exercise of Curiosity (and initiation of the Curiosity Spiral) is questioning. The art of constant questioning is one of the fundamental skills that a Curious Project Manager must acquire and master. Albert Einstein was quoted as saying that he was not *learned* but *curious* and that he had became curious because his mother asked him every day if he had posed interesting questions rather than learned something interesting. Questions are the bridges between what we know and what we do not know and help us cross the divide from anxiety and to curiosity.

Not all questions are the same. Yes/No, Which, Who, Where and When questions are usually considered less powerful than What, How and most of all Why questions. However, from a curiosity point of view, all open questions are valuable tools in practicing what Nonaka defines as "*learning by intrusion*". In this paper, we will not take into consideration social and cultural issues that are certainly related to questioning.

Chunking offers a useful technique to guide our questioning and exercise our curiosity. A "chunk" is any piece of information that can be viewed a single "object". Chunks can come in different sizes. "The world" is a big chunk and "the universe" is even bigger while "an atom" is very small. You can also have conceptual chunks such as "love" (a big chunk) and "family ties" (a smaller chunk).

Chunking refers to exploring the logic of a key idea, an issue or even a word following three basic directions:

- **Chunk up.** Chunking up is about taking a broader view by asking "why" questions to find higher-level purpose and/or "what is this an example of" to find a more general classification.

- **Chunk down.** Chunking down is about going into detail to find smaller and more specific elements by asking "how" questions to find lower-level detail and/or "what specifically" to probe for more information.
- **Chunk laterally**. Chunking laterally is about exploring alternative meaning and points of view by asking "what else is like this*"* and/or asking for examples.

Posing a question however is enough: listening to the answer is equally important. Faking curiosity and interest does not work; only genuine interest will open the door on both sides to dialogue and discovery.
Kashdan's studies on how curiosity affects relationship show that people who talk to curious people enjoy the undivided attention they get and respond to it, as recounted in the anecdote about the two English statesmen Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone. After a dinner where they were both present, a woman was said to have commented "*When I left the dining room after sitting next to Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest man in England. But after sitting next to Mr. Disraeli, I thought I was the cleverest woman in England."*
Curiosity is about the quality of attention we give to ourselves, other people, tasks at hand and all the different aspects of our daily life.
Sometimes the best place to focus one's curiosity and questioning is on one's self. "*Introspection is an act, and the curious person enjoys figuring themselves out; the less curious person cares less about examining the inner motives that guides their choices*" (Kashdan, 2009, p. 32).
The second step in exercising Curiosity is mindfulness. Mindfulness means using all our senses to center ourselves and concentrate on the moment, silencing constant inner chitchat. Focusing on the present allows us to recognize the novelty of everyday life and reconsider or rediscover unappealing task, situations, and even people. Two easy ways to keep focused and centered can be practiced almost everywhere and at all times. These are:

- **Focus on breathing.** Taking long deep breaths and listening to your in and out breaths for a few moments.
- **Anchor yourself to the specific moment**. Focusing on what is right in front of you and/or around you, using all your senses to become fully aware of all surrounding colors, sounds, smells, and textures.

The third step in exercising Curiosity is to keep a journal for recording discoveries, for example making a short list of unique and novel ideas, information, impressions, or even just new words. "*For a positive experience to last we need to transfer information to our memory (…) and ensure that it stands out among the backdrop of other stimuli clamoring for immediate consideration*." (Kashdan, 2009, p. 56). Even a scrapbook or other visual form of narration can trace the story of the progress of a Curious Project Manager and help retain the gift of curiosity.
To answer the second question, what are the advantages of being a Curious Project Manager, let us follow in Alice's footsteps.

Discovering Projectland

"Oh, I wish I could shut up as a telescope! I think I could, if I only knew how to begin. For, you see, so many out of the way things had happened lately, that Alice had began to think that very few things were indeed impossible." (Carroll, 1865, p. 19*)*
At the beginning of her adventures, Alice finds herself faced with several doors to which she does not have the key while she has that to open the only door too small for her to pass through. Through that small door she catches a glimpse of the "*loveliest garden*" she has ever seen.
The PMBOK® Guide defines constraint as "*an applicable restriction or limitation, either internal or external to a project, which will affect the performance of the project or a process*". (PMI, 2008, p. 421). Constraints, like Alice's size, limit our actions as Project Manager as well as individuals and, on the other hand, mark the degree of our freedom. Constraints perceived as limitations take us only as far as the adequate application of project management. Constraints perceived as springboards lead us towards the full expression and development of our skills. The same applies to assumptions, which affect our experience and define those "*factors that, for planning purposes, are considered be true, real or certain without proof or demonstration*" (PMI, 2008, p. 419). The paradoxical co-existence of constraints (stated or implicit, proved or not) and freedom is the origin of consciousness, and the raison d'être for all human endeavors, including the project.
Alice's answer to the constraints and paradox of her situation is of course curiosity and thus freedom. After careful inspection and self-questioning, she chooses to drink from a small bottle alluringly labeled "Drink me". She thus initiates a process of trial and error, growing tall and growing small, which will lead her not only to reach her objective (the beautiful garden) but most of all to balance her strengths and nurture a resilient spirit.

Alice's size changes are also a change in perspective, and she sees the world from a different points of view. Her questioning is a perfect example of the cognitive process underlying curiosity. She "wonders" all the time ("I wonder" is her most recurrent expression throughout both books), paying careful attention to her surroundings, exploring discrepancies and balancing them against her cognitive map -"*and so she went, on, taking first one side and then the other, and making quite a conversation of it altogether*."(Carroll, 1865, p. 44) - and finally expanding her knowledge.

We can assume that Alice would behave in the same way in Projectland, using her curiosity to explore and master new skills, which will enable her to adapt to the needs of each new project. The process is not pain free (and in Alice's case, plenty of tears and some faux pas), and there is no guarantee that the new size will always fit the new situation, but she does use the experience gained to find the "right size": "*she set to work very carefully, nibbling first at one and the at the other (*magical mushrooms*), and growing sometimes taller and sometime shorter, until she had succeed in bringing herself to her usual height*". (Carroll, 1865, p. 64)

Furthermore, she always demonstrates an interest in the point of view of any living thing she encounters thus "collecting the requirement" and "networking" even in the strangest environments. Her ability to deal with unusual stakeholders is probably the most interesting aspect from a Projectland point of view.

Among the many creatures Alice meets in both Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, the following are the best known and might just be found wandering in Projectland as well.

The White Rabbit is responsible for starting it all. It bounds into Alice life and triggers her curiosity: "*Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, **and burning with curiosity**, she ran across the field after it*." (Carroll, 1865, p. 12)

For the stage adaptation of his work, Carroll described the rabbit as "*elderly, timid, feeble, and nervously shilly-shallying*, the very opposite of young, courageous and purposeful Alice. Constantly muttering to himself, always late and afraid of the consequence, the White Rabbit is obsessed with time and does not seem to be aware of any other dimension in life. When he finally meets Alice face to face, he is in such a hurry that he mistakes Alice for his maid. What type of sponsor would the White Rabbit make?

Alice, however, continues to try to understand and help him, with active and constructive answers to the White Rabbit's worries. She listens, asks questions and avoids direct confrontation. She uses her curiosity to create bridges instead of raising defensive barriers, taking into account her own mistakes but standing her ground when she knows she is right.

Alice also meets three Queens, the Queen of Hearts in Wonderland and the Red and the White Queen in Through the Looking Glass. The Queen of Hearts and the Red Queen share some common traits. They are often confused and, as in the Disney adaptation of the two books, are made into one character. The Queen of Hearts is most famous for her peculiar way of dealing with any issue or novelty: "*Off with the head*", she orders anytime something displeases or surprises her. She invites Alice to participate in a quite complex game of croquet, one of the many games Alice has to play during her adventures. Learning the rather bizarre rules of the various games is a metaphor for adaptation to new social situations. Alice masters this particular challenge by exploring the field and making a fair effort to play. By starting a dialogue with every player, she builds consensus and becomes recognized as a leader, finally challenging the arbitrary proceeding to return to be herself. "*Curiosity"*, said Nabokov, "*is the purest form of insubordination*", and yet it has deeply ethical application. Even in Projectland, Alice could find herself facing a conflict of interests, lack of respect, abusive language or unfair management. Throughout her adventures Alice is moved by respect for all the creature she encounters, she is indignant when any of them is not treated fairly and she never shrinks from her responsibilities. She sometimes favors politeness over complete honesty but never lies or even gossips. In other words, she seems to behave according to the four tenets of the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. We therefore feel confident that her untiring curiosity would lead her to view the situation from different perspectives, and to explore her emotions before acting on her decision openly, thus aligning her behavior to core values to make her choice and truly be herself.

A different type of challenge awaits Alice when she meets the Red Queen. Her apparently well-ordered world (a chessboard) is ruled by "Looking Glass Logic". Words take a different meaning and Alice has to learn not only a new language but a totally new perspective on time and space. "*I think I'll go and meet her, said Alice (...) You can't possibly do that, said the Rose: I should advice you to walk the other way. This sounded nonsense to Alice, so she said nothing, but set off at one towards the Red Queen. To her surprise, she lost sight of her in a moment. (...) She thought she would try the plan, this time, of walking in the opposite direction. It worked beautifully"*. (Carroll, 1908, p. 35)

Curious Alice however, does not only apply the "when in Rome" rule, she actually wants to belong "*How I wish I was one of them! I would not mind being a Pawn, if only I could join – though of course I should like to be a Queen,*

best." (Carroll, 1908, p. 35). Cultural diversity is quite common in Projectland, and cultural awareness goes beyond the observance of "the customs of the country".

Strong technological and economic forces continue to expand the boundaries of most business sectors, organizations, individuals and most of all Projectland. Interdisciplinary by vocation, Projectland is not new to the constant challenges of operating in diverse organizational, geographical and cultural settings. Studies in this field have become increasingly popular and cross-cultural literature offers several criteria to better understand and essentially cope with different cultures. Most cross-cultural models are indeed based on a comparative approach: focusing on culture as difference they are at risk of stereotyping and ultimately contributing to building on the already existing cultural barriers.

An interesting and novel approach is outlined by N.J. Holden *"culture is dead resource until its value and utility are recognized as knowledge"*. (Holden, 2001, p. 289). This approach offers several advantages if applied to the project environment, which PMI® defines as both "knowledge-based" and "people-oriented".

Alice's curiosity leads her to dive into the "pool of common knowledge" which is Holden's definition of culture. She passionately lives her adventures, all the while thinking and acting "glocally", magisterially applying Holden's Interactive Translation techniques to negotiate common meanings and conceptions in a diverse and often puzzling environment. In Wonderland Alice has learnt that even language may be a source of both joy and confusion: puns and riddles revealed her the slippery relationship between words and meanings, and she had to learn to discern between unusual logic and utter nonsense. Not all the conversation she might engage in Projectland will be pleasant but her gentle and steady curiosity will help to negotiate even the most emotionally charged encounters.

Finally, in Looking Glass world, Alice meets the White Queen and discovers "living backwards": "*it always makes one a little giddy at first (...) but there are some great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways. I'm sure mine only works one way, Alice remarked. I can't remember things before they happen". It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards, the Queen remarked"*. (Carroll, 1908, p. 95).

Being a highly curious child, Alice may not need backwards memory: she is well rehearsed in embracing and exploiting uncertainty. However, finding herself in Projectland, she may discover that "uncertainty matters" in many different ways. Although a risk is officially defined as an "*uncertain event or condition that, if it occurs, has a positive or negative effect on project's objectives*" (PMI, 2008, p. 446), the amount of attention devoted to threats still exceeds that given to opportunities. The "evolutionary design of our brain" is partially responsible for our alertness to danger. However "*worrisome thought consumes the limited amount of working brain power at our disposal*" (Kashdan, 2009, p. 181) and fear is a bad advisor, it narrows our mind, kills curiosity and with it the wiliness to explore the unknown. Concentrating on threats may actually prevent us from managing risk effectively. Focusing on opportunities, on the other hand, creates the optimal state to trigger curiosity and creative thinking. Balancing and tuning out threats and opportunity through the risk management processes will help our brain to remain open and receptive, defusing the negative bias. Far more powerful than any brainstorming techniques, curiosity will help to overcome the bias of risk attitudes and risk tolerance.

Alice herself learns the importance of a double focus from the White Queen: *"'Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you've come today. Consider what o'clock it is. Consider anything, only don't cry'. Alice could not help laughing at this, even in the mist of her tears 'Can you keep from crying by considering things?' she asked. 'That's the way it's done' said the Queen with great decision."* (Carroll, 1908, p. 100).

From the White Queen Alice also learns the secret to nurture her curiosity "*Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things'. 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,"' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast*!' *"*. (Carroll, 1908, p. 101).

Some of the creatures Alice meets befriend her and help her somewhat to understand and manage the complexity she faces. The Caterpillar and the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland and in his own wobbling way the White Knight in Through the Looking Glass, all look after Alice and seem to appreciate her eagerness and candor:

"*by being observant of what is going on inside them and around them, very curious people gain close proximity to their thoughts and feelings, and those of others, and this ability is also visible and highly regarded by others"*. (Kashdan, 2009, p.137). Acting mostly as benignant if sometimes ambiguous mentors, they mark the turning points of Alice's development. Most of us can recall the spark that started us on personal and/or professional quest; sometimes it is a strange coincidence, an occasional encounter or an illuminating moment. Many times that spark would have died away without the help of a mentor who both probed and nurtured our curiosity:

"'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?' 'That depends a good deal on where you want to go', said the Cat. 'I don't much care where' – said Alice. 'Then it doesn't matter which way you go', said the Cat. 'So long as I get somewhere', Alice added as an explanation. 'Oh you are sure to do that', said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough'." (Carroll, 1865, p. 75).

In Projectland Alice would often find herself needing to motivate others. Achievement, growth, autonomy and responsibility have long been recognized as the true or at least most powerful motivators. Herzberg's theory, among others, emphasizes the difference between fulfilling a physiological need and a psychological one. A physiological need, once assuaged, leaves us where we were, like the Red Queen running wildly to remain in the same place, while the achievement of psychological need will change the quality of our life. Alice does not grow alone, she invests in other peoples curiosity, recognizes their uniqueness and personal strength and often tries to reward them with meaningful and personal tokens (certainly not with money which, even in Projectland, she might not have at her disposal) and most of all she shares their dreams. Tim Burton's latest screen adaptation of Alice's stories builds on this aspect and Alice is called back to safe Wonderland and, at the same time, to herself.

The White Knight makes Alice his prisoner "*to see her safe at the end of the woods*" and from him Alice learns the humility and resiliency of the true beginner's mind "'*It's too ridiculous!' cried Alice, losing all her patience this time. 'You ought to have a wooden horse on wheels, that you ought!' 'Does that kind goes smoothly?' the Knight asked in a tone of great interest, clasping his arms round the horse's neck as he spoke, just in time to save himself from tumbling off again*." (Carroll, 1908, p. 170). Curiosity and arrogance are mutually exclusive and Alice's youthful impatience never keeps her from focusing on people as the true source of knowledge and meaning.

She does exchanges stories with many characters, sharing knowledge and creating meaningful relationships. Each new story is in itself an "*act of meaning"* that actively helps to form and maintain a sense of belonging: *"The brain still separates the self and other people, but it makes a special exception for friends, lovers and family members who are intimately intertwined with our own life. When you form close bonds and trade access to your innermost self with close friends, these relationship get imprinted in your brain. Your brain gets rewired, adding new neural connections to include the people most important to you. The brain literally changes as a result of experience.* (Kashdan, 2009, p. 133).

According to Bruner (1990) narrative thinking is a mode of thought that engages the mind in sequential, action oriented, detail-driven thinking that takes the form of stories. Their power is twofold: they help the storyteller to understand and summarize key elements, fully conveying the unique wisdom and value of the personal experience. Stories also help the listener by anchoring new knowledge to a context. They "*breach the normal state*", suggest new connections and facilitate learning while they also aid the memory to retain both the learning experience and the concepts. Or in the words of the Gryphon "*The Adventures first, explanations take such a dreadful time.*" (Carrol, 1865, p. 122)

In Projectland Alice may have the opportunity to listen to many stories revealing how different aspects of the project are viewed, commented and worked upon by key stakeholders. During the project lifecycle the exchange of knowledge by sharing stories will happen innumerable times every day, in the form of jokes or serious talk, and often without any need to prompt them or attempt to record them. What we may call *Project Tales* will be told, related and listened to on and about specific events, problems or situations, giving shape to the unofficial history of the project. Alice may also create new stories of her own, to make sense of all her of her adventures in the land of temporary endeavors and, returning home, she may wonder "*who it was that dreamed it all"*. No doubt curiosity will once again guide her while she tries "*to carry out the integration required to create a sense of cosmos where there was the threat of chaos*." (Beswick, 2000) and she will gather her strength to continue to nurture her curious spirit with new and fascinating questions.

It is now time to let Alice have the last word about growth, self-awareness and the curiosity that started it all:

"*I could tell you my adventures- beginning from this morning, said Alice a little timidly, but it's not use to go back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.*" (Carrol, 1865, p. 122)

A Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my father, whose insatiable curiosity taught me to observe and respect nature, the wisest of teachers.

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