



The agile42 Training Effect

What is the difference in substance and impact provided by agile42 trainings? We ask four individuals who received training in the last 18 months.

The agile42 coaching company is a global organization that trains and coaches individuals and organizations in Agile approaches to their work. One of its most popular courses is Certified Scrum Master Training, providing new scrum masters and many others who work alongside development teams with vital grounding in an Agile workflow. As a focused introduction to Scrum, the course serves a diverse group of participants, including many who enroll in the course from outside the software industry.

Let's hear from four trainees who participated in courses with agile42 trainers during 2015 and 2016. Each arrived with a different background or business context ranging from project or program manager to consultant and coach. As full-time employees or working independently, Mitchell Fong, Michael Matic, Carly Janes, and Anne Sproull enrolled in agile42's Certified Scrum Master training with a wide range of experiences and expectations.

Carly and Michael came to CSM training as project managers. Carly was employed by a software development agency, very much engaged in the business end of the company. Michael worked as a project manager within a software and web services company that serves the auto manufacturing sector.

Mitchell was a program management consultant who worked from his own office for a software company as an independent contractor. Anne rowed and cycled at an elite level and had served for many years as a rowing coach and independent consultant.

At the end of 2016, we asked these individuals for insights into their two-day trainings and to describe any benefits they noticed when they returned to work.

What is Certified Scrum Master Training?

CSM training as delivered by agile42 is an interactive two-day introduction to the principles and practices of Agile and the Scrum framework. The training blends an overview of key principles from Lean and Agile with an in-depth discussion of the practices necessary for Agile to work. Then it quickly moves from theory to practice in the form of a Lego Scrum City Simulation. Trainer Dave Sharrock explains:

“Teams build a Lego city during much of the course. We use it to emerge all of the practices around Scrum. For example, you immediately observe that building a city requires planning and coordination, which is part of the Scrum discipline.”

Dave says that information transfer is less important to agile42 than finding out what aspects of Scrum will be applicable for attendees. He admits to being an academic, but says, “I sacrifice that to give people practical tools. I want to know what are your problems, so we can bring them to the fore. We spend as much time as possible targeting key areas.

“We need to jolt people to change how they think, but we need to be confident they have one to three things they can immediately benefit from.”

During our interviews for this paper, we heard how trainees took the CSM course and then put it to work. Some also signed on for more courses. Michael followed CSM with the Certified Scrum Product Owner class. Carly completed CSM, CSPO and three more courses during the year.

Here then are the stories of four agile42 students, followed by personalized trainer observations.

Michael Matic (senior project manager/scrum master):
Certified Scrum Master, January 2016; Certified Scrum Product Owner,
April 2016



Michael Matic works for a software and web services company focused on top-tier auto manufacturers. He began the training to gain recognition within his company as an Agile specialist, understanding that there was a desire within the company to do some things in an Agile way, if not a full commitment to it.

“I went into the training with an open mind,” he says, “but I gained much more than my certification, including a network of several people I’m still close with.”

The Training: “Applying Agile beyond the book”

Michael reports his trainer knew how to use humor and develop good class chemistry, but also knew when “it was time to get to the meat and potatoes of the methodology.” In both trainings, Michael says, “We were divided into small groups and the theory was woven through practical exercises.”

According to Michael, groups get to exchange ideas from what they conclude in a “Scrum of Scrums. I found this useful and powerful,” he says. “There were people from different backgrounds—manufacturing, telecommunications, and software—and they had lots of takes on how the method applied.

“One of the biggest values with agile42 was that they didn’t stick with reading the book and doing the exercises when challenged with how we could implement Agile in organizations with legacy systems and practices. In one exercise, we built a Lego castle, following Agile philosophy; the goal wasn’t to build a castle, but to extrapolate what we learned into real-world business.

“Our trainer was able to handle different examples brought up across all three industries. He was able to explain how to work around monolithic organizational challenges. As a result, I realized we could use a Scrum approach for our delivery team using Agile, but not expand it to sales. I realized I don’t have to change the whole organization, just my business unit.”

A key difference presented by agile42? Michael says, “They are not Scrum or Agile zealots. When presented with real-world challenges, they don’t say ‘I can’t help you, the book says do it this way.’”

The impact: “The power to negotiate scope”

Michael was excited to use what he’d learned immediately, but he realized it would be a challenge to implement it in a company that manages projects through traditional “waterfall” methods. His insight was to use his position as scrum master to negotiate scope, and he provided this example:

“The product owner presents a road map with a prioritized backlog. As scrum master, I can decide to utilize short, two-week sprints and start by pulling in well-defined work we can get done in two weeks. For the first couple sprints, we make progress and establish a velocity or burn-down rate for our work.

“All of a sudden there’s conflict in terms of priority or an escalation. Management asks: ‘Can you squeeze this in?’ I’m now in a powerful position to say, ‘We can try to fit this in and fail—and lose control over what we do and don’t get done. Or, if this is high priority, we can look at the data and ask what would you like to take out of the sprint so we can be sure to get this done?’”

Michael highlights other key points he’s put into practice:

1. Clarifying the “definition of done” so products aren’t delayed by over-engineering
2. Using shorter sprints to make it possible for teams to fail safely
3. Generating through Agile teamwork a “we’re in this together” culture that improves velocity and product quality through iteration and process improvements.
4. Learning about people’s challenges in different domains and applying this methodology else where, even to managing personal lists outside of work.

The training has opened new doors for Michael. Within his company, he says “No question there are new opportunities. The certification gave me credibility, and I was hand-picked to salvage one project.”

“The training reinforced for me the paradigm shift from the waterfall approach in a monolithic organization to Agile’s concept of servant leadership. Yes, I’m leading the team, but I’m here to enable your success.”

—Michael Matic

Trainer’s view: “Michael’s interpretation of his scrum master role is expansive, but he’s learning to shield his team and gave a great example of that. With every class, he’s gone more to the Agile side. He is getting results and moving up in terms of credibility.”

Carly Janes (project manager, Venture Media Labs):
Certified Scrum Master & Agile Product Management, June 2016

Working for a self-funded software company, Carly Janes serves as a project manager engaged with technical, design, and senior management. At any given moment, she’s engaged in two to three projects with an average duration of three months, sometimes returning to projects if further work is needed. She took the agile42 CSM course and others in Agile delivery methods, leadership, and product ownership.



On her motivation to engage in training, Carly says, “As a company, we use the word Agile a lot. I wanted to see what kind of advanced learning was available as a project manager.” She considered a course that offered project manager certification, but her research led her to agile42’s courses.

The Training: “Interactive, practical, with tools and frameworks I could use.”

“My goal was a better understanding of what Agile is and how to apply it in my workplace,” Carly says. “I didn’t have particular expectations; I was ready for it to be two days of note taking. It turned out to be

really enjoyable. The trainer would teach us a new idea and then we would go into an activity with different props—games, balls, Legos—and working as a team to experience the idea.

“Some education is theory-based. This had theory, but it was very practical, with lots of tools and frameworks; I left with tools I could use in my workplace.

“In my courses, people came from all different backgrounds—librarians, people in health care and in government. Our trainer was able to cater to learning in each environment and helped us see that you can’t be as agile in some more regulated environments, like health-care, as you can in others, like online gaming. During our smaller team sessions, the trainers would come around and discuss specific examples.”

Carly describes one concept she absorbed — having trust and empowering the team and providing the support for them to be successful: “...not top-down, telling everybody what to do, but empowering them to make decisions. For me, what I learned was providing them with the boundaries, while removing barriers. When they don’t know the business requirements, now I clarify them, help prioritize the business perspective, and remove roadblocks. This allows the team to figure out how to solve the problem in a way that is conducive for the business.”

Impact: “Continuous improvement and shoring up the weak link”

Carly reports multiple benefits from her training, starting with retrospective evaluations: “We never did ‘retros’ before, and now we do. I didn’t have the same emphasis on continuous improvement. We thought of making changes quickly but not of measuring things to see if you’re improving. Even in copy for our website, now I write it, then ask customers what they think, then revise it, then do it again. Before, the concept was to write and never look back.

“In one of the Product Owner classes, we went through a planning process, and I realized within our own projects, we weren’t tracking the success of a feature once we shipped it. Now I add a stage that says ‘after X customers have used this’ go back and see what the metrics are saying! I’m a little embarrassed that this was such an amazing idea, but we had become a feature factory and weren’t doing the follow-up.”

Through her training, Carly gained a more global understanding of her company’s operation, and that has allowed her to modify how business and product work together: “The training opened up my awareness to the fact that our development team is extremely Agile and very good. My ‘aha moment’ was that our weak links were on the business side and in the conduit between business and the rest of team.

“Rather than just pushing and saying everything is important, now my role is to ask stakeholders why we want it and how important it is? Then I ask the team how big it is, is it well enough defined, and are they missing any info? This gives them some time to think about a feature. Programming is a creative job; you need time to think of the best solution, and treated this way, they feel less pressured and more trusted. The response has been really positive!”

Business stakeholders no longer write tickets, Carly says. “I split out three Trello boards to separate different processes: 1. Business planning board; 2. Team board; 3. Shipped board. Stakeholders use the first board as their playground to work through ideas and priorities.”

“There’s intrinsic value and extrinsic value. The certifications are beneficial career-wise, and I’m also better at what I do. Plus, you can apply this training to your relationships and how you live your life.”

— Carly Janes

Trainer's response: “We don't teach anything exactly as she described—that excites me. The multiple Trello boards are an example of where she has extended the learning into her context. She's adopted new practices and benefitted from them. She is by no means following a script.”

Mitchell Fong (program management consultant):

Certified Scrum Master training, January 2016

As a program manager working with Agile development teams within companies with more traditional structures, Mitchell Fong says he wanted to learn more in-depth best practices for Agile. “I wanted the formal Certified Scrum Master experience and to understand the methodology,” he says, adding, “Honestly, I had low expectations going into the training, but I figured it would at least provide tools and information I could use every day.”



The Training: “Toward the greater good”

The two-day CSM course was much more interactive and exercise-based than Mitchell expected: “Everyone thinks they can do proper estimations,” he says. “One of the exercises put us in line to do a task, which was then iterated. The first two guesses most made were far off, but we gained a realistic view through experience. We saw the value of going through the process and failing—failing fast and failing safe—reinforcing both that value and the Agile thought process.”

The lessons learned experientially were of far greater impact, Mitchell says. “Afterwards, you felt that you could show up to work the next day and you were smarter; you could use lessons learned right away. And as an employee, you've added value to your workplace.”

Mitchell also learned to appreciate the empowerment gained by teams of developers through show and tell, or demo days. “I now truly understand the value to teams and developers to showcase their work...that was a concept I didn't have.”

Asked what difference agile42 brought to his training, Mitchell said “Phenomenal! Rather than a matter of training us towards an exam from an academic perspective, I felt our trainer was able to train us toward the greater good, towards best practice.”

The Impact: “Confidence to take on more and larger projects”

“The training was fantastic for my personal development,” Mitchell says. “Now with an in-depth view of Agile, when I attend workshops I am learning more from the conversations; before it was academic. Now, I'm able to ask better questions, making it much more valuable.”

“As a program manager, you often have a cursory understanding of the process, but only when you dive in can you truly be a leader, and inspire and galvanize your team. That's when you can appreciate the wonderful work the team does and also allow the team to shine even more. That's the Agile way.”

When he attended the training, Mitchell was program management consultant for a software company. Since then, he has taken on work for more engagements and says that the training was key to giving him confidence that he could handle larger projects.

“The main thing again,” he says, “is that I have a better working relationship with the team. When they know you’ve been through Agile training, it puts you at their level better. I have added credibility and we have a greater trust.”

“Eleven months later, what has stuck with me the most is that the training provided an expanded tool belt of techniques and concepts. I feel I can draw on the tool belt any time I need.”

— Mitchell Fong

Trainer’s response: “Mitchell broadened his learning and is very positive about Agile. If he weren’t a program manager, he would likely be a senior scrum master or coach.”

Anne Sproull (researcher and private coach, Stratetude Consulting):

Certified Scrum Master, March 2015

Rowing coach, researcher, athlete, educator and architect, Anne Sproull doesn’t fit a stereotype of someone who would seek out Agile training. Private coaching for rowers is her primary profession, but research has always added dimension and texture to her work — and she has her eyes on leadership coaching as well.



At a meet-up in early 2015, she heard developers discussing how their managers were having trouble understanding their problems and weren’t connecting with them on a fundamental level. Agile is not something you do in isolation, they explained to her. Everybody has to be Agile. Intrigued, Anne enrolled in the agile42 Certified Scrum Master training through a local university.

“I could understand their point,” she says. “In sports, you wouldn’t dream of a coach not understanding what you were doing. The problem they were describing and the language they were using was familiar — what I also face working with teams. I decided to find out more about Agile and Scrum, and explore the connection between rowing and the Agile mindset.”

Anne started the training to see if she might learn to offer her skills and know-how in a different way. She was also curious to see if she could get through the class successfully. “I asked the course coordinator if I needed a team to benefit from this,” she says, “and I was told ‘No, just come with an open mind.’”

Training: “Creating shared knowledge together”

Anne’s CSM training offered basic orientation to the principles of Agile and Scrum, including a brief review of the Agile manifesto. But what followed was more empirical, she says, using games and other interactive processes. Anne was pleased to find she could participate fully in the class and felt it was a safe learning environment.

“What intrigued me was that the trainer used Legos,” Anne says. “That made sense to me as an educator, familiar with model-making as a tool to teach design with students. Here we were just designing a solution using a different methodology.”

“The trainer gave examples of Scrum helping teams,” Anne says, “but we were not just sitting and absorbing. We all worked together, often in smaller groups, to create shared knowledge. Our work was hands-on, which I appreciated, and through sharing of stories from different industries on why this process of Scrum is useful. We used boards on side walls, made lots of lists, and taught each other through our own unique

expertise.”

Anne sums up the training provided by agile42, saying, “It’s deeply satisfying knowledge gained through experience, and it’s well shared, well thought out and well presented. Opportunities to immediately implement the knowledge are provided, and that’s key because that’s the best way to learn.”

Impact: “Testing the importance of language; moving from fear to safety.”

After her training, Anne says she became even more attentive to her dialogue with teams of adults, who come to rowing from different professional backgrounds: “I became more aware of the language I use. Now I try different things, asking questions in a slightly different way. I have more awareness of what I’m doing besides teaching people effective technique.”



For beginners getting into a skinny rowing shell, Anne says, “If I’m clear about the technical aptitude needed and articulate what they should pay attention to, I can move them from a fear place to a safe place. As they become more skilled in moving the boat, I’m even more attuned to their feedback, guiding them gradually to mastery of their own movements to produce speed.”

The training has also led Anne to 18 months of research toward a new training she plans to present: “I specialize in teaching individuals and teams. The training made me curious to know more about the software industry, possibly working with upper management to support Agile environments and company culture.

“The context for teams working to solve a problem could shift from boardroom to boat, where the same notions of respect for other people in a safe environment are just as valuable. The research is slowly leading me into being able to offer a different kind of rowing experience. In a rowing shell, you’re responding, literally, to the movements of others. It’s very much a shared experience...you actually sense the forces of others, providing instant feedback, which requires you to adapt in the moment while visualizing future adaptations.”

“I am actively developing a product through my consultancy, realigning my skills and knowledge to bring deep Agile understanding to teams and organizations, supporting their own creative, positive development.”

- Anne Sproull

Trainer’s response: “Anne has learned that Agile is not just a methodology but a mindset in how to work with people. She realizes Agile practices are universal and whether she’s a leadership coach or a rowing coach, it’s about teaching a way of thinking.”

Summary: the agile42 Effect

These stories of individuals who experienced agile42 Certified Scrum Master training and other trainings have common themes. They also describe a variety of individual benefits and growth. As agile42 trainer Dave Sharrock reminds us, each participant came from a different point on the compass: “They are people ranging from a normal technologist delivering products to one working in a crossover/agency world, from someone embedded in the project management world, to a marketer, consultant, and coach.”

According to those interviewed, agile42 trainers:

- “Demonstrate an Agile approach in their teaching methods.”
- “Let students learn the lessons rather than being told the lessons.”
- “Create a safe environment and says go ahead now and work on it.”
- “Tells you what you need; doesn’t feed you the whole cake.”

Common benefits of the training that participants cite include:

- “Personal awareness, job performance, and career development”
- “Application of the Agile approach within a more traditional business”
- “Business process modification to support Agile software development”
- “Use of Agile thinking beyond business”

The agile42 Certified Scrum Master training provides graduates with a certification and the foundational training to serve as a scrum master. It also provides a broad introduction to Scrum and the Agile mindset and leaves participants with a variety of tools that can be brought to bear by anyone who works with a team.

The agile42 trainers lead trainings based on spending most of their time coaching teams and companies in making the shift to Agile. Dhaval Panchal, agile42 vice president, says, “They bring real-world experience, so they can relate to participants’ challenges, with ease, because they encounter similar situations when they are not training.

“While some training companies have taken our Lego City idea to run simulations in their classes,” Dhaval says, “we are continuously innovating based on our field experience. What you learn in our classes is unavailable in any book because our trainers have moved on. What they care about is creating a world-class learning experience, so your learning is only limited by your curiosity.”

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