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The door is ajar—response to 'Project management: a profession with a hole in its head or, why a change in the culture of academic support is needed for the profession'

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A personal view (response) is offered to three themes discussed within Morris [(2014) 'Project management: a profession with a hole in its head' or, why a change in the culture of academic support is needed for the profession', *The Engineering Project Organization Journal*, available at http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21573727.2013.873717 (published online, January, 2014)]. Specific themes responded to are: conceptual academic activity; the integrative function of academia in researching and delivering project management (PM) knowledge and stakeholders' responsibilities for developing experiential PM competence.

Keywords: Academic knowledge, knowledge stakeholders, opinion, PM competence.

Introduction

Many years ago, I[1] came upon an aphorism that has remained with me ever since. It went something like this: 'If your research has pushed the door ajar, if only by a small amount, it allows others to potentially see what lies beyond and in that respect, it will have achieved something' (Anon.). Academic papers can be the same. Every once in a while, a paper pushes on the 'metaphorical door' with just that little extra force and invites one to view 'the beyond'—and the perspective revealed, can serve as a stimulus for further inquiry, dialogue or debate.

So it was for me, regarding a recent paper published in this journal: 'Project management: a profession with a hole in its head or, why a change in the culture of academic support is needed for the profession' (Morris, 2014). Aside from my initial thought that this is a hot contender for a paper title of the year award, it (more seriously, in response to said stimulus) inspired me to think: 'this paper raises relevant, topical and important issues that require debate'. Accordingly, this short note highlights some of those issues and provides personal reflection in response to them.

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Discussion

The discussion will centre on: conceptual academic activity; the integrative function of academia in developing and delivering project management (PM) knowledge and stakeholders' roles with respect to developing individuals' experiential PM competence.

Conceptual academic activity

Morris (2014) questions:

> … [what] type of knowledge that an intellectual leader in a practice-based discipline such as project and programme management should generate and articulate, and how valuable such knowledge is. (p. 1).

Furthermore, Morris (2014 hereafter) confirms that:

> Professors tend to dwell in conceptual knowledge. How is conceptual knowledge valuable in a practice-based field? (p. 1).

Conceptualism is critically important to academic endeavour and especially to research ('knowledge generation', in the above context)—whether related to practice-based subjects, or otherwise. In stating this, I readily accept Morris' connect between conceptual and theoretical in referring to academics as 'theoreticians' [confirmed by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2014) who describe 'conceptual' as relating to concepts and abstract ideas; as does theory]. Indeed theory, notwithstanding its different meanings to different people (Metcalfe, 2004) is an essential component of *all* research (Gelso, 2006). The explication of 'conceptual' meanwhile can also differ in relation to the research process vis-à-vis research outcomes. So yes, an academic ('theoretician') engaged in pure research will probably '… dwell in conceptual knowledge' (Morris, 2014, p. 1).

But we should not presuppose that conceptual academic activity automatically yields conceptual outcomes. In my own experience, many successful (as measured in terms of end-user value by the research-sponsoring industrial beneficiaries) applied research projects (i.e. outcomes) achieved their practical value through evolving iterations of conceptualization and theorization (en route). As Wacker (2008) asserted, conceptualization drives empiricism and so should always precede it. 'Conceptual knowledge' and applied or 'practice-based' academic endeavour, therefore, are not mutually exclusive. Industry (and hence by inference industry practitioners), widely recognize research but are sometimes less keen to accept it (Ormala, 2013)—and maybe the 'conceptual' connotation helps explain this? Furthermore, given the present epoch, where applied research and 'impact' are in vogue (see for instance, Delpy, 2009; Research Councils UK, 2014), to detract from pure, blue-sky or conceptual academic endeavour would be damaging to research and academic freedom. Such epoch is in my view already proving detrimental in this regard [for similar admonition, see Braben (2010, 2012) and Anon (2010)].

The integrative function of academia

The second issue I wish to respond to is the integrative function of academia in researching and developing PM knowledge. To quote various excerpts from Morris in this respect:

> … project and programme management are pre-eminently multidisciplinary, pluralistic, integrative disciplines […] The discipline's distinctive knowledge is at this level. This is where we need to focus [yet the profession] … is notable for the absence of academics working at its overall summative level [so] … in the absence of academic enquiry at the level of the discipline as a whole, project management is like a profession with a hole in its head (p. 3).

I have assumed that what Morris (at least, in part) is suggesting when describing academics 'working' at the summative level refers to their physical—vis-à-vis theoretical—presence among the 'workface'. That is,

> … listening to and in framing, issues raised by the practitioner (p. 4).

Acknowledging this while wearing my researcher's hat—I concur. Indeed, the need for (more and meaningful) industrial/academic partnerships is now more important than ever given increasing momentum of the 'impact agenda' (Times Higher Education, 2014); and this according to the Science Business Innovation Board (2012) calls for a big leap beyond the conventional 'research for funding' exchange. Such collaboration has long been recognized as a way to nurture research products (knowledge) that can transcend academic boundaries [but the earlier caveat regarding devaluation of pure research is reiterated]. However, the ethos proposed by Morris suggests a new mould of PM academic: one that is embedded in an organization to coach individuals and nurture Aristotle's *most important* intellectual virtue (Flyvbjerg, 2001)—*phronesis* (practical wisdom). But is coaching an academic's role?

In my view it is not (see later). Rather, I proffer that the optimum industrial/academic arrangement involves the partnership referred to earlier, from which the academic abstracts the problem setting; relevant information and data—*to study the phenomenon academically*. This phase represents knowledge generation in relation to a real-life 'problem setting' and helps formulate 'appropriate' PM research questions (cf. Hällgren, 2012). Commercial sensitivity, confidentiality and partners' contractual limitations aside; the products of that exercise in addition to solving the 'problem'[2] often expands extant knowledge. I like to think that this encapsulates perfectly the role of academic work: whereby this first iteration of 'knowledge generation' then feeds a second, which capitalizes on its outcomes to inform 'knowledge transfer' (PM teaching and learning in the present context). But what of *phronesis*?

Developing experiential project manager competence

Questioning the rigour and relevance of PM (indeed, management generally) education is not new (Berggren

and Söderlund, 2008), but what are the answers in seeking appropriate PM education and ultimately, *phronesis*? While accepting that it is convenient to generalize, I will do so regarding the present project manager learning culture via higher education study, in regard to its principal stakeholders. Typically:

(1) The learner wants a PM qualification with least effort in the shortest possible time. To achieve this, the learner invests personal time and effort into studying.
(2) The study funder wants the learner to successfully achieve the qualification, at lowest cost, usually within the shortest possible time. The funder might also be the learner.
(3) The education provider wants to deliver the qualification to successful conclusion, to reflect appropriate occupational standards (using in part, knowledge generated from the academic processes described earlier), usually in the shortest possible time, and profitably.
(4) The ultimate employer of the qualified project manager wants a competent professional who will add value to their business. The employer may be the funder of said study, but then again, may not.

Hence, one view of this generalization might describe a 'wants' (needs) driven culture, characterized by disparate interfaces of numerous stakeholders, where the ultimate beneficiary—the PM employer—will utilize the project manager's qualification (abilities, as manifest in Aristotle's *episteme* and *techne*). That is, to augment their fundamental business ambition of profit generation. But noteworthy, the employer may not have invested in that individual's learning or professional development. Furthermore, if we respect the overriding thesis of Morris' paper, the employer (and the profession) may not at this juncture have obtained an optimally competent project manager, because *phronesis* may be missing. *Step forward the academic coach?* I prefer a different view.

PM education faces several challenges (Córdoba and Piki, 2012), as does PM practitioner development for which presently, standard development paths do not exist (Ashleigh *et al.*, 2012). The future will remain fluid as project managers' necessary competencies continue to evolve. For instance, Mazur *et al.* (2013) highlighted the need for PM emotional intelligence (EI) and cognitive flexibility (CF). These are competencies less readily transferred from the 'book knowledge' held by PM professors and academics (cf. Morris 2014, pp. 2–3) and much more effectively nurtured from real-life experiential learning [for instance, see Hobbs and Smyth (2012)]. Although, optimum EI and CF employee development solutions remain prone to debate (Beigi and Shirmohammadi, 2010) and EI in particular, remains largely unexplored among PM (Zhang and Fan, 2013).

Hence, what project managers need to learn and how that will be learned[3] remains open to debate (cf. Palacios-Marqués *et al.*, 2013)—and the employer's role is superlative in helping resolve this. After all, the employer is a major beneficiary of the 'competent' project manager (refer generalization above); and while all stakeholders might each have to contribute something extra in striving to develop such, the employer usually has the most to offer. *Phronesis*, I proffer, is best facilitated by embedding the project manager within an employer organization and real work situation: post-academic qualification and, as a prerequisite to achieving 'professional status'. That is, in order to develop tacit knowledge '… based on individual experiences' (Ojiakoa *et al.*, 2014) [in contrast to training which is a formal type of instruction]. This model of organizational-led knowledge transfer already exists (Pollack, 2012); as does the utilization of experientially competent project managers, to transfer tacit knowledge to junior peers (Buganza *et al.*, 2013) [what Bach (2014) alludes to as, 'The project coach: the new role for the project manager … '].

Notwithstanding the importance of developmental training to achieve increased project manager competence, little attention has been directed to this (Lee-Kelley and Blackman, 2012). Organizational-led knowledge transfer (e.g. via coaching) should become mandatory (post-master's degree) professional learning, as is 'usual' (though not necessarily compulsory), for instance, in Sweden and Germany (Berggren and Söderlund, 2008). Furthermore, the benefits are mutual—this kind of employer investment in employees has allowed some companies to influence the competencies they need and be an attractive employer (Berggren and Söderlund, 2008). It also encourages employee commitment to their organization (cf. McGuffin and Obonyo, 2010) and helps organizations retain newly competent project managers as part of an '… holistic yet integrated incentive system and career path'—that Hölzle (2010) suggests, the PM profession dearly needs.

Conclusion

Three views I wish to conclude with are:

(1) Conceptual (theoretical) is intrinsic within academic endeavour, but this should not infer detachment of academia from the real world, or, for example, practice-oriented or experiential realisms in the present context. Neither, are conceptual

knowledge and practice-based research, mutually exclusive. Conceptualization therefore, will always underpin PM knowledge generation both at the constituent and, holistic levels.

(2) Increased and mutually meaningful industrial/academic PM partnerships are needed; but the academic role within those should concentrate on identifying problem settings; accruing relevant information and data and extending extant knowledge *academically*.

(3) It is not the academic's role to coach project managers; albeit this is not to suggest that 'coaching' is superfluous. On the contrary, it is essential in striving to produce a competent manager as defined here by their possession of *phronesis*. But it is the employer—*who incidentally stands to benefit most from the 'phronesis-armed' project manager*—not the academic, which is best placed to facilitate this.

The door is ajar.

Notes

1. Given this is personal opinion, first-person writing style is used, though I acknowledge that views can differ on this.
2. Or helping better understand it, or otherwise adding to evolutionary knowledge advancement.
3. History too, can play a role in PM learning (Holt, 2013; Kozak-Holland and Procter, 2014).

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