How Can Theory Help Improve Project Management Practice?

Introduction

It is unquestionable that the subject of project management experienced an increasing level of interest recently. Despite this, projects keep failing and although more knowledge is created and is available to practitioners, we are still far from an ideal situation where all projects would succeed. Based on this scenario, some authors suggest that there is still a gap to be bridged between theory and practice of project management and others are even more radical in their views by claiming that project management theory is obsolete, fragmented, or even non-existent.

While the challenge to capture and transfer a knowledge that is mainly tacit and contextual relates not only to project management but also to other social sciences, the fact that there is not a consensual and recognized solid foundation for the management of projects as a discipline leads also to other core questions, such as its professionalization, or what role is still there for theory to help improve project management practice.

This essay will thus outline the main causes driving the ongoing debate between the theory and practice of project management. After examining the causes, an emphasis on reflective practice, phronesis, and on co-creation mechanisms between actors will be highlighted as a possible approach to re-connect theory with practice. In addition, this essay will stress the need for theory to fulfil its ultimate mission of usefulness for the end user, and inspire a call to action.

The gap between theory and practice

Most of the current literature describes project management as planning, implementing, and controlling a group of activities intended to deliver a unique product or service, as prescribed by the PMBOK Guide® (2001). As a result of this dominant model, project management is still seen as an execution-oriented discipline (Morris, 2013), whose focus is on delivering projects on-time, on-budget, and to scope.

Morris (2013) strongly criticized this narrowed mind-set, as it neglects the front-end aspects of a project, in particular its definition and its interfaces with strategy, procurement, finance, and similar crucial elements that make the management of projects a pluralistic discipline, much more comprehensive than the management of the triple constraint. Also, authors from Critical Management Studies (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006, Cicmil et al, 2006), highlighted the perils of an instrumental rationality, too focused on efficiency and efficacy, and too and techniques, but not in its context, thus ignoring the role of ethics, relationships of power, political issues, or interdependencies between project actors. Yet, Koskela and Howell (2002) are even more drastic in their views, by arguing that there is no explicit theory of project management, but a weak underlying foundation because its model is borrowed from other disciplines.
According to these authors, as a consequence of the lack of a well-defined, and unique theoretic basis, there is no distinct body of knowledge that could legitimize the project management discipline, and future advancement is hence dependent on a new, firm, theory that could allow the discipline to gain its own academic position and autonomy, as well as be translated into effective and consistent performance on delivering projects.

Hepworth, CEO of Axelos\(^1\), recently stated that “we are all project managers now” (2014) and this sentence is indicative of the crisis of identity faced by the profession of project management nowadays. The breadth of the concept of a “project” and the lack of a clearly defined body of knowledge leads thus to question whether project managers can be termed “professionals” in the same way that a doctor, or accountable is a “professional”. Several authors have researched this subject (Konstantinou et al, 2013; Morris et al, 2006; Giammalvo, 2007) and the conclusion is either “not yet”. This is also the position of Zwerman et al. (2004, p. 195), who concluded that project management is “unlikely to ever become recognized as a stand-alone profession”.

Additionally to this viewpoint, it is not uncommon to find accidental project managers (Darrell et al, 2010), suggesting that project management does not involve a distinctive and expert labor work. In light of this picture, a question should also be raised on how theory can be learnt in order to deliver better results.

Moreover, in traditional professions, there is an established distinction where knowledge is claimed by the academia while practice is exercised by the practitioner. In project management, however, both are claimed by professional associations, which even accredit universities to their frameworks, making them a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is, therefore, a combination of concerns that are driving a crisis in the field of project management, leading to a vicious circle that reflects poorly on the discipline. Project management theory is not yet unique and solid, which hinders its legitimization as an academic and professional discipline in its own right. In order to help improve practice, theory needs to reclaim its place towards practice.

**Making theory matter to practice**

Morris (2013) touched a sore spot by claiming that current research seems to be more focused on the means rather than on the ends, thus, lacking a link to organization’s performance improving. While some theorists persist in keeping an insular and inward-looking view, producing literature targeted for other theorists to read instead of for practitioners to improve their practice, theory will keep losing sight of the relevance of the discipline, hence, failing to accomplish its role in shaping practice.

To support this view, we encounter a paradoxical situation where practitioners are often invited to lecture on project management and bring to the academia their experience and working practices, but the opposite – researchers being invited by companies to test assumptions and share their findings – is

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\(^1\) Axelos is a joint venture set up in 2014 by UK government and Capita, to manage and provide training in best practice, in methodologies formerly owned by the Office of Government Commerce (OGC), such as PRINCE2® (Wikipedia, 2014)
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not as frequent. As a result, in order to connect theory and practice, it is the view of the author of this essay that theory has to be more particular-problem-driven rather than general-methodological-driven, that is, resulting in a practical impact to practice and able to make theory relevant to it.

Whilst many have engaged in a never-ending ontological debate about project management, the need persists in having a theory, not just about the practice of project management but also for the practice of project management. Regardless of the value of philosophical questions pursued, theory produced needs to re-focus on the “why?” and on the “so what?”, that is, on its purpose, relevance, and impact, so that the discipline of the management of projects can become critical to business and ultimately to society.

With this in mind, a shift from “practitioners as trained technicians” to “reflective practitioners”, as recommended by Winter et al. (2006), is argued in this essay as an approach that brings together theory and practice through “the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning” (Schon, 1983, pp. 102-4). Reflective practice enables a practitioner to critically analyze and evaluate his practice against the theory, and incorporate his reflection into practice, therefore allowing for continuous improvement and for the generation of new knowledge that can, in return, be useful for his praxis.

Although able to incorporate theory into practice, it is also important to ensure that concrete approaches and emergent practices (Snowden, 2007) followed, where best practices have proven to be insufficient, are captured and studied in theory, based on the circumstance that practical case studies are more compelling as vehicles of communication and learning than generic methodological examples (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Further to this observation, it is central the concept of phronetic research as an approach that aims to bring relevance into social science.

In view of the concept of “project” as a social construct and the management of projects as contextual, some authors (Flyvbjerg, 2004, 2005; Nonaka, 2010) advocate that phronesis can be the epistemological model to harmonize both the rigor and relevance that has been lacking in previous theoretical models. Based on Aristotle’s ethics, phronesis is an intellectual virtue that can be defined as a practical wisdom obtained through the experience of the practitioner, thus combining know-why (episteme) with know-how (techne). Besides incorporating elements of reflection on practice, by emphasizing the concrete over the generic, and the context over the rules, phronetic research is problem-driven rather than methodology-driven, thus prone to engage more effectively the practitioner community and, consequently, influence it.

Building on the previous point, other key characteristic of phronesis is its orientation toward action. Flyvbjerg (2005, p. 40) summarises it in four key questions: (1) where are we going? (2) who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?; (3) is this development desirable?; (4) what, if anything, should we do about it?. In a time where the identity of project management is at stake, these are definitely critical questions to ask. Morris (2013) also stressed this forward-looking orientation, calling it the “third wave” of project management, one that not only comprises a more holistic view of project management, but also contributes actively to a future social good. In light of challenges such as climate changes, national security threats, or poverty, and technological and scientific developments such as 3D-printing, nanotechnology, or even the hypothesis of technological singularity, project
management theorists and practitioners can play a substantial role in shaping the future and ensuring sustainability, and therefore these questions are more relevant than ever.

Assuming that social issues are best decided by means of the public sphere, not by science (Flybjerg, 2004), phronesis encourages us to engage a multiplicity of voices which could help to build answers that benefit the larger number of people. Following this view, some universities are now taking a step further by partnering with companies and with government to offer industry-led courses (e.g. Manchester University and Rolls-Royce, or Oxford University and Major Projects Authority) that could address real challenges and opportunities faced by the industry and thus promoting an environment that goes beyond collaboration and is built on co-creation instead.

Despite progress in that arena, this essay argues that frontiers can still be expanded to include other actors, aligned with the concepts of phronesis and co-creation. In an era of connectedness, the emergence and application of collective intelligence, based on the wisdom of crowds (Surowiecki, 2005), communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and open innovation models (Chesbrough, 2003), have proved successful in some areas and suggests that the academia does not fulfils anymore the traditional role of exclusive guardian of knowledge. Despite reservations regarding validity of knowledge, integrating different perspectives around a defined problem, in order to make theory relevant and successful in practice, should thus be considered.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although the boundaries of theory are expanding towards a reflective and situational model (Lalonde et al, 2010), “beyond high philosophy and grand themes lie the gritty details of practice” (Garvin, 1993), and the fact that the dominant model in practice is still a functional one, and that the rates of projects failure are still consecutively high, seem to corroborate it – a theory that is out of sync with practice, and not yet been converted into effective and reproducible performance.

In order to transform this scenario, this essay sustains that theory needs to become useful again, not just telling but showing, not focusing on generic but on particular. Theory needs to re-gain its ability to understand, dialog, and shape (the future of) practice. It is thus the view of the author of this essay that this goal can only be achieved if theory becomes relevant to practice again, and that a pathway to build that relevance could be by promoting phronetic research, partnering with different actors in order to co-create a solid and unique theory that can prove useful and successful in addressing actual problems of the practice. As Lewin (1952) put it, “there is nothing more practical than a good theory”, therefore, the best approach to improve the practice of project management is to start by improving its theory.
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References


Summary Bio

Marisa Silva is an accomplished Project and Portfolio Management (PPM) professional and trainer with over 7 years of experience gained internationally and cross-industries. Passionate about PPM and Project Management Offices (PMOs), Marisa has developed her career from management consulting and has held positions as PMO Analyst, PMO Manager, PPM consultant, PPM Competency Centre Manager, and Country Manager. Currently she works as PMO Analyst at Oxford University Press.

Marisa holds a BSc. in Management, a specialization in Competitive Intelligence, a PgDip in Foresight, Strategy and Innovation, and is currently a MSc. candidate in Strategic Management of Projects, at University College London (UCL). As a trainer, Marisa delivered over five hundred hours of training in Project Management foundation and advanced courses and PMP® preparation courses. She is certified as a PMP®, PMD Pro Level 2, PRINCE2®, and P3O® professional, as well as a Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP®) in regards to PPM tools.

Marisa has authored Project Management articles and scientific papers presented and published in international conferences, and is also an active member of the Project Management community and professional bodies, being. She is the owner of the LinkedIn group PMO Portugal, a member of PMI®, APM®, Founding Member of the IIBA® Portugal Chapter, and has served as a volunteer in the PMI® Portugal Chapter.

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