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Practitioners as Partners in Knowledge Creation

Abstract

Opening comments from the Academic Program Chair

The justification for attending conferences can be challenging to make. There are constraints on both budgets and times while the benefits of attendance are often unclear. Some conferences can appear to be a junket, especially as the value of merely meeting peers and discussing topics of interest can be hard to quantify in financial terms alone. For academics, the justification for attending a conference often comes down to the presentation of a paper, yet there can be significant benefits that can arise from learning new perspectives at a conference.

In the case of the Project Management Institute's Australian Conference held in Melbourne in May 2018 (PMIAC18), practitioners and academics were both present to share their thinking and challenge each other where appropriate. While purely research conferences have value in bringing together the tightknit community of project management (PM) academics, it is essential that we do not feel too comfortable operating in a silo. While academics work to develop the theoretical foundations of the PM discipline further, this can only legitimately be done by understanding the practitioner's experience.

As a late-career academic working to bridge practice and academia (Taborda, 2018), I fully embrace the need to formally define what it is we project managers do and how we do it. However, as a PM practitioner, I am also challenged to keep research relevant to my colleagues operating in the trenches. I worry that too great a focus on the discipline's theoretical foundations might lead to an esoteric discourse between academics using arcane terminology that is unintelligible to practitioners. Also, before we know it, we are having the modern equivalent of the debate about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin (Wikipedia, 2019).

The Science of Project Management?

A rationalisation that helps me accommodate both the practitioner and academic perspectives comes from my background in Physics. From this cradle of modern scientific methods, there have emerged two broad camps of Physics researchers – the experimentalists and the theoreticians. The experimentalists probe and investigate our physical world through observation and measurement, while the theoreticians attempt to develop models of our reality that can explain the observations and, importantly, make predictions that have yet to be observed.

The interaction between these two groups is vital for the advancement of Physics as theories are subject to validation by experiment before being accepted. Even theories on the formation of the universe are subject to creatively designed experiments that seek to prove or disprove each theory's predictions. Many people are familiar with these dynamics from the popularity of the Special and General Theories of Relativity which have made Einstein one of the most recognizable Physicists, if not a scientist of modern times. Sadly, science has a bias that favours theoreticians (Jogalekar, 2013), but in fact, it was the experimentalists who supported or validated each of Einstein's theories. Albert A. Michelson and Edward W. Morley's experiment (Shankland, 1964) predated Special Relativity, showing the constancy of the speed of light, a then-unexplained result that was later predicted by the Special Theory of Relativity and Frank Watson Dyson who studied the solar eclipse and showed the bending of light predicted by the General Theory of Relativity (O'Neill, 2017). Indeed, there is evidence that Einstein himself was highly respectful of the experimentalist (Hentschel, 1992).

Returning to PM, we can identify similar camps of theoreticians and experimentalist, except that many of the second group work in industry and look to make the best of what PM knowledge available and test its practicality in a real-world setting. PM practitioners can be considered to be experimenting in the "laboratory" that is their workplace and effectively verifying the validating the theories and models that codify PM knowledge.

Taking this somewhat idealistic perspective places the PM practitioner as a central player in the development of new knowledge, worthy of taking an active part in the exchange of ideas and views – not just on what works and what does not, but in the exploration of new frontiers which theory has not yet reached. The latter is key to PM and more generally to management and organizational studies because, unlike Physics, projects are not governed by the laws of our physical world. PM, like all of management, is a part of the social sciences, which means that our reality is more fluid and contextual - we are effectively able to create our reality as we go along.

Viewing projects as a socially constructed reality suggests that it is essential that PM researchers stay close to practice, as it is the practitioner that is creating, or at least operating in, and evolving this reality. Breaking the nexus between theory and practice is problematic and can result in academics suffering from Imposter Syndrome (Bothello & Roulet, 2018). The anxiety and self-doubt Bothello and Roulet express as academics undertaking management research can only overcome what they describe as a legitimacy crisis if research is organized 'around phenomenological rather than theoretical foci' – which in simpler words, means that research needs to be relevant to the manager's reality.

The Divergence of Theory and Experience

As a younger discipline, PM research has closer ties to practice, which need to be recognized and maintained to avoid a similar legitimacy crisis. However, as PM matures as a discipline, our academics may be tempted to follow their brethren the Business Schools and undertake pure management research often developing theoretical models that can remain unread by, and mostly irrelevant to real-world managers.

The formidable challenge facing PM academics is to both publish in the leading journals and yet remain relevant to the practitioner base. And to illustrate the value of conferences, it was a casual conversation during a break at PMIAC18 that an interesting and somewhat uncomfortable question was raised relating to the growth of PM academics relative to the number of PM practitioners. The discussion went along the lines that the number of PM academics have not kept pace with the tremendous growth in the PM profession, suggesting that this was evidence of the potential divergence between PM theory and experience. The logic of this thesis needs to be tested further, but it piqued my curiosity enough to investigate the relative growth of PM researchers to PM practitioners.

While the growth of PM practitioners can be discerned from the number of PMI's Project Management Professional (PMP) certifications, the number of PM academics are more challenging to ascertain. However, the number of academic publications in the field can act as a proxy for the number of PM academics in the informal

exploration that follows. Fig. 1 compares the graphs of academic publications in PM between 1980 and 2017 (Abbasi & Jaafari, 2018) with the growth in the number of individuals attaining their PMP certification between 1999 (when the certification was introduced) to 2017 (Schwalbe, 2018).

While the number of project professionals is growing (with PMP certifications being just one of many PM credentials available) the number of academic papers published in PM is rather bumping along and somewhat lower than they were a decade ago. However, does this provide evidence that the PM discipline is facing a crisis where academics are falling behind? These measures and the graph comparing them can be interpreted in several different ways but are indicative of a profession which is rapidly growing while academic activity is not keeping pace – at least as measured by publications. This may be an appropriate picture if the foundations of the discipline were established and the growth in practitioner numbers is a result of applying them - arguably true if PMBOK is considered as one of the foundations upon which the PMP is based. However, that scenario suggests a mature discipline which is not what evidence shows PM to be. Trends in PM research (Uchitpe, Uddin, & Crawford, 2016) point to a discipline that is continuing to evolve at a rapid pace. Researchers have an opportunity to contribute to the discipline's core knowledge by codifying those adaptations and experimental techniques that practitioners find necessary to make projects successful in the complex realities they encounter.

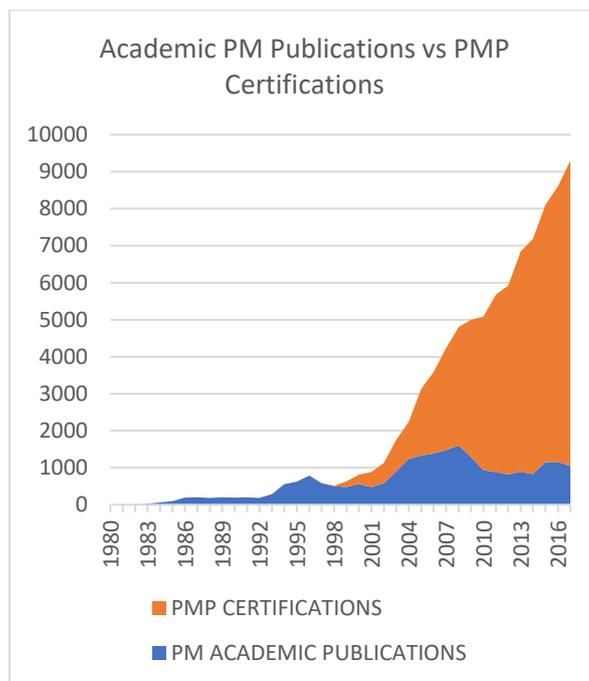


Figure 1 Indicators of PM Research and Practice Activity

Perhaps, PM with its practical foundations and evolving reality - that bibliographic analysis suggest includes keywords like *culture*, *portfolio*, *probability* and hearteningly, *practitioner* (Uchitpe et al., 2016) – is nearer to accepting that the two complementary aspects of theory and practice, academic and practitioner, both have an essential contribution to make to knowledge. To ensure there is active engagement between these groups, there need to be forums where they can meet and discover common interests. That is the critical role that a conference in like PMIAC18 can play with an academic program that is a part of a broader industry conference – effectively breaking down silos and encouraging research partnerships between the theoreticians and experimentalists of the PM discipline.

The PMIAC18 Academic Program

PMIAC18 was held in Melbourne, Australia on the 21st and 22nd May 2018 and marked the second year that an Academic Program was a part of the conference. If setting up the inaugural Academic Program the year before was difficult, then doing it a second time without the support of PMI Global presented a different set of challenges. The most significant learning from the previous year was that it was essential to assimilate with the industry tracks both physically by having rooms that were co-located and programmatically by ensuring that academic papers were presented and scheduled as an integral part of the PMIAC18 program.

We broadly achieved these goals with the one-day academic program presented in the Innovation & Trends track, which had the desired effect of blurring boundaries between research and practitioner presentations. While there were concerns about the applicability and level of interest that the academic topics which underwent a comprehensive double-blind review using the Ex Ordo submissions management system, the feedback received was overwhelmingly positive.

Conferences as Connectors

Conferences that aim to bring together PM practitioners and researchers can be an essential way to connect the two camps and ensure both actively work towards co-creating relevant and practical knowledge. That is the mission of the PMI Australia Conference's Academic Program, which was borne out of the desire to have representatives from both groups share their perspectives on the PM discipline. While both sides might be cautious about this merging of their separate professional interests, at least PMIAC18 demonstrated that there could be real benefits to having an open invitation for academics to attend, and present their research at industry conferences.

Behind the curtain, there was greater participation in the PMIAC18's requisite administration and conduct of the peer-reviews. The Academic Program Committee, recognized below, is an essential part of the sustainability of the program and represents a growing community that has been gathering in support of the annual Australian conference.

PMIAC18 Academic Program Committee

Louis Tabora	academic program chair (University of Sydney)
Nigam Vaid	academic outreach (PMI, Melbourne Chapter)
Terry McKenna	academic outreach (PMI, Adelaide Chapter)
Karyne Ang	session chair (University of Technology, Sydney)
Tayaab Maqsood	session chair (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology)
Chivonne Algeo	reviewer (Monash University)
Hiyam Al-Kilidar	reviewer (University of Technology, Sydney)
Brad Carey	reviewer (Curtain University)
Andreas Hansen-Nilsson	reviewer (Örebro University)
Reza Hosseini	reviewer (Monash University)
Mile Katic	reviewer (Deakin University)
Chris Lawler	reviewer (University of Sydney)
Santhosh Loganathan	reviewer (University of Technology, Sydney)

Haytham Masad	reviewer (University of Technology, Sydney)
Mohammad Mojtahedi	reviewer (University of New South Wales)
Sherif Mostafa	reviewer (Griffith University)
David Noble	reviewer (Southern Cross University)
Amela Peric	reviewer (University of Sydney)
Julien Pollack	reviewer (University of Sydney)
Karen Ryan	reviewer (University of Sydney)
Shankar Sankaran	reviewer (University of Technology, Sydney)

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