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International Journal of Project Management 26 (2008) 286–296
International Journal of Project Management
www.elsevier.com/locate/ijproman

Rethinking project management education: Social twists and knowledge co-production

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Received 17 January 2008; accepted 22 January 2008

Abstract

Projects play an important role in modern enterprises, not only as arenas for corporate renewal and capability integration, but also for the development of leadership capacity. As a consequence, the area of project management is becoming increasingly important for universities and management educators. Previous research and reports, however, have given severe critique to much of the project management education for its lack of relevance and rigor – but offered surprisingly little guidance as to what to do to deal with the problems. In this paper, our aim is to contribute to the current debate about project management education for practicing managers. We draw on more than ten years of experience from two senior-level education programs to show how educational practices can be developed to stimulate knowledge co-production between practitioners and academia. We suggest a model based on a "social twist" of experiential learning theory and discuss six learning modes of how to rejuvenate, stretch and improve project management education.
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Keywords: Project management; Education; Learning; Articulation; Social twist; Experiential learning theory; Knowledge theater

1. Project management education in a Mode 2 society

In an increasing number of industries, project-based organizations are complementing or in some cases even replacing traditional postwar divisional structures [25]. A large survey study by Whittington et al. [26], for instance, documented the widespread growth of project management and its rising importance as a top management concern. As a consequence, project management has become an important area of research and education. To meet the demand, management educators launch new training programs, master programs and specialized courses, and today, at many universities and business schools, project management is an important part of the MBA and executive education syllabus. Project management courses are not only important sources of revenues for universities and business schools, but also critical investments for a range of companies in a growing number of industries and sectors.

Despite this important development, some commentators have argued that much more could be done to develop courses and programs on project management, in order to improve the understanding and the knowledge of capability development and strategy implementation [18]. As it seems, the improvement of courses on project management at university-level and at customized company programs could considerably improve the relevance of management education and corporate practice. But what is the state of project management education today? And what improvements are necessary to further improve the quality of management education in the project management area?

In an influential initiative called "Rethinking Project Management" a number of project management scholars and practitioners gathered to set out a new agenda for research and education within the area of project management. Many of their findings and key lessons learned were

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doi:10.1016/j.ijproman.2008.01.004

published in articles in a Special issue of the International Journal of Project Management. These articles offer a variety of refreshing and important advice for research, research methodology and teaching. For instance, in the introductory paper, Winter et al. [27] highlight the growing critique of project management theory and state the case for the need of a new research agenda in relation to the developing practice of project management. The authors claim that despite the developments in practice and the growing number of members in professional associations, "the current conceptual base of project management continuous to attract criticism for its lack of relevance to practice" [27, p. 638]. Their main conclusions center on the need to rethink project management research, the need to illuminate the complexity and actuality of projects, and that project management scholars must allow for greater pluralism and broader conceptualizations of projects. What is more important, particularly for this paper, is that the authors also argue for the need to rethink education and that educators must move away from the delivery of standard package solutions and techniques-orientated pedagogy to "learning and development which facilitates the development of reflective practitioners who can learn, operate and adapt effectively in complex project environments ..." (2006: 642). In the same special issue, Crawford et al. [4] further elaborate on this idea. They offer substantial criticism to mainstream project management teaching and education. For instance, the authors claim:

> "Even in academic programs, education in project management is often pitched at the same level as the certificate and commercial training in project management, covering largely the same material based on the project management bodies of knowledge ..." [4, p. 724].

As a consequence, Crawford et al. argue that project management practitioner development today may therefore be seen as "both narrow and shallow" (p. 624) and that "it falls short of the reality of ... complex projects" (p. 624). In sum, the articles by Winter et al. and Crawford et al. offer fierce criticism to much research and education within the area of project management – for its lack of rigor and relevance. We generally appreciate their work and acknowledge the importance of rethinking project management research and education. However, we would argue, the authors do not offer much advice as to what educators should do besides the general recommendation that they should move away from the bodies of knowledge and simplified textbook theories of projects to improve both rigor and relevance of project management education.

Much of the above criticism also holds true for management education in general. The focus of our paper, however, is on advanced project management training programs for practicing managers. We address both the issue of relevance, drawing on some of the ideas presented by Pfeffer and Fong [17] and Ghoshal [6], and the issue of scientific rigor. Drawing on the challenges of the Mode 2 society, we believe that these two challenges are intimately associated. In several ways, the idea of the Mode 2 society, as presented by Gibbons et al. [7], criticizes the conventional model of science as linear and argues in favor of knowledge co-production and of closer integration between research and practice. The idea of the Mode 2 society also highlights the need of doing research in the context of knowledge application. We believe that the writings of Gibbons et al. [7] have important implications for project management research and education. In this paper we focus on the implications for education for practicing managers, although some of our ideas also have implications for the ways we do research. We concentrate on the following questions: How can project management education be designed to respond to the challenges of the Mode 2 society? How is the idea of knowledge co-production brought into project management training and education programs? In several ways, we believe that the ideas presented in this paper are well in line with the pleas of the Mode 2 society and with the criticism presented by Winter et al. and Crawford et al. However, in this paper we will offer more concrete examples, advice and suggestions for how to improve project management education in a Mode 2 society and use our own practice to reflect on management education in the area of project-based organization and business.

2. Purpose and outline

As stated earlier, this paper analyzes the question of how to respond to the management education challenges of the emerging Mode 2 society. The paper draws upon ideas presented in a previous paper in which we presented a set of challenges for management education in the light of a Mode 2 society [2]. However, the focus in the present paper is on advanced project management education and our starting point is the recent critique against project management education offered by a number of scholars that participated in the Rethinking Project Management Network. Inspired by the writings on the Mode 2 society, we address the ideas around the co-production of knowledge and how the critique of the linear mode of scientific knowledge production can be used to revitalize education programs for practicing project managers, align personal and organizational learning, and reinforce the programs' action components. Of importance here is our own practice and our own attempts to improve management education. The empirical foundation for the article is more than ten years of experience in executive project management programs developed in close collaboration between industrial partners and academia. Our intention is to contribute both to the debate about the future of management education by providing detailed examples of learning practices, and to a renewed discussion of experiential learning, where articulation, enaction and diffusion, but above all reflection and action play key roles in integrating personal and social learning. We submit that the Mode 2 society has a number of implications for experiential learning and that it pro-

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