



# Responsible forms of project management education: Theoretical plurality and reflective pedagogies

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## Abstract

The paper aims to revive an interest in the notion of responsible project management education (RPME) in the context of related contemporary debates about the integration of reflexivity, ethics and sustainability in the business schools' curricula; the purpose, values and effectiveness of university education; and practical relevance of business and management courses, to mention only a few. We offer an interpretation of what RPME at university level may mean concerning the practice of curriculum design and pedagogy of project management courses in light of a perceived nature of project management theory and the field as practised. We argue that responsible project management education should make the theorising of the process of projectification, relational complexity and practical wisdom (combining prudence, instrumental and value rationality) accessible and appealing to all involved and should pursue experiential reflective learning. To illustrate how it may work in practice, we reflect on our longstanding experience with designing and delivering a PM module for an MBA programme. Apart from the challenge with maintaining the requisite diversity of the teaching team and practitioners' input into the course, we illuminate some benefits and challenges as perceived by the participating students. These are: discomfort caused by encountering a different 'project management'; excitement in embracing the unexpected; light-bulb moments in redefining one's own understanding of PM practice and in finding a new way of understanding and dealing with a specific situation in the workplace.

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## 1. Executive summary

There is a prevailing perception of project management (PM) as a universally applicable managerial discipline grounded in a set of tried and tested methods, tools and techniques for planning and controlling work for organised and efficient delivery of discrete undertakings defined as projects. In the paper, we take the issue with such a narrow view of projects and project management which has over many decades influenced the content of project management education. We question its adequacy in a complex, ambiguous and diverse global world by drawing on a wider contemporary debate

around the values and purpose of management education at university level and its relevance to practice.

In the first part of the paper, we conceptualise and justify a set of pedagogic and theoretical principles of responsible project management education (RPME) centred around theoretical plurality and reflective experiential pedagogies. We argue that RPME requires focusing on the skills, knowledge and competencies of PM as well as on a diverse, political and ambiguous context of contemporary projects and projectified society. It should openly encourage reflection on ethics, accountability and the multiple values at play in PM practice. In RPME, the understanding of the projectification process, existential reflection on complexity and the development of an ability to exercise practical wisdom, are treated as equally important as the teaching of conventional PM models and techniques.

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We then empirically explore the benefits of and challenges with, integrating these principles into our practice as management educators. The analysis of a concrete PM course case, using our personal reflections and the students' feedback over a number of years, illuminates important issues regarding the effectiveness, benefits and challenges of our pedagogic practice. For example, Turner and Cochrane's (1993) project typology matrix in an adapted form can serve as an inspirational introductory framework for making contemporary theories and theorising of projectification, relational complexity and practical wisdom (combining instrumental and value rationality) accessible and appealing. Careful attention needs to be given to the composition of the teaching team to harness epistemological diversity. A reflective ethnographic form of assessment fosters an awareness of situational ethics and concrete reflective analyses of lived experience with projects, including the practice of theorising.

We argue for further research into the concept of RPME and its implementation in practice. Some important areas for attention are: a) students' perceptions of discomfort caused by encountering a different 'project management'; b) creative potential of their excitement in embracing the unexpected; and c) light-bulb moments in finding a new way of understanding and dealing with a specific situation in their workplace more generally.

## 2. Introduction and rationale – the phantasy of an idealised project management mind-set in the context of ambiguous organising

*'Project management is no longer an organised and orderly game where the players pursue preconceived plans to achieve predetermined ends, but an ongoing play with chance and probability in an environment where not only players but also the rules of the game, are subject to change'.*

(Laszlo, 1994, p.3–5)

This statement challenges the very assumptions behind a global and ever-rising interest in project-based organising and management since the 1980s - the assumptions which have made PM universally appealing as both a powerful, structured management methodology and a promising organising model for efficiently implementing strategic change, creative ideas and major development initiatives. The notions of *'playing with chance and probability'* and *'changing rules of the game'*, used by Laszlo to describe a reality of PM practice, stand in stark contrast to standard methodologies which imply and promote an idealised, persuasive, command-and-control model of the PM process, driven by knowledgeable project managers with known and consistent preferences, with adequate information and clear organisational status (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992; Buchanan and Badham, 1999). While a messy, ambiguous, fragmented and political nature of contemporary organising within which projects are being managed has now been widely acknowledged, the universal PM best practice prescriptions and professional standards have continued to be promoted as

critical to managing projects efficiently and, as such, remain at the core of most PM courses. These include a traditional range of, now ICT-modernised, project planning and control tools (Gantt, CPM, EVA, PERT) and a-contextual governance models (PRINCE 2, Six Sigma, etc). The perception of these tools and techniques as being accessible, adaptable, scalable and thus universally effective seems to be at the heart of a rising tendency to routinely label work tasks as "projects" which, it is often assumed, increases the visibility and controllability of these tasks and the likelihood of their successful outcomes. This has, over recent decades, given rise to a project-driven and project-dependent economy, where newly minted projects (and, for that matter, related success criteria) no longer resemble the original definition and traditional contexts of project-based industries (aerospace, construction, defence) but emerge discursively (e.g. Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Lindahl and Rehn, 2007; Fincham, 2002).

As a result, a significant number of organisational members have been and are being redefined as project managers and project workers, needing relevant upskilling. Training courses in 'PM basics' have been offered even to school-age pupils, reinforcing a particular view of PM best practice across generations, sectors and societal groups, thus entrenching PM further into the rational-instrumental paradigm while, simultaneously and paradoxically, profiling it as mundane (titles such as 'PM Pocket Guide' or 'The Complete Idiot's Guide to project management' are not rare). It can be argued that, as a consequence, PM as an academic subject has remained rather closed to more imaginative, experimental philosophical and socio-political conceptualisations of the practice of project-based work. Until the turn of the century, PM was rarely researched, let alone taught, by general management and organisational studies scholars.

Scholarly interest in these and related issues since the late 1990s has resulted in a wide range of academic-practitioner partnerships, research initiatives (including those funded by PM professional bodies) and related volumes and journal special issues (see e.g. Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2017, for an overview). This paper is specifically informed by the emerging and evolving strands of management studies that have illuminated the process of projectification of work-life and society (Maylor et al., 2006; Cicmil et al., 2016; Hodgson et al., 2016). The consequences of projectification for individual and professional identity (Smith, 2006; Paton and Hodgson, 2016; Rolfe et al., 2017), economic performance (Fincham, 2002; Lindahl and Rehn, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2014) and international development (Lannon et al., 2016) are particularly significant. Similarly, research around the socio-political and ethical aspects of project-related decision-making and the colonising power of project discourse is revealing. Processual approaches in studying projects and PM have highlighted the significance of understanding complex processes of human relating in unpredictable, ambiguous global project-based environments (Stacey and Mowles, 2016; Cooke-Davies et al., 2007; Linehan and Kavanagh, 2006; Clegg et al., 2006), and the possibilities of philosophical practice in the field of projects and PM (Konstantinou and Müller, 2016; Rolfe et al., 2017).

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