
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Asking strategic questions: reflections on the temporal bounds of projects and programmes

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Is it time to revisit our definitions of projects and programmes?

Definitions and assumptions play a key part in delimiting both knowledge and practice. Language is closely entwined with human life: Words and constructions and the way a language is used can shape what is seen and understood, defining what is acceptable and even possible.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean- neither more nor less."

— Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871)

The Humpty Dumpty theory of semantics holds sway in most societies and many organisations and cultures. Words, symbols and concepts are endowed with additional meaning or associations, often derived from highly contextual, regional or vernacular sources, which can make a word mean precisely what the user wants it to mean.

Debates around the real nature of linguistics often focus around the ability to learn and adapt as opposed to inborn notions. Yet, given that meanings within linguistic communities change over time, there appears to be a need to re-visit linguistic associations and consider their impacts on language, understanding, and more widely on the implications for the wider practice.

American philosopher and logician, Willard Van Orman Quine invoked the metaphor of the 'myth of the museum', where exhibits are meanings and words are labels (1960). His main objection is to the assumption that semantics is determinate in the mind. Instead, Quine advocates for a naturalistic view of language, which implies discovery of the use of native words that comes from observation of behaviour. By this logic, only an empirically based account can address the indeterminacy and contextuality of words and their use, and uncover Humpty Dumpty's intended interpretation.

¹The *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the current monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>. See Darren's background summary at the end of this article.

Cognitive psychologist, Steve Pinker concedes that semantics is about the relation of words to thoughts (2007). But he is quick to point out that it is also about: the relation of words to other human concerns; the relation of words to reality; the relation of words to a community; the relation of words to emotions; and, the relation of words to social relations. Semantics thus defines how thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world, what shared understanding may be possible, how a word comes to evoke (and even define) an idea, how these ideas are transferred, and ultimately hint at what is allowed and what is considered possible. Above all, semantics can open a window into Humpty Dumpty's wider world and its impact on ours...

Starting with projects

The traditional definition of a project implies a temporal arrangement concerned with actualising a planned and defined objective. Indeed, project management is regarded as an execution discipline concerned with realising plans. In the UK, especially in government circles, there is currently a growing emphasis on strengthening the profession of *project delivery*, implying that project management as practiced is an implementation-focused approach.

Projects are designed to deliver some asset; a result, capability, product or service. In other words, projects are undertaken in order to reach an end point and generate artefacts and outputs that have been planned and requested.

Programme management on the other hand, requires an open-ended approach. The sixth edition of APM Body of Knowledge defines programme management as “the coordinated management of projects and change management activities [required] to achieve beneficial change” (p. 14). The definition cleverly sidesteps the continuous debate about the relationship between project and programme management, offering a more continuous interpretation inclusive of change, and potentially, benefits.

Benefits obscure the picture

The increasing interest in benefit realisation necessitates a wider focus beyond project delivery. Benefit realisation management was first encountered in IT project Portfolio discourse. Alternative methods and approaches were devised to ensure that IT projects deliver defined, and agreed, benefits according to a plan. Over the last twenty years, the benefits discourse has penetrated additional areas, featuring in programme management and most recently in project management dialogue engendering some confusion and lack of clarity.

The APM Body of Knowledge asserts that “a project is a unique, transient endeavour, undertaken to achieve planned objectives, which could be defined in terms of outputs, outcomes, or benefits” (p. 12)

It further elaborates that “a project is usually deemed to be a success if it achieves the objectives...” (ibid.)

This is confusing as outcomes occur beyond delivery and handover. More critically, benefits accrue over an extended time period as the new or improved asset or system goes into use.

If the success of a project is to be determined by the achievement of the planned objectives, which may encompass outcomes and benefits, it cannot be ascertained until the passage of a significant amount of time beyond project handover, when the benefits from use can be realised and the resulting value is accrued.

The conflation of different timeframes and timescales associated with projects and benefits is far from helpful. Making sense of an increasingly confused picture may require the creation of a distinction between project delivery and post-project benefits realisation and value that imply that the project outputs are actually in use following project completion.

Learning to think strategically

Viewing projects through a delivery lens decreases the wider impacts and potential influences of projects, not least by omitting the shared understanding, the focus on human concerns, and the relation to emotions and social relations. Delivery reduces project management to a lower common denominator focused on implementation of pre-defined results. Crucially, it ignores the potential influence of project managers and leaders in shaping, advocating, negotiating, motivating and enhancing potential solutions. It is also worth pointing out that an execution perspective excludes an interest in the longer term, thereby discounting the need to consider benefits, and longer term change impacts.

Moreover, the adoption of the delivery lens creates a strategic vacuum between organisational strategy and the execution of projects.

If projects are to become focused delivery mechanisms there is a need for something else to take a more strategic approach. Meanwhile, if the interest in benefits realisation requires a more strategic and longer-term approach, there is a need for a further discipline to address the wider concerns and the linkage to strategic aspects that extend beyond delivery.

This month's article by Dr Michel Thiry entitled *New Developments in Program Management*, bridges this gap by considering the new and expanding role of programme management. Programme management is increasingly called upon to address an uncertainty- and complexity-laden context. It is also focused not on the delivery of products and artefacts, but instead on the longer-term realisation and sustainability of benefits.

The article represents a reflection on the new developments and changes within the discipline of program management, primarily over the last five years and draws upon the publication of the second edition of *Program Management* published by Gower in the Fundamentals of Project Management book series. It offers fresh thinking about the connection between programme management and agile management and the alignment

of the programme management standards, but more importantly, it provides new ways of thinking about the differences between projects and programmes and revisiting our definitions of what might be expected of each.

The book offers a direct and well thought out link between strategy and project execution, proposing programme management as a vehicle for organisational change. It encourages managers and executives to consider the integration of programme management in the business, the crucial role that it can play in delivering benefits and driving change and improvement. The discussion is further extended to consider the integration with portfolio management and delivery of change.

Dr. Thiry has made significant contributions to programme management thinking. His book integrates, synthesises and strengthens the body of knowledge and empirical understanding of programmes and their wider role within organisations. It also provides detailed insights into the processes and activities of decision management, stakeholder engagement, governance, change management and benefits management. The new edition reflects the latest thinking on programmes and their wider integration to business addressing life cycles, change, programme management maturity measures, organisational issues and the development of programme management into a key organisational capability.

Rethinking our definitions

A key value of the work is in rethinking our definitions, contexts and relationships. The article offers a useful mechanism for advancing the discourse on projects and programmes. While it does not offer a direct definition of either, it provides a useful set of measures based on five factors. In doing so, it clarifies the context through a multi-dimensional exploration of the different aspects of the undertaking. It is particularly encouraging to see the kind of thinking and maturity that result from the reflection on the development, improvements and changes within the discipline.

Similar efforts are required to derive an improved understanding of the context of projects, project management and project delivery. The words as currently used are laden with meaning and expectations. To escape from the static museum, we need to derive a more contextual understanding of the empirical uses of each and their implications. The relation of words to reality remains key.

As thoughts are anchored to particular meanings and interpretations, it is important to uncover some of the underlying assumptions and interpretations that they entail. Improving our shared understanding will depend on the ability to identify how ideas are evoked, transferred, shared and executed, and where the limits may lie.

American novelist, Jonathan Safran Foer noted that 'definitions have never done anything but to constrain'. Further advances may well depend on our ability to make clear the definitions that underpin particular views, resulting in the repetition of certain patterns and approaches. Learning to deal with Humpty Dumpty may well entail understanding what he means through naturalistic interpretation of his actions and behaviours.

Many of the different flavours and expectations come from the baggage that words and phrases such as 'projects' and 'project management' evoke. Addressing strategic needs and affecting improvement would ultimately depend on the ability to clarify the contexts and implications of different terms and nuanced interpretations.

Semantics, as the study of meaning has a lot to offer the unfolding dialogue. American theologian, Tryon Edwards (1809-1894) asserted that 'most controversies would soon be ended, if those engaged in them would first accurately define their terms, and then adhere to their definitions'.

Meanings are incomplete without some elements of context. American Anthropologist Clifford Geertz observed that 'meaning is socially, historically and rhetorically constructed'. Until we begin to understand the geographies and the situational boundaries of the terms invoked in our conversations around projects we may continue to talk at cross-purposes. Our definitions and dialogue will become richer when we learn to share some of the context and use it to underpin current understanding, explore the emerging boundaries and limits, and continue to drive future development and improvement by re-visiting and challenging both understanding and boundaries.

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Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.peworldlibrary.net.

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