Being a Pracademic – Combining Reflective Practice with Scholarship

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Abstract
This paper traces recent research outcomes by pracademics who explore the margins of PM theory and practice. Many seasoned practitioners would like to develop their understanding of PM and related theory to aid their PM career but they may feel that they are ill equipped to do so. This paper will also introduce relevant trends in PM practice where practitioner-academics are taking a leading role in developing PM theory and shaping an emerging agenda in how PM theory is understood and how it remains relevant to practitioners.

Introduction
I present this paper expecting that many of you are curious to learn something new. I pose several relevant questions relating to being a reflective practitioner. What is a pracademic? What use are they? Why would you want to be one? How could you become one? What value would you better contribute as a pracademic?

These are interesting and relevant questions to any project management practitioner that wishes to carve out a niche as somebody with something valuable to offer clients and organisations that employ them.

I hope that this keynote address will help you understand what being a pracademic means and its value proposition that will help you think about mapping out a professional development path for you and your colleagues.

I intend to do this through presenting you with some theory and pragmatic examples of pracademic activities that I have observed others engage as part of their individual professional development.

What is a pracademic?
According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia a pracademic is “someone who is both an academic and an active practitioner in their subject area… the term has a history of at least 30 years, but its first coining is unclear”1. The Wikipedia is a source that is somewhat suspect at times but often is a useful starting point to learn out about a technical term. I used it to follow through with one reference in that Wikipedia entry.

A pracademic is a person who spans both the somewhat ethereal world of academia as a scholar and the pragmatic world of practice. Many engineering and management academics in particular, come to academia with a successful career in their practice. Indeed, a certain level of experience in that field is needed to understand the complexity, context and degree of tacit knowledge required to gain a sound understanding of practical problems that need rigorous investigation and attention. Most if not all of my colleagues in PM research and scholarship have solid practical experience gained through ‘the school of hard knocks’. Two facets are necessary for a pracademic. These are:

1. A solid grounding in experience in the field to appreciate nuances and subtle signals that the environment emits and
2. Rigorous academic research and reflective analysis training to be able to make sense of situations encountered and to be able to probe deeply into causal issues and to understand implications for practice.

Posner (2009: p17) cited in my Wikipedia search for the term ‘pracademic’ states that in terms of the synergy between theory and practice within the context of public administration he sees them as:

- Playing many bridging roles;
- They are ideal network brokers, through their deep exposure to both theory and practice, to create new channels to enhance cooperation and communication across the academic-practitioner divide; and
- They gain valuable insight from their service as pracademics as well, deepening their understanding of concepts and frameworks that provide valuable perspective and context for the day-to-day issues.

This provides a good foundation for this keynote. What is under discussion is a somewhat rare breed of individual. They are boundary spanners who live in the thinking world of observing, reflection, questioning, criticism and seeking clarity while also living in the action world of pragmatic practice, doing, experiencing, and coping.

Pracademics often avoid ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’ of those around them so they are frequently misunderstood souls perceived as ‘not being team players’. Sometimes they are introduced to problematic situations precisely to question and critique but most often they are viewed as sceptical ‘awkward guests’ who do not try to fit into conventional mainstream thought.

**What use are they?**

One view of a pracademic as sceptical observer and critic resonates with the role of court jester who was a ‘licensed fool’ that was allowed and expected to attend court and apart from making jokes and amusing people, slipped in subtle satire and wit to warn the court of potential problems of sycophantic group think. As jesters they wore special distinguishing clothes and regalia that made them stand out so it was safe for them to state (within the context of the ‘wise fool jester’ those things that needed to be said to be.

Pracademics do not have any uniform, traditional regalia or distinguishing traits except perhaps a tendency to pause and stare into the middle distance as if suffering with indigestion. Its not that they are averse to action, rather they question relevance, context and conventional wisdom before acting. They usually perform the typical action learning cycle of plan, do, review and reflect (Kolb, 1984) in their practice.

The function of a pracademic is to actively question practice. Their assumption is based upon an appreciation of the context of action. One size does not fit all. Appropriate action should fit the surrounding circumstances and the reality of the situation.

What is reality? – Now, that is a big question! Most of the time most of us go along with the prevailing Newtonian view that reality is ‘out there’; it is physical, tangible; it is ‘the law—PMBOK, rules etc.’ A chair is a chair and a bum is a bum – both solid – bums sit solidly on chairs. However, most of us are aware of quantum physics. We vaguely recall that a chair is a cloud of atomic particles and sub-atomic entities, so is a bum.
The bum cloud hovers over the chair cloud. Our pragmatic senses take over and we don’t see a problem with the paradox of holding the view of the act of sitting on a chair from a Newtonian physics perspective while simultaneously accepting a quantum physics view. We need to sit down and we don’t fear slipping through the chair cloud. We cope at a more course-grained reality level and push aside the fine-grained quantum physics ‘reality’ because it is more convenient, more sensible and less stressful for us to accept the Newtonian perspective.

Pracademics more than occasionally think at the finer grained level before acting and often that is more sensible and less risky but often it is overcautious and inhibiting. Pracademics are more likely to be able to recognise early warning signals and figure out coping mechanisms. They have gained skills in critically observing, have a repertoire of ways of seeing ‘reality’ and levels of analysis and so may be better positioned to step back from the brink of a bad situation and find coping strategies to recoup composure.

Their usefulness stems from:
1. Having a rich repertoire of ways of observing and listening;
2. Being good thinkers and analysers at multiple levels of analysis;
3. Knowing a sufficiently wide range of theoretical bases to help explain why certain actions do or do not lead to anticipated results;
4. Being able to operate at both the course and fine grained level of thought at the same time;
5. Being quick to offer multiple responses; and
6. Generally being in a better position to react to unforeseen situations more effectively that those without their academic skills so be better at coping with uncertainty.

Hey, these are real and valuable skills!

**Why would you want to be one?**

There are two elements to this answer, the personal and commercial and it also depends on the type of organisation you are engaged with.

At the personal level, many pracademics in my experience are practitioners who felt a deep itch to know more; be better informed, and to improve their capacity to make sense of what was going on and why those certain things were going on around them. In short, they have a deep hunger/thirst for knowledge and insights. They generally don’t immediately take the easy path when faced with two alternatives. They often like an intellectual challenge and they simply believe that they could perform better and want to hone their skills to do so.

At the commercial level, mainly in an academic world, pracademics generally want to anchor their scholarship and work in a practical setting but with the recognised academic credibility, command over their practice tools, techniques and ways of thinking that sets them apart from those without substantial experience of practice. They can effectively build a bridge between theory and practice. Their practice and reflective skills are highly prized in many fields of academia. Pracademics who operate mainly in practice as consultants, employees or coaches find that the academic rigour and knowledge of theory and how to apply it, along with their research methods training, is highly prized and a defining point of competitive advantage. Australia does not tend to value academic prowess (as much as, for example, Northern Europe). It can be ‘a positive’ to have a pracademic on your team when submitting proposals based on a project team’s potential performance where dealing with a lot of uncertainty is involved.
In some organisations, with a tightly bound culture where ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’ is demanded, a pracademic needs to lie low and often denies having advanced academic qualifications. However, pracademics feel very much at home in organisational cultures that are open inviting reflection and knowledge creation and sharing rather than pure knowledge/skills exploitation.

How could you become one?

Some pracademics become engaged through their association with academics via a research project, or a consultancy, or a study of some kind. For example Charles Smith in the UK became involved with the re-thinking PM study in the early part of this decade and from that involvement wrote a highly reflective book (Smith, 2007) that he has used as a basis for his niche consultancy. He closely interacted with academics and researchers with other practitioners, professional institutions and government departments in the re-thinking PM study initiative. Other practitioners for example Bradley (2010), have trod a similar path in a recent well received text book on benefits realisation.

The path to being a pracademic purely by association with academics has its limitations. As with any pragmatic pursuit, there is nothing quite like rolling up your sleeves and getting involved. Most pracademics with a higher academic qualification (doctorate) begin their journey with a base degree or qualification followed by one or more coursework master degrees. I have supervised about 18 people through their doctorates to completion. Most of these pracademics had a technical masters level degree such as a Masters of Engineering or IT in addition to a business masters such as a MBA and got fed up with doing more coursework but wanted to continue and stretch themselves academically and so they pursued a doctorate.

It is interesting at this point to bring in some academic theory to explain this desire. I will only focus on three theories, one on skills and career development and another on what is called knowledge entrainment and that leads naturally to the concept of sticky knowledge.

Skills and Career Development

Svetlana Cicmil is a highly respected PM academic based in the UK and known to my partner. I first came across Svetlana’s PM work through a network of PM academics I joined but previously she had done a lot of research work on quality management. Her PhD moved her from a focus on PM techniques to a focus on soft skills in the development of project manager’s careers and she is also interested and undertakes respected work on the lived realities of project managers. This means that she and her collaborators are interested in the reality rather than rhetoric of PM and what projects mean to those working on them.

She used some ideas by Stuart Dreyfus (Dreyfus, 2004; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005) in developing a model of career development from novice to virtuoso as illustrated in Table 1. Svetlana published these ideas in several journal papers most notably in Cicmil (2006) and also a paper with several collaborators including me in 2008 (Walker, Cicmil, Thomas, Anbari and Bredillet, 2008).

What we (Walker et al., 2008) realised from our paper using Svetlana’s model was that so much of the pathway towards becoming a proficient performer or a virtuoso as shown in Table 1 relates to becoming a truly reflective practitioner and pracademic.
### Table 1- PM Expertise, competence and knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Real-time action in context is driven by</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Novice</td>
<td>Faces a given problem and a given situation for the first time</td>
<td>• Instructions (training courses, PMBOK® Guide)</td>
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<td>• learning to recognise objective facts about and characteristics of the situation (models and definitions of project)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• learned generalised rules for all similar situations on the basis of identified facts, thus context-independent (project management methodology, procedures)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• evaluation of the performance of the skills on the basis of how well the learned rules are followed</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Advanced beginner</td>
<td>Has gained some real-life experience</td>
<td>• Learning to recognise relevant elements in relevant situations on the basis of their similarities with previous examples (e.g., awareness of a typology of projects)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The awareness of the importance of the context of experience; thus making a choice about what are the key elements of the given situation, in addition to context-independent rules (learning from experience, limited reflection, PMBOK® Guide recommendations)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• trial-and-error</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Competent performer</td>
<td>Amount of experience increases and the number of recognisable learned elements and facts becomes overwhelming</td>
<td>• Learning from own experience and from others to prioritise elements of the situation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Organising information by choosing a goal and a plan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Dealing only with a set of key factors relevant to the goal and plan, thus simplifying the task and obtaining improved results</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Deliberation about the consequences of using own judgement in relation to the given goal and plan (simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity), the relationship of involvement between performer and environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• the model of analytical, proficient performer: Elements-rules-goals-plans-decision</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to think on one’s feet (confidence, reflection, choice of action and risk taking)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Proficient performer</td>
<td>Away from cognitivist, analytical rationality (rules, principles, and universal solutions) towards perceiving situations rapidly, intuitively, holistically, visually, bodily, relationally</td>
<td>• The awareness of interpretation and judgement involved in such decision making, rather than logical information processing and analytical problem solving only</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• understanding of the situation on the basis of prior actions and experience, acts as deeply ‘involved-in-the-world’ manager/performer who already knows</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflective understanding and participation in power relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Expert or virtuoso</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflective learning; simultaneous thinking and doing</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• intuitive, synchronous understanding of the situation with an overarching participative critical reflection of the self and the group</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• the thought, body, knowledge, and action are inseparable, are simultaneously forming and are being formed by one another;</td>
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<td>• understanding that power relating is an intrinsic part of intersubjective relating, always there</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• considerations for the present and deliberations about the future</td>
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Becoming a pracademic does not automatically make you a Level 4 or 5 practitioners but it certainly helps speed up that process. When we look at that model its almost as if formal teaching and learning is counter productive, though various techniques can be learned at that level through courses etc. the real learning comes from action learning, brutal reflection on practice and a very substantial development of skills of making sense of context and environmental factors. Coaching and mentoring can also help move people through the levels. Level 1 to Level 2 often happens through formal
training and education, either in-house or through university courses such as taught Masters Degrees.

**Knowledge Entrainment**

The term entrainment is not new. Basically it refers to timing things so that they naturally flow together and synchronise. I was introduced to these ideas by a Norwegian colleague Erling Andersen who heads the business school at BI Norwegian School of Management, Oslo, Norway which is one of the biggest business schools in Europe and has a very high profile in PM in that part of the world. Erling wrote an intriguing book (Andersen, 2008) and in that book he talks about entrainment in planning terms where elements of a project’s tasks or projects within programs are synchronised rather than planned by early start of early finish times.

One of Erling’s colleagues, Jonas Söderlund, has developed ideas about the importance of knowledge entrainment that is timing knowledge (and in fact other communications) to be timed to arrive when most effectively received - ‘the adjustment of the pace or cycle of one activity to match or synchronize with that of another’ (Söderlund, 2002: p428). I can illustrate this concept through my own experience. I first read Jonas’ paper and somehow grasped its implications—but not strongly, in terms of skills development. At the recent PMI Research conference in Washington, I was lucky to see Jonas present again on this topic but this time he more specifically talked in one paper about people in temporary assignments and how their effective passage from one project to another entailed their entrained entry and exit within institutions (Söderlund, 2010a) and in a second paper about entrained knowledge transfer (Söderlund, 2010b) within teams.

The lights really went on for me at that point. I was ready and prepared to enjoy his presentation because he is an excellent performer and academic and he has a very clear and engaging way of expressing his ideas (he speaks Swedish as his home tongue but worked in and lived in Norway, France, Germany and the USA mainly operating in English in those counties though he speaks all those languages as well). His multicultural way of living means that he constantly has to entrain ideas to suit the cultural situations of his audience and he reflected upon that in his presentation. What I realised was that entrainment actually operating for me at that conference as a practical instance of the concept. I was ready at the Washington conference (but not before that time) to receive and absorb that knowledge about the implications of entrainment and it was only then that ‘constellation of stars’ was favourable at that conference for the idea to take root in my mind. This is an important aspect of being a pracademic, knowing how to time knowledge exposure, and how reflection and action is critical to understanding new concepts.

This brings me to the last theory that I will discuss at this stage.

**Sticky Knowledge**

Knowledge is said to be sticky. Szulanski (1996) did a PhD on the subject of why knowledge is often sticky so that lesson learned become lessons recorded but often ignored or that knowledge just seems to flow so difficultly within organisations. His work found several highly relevant reasons why knowledge can become sticky.

1. **Characteristics of the knowledge transferred**
   a. Some knowledge is easier to transfer than others. It is difficult to transfer practices that have a high proportion of undefinable knowledge due to the degree of tacit human skills involved, collective nature of the information, or idiosyncratic features of the context in which the knowledge is put to use (that is, when there is ambiguity about why or when a practice works well).
   b. Knowledge that does not have a proven track record will be harder to "sell"
2. **Characteristics of the source of knowledge**
   a. Lack of motivation - may fear losing ownership, privilege, resent not being rewarded for sharing success.
   b. Not seen as reliable, trustworthy, and knowledgeable.

3. **Characteristics of the recipient of knowledge**
   a. Lack of motivation - the ‘not invented here’ syndrome.
   b. Lack of ability to value, assimilate and apply new knowledge successfully to commercial ends (‘absorptive capacity’).
   c. Lack of persistence to make it work instead of giving up and reverting to status quo (called ‘retentive capacity’)

4. **Characteristics of the context**
   a. Fertile versus barren organizational context - a fertile context is one that facilitates the development of transfers while a barren one hinders the gestation and evolution of transfers. Some factors that differentiate the two are their formal structures and systems, sources of coordination and expertise, and how they frame behaviours.
   b. Arduous relationship between transfer units - if the communication between the source and recipient units is fluid and the overall relationship is ‘intimate,’ the transfer will go more smoothly than if the relationship is laborious and distant.

All these four reasons and their sub-reasons make sense when looking at the Table 1 evolution, and knowledge entertainment theory. To become an effective pracademic the individual needs to be prepared through having the technical and other skills and also much of the required knowledge is gained through practice and reflection. The knowledge needs to be perceived as useful, valid and practical so the person’s career evolution needs to progress beyond Level 1 to begin to be in tune to synchronise or be entrained for absorption. The source of knowledge transfer needs to be timed well and such aspects as an organisation’s culture, its attitude towards learning and a lot of other workplace issues need to be prepared prior to effective learning. Absorptive capacity is vital, the knowledge recipient needs to have learned how to learn, to practice being a reflective practitioner and have the confidence to challenge assumptions and to build up some heavy-lifting skills in critical thinking. The fourth factor of Szulanski (1996) relates again to the context and culture of the organisation and individual’s career trajectory.

We can also see how entrainment is important here, timing is everything!

In answer to the question ‘how do you become a pracademic’, it becomes clear that developing pracademic skills in people is a complex and highly individual endeavour. For those of you who are interested in managing your own pracademic career you need to at the very least think about these three theoretical aspects. For those contemplating institutionalising pracademic tendencies in key staff, you need to prepare the organisational cultural environment as well as identify and manage the timing of learning events and opportunities. I will come back to my experience of developing pracademics a little later.

**What value would you better contribute as a pracademic?**

The above section should make it clear that an organisation’s culture and milieu is vital to gaining value from pracademic influence.

You can have a wonderful cluster of pracademics to help shape efficiency improvement, to move to second-order learning through a greater focus on effectiveness and even to help prompt out-of-the-box creative thinking that could bring about sustainable and positive organisational transformation. However, little value will be gained if the culture and organisational leadership mindset does not value this potential or if it feels
threatened by this potential challenge or even is antipathetically disposed towards pracademics. For the highly knowledge exploitative (as opposed to explorative) oriented organisation (March, 1991), pracademics can be a hindrance because they will slow down the pace of exploitation of ideas, IP, systems etc through their need to reflect and question. The difficulties for these organisations arise when they need to change and adapt. This mainly because they may inevitably be overtaken by their competitors (Miles and Snow, 1984) if their focus is too closely oriented towards exploiting knowledge rather than creating knowledge and ideas, or products.

Pracademics in their consulting or industry setting are generally very good at clear thinking so they can make contributions to the short term competitive advantage of organisations through an ability to suggest, champion and facilitate business efficiency and effectiveness. Their best strength may well be in the strategic arena as contributor or driver so their best contribution is most likely in business/organisational development and advocacy or critical evaluation of strategic positions. Their training in reasoning and reflection also means that when things are going well they better understand why they are going well and if things turn sour they are better placed to trace the chain of evidence that explains what may be going wrong.

In more personal terms, the value that they gain from being pracademics is personal satisfaction and career development in a more intrinsic way. To undertake long term and intense professional development for many people is a normal state of their professional life. Many, if not most, organisations these days invest in their people, and many focus on their key people to develop them to help them develop their organisation. For others, this kind of effort may clash with other priorities. Drawing on the entrainment ideas I outlined earlier, it is quite natural that people will find a variable need for and their commitment to become a pracademic. It is not healthy for an organisation to be overwhelmed with any one set of attitudes, skills or traits so that groupthink does not ossify the organisation.

**Examples of Pracademic Development**

In the AIPM membership I can think of at least two contrasting examples of the trajectory to becoming a pracademic. Dr Bill Young undertook a PhD in the 'old days' I believe straight from his undergraduate studies or at least with only a few years industry experience prior to his PhD. He then entered industry as a newly minted PhD and developed his skills and acumen as a practitioner through his work. I know from having interviewed him on a research project in 2009 that he has a highly academic approach to reflecting upon experience gained and lessons learned on projects and that his reports and reflections are rigorous and what one would hope for and expect of a good PhD graduate. That is a good example of the academic to reflective practitioner pracademic route.

Dr Paul Steinfort who presents a paper here on his recent PhD work is a good example from the other end of the spectrum. He and I worked closely together on the Collin Place project in Melbourne between 1979 and 1982 and even at that time he was a thoughtful and reflective engineer. We have been good friends and mentors to each other since and I supervised him for this PhD as a collaborator and colleague rather than in any hierarchical manner. Paul brought to his PhD studies no less than 40 years of reflections in his work diaries that he started all those years ago –keeping a professional practice diary is typical of a young engineer who seeks to be an accredited engineer. He has been a reflective practitioner as long as I have known him and what he gained from the last four years of intense PhD study of theory is the epitome of taking the practice to academic pracademic route. This included designing ways to gather data, making sense of the data and then reflecting on the implications of his findings to PM practice. He
presents his findings at this conference and one interesting finding is his realisation that PM and Action Learning are so similar as to be different sides of the same coin.

Other academic colleagues of mine refer to projects as learning factories (Prencipe and Tell, 2001; Koskinen and Aramo-Immonen, 2008; Koskinen, 2009). While each project may be contextually unique the shared context and similarities between many of them make learning as adaptation mandatory for good PM practice. We tend not to acknowledge this in the PM world as readily as we should.

Other examples of practitioner to pracademic transformers can be given by other doctoral candidates that I have been involved in supervising. Several of these are from the construction world, one investigated success in joint ventures (Johannes, 2004) and another about implementing an ERP system in his organisation (Chan, 2009) and a third investigated construction infrastructure alliances (Davis, 2006). I have had other doctoral pracademics investigate issues associated with leadership and how vision impacts PM delivery (Christenson, 2007), how stakeholder engagement can be critical in PM (Bourne, 2005), leadership issues such as impact of emotional intelligence (Turner, 2007), best practice in cross cultural leadership in teams (Grisham, 2006) and an interesting study that started out as research into QM but ended up as a study of the impact of multicultural teams in complex expat communities (Small, 2009). There was also a study on a new direction in earned value in PM (Bower, 2007) as well as another on improving portfolio management (Norrie, 2006) and linking tangible and intangible outcomes in PM (Nogeste, 2006). The key issue here with these illustrations is that all these were practitioners who sought to invest 4 to 5 years of intense study while working full time on their day-job to complete and pass a doctoral thesis that links their practice to current and emerging academic theory. Some of them are now part time academic staff teaching and supervising others doing research, they are coaches and mentors and they bring their academic and practitioner contributions to enhance their own career and also to help others.

Know Thyself – Authentic Personal Career Development

The core attributes of a true pracademic is intense curiosity about what underpins their professional practice. You can't be a true pracademic if you are satisfied to merely 'go with the flow' and wholeheartedly accept any wisdom in the forms of rules, rigid received 'truths' PMBOKs and the like. Context is the driving force in regulating a pracademic's, indeed any reflective practitioner's, propensity to question, probe and adapt rules and guidelines to suit the circumstance. I refer you to Level 4 and Level 5 in Table 1 for proficient performers and virtuosos.

Pracademics and truly reflective practitioners expand their repertoire of responses to messy and complicated or complex situations. This can best be explained in terms of Paul Steinfort’s PhD thesis (2010) illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Here we see the primacy of situation analysis in investigating the context of a PM project (the evaluation phase) in terms of what is trying to be achieved and why as well as what is the prevailing context and why is presented in that way. We can see how stakeholder engagement enters the model of managing projects. This leads to the action phase and this raises questions of who should take action and how that action plan should be conducted (the project plan) and how action is monitored. This follows the classical action learning cycle of plan, do, review and reflect (Kolb, 1984). It provides an adaptive learning model to help explain how pracademics build expertise.
Figure 1 Adaptive Learning Model (Source Steinfort 2010: Figure 7.1 page 270)

This model, particularly a rigorous and critical approach to the situational analysis element lies at the core of pracademic behaviour. It can be adapted universally and helps explains authenticity. The depth of situational analysis is limited by the pracademic’s grasp of relevant theories that help (partially) explain what is observed or evident and how the context modifies the application of existing known theory. Pracademics continually build and enhance their own theory-in-use and somehow ‘download’ that into their expertise base and hence develop their repertoire of actions and responses.

Career development for pracademics in intrinsically and entirely linked to bridging theory and practice and the process I just mentioned of theory building into expertise. It is a workplace learning model that has recently been shown to be effective in a PM context (Sense, 2005; Sense, 2007).

The best way to develop expertise is to be exposed to and to grapple with a variety of contexts using the Figure 1 approach. Fundamentally as I referred to in the section on entrained knowledge, access to theories, possible explanations and relevant knowledge is essential otherwise the pracademic will fail to see any relevance in those ideas and knowledge development and transfer will be sticky due to this misalignment of motivation to accept new ideas/knowledge and scepticism of its value. This is why it is so important to reflect because this helps link cause-and-effect and in terms of sticky knowledge theory, active and successful reflection increases absorptive capacity.

The good news is that this process is open to many sources that are readily available to anyone in a workplace setting. The most effective way to build and develop knowledge is through dialogue. Authentic problem solving involves groups of people each sharing perspectives on the problem, discussing the context and potential solutions and probing and testing opinions on how well suggested solutions may fit the problem. This involves a great deal of re-framing and context-broadening of problems and solutions. It is a form of mentoring and coaching that can be expanded upon past the immediate problem solving episodes to authentically develop people. Access to sources of theory also may be made via human contact but universities have vast sources of literature and theory available on-line to students. Anyone engaged in study at a university has on-line access to this important and often underutilised recourse.

Pracademics generally are linked to one or more universities and so they have direct and on-line access to libraries of theoretical sources as well as case studies.
documented in journal papers. Many, if not most in my experience, organisations avail themselves of these resources.

**Conclusions**

So what does all that I have discussed actually mean? First, I explained what a practitioner is and then explained in general terms how useful they can be to you in industry grappling with day-to-day problems. I spoke a little bit about why any of you may wish to become a pracademic at both the business and individual level. I also provided some examples of how pracademics develop themselves.

The key take-away gems for you can be summarised as follows:

1. Pracademics can be a highly valuable resource for pragmatic and practical problem solving and management of projects (and programs)—they have wide solution repertoires they can draw upon and extraordinarily wide access to published theory through their academic links;
2. Organisations that make best use of pracademics need to be open and culturally attuned to diversity of opinions and perspectives on the context and potential solutions to problems being addressed;
3. Context is everything. Recognising similarities and difference is crucial to truly understanding how an existing (theory) problem solution can be effectively adapted and what the likely consequences might be;
4. Most people taking the journey illustrated in Table 1 reach Level 3, competent performer, moving beyond that takes extra effort in developing your expertise. What I suggest is needed is BOTH academic (theoretical) knowledge and further expertise in reflection, re-framing knowledge and building a wide repertoire of expertise that is downloaded into your ‘being’;
5. One very viable and available way of moving to Level 4 or 5 is through a combination of access to existing theory (I suggest via universities) and through expert practitioners (human interaction, mentoring and coaching); and finally
6. Many practitioners are intrinsically motivated to explore, study and develop their expertise but often there is no formal structure or ‘roadmap’ that they can follow with discipline to achieve their potential—I offer some ideas how to do this.

**References**

Keynote address AIPM Conference in Darwin, 10-13 October 2010


