

The Lifeworld-grounded Critical Theory of a Field Philosopher: Practicing Philosophy on the Project Team

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Introduction

This essay provides some insight from the point of view of a project team member in a government agency. It reflects experience gained on some 400 Alaskan environmental and construction projects. As a non-Native woman engineer with undergraduate and personal development education in philosophy, the last half of my 30 year engineering career, I broadened my perspective beyond ‘practicing engineering’ to ‘practicing philosophy.’ The opportunity to begin doing this presented itself while I was assigned as project environmental engineer on six or seven formerly used defense site (FUDS) cleanup projects from the WWII and Cold War era. These projects were located in or near Alaska Native villages. My agency had some 100 active FUDS projects and there were system problems due to cross cultural communication issues arising based on worldview and epistemological differences between the tribes, the regulators, and my agency’s scientists and engineers. I was empowered to develop solutions to these systemic problems.

This engaged mode of philosophizing has been described by Robert Frodeman as ‘field philosophy.’ In contrast to academic and journal philosophy which embrace rigor as an absolute value, field philosophers on project teams must be responsive to the pressing project values such as timeliness, relevance, cost, risk reduction, and communication (both interdisciplinary and cross-cultural). The aims, goals, and methods of project-focused philosophy must align with and support the goals of the project and the project team. Jürgen Habermas proposes that philosophy provide a mediator role between expert disciplines and the *lifeworld*. He also has a notion that philosophy must retain the historic role as the *guardian of rationality*. In my practice of philosophy, I have drawn upon Habermasian concepts of discourse theory, ideal communication community, communicative rationality, and communicative action. I’ve also used several internationally recognized project-focused methodologies which are trans-disciplinary in nature. Both the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK®) and the value management body of knowledge identify needs and provide processes relating to integration and interdisciplinarity. By taking the lead on these aspects of the project, I’ve found that philosophy can provide a methodological response to systemic problems caused by lack of cross-cultural communication and lack of cross-disciplinary integration. This essay reflects on one of the methodological responses I provided as I ‘practiced philosophy.’ My particular way of practicing philosophy is compared to the suggested roles for philosophy from Frodeman and Habermas. Recommendations for others wishing to practice philosophy on the project team are provided.

Practicing Philosophy on the Team

A case study¹ is under development reading project-focused philosophy through Habermas’s communicative action theory. Due to space limitations this essay will address only one methodology used to practice philosophy on the team. During a seven year period early in the 21st century, while I served as value management officer for the Alaska District of the United

¹ Kerry Walker, *Reading Habermas’s Communicative Action Theory Through the Lifeworld-grounded Critical Theory of a Field Philosopher*, PhD Dissertation, University of North Texas (Upcoming ~Fall, 2012).

States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), we developed, implemented, institutionalized, and continually improved a *partnering value management methodology* based on a combination of best business practices. A one-week team workshop was led by a value management professional (usually me), during the early planning phase of every project. I suggest that this value management workshop provided interdisciplinarity methodologically. In this essay I use the term interdisciplinarity to include transdisciplinarity².

Projects, Best Business Practices, and Partnering Value Management Workshops

The *partnering value management methodology* is based on a combination of internationally recognized business standards in project management, value management and design charrettes. All these methods transcend disciplines. *Projects* are, by definition, *any temporary endeavor to create a unique product, service, or result*. Best practices in project management have been institutionalized and international standards deployed since 1996. The PMBOK® categorizes the practice into nine knowledge areas: four core functions (scope, quality, time and cost); four facilitating functions (human resources, procurement, risk and communications); and project integration management. It is the areas of project integration and communications that show the greatest need for philosophy.

Best business practices in value management began in the 1950s with the value analysis process creation by Lawrence Miles at General Electric. This process has been successfully used over 50 years and is currently a mandated process in the U.S. on all projects valued over \$2 million. More recently the value process has expanded beyond its more narrow optimizing paradigm focus (as primarily used in the U.S. in value engineering) to a more robust group decision support (GDS) process of value management as institutionalized in Europe in the 1990's. Design charrette processes have been used actively over the past two decades by many architectural firms.

I co-developed a combined process known as the *partnering value management methodology* which is led by a value management professional (VMP) generally in a one-week workshop. It provides project integration and interdisciplinary communication. I led or oversaw several hundred workshops. In addition to using the best of the bodies of knowledge of project management, value management, and design charrettes, it included process steps and techniques for rational team decision-making in which arguments were developed analytically and consensus decisions made based on the 'merit' of the best arguments. Techniques for consensus decisions were developed based on observation and learning from the consensus-authoritative model of decision-making used by the Alaska Native village tribes. Many of Alaska's 229 villages have existed over 400 generations, some 10,000 years. Their consensus decision-making process obviously has worked for them and been a keystone in sustainable governance. A summary of the steps and principles of the *partnering value management methodology* is provided in the addendum of this essay.

Is this methodology 'philosophy as interdisciplinarity'?

² See Julie Thompson Klein's "A Taxonomy of Interdisciplinarity" in *Handbook on the Theory and Practice of Interdisciplinarity* ed. by Robert Frodeman (Oxford: Oxford Publishing, 2010). She contrasts characteristics of *multidisciplinarity* (juxtaposing, sequencing, coordinating) with those of *interdisciplinarity* (integrating, interacting, linking, focusing, blending) and *transdisciplinarity* (transcending, transgressing, transforming).

Robert Frodeman believes that there is a tacit commitment in the professional and institutional structures of philosophy to what he calls the ‘analytic fallacy’ which he traces from *Descartes’ Method* which breaks things down into parts through to the present day research university which is divided into numerous domains of knowledge or disciplines. Disciplinization leads to privileging specialization and depth. This privileges the vertical dimension of thought over horizontal movement and making “lateral connections across disciplines, with communities, and with the public and private sector”. He suggests that perhaps in this hyper-specialized world at least one discipline, perhaps philosophy, could be “explicitly trans-discipline in nature.” Most recently Frodeman³ argues for philosophy to regain its holistic view of knowledge in an integrative capacity between disciplines. He paints a picture wedding philosophy and interdisciplinarity. Because interdisciplinarity is the larger view of things, it is inherently philosophical in the non-professionalized and non-disciplined sense of the term.

Habermas⁴ suggests that philosophy stop playing the part of the arbiter and instead starts playing the part of the mediating interpreter as a translator mediating between the *lifeworld* and all the expert disciplines. He calls this role the ‘stand-in’ or ‘interpreter’. He also advocates the notion that philosophy is the *guardian of rationality*. His argument is centered around his perspective on epistemic authority. He claims that in recent years, philosophy has been shown to have no special access to knowledge or epistemic authority regarding which knowledge is true. Citing pragmatism and hermeneutics, Habermas claims that epistemic authority is now acknowledged to be located in the community of those who cooperate and speak with one another. Because of the trends for compartmentalization of knowledge domains and the fact that aspects of rationality such as truth, justice and taste are becoming fragmented “reason” is in need of mediation. For Habermas, this poses two questions: how can reason go on being a unity on the level of culture? And how can expert cultures with their rarefied, esoteric forms be made to stay in touch with everyday communication?

His answer is philosophy. Philosophy, to the extent it keeps one eye trained on the topic of rationality has a role as a mediator mitigating the radical differentiation of reason and point to its unity. Habermas claims that everyday life is a more promising medium for regaining the lost unity of reason than are today’s expert cultures or “yesteryear’s classical philosophy of reason.”

My experience practicing philosophy as in the *partnering value management workshops* confirms aspects from each of the proposals (Habermas’s and Frodeman’s) for the role of philosophy. From Habermas’s mediator role for a philosophy, the case study confirms a role for leading interdisciplinary translation in value management workshops and cross-cultural communication on FUDs clean-up projects. From Frodeman’s critical interdisciplinary ‘field philosopher’ role, the case study confirms that indeed there is a need for interdisciplinarity. The philosopher, in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary role, can fulfill that need by leading interdisciplinary teams in communication toward mutual understanding and rational group decision-making.

There are several areas in which the case study can serve to enhance or amend some of the proposals from Habermas and Frodeman. Both Habermas and Frodeman imply the philosopher herself could translate each of the disciplines into everyday language. The case study

³ Robert Frodeman, “Introduction to the Handbook of Interdisciplinarity” in *Handbook on the Theory and Practice of Interdisciplinarity* ed. by Robert Frodeman (Oxford: Oxford Publishing, 2010).

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “Philosophy as Stand-in and Interpreter” in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990).

does not confirm that is possible for this to occur. In fact, what I learned by leading interdisciplinary workshops on complex projects and issues is that there is no single person capable of understanding all the complexities, nor translating from each discipline into everyday language. There are so many highly complex issues that, at most, the philosopher-workshop leader can be the one to ask the questions of the individual disciplines supporting them in their translation from their code language into everyday language. It is difficult enough translating the code into everyday language, without also having to grasp the complex issue that each of the translations would require.

Another area of concern implied in their proposals regards the suggestion that the philosopher herself provide a holistic synthesis of the problem. I have found through my project experiences, that no one individual, no matter what their discipline, is able to synthesize the amazing complexity, from all the differing disciplines and worldviews. However, I found that the team working together could synthesize the problem. I observed that the team's brain and reasoning capacity far surpasses that of any one individual or even the sum of the individual brains. All the workshop reports in the case study were produced during the workshop by the workshop participants. Forms and templates helped tremendously in this matter. The workshop team jointly developed and presented the out-brief of the team's decisions to higher authorities at the end of the week.

I would also like to suggest that value management is not only a methodological expression of 'philosophy as interdisciplinarity' but also can be seen through the lens of a Habermasian 'ideal communication community' providing 'communicative rationality'. The team members come together in an orientation of 'mutual understanding' and 'action orientation'. In the first phase of the value management process (the 'information/function analysis' phase), the team develops mutual understanding (sense-making) and learns to set aside their highly complex, solutions oriented 'code' language, for an everyday language (function analysis language of action verb/ measurable noun). In the next phase 'creativity' (or ideation), ideas are generated freely (in a non-evaluative and non-attribution environment). Then the ideas are evaluated and culled and thematized into value proposals ('validity claims'). The validity claims are justified in a discursive (small group) analytical procedure and documented. Based upon the results of their analysis, the small groups recommend acceptance or rejection of each value proposal to the entire team. The entire team, in further sense-making and dialogue comes to a 'consensus decision' on the value proposal. Decisions ('behavior expectations'/ 'action norms') are made and documented in the project management (action) plan. The team members who will implement the actions are the same members who are authoring the plan. Because value management leads the 'communicative rationality' process it can be seen in the Habermasian role of philosophy as *guardian of rationality*.

Conclusions

"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it."⁵ As an individual searching for utopia, I found my guiding vision and pursued it through action beginning in the mid-1990's. The vision is a partnership culture and requires a cultural transformation from the current dominator culture⁶. To implement the utopian vision, I

⁵ Karl Marx, "11th Thesis on Feuerbach, 1845" (Reprinted in Karl Marx; Early Writings (London: Penguin Classics, 1974), 423.

⁶ Riane Eisler's cultural transformation theory was popularized in 1987 with the publication of her macro historical account of social relations in *The Chalice and the Blade*. Cultural transformation theory identifies two models for

was motivated to see if partnership culture was possible and, if so, how it could be implemented. How could ordinary people, whose only vision of the world had been through the lens of a dominator culture, learn that a partnership culture is possible and that it is beneficial?

To answer that question, I employed tools available to me in my everyday work life. This involved both modeling the behavior of a partnership culture through participatory meeting management, as well as leading teams through a participatory workshop process in which they were able to experientially learn partnership behaviors and the powerful benefits of such a culture.

Through the 400 *partnering value management workshops* discussed in this essay, glimpses of utopia were experienced and gradual experiential learning occurred. If indeed, the vision for 'utopia' as a partnership culture is valid for others also, then the true test would be whether these workshops could be institutionalized and continue after I departed from the scene. The jury is still out on this last question. Indeed, the workshops were popular and used on every project while I was present. The use of VE studies which were averaging 4 a year when I took over the value management officer position, increased to 40 a year using the *partnering value management workshop* process. Project managers requested this workshop process for their projects because it increased their project success. Did any of them request it because it was empowering and liberating for teams? These questions are yet to be answered.

One recommendation I have for anyone wishing to work on project teams in any capacity, including 'practicing philosophy', is to increase their knowledge of the internationally recognized project management body of knowledge. Many organizations, businesses, educational institutions, and government agencies are adopting these standards through significant organizational cultural transformation initiatives.

decision making. They can be represented as either end of a continuum. At one end is the 'power over' (dominator/control) model which is reflected in the hierarchical organizational model. At the other end is the 'shared power' (partnership/respect) model which is reflected in the "empowered team" organizational model. All decision-making can fall somewhere along the continuum depending on the circumstance. In her book, *Tomorrow's Children* she summarizes the two models: "... these two underlying models mold all our relationships- from relationships between parents and children and between women and men to the relations between governments and citizens and between us and nature. As you learn to recognize these two models, you will see how both individually and collectively we can influence what happens to us and around us. As you learn to move relationships toward the partnership model, you will begin to make positive changes in your day-to-day life and our world." Riane Eisler, *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2000).

Addendum: Value Management Workshops

9-Step GDS VM Workshop Steps: This decision making workshop format includes the traditional value methodology job plan 6 step value study plus the traditional 3 step post study decision making steps. Please note that this is a ‘process’. There is no ‘agenda’ of items to discuss. Issues and concerns are generated by the participants and through this process come to be on the agenda and addressed through the process.

- 1) Information
- 2) Function Analysis
- 3) Creativity
- 4) Evaluation
- 5) Development
- 6) Value Presentation *{Normal SAVE International Value Study ends here}*
 - i. Product is a list of innovative value proposals (recommendations)
- 7) Judgment Phase - consensus “decisions” on the value proposals/ trade-off analysis/ partnering within the workshop team
- 8) Implementation Phase- “decisions” in project/program management plan and out brief
- 9) Command Out brief - partnering continued with senior leaders
 - i. Product is an informal partnering agreement with ‘decisions’ in a program management plan

9-Step GDS Value Management Workshop Principles:

1. *Empowered team:* Workshop value team includes those project/program team members affected by and having to implement the decisions. Workshop team is empowered to make decisions.
2. *Workshop process is fixed* (value methodology); *Workshop ‘content focus’ is flexible* and determined by the workshop participants as a result of the creative phase. Workshop is led by a CVS or VMP who also has expertise in program/project management. The workshop team documents results in a workshop report.
3. *Commander’s intent* for the workshop (objective/program strategy element(s) focus) must be presented and documented on a flip chart to focus the workshop team’s efforts.
4. *Workshop empowered team out briefs ‘decisions’*, not just ‘recommendations’ (this is a major difference between the Corps traditional use of value methodology).
5. *Function analysis* leads to program function (i.e. objectives) clarification, mutual understanding (sense-making) amongst participants, and functional breakdown structure (FBS) development.