Success factors in consultancy projects: making 'maps that work'

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The author, a consultant who has worked on projects in the education, training and professional regulation arena for more than three decades, reflects on factors that make for successful interventions and sustainable project outcomes. Seven key factors are identified: (1) intellectual credibility, both in a substantive and methodological sense; (2) a consistent and explicit ethical perspective; (3) developing a comprehensive rich picture of the practice context; (4) using a 'realisation' or 'co-creation' approach to ensure that the client community has ownership of the project; (5) the development of effective systems architecture; (6) being able to act as a constitutional arbiter to maintain consistency and constancy of purpose; and (7) treating the project as a research process, both internally to build in ongoing review and evolution and externally to provide critique and position it in relation to parallel developments in the field. The importance of methodological fluency is also emphasised to develop approaches that are contextually appropriate, while cautioning against the use of over-formalised methods and processes.

Keywords: Consultancy; projects; practice as research; practice methodology; success factors.

Introduction

I work as a consultant and researcher in work-related education and training systems, including with the frameworks and regulatory systems used by professional membership and registration bodies. I have worked with professional bodies, universities, government agencies, specialist and sector groups, project partnerships and (to a lesser extent) public, private and voluntary-sector employers on projects that range from short expert inputs or reports through to long-term projects to set up or review and revise major systems and

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frameworks. I am also an early graduate of Middlesex University's practitioner doctorate (DProf), which I completed in 2002 based on the initial stages of a long-term consultancy relationship ('B' in table 1 below).

A request in 2022 to lead a seminar on intellectual leadership for professional doctorate candidates, along with the 30-year anniversary of my time in private practice and reflections on how I want to organise my work pre-retirement, acted as prompts to think about what has worked well and what less well in my work. Since 1993 I have worked with roughly a hundred clients or project partners on nearly 300 discrete pieces of work, ranging from short reviews and commentaries to research and development projects spanning several years. It is the larger projects – those that cover at least one full cycle of activity and allow an opportunity to review their effects – that are the most valuable as subjects for evaluation and reflection. I took seven projects as the main objects of reflection, dating from 1998 to 2022, between two and nine years in length, and including EU-funded development projects and work for clients (table 1). From these I identified key themes that aided their success and then returned to each project to pick out greater detail relating to each theme; five themes appeared in all of the projects, one (practice as research) in six, and one (constitutional arbiter) in five. Finally I reflected on each theme in relation to my overall body of work, including two less successful pieces of work, to identify any additional points of note. The results illustrate what has worked for me; I am offering them for consideration and further exploration rather than as a prescription for anyone else.

Table 1. Project-base.

Project	Timescale	Client type	Main focus
A	1998-2002 (3 years)	Government agency	Framework for online learning
B	1998-2007 (9), revisited 2018-20	Professional body (initially consortium)	Establish and further develop self-regulation framework, promote development of the profession
C	2011-2013 (2)	EU partnership project	Develop and trial international qualification
D	2013-2016 (3.5)	Professional umbrella body	Establish self-regulation framework
E	2015-2017 (2)	EU partnership project	Develop principles for a professional competence model
F	2017-22 (4.5)	Professional regulatory body	Review education and qualifications system
G	2018-21 (3)	EU partnership project	Research and development for digital learning

The main themes emerging from my review are *intellectual credibility*; making clear my *ethical stance and perspective*; building a *rich picture*; gaining *ownership* from stakeholders; developing effective *systems architecture*; acting as a *constitutional arbiter*; and framing *practice as research*. These are outlined in the sections below.

Intellectual credibility

In my experience the value of intellectual credibility in a project typically has two facets, and appears firstly as one of the factors for being approached and securing the work in the first place, and secondly as a source of authority for taking the work forward. The first facet is authority in the broad substantive area concerned. This can differ depending on the type of client and project. In some projects there is a close correspondence between my expertise

and that of the client or project partner, for instance when working with a university on work-based learning, in which case my role can be closer to that of a team member than an external adviser, and my intellectual authority is that of an academic peer bringing in an additional perspective. In others I have expertise that is substantially different from that of the client, for instance when working with a practitioner community on matters of professionalisation and self-regulation. In both contexts I am able to draw on, and demonstrate a record of contributing to, current thinking and research. Part of this contributes to credibility to be able to take on a project – being able to point to a large collection of refereed papers and research and development reports, some of which are likely to be relevant to the project being contemplated, is often useful – but it also provides a base from which to develop thinking within the project as well as to provide material to convince more sceptical stakeholders.

The second facet is process and methodological expertise. The extent to which clients have project management and research-and-development expertise can be highly variable, but in any case I am usually able to add process insights to a project whether it is principally about carrying out research or developing, communicating and securing the adoption of a new system. My natural standpoint is essentially phenomenological (Lester 1999, Schutz 1999) and systems-oriented, but I have a range of experience in practical research and development that gives me insights into how to construct studies and projects so that they work at a practical level as well as being conceptually consistent. I sometimes have the good fortune to work with a methodologically adept client or group of partners, but I have often found myself either needing to lead on the development of plans and methods or attempting to move clients away from adopting inappropriate or narrow approaches that stem from a lack of methodological fluency.

Ethics and perspective

The importance of ethics and perspective has increased over the years I have been active, nominally owing to concerns with matters such as fairness, transparency, diversity and wider impact, but primarily from a desire that projects should result in something worthwhile; this could be summarised as a concern with fitness of purpose as much as fitness for purpose. At

a practical level this translates into the obvious requirement for me to work in a way that is ethical and transparent, but it also creates an obligation to be clear about ethical boundaries and how my perspective will influence the work. A general principle that I have adopted is not to become involved in projects that will, or are likely to, result in avoidable harm or unfairness, such as using technology to economise while undermining quality, or developing an assessment system that has poor validity and accessibility or is insufficiently robust. Secondly, I attempt to make my perspective on matters relating to potential projects clear at the outset, both to avoid mismatches and to provide a baseline that can be referred back to later in the project, both in developing systems and practices and in the 'constitutional arbiter' role discussed later.

Two examples illustrate this. One is from a project proposal for a professional body that wanted to expand its qualifying process internationally. Part of my presentation concerned principles of good assessment such as validity, robustness, accessibility and so forth. One member of the commissioning panel said something to the effect that this is all very well, but they need a system that is efficient and above all cost-effective; these are niceties that could come later. I explained that they would be undermining their reputation and exposing their members' clients to incompetent practice if they didn't adopt good practice from the outset. They were not persuaded, and needless to say I didn't secure (and under the circumstances would not have accepted) the work. The second more positive example comes from a partnership project concerned with digitally-facilitated learning, where I was invited to take part as a work-based learning expert. In the initial discussions I made clear that while I support the use of new technology, the project needed to focus on learning first and technology-based solutions second; learners could not be diverted by exciting but poorly aligned technology that moves the focus away from the value of the learning. This principle was adopted throughout the project alongside enthusiasm for the technology, and interventions to ensure learning sequences were well-designed and supported were welcomed.

The issue of perspective can be a more difficult one to manage within projects, as unlike ethical considerations the boundaries are less clear and differences in perspective between

different actors in a project can, if managed well, be a source of creativity and innovation. There is a tradition of the consultant as an objective outsider, and while I do not dismiss this completely it is important to clarify that 'objective' in this sense simply means bringing in a set of perspectives that are (in most cases) not contaminated by the organisation(s) or particular case involved, and employing methods that wherever possible are open to scrutiny and make assumptions explicit. I aim to make important perspectives apparent in proposals and early-stage discussions, with where relevant pointers to published work and previous projects that illustrate how I might view and approach analogous situations in both an ethical and a methodological, and to some extent epistemological, sense.

The rich picture

Building a 'rich picture' is one of the initial steps in Peter Checkland's soft systems methodology. Checkland describes the need for a balance between being "sponge-like, soaking up as much as possible of what the situation presents… holding back from imposing a favoured pattern on the first impressions" and "hav(ing) in mind a range of prompts which will ensure that a wide range of aspects are looked at" (Checkland & Poulter 2006, p24). I concur with that, while adding that in my experience the development of the rich picture is generally more messy, iterative and multi-layered than Checkland's accounts suggest. It is also more phenomenological in principle, particularly in aiming to "identify phenomena through how they are perceived by (the) actors in a situation" (Lester 1999, p1) and avoiding creating firm interpretations until there is enough information to justify them. It draws on the metaphor of map-making and the pragmatic need to develop 'maps that work' (after Korzybski 1958) from multiple perspectives, recognising that the situation being addressed typically involves a 'wicked problem' (Rittel & Webber 1973) or 'mess' (Ackoff 1974).

In most instances the detailed work of a project will start with a broad brief or objective and a presenting problem as stated from the client's perspective, with an accompanying narrative setting out the associated reasoning, some of the history, what it is hoped will be achieved, the main actors (and sometimes counter-actors) involved, and some of the perceived facilitators, obstacles and wider dynamics. At the outset I will normally ask further questions

to orient myself in the situation, probe reasoning and gently question any assumptions that I think may be suspect. I will also ask for suggested reading materials, data sources and other people to speak to, as well as searching more widely from published and internet sources, and if sensitivities permit talking to other potential informants. In theory the rich picture can be built up from a single initial research phase, but in practice this is often not feasible or even desirable; feasible because the client or funder may want to see some proposals early on in the project, and desirable because part of the picture concerns assessing reactions to proposed changes, which might not be possible to do sensibly until those who will be affected by them can see the detail taking shape. A rich picture underpinning a systemic change will need to include current problems, practices, aims and visions, as well as tensions, politics and dissenting perspectives, and not all of these will become fully apparent from initial research.

In practice I find that the rich picture or working map develops over time alongside other aspects of the project, and the key is to make sure that proposals and implementation details do not run ahead of what is known about the situation. This will typically mean sketching out some proposals early on in the process, perhaps providing examples of how the detail could be developed where the client is unsure how something might work, but leaving enough room to modify them or propose a different solution as the picture develops. Firming up proposals and then consulting on and testing them generally open up new sources and perspectives, and these can substantially add to the richness and depth of the information available about the situation. In several cases the developed rich picture has provided the client or partnership with significantly enhanced knowledge about their operating arena that can be used to inform other developments and modifications.

Systems architecture

The idea of 'systems architecture' has its origins in engineering and later information technology, as a discipline for modelling complex systems and facilitating their design and modification (e.g. Crawley *et al* 2004). While I work with systems of principles, procedures and practices rather than physical components and processes, I find systems architecture as a perspective or analogy draws attention to the interrelated nature of systems as well as

supporting working effectively with the complexity involved. Educational or regulatory systems have different components that interrelate in different ways, they involve procedures and processes that translate into practices that both affect and produce the outputs of the system, and they have emergent properties some of which are reasonably predictable and others less so. In my experience setting up or modifying things such as qualifying processes, regulatory systems and even continuing development frameworks requires a systems-oriented approach, informed by a well-constructed rich picture, if the results are to work effectively and be robust and sustainable. The aim is again to develop a pragmatic 'map that works', i.e. a set of constructs, components and interrelations that may not be theoretically perfect but provide a way forward that is effective, equitable and durable.

In my development as a practitioner I have been influenced by work going back to Rittel & Webber (1973), Ackoff (1974) and Argyris & Schön (1978), through Schön (1983), Senge (1990) and Goldratt (Cox & Schleier 2010) to Checkland (Checkland 1981, Checkland & Poulter 2006). Early in my career I attempted to apply Goldratt's Theory of Constraints and Checkland's soft systems methodology in a fairly formal way, but I quickly found that most projects need flexibility to examine system components, processes and interactions as relevant to context. The closest I have to a formal approach it is something like:

- What are the issues, and who own and are affected by them?
- What needs to happen here, at an overall level?
- What are the main components, and what happens (or needs to happen) in each of them?
- Who needs to own, operate and take part in them – and who can undermine them?
- How are they interconnected?
- How does (or should) the system work as a whole?

I add to that as a guiding process a simple action research cycle involving investigation, definition, design, implementation and review. The cycle need not simply move forward and repeat; different cycles can take place at different speeds (for instance for components and for the framework as a whole), and not all parts of the cycle need be revisited at different

stages. An essential property of a 'live' system is that while it has constancy of purpose and consistency of practices, it is open to evolution. Part of the role of this action research cycle is to ensure that evolution takes place as necessary and in a consistent and evidence-informed way. There is therefore a need within at least the more complex types of project to build in a systems perspective and culture of ongoing review within the client organisation.

As a final point, a systems perspective links the context and purpose of an undertaking (the 'big picture') with the detail. An important aspect here is distinguishing critical from trivial detail. In a physical system critical detail could be a tiny mechanism or a piece of code without which the system would work poorly or not at all, while trivial detail could be the colour of a part or design factors that don't affect how it functions. In the kinds of systems that I work with, critical details typically describe process activities or criteria and can hinge on consistent, unambiguous and easily understandable terminology. Getting this right and communicating it effectively can make the difference between successful, easy implementation and a system failing or struggling because of lack of clarity about how things need to work. This also means getting the balance right between maintaining consistency and allowing scope for interpretation and evolution, something that can require careful and subtle use of language.

Realisation and ownership

Realisation (Schiff 1970) or co-production (Reeves & Knell 2006) involves the external expert or facilitator working jointly with a client to produce an outcome – such as a system, framework or process – rather than delivering an expert solution that requires handover. While some of my smaller projects are commissions to produce for instance a report, review or set of recommendations, on systems projects I have found a realisation approach is vital to ensuring acceptance and sustainability. In most instances this is unproblematic at a surface level, as the client will have a reason for developing the project and will want to own the results, psychologically as well as legally. There are however a number of obstacles that I have encountered, variably in different projects, that can affect sustainability.

In a few projects I have come across a lack of attention to gaining wider ownership – or at least buy-in – across the organisation or community. This can be a particular problem if the project promoters (for instance the committee or executives of a professional body) start with an attitude of wanting to impose change on a wider community (such as their members). Often this will be revealed in early discussions and illuminated through developing the rich picture, and there is scope in the development process to modify the system so that it is more acceptable, to incorporate extended consultation and communication, or to agree that the outcomes will not be accepted by everyone and will result in some of the relevant group becoming hostile or going elsewhere. The value of a rich picture developed from multiple perspectives becomes apparent here, as it allows dissenting views and sources of negative power to be identified, and an assessment to be made of how changes need to be negotiated and managed in order to succeed.

Another limiting issue that is sometimes present is that projects can be driven by enthusiasts whose ability to sustain momentum in their wider organisation or operating environment may be limited. This raises a question of how the project is to be framed; for instance as a short-life project or trial, as a catalyst or incubator, as a peripheral activity or spin-off, or as something subversive that has the potential to create wider-scale change later. Ensuring that the parties involved agree on this early on can be critical to making it a worthwhile activity rather than a brave effort that fails as soon as the driving force behind it is removed. As an external expert and facilitator I have very occasionally been able to aid wider adoption of something that started as a peripheral activity, but more often my role has been to inject realism and help identify appropriate achievable goals – for instance focusing on creating an example of innovation or good practice rather than instant system-wide change. In the early part of my career I have been as guilty as any of over-optimism about translating innovation into large-scale change, but I think I have learned from the failures of projects to achieve overambitious goals.

A different type of dynamic is present in partnership projects, where several different organisations come together to share ideas and develop a new framework or approach; European Union supported strategic partnership projects, of which I have been involved in

several, are of this type. Here there are multiple objectives: the overt ones expressed in the partnership agreement or funding application, and the private ones of the individual partners. An important factor is bringing to the surface the more private objectives and agreeing that they are a legitimate part of the project, while gaining enough buy-in for the project objectives to produce some viable results. Again some realism is in order, as while many of these projects produce interesting reports and resources few act as catalysts for wider change; the more sustainable impacts are often within the individual project partners or organisations that they work closely with.

The constitutional arbiter

A role that I have sometimes needed to take in relation to systems projects is that of constitutional arbiter, guiding the client to work within the system that they have set up until it is fully embedded and appropriate ways of working have become part of the organisation's practices. The aim of this role is essentially to maintain constancy of purpose and consistency of practices while also allowing for adjustment and modification. In some instances it can be like an editorial role, maintaining internal consistency across documents, guidance and communications, while in others it takes on a quasi-legal status involving making formal interpretations and judgements, including where necessary challenging the client's perspectives. One client described this role as more akin to a mufti in Islamic law than anything in the English legal system. It is probably best illustrated by way of two examples, one operational and one constitutional.

An example at an operational level concerned a professional body's continuing professional development (CPD) regulations. Within the regulatory framework that we had agreed, CPD was defined as activity of any kind that led to learning relevant to the person's practice, career or role in the professional community. In the trialling stage of the framework there was some reversion to attaching more significance to CPD inputs than to the actual learning that had taken place, and criticism of CPD accounts that did not include courses or conferences. My response was to pause the process briefly, call in a sample of cases and make exemplary

interpretations, developing them as precedents to reinforce the guidance material on how the regulations should be implemented.

A constitutional example involved the relationship between a joint council representing multiple organisations and an 'arm's-length' (i.e. operationally independent) standards board. The council had a history of inter-organisational politics that had undermined its effectiveness, and I had worked with its executive committee and a government sponsor to set up the standards board so that it could operate independently of the influence of the individual organisations. However, shortly after its establishment the board attempted to go beyond the level of independence provided for in its constitution, provoking the council to rein it in. The council's proposal was effectively to rewrite the constitution giving itself more power over the standards board, which would have undermined the latter's ability to make independent operational decisions. In response I provided a written interpretation that explained how the constitution had been devised to deal with this type of eventuality, and the course of action that should now follow; the council accepted my recommendations and the situation was resolved.

Practice as research

The idea of 'practice as research' was coined by Goldiamond and colleagues in the 1960s to reflect the fact that day-to-day practice (in their case in psychology) could, if approached in an appropriate manner, simultaneously be research (Goldiamond *et al* 1965). With systems development projects it is difficult to envisage how practice cannot be research, as each project is essentially unique while drawing on and offering learning points for other similar work. In most projects a large quantity of data and information of various kinds is gathered and the project necessarily has elements that are reflexive, cyclic and evaluative. However, learning from this kind of practice can be enhanced significantly if the project is approached throughout as a research-informed and knowledge-generating activity.

In most projects there are two aspects to this, one internal and concerned with evaluation and review, and the other external and about positioning the development and having

something to say to the wider world. Most developments I have been involved in envisage some form of evaluation activity, but it is often an add-on and can be more about surface opinion and validation than genuine evaluation. It is more valuable, and often easier, to build information-capture into the system, both to adjust developments as they progress and to review them later. This suggests an ongoing action research-type process with multiple sources of feedback rather than periodic review points, though what is practicable varies from one development to another. The external aspect involves both looking out to see what others are doing (though generally from a more critical perspective than one of simple benchmarking), and gathering evidence from which to develop an account that is located in a wider practice context and says something valuable to others in parallel fields. It is not necessary for the development to be innovative or even particularly successful, as sometimes learning from partial failures and missed opportunities can be as useful as that from ground-breaking successes.

A third point about practice as research is that it is not normally attempting either to produce formal social sciences research, or create the kind of quantitative or evaluative reporting that is the norm for many public-sector and large-scale consultancy reports. Practical research is often a type of bricolage that uses whatever opportunities are available and blends the findings together in a way that is internally consistent, authentic and valid for the case in point; again it aims to produce a 'map that works' rather than a fundamental truth or a practice prescription. The value of this kind of reporting is principally in moving practice forward; it can have wider and longer-lasting value, but its intention is not primarily to add to a body of academic knowledge. Having said this I have found that academic papers that discuss practice projects can have value for clients in being able to see their developments from a wider perspective, enabling them to recognise the significance and credibility of what they are doing. They can also provide me with an opportunity to add a more measured critique and longer-term perspective than may be possible directly in a consultancy role.

A final reflection: methodological fluency

A major consideration for being able to work with the factors described in the preceding sections is what can be termed methodological fluency. This means having a good theoretical and working understanding of different methodological approaches and techniques, and being able to select and construct methods that are appropriate to the project in hand. Where necessary it also means drawing on other sources of expertise; for instance while I am comfortable with manipulating and interpreting numerical data I am not a statistician, and have brought in, or persuaded the client to bring in, additional resources when statistical analyses have been needed. Overall this approach is again essentially a form of bricolage, making best use of the resources and opportunities that are appropriate in the context, and it is the opposite of taking standard methodologies and applying them according to procedural rules regardless of context.

Related to this is an observation about textbook descriptions of research and development methodologies, whether for instance Checkland's original exposition of soft systems methodology, Glaser and Strauss's work on grounded theory, Kincheloe's description of bricolage, or formalised processes for applying Goldratt's Theory of Constraints. From the perspective of drawing on these methodologies in diverse and messy practice situations, descriptions are typically overformalised and too rigid to apply optimally in context. This doesn't mean that the descriptions are not valid – more formal expositions have value in large-scale, well-structured projects as well as to some extent in establishing academic credibility – but that attempting to follow them in every situation is not a recipe for good practice. A more appropriate and effective approach is to start from a transdisciplinary or situational perspective and build a methodology around the needs of the practice situation, drawing on the theory that is relevant and developing methods and interventions that fit the context.

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