The confusion of battle

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Reports in the trade press about a 'battle' between the PRINCE2 methodology and the rest of project management, with qualifications as the battlefield, are not only misleading, but could lead to even more confusion says Adrian Dooley, chairman of The Projects Group plc.

Debate about the role of PRINCE2 within project management arises from a genuine confusion in the marketplace about the relative position of qualifications such as the PRINCE2 Practitioner and the APMP.

There is no battle between the APMP and PRINCE2. The former addresses the fundamental tools and techniques of managing projects and the latter addresses a structured process for pulling all the tools and techniques together. They are simply two sides of a coin that must work together to deliver projects effectively and efficiently. There are many analogies between managing projects and going on a car journey.

Both have defined starts and finishes, they usually have some sort of time constraint and they cost money. We plan both and then we apply control methods to check we are progressing as we had hoped. Both projects and car journeys have risks attached to them and either can, in retrospect, be seen as a great success or an unmitigated disaster.

Now, imagine that someone you didn't know had offered a close relative a lift. You would be concerned that your relative would get there on time, have a comfortable journey and, above all, be safe. You might ask many questions of the driver about which route they planned to take and whether they had they driven that route before. The first and most basic question is probably the one that you would take for granted – 'Have you passed your driving test?' If the answer was 'No!' you wouldn't even let your relative get in the car.

When you ask somebody if they have passed their driving test you are actually asking them two questions, simply because the driving test examines two aspects of driving a car. Firstly, does the driver have the mechanical and co-ordination skills to drive a car? Secondly, do they understand the Highway Code, i.e. do they understand road signs and know how to drive in an environment that involves many other drivers and pedestrians?

Substitute the relative for a project that is important to you and the driver for the project manager. Do you ask the same basic questions? Experience of the way people buy training courses leading to qualifications suggests not.

The two most popular qualifications in the UK are the APMP from the Association for Project Management and PRINCE2 from the APM Group Ltd. The APMP is a test of the topics listed in the APM's Body of Knowledge, and PRINCE2 qualifications are a test of the methodology of the same name, developed by the Office of Government Commerce (OGC).

A common question asked of any training company is: 'Which qualification should I go for, APMP or PRINCE2?' The implication being that these qualifications cover the same ground in a different way. This is simply not the case.

In my analogy, the APMP is the equivalent of knowing how to steer, how to change gear, how to accelerate and brake, etc. PRINCE2 is the equivalent of knowing that you should check your mirror and indicate before pulling out, drive on the left and give way at a double white line. Being able to drive safely clearly requires both.

Would you entrust your relative to a driver who knew how to drive a car but didn't know that you have to drive on the left? Would you entrust them to a driver who knew the Highway Code inside out but had never actually driven a car? No, you wouldn't. So why treat project managers any differently?

The task facing the profession is to communicate the symbiotic relationship between process, tools and techniques. This is nothing new. Documents such as the Project Management Institute's PMBoK® Guide clearly demonstrate the relationship in a single document. Qualifications such as the ISEB Certificate test both process and technique in a single exam.

The combination of the APM's Body of Knowledge and the OGC's PRINCE2 methodology has the potential to be a robust and powerful framework for managing projects and developing project managers.

Misguided suggestions that the two are battling for the hearts and minds of the profession are unhelpful in the extreme.