

Considering the effectiveness of the approach to primary research for a dissertation

INTRODUCTION

As a part of my dissertation research and writing process, I conducted a parallel process of reflective learning in order to capture important points of personal growth, learning and development resulting from my course of study (Williams, Woolliams & Spiro, 2012). Whilst the results presented in my dissertation reflect the more academic aspects of my learning journey, this report considers the less tangible elements of my performance, focussing on how I approached the task and what I could have done better or differently (Bassot, 2016). The aim is to ensure that I learn from my experiences, using a reflective approach to gain greater insight and understanding of how I tackled my research, using this to establish a baseline for a longer-term development plan (Jasper, 2013).

CONTEXT

This paper was compiled following the submission of my dissertation, which involved the conduct, collation and presentation of primary research in an international business studies environment (Kumar, 2014). As a result, the observations and findings presented relate to the following core activities:

- Decision making processes surrounding the choice of dissertation topic and the research approach to be applied.
- My approaches and attitudes to the more academic aspects of the work involved (secondary research, writing of my dissertation, collation and presentation of the data captured).

- The issues and challenges that I experienced in relation to the more inter-personal aspects of the work (engaging with my tutors and academic sponsors, approaches to primary research respondents).
- The gaps in my knowledge and understanding of the topic area/research that emerged and how I sought to close these gaps.

(Jarvis, 2006; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009)

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Before embarking on my dissertation, I noted the importance of conducting reflective practice in parallel given the feedback and guidance I was receiving from my academic institution (Hoult, 2006). As a result, I completed a Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment in order to understand how my personality type shapes my learning preferences (Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1980). From this (and from my subsequent preparatory readings around learning styles) I noted that I was a 'reflector' i.e. someone who is more comfortable when given time to think about new situations (Honey & Mumford, 2000). Whilst I also displayed some 'activist' tendencies (I am always keen to explore new challenges), I recognise that I prefer to observe and collect/collate information first before developing and displaying a broader understanding, which is often perceived as being over-cautious (or even slow) by my peers (Honey & Mumford, 2000).

As a result, I decided to maintain a journal throughout my period of study in order to capture and combine both my activities and the feelings and attitudes I was experiencing/displaying at that time (Williams et al, 2012). This approach suited my learning preferences and for each entry I applied the structure suggested by Knott and Scragg (2013):

- Reflection - what issue was causing me concern at the time of writing (e.g. an inability to motivate myself to begin secondary research).
- Analysis - considering what is happening (e.g. prevarication), what assumptions I was making (e.g. I would find secondary research dull and difficult), what this showed about my beliefs and practices (e.g. I find it challenging to start new working practices without some form of support) and how was this viewed by others (e.g. some peers felt that I was not committed to my studies).
- Action - having reviewed the journal entry I could then consider what actions (immediate and long-term) I could take. For example, having reviewed my entries about secondary research, I sought help from my tutor and joined a working group conducting research in the same area. This provided me with both motivation and support.

(Knott & Scragg, 2013)

Building my reflective learning around this journal initially lent itself to the adoption of Kolb's cyclical model of learning as the entries were providing the critical material needed to encourage me to learn, adapt and develop (Kolb, 1984). The journal provided evidence of the experience and my subsequent reflection ('Do' and 'Observe'), supported the required learning to help me adjust my approaches in the future ('Think') and ensured that I created a personal training and development plan to ensure that I acquired the skills and experience necessary ('Plan') (Kolb, 1984). However, an early review of my journal entries highlighted the importance of my emotional state and my feelings to my work activities and learning approaches and I subsequently adapted this approach to apply the experiential learning cycle developed by Gibbs (1988).

OBSERVATION, REFLECTION AND FINDINGS

Whilst a number of learning experiences and areas for training and development were identified, one particular issue emerged as providing the most significant material - my attitudes, feelings and approach to the primary research required for my dissertation (Kumar, 2014). The key points are presented using Gibbs experiential learning cycle (Gibbs, 1988).

DESCRIPTION

As a part of my dissertation, I was required to conduct primary research to capture key data to support the detailed consideration of the research questions I had proposed (Saunders et al, 2009). The approach that I decided to adopt having identified the sample group (and after having gained the necessary consents) was to use an internet-hosted survey platform (SurveyMonkey, 2017) to capture the basic data and then follow this up with a series of face-to-face interviews to explore the respondents views in greater depth.

Whilst my organisation of the on-line survey and the timetabling and physical arrangements for the interviews went well, the first five face-to-face meetings (conducted over a period of three days) did not. This was the first time I had conducted any form of research interview and I had not properly prepared myself for the experience. As a result, the quality of the data collected from these interviews was poor and the interviewees expressed concerns about my professional ability and clearly felt that they were not being taken seriously (Brinkman, 2013)

FEELINGS

In the days leading up to these interviews, I began to feel increasingly stressed and worried about what I would need to do. I am aware that I am not particularly comfortable in unfamiliar formal settings and I had intentionally created a scenario where I would need to face such an environment (Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1980). The respondents were also

professionals with many years of experience in their field which meant that I was intimidated when I finally met them - I was much younger and felt intellectually inferior.

Because these feelings of inadequacy (and implied intimidation - even though all of the respondents were engaged and courteous), I quickly became flustered and lost my way in the interviews. I found it difficult to quickly locate the relevant notes and questions and I became embarrassed as each respondent realised that I was beginning to struggle. Unfortunately, this embarrassment seemed to lead to me developing an interviewing style that was almost aggressive. Thankfully, three of the respondents recognised my discomfort and offered to engage in the interview process again once I was feeling better prepared. This generated a sense of relief and gratitude and encouraged me to review my approach.

EVALUATION

In reflecting on this experience, there is clear evidence that my ability to organise and timetable the interview processes needed to support my primary research is sound. Each respondent knew the direction of the research I was exploring, understood the questions to be presented and the rationale behind them and (thanks largely to the initial survey approach) they were fully engaged in the programme I had initiated (Saunders et al, 2009). However, my poor inter-personal skills and lack of preparation for the face-to-face interviews themselves undermined this process. In essence, whilst the research questions appeared credible, the researcher did not!

I was disappointed in myself and these feelings were exacerbated when I noted the disappointment and frustration expressed by some of the respondents. However, the situation was mitigated by the apparent quality of the research questions and the initial survey that had been presented to respondents, evidenced in the continued engagement of three of the

respondents after this poor initial meetings (Brinkman, 2013). I was still able to obtain feedback that indicated how my research findings would be valued and that the approach I wished to explore had both academic rigour and would be valued by the businesses each respondent represented. This helped to focus my thinking, confirming that the problems experienced were due to my inter-personal skills and poor preparation rather than a more fundamental issues surrounding the direction of the research (Kumar, 2014).

ANALYSIS

In order to ensure that I was able to present a fully supported and balanced dissertation, I needed to make sure that I captured detailed qualitative data and opinions from respondents (Brinkman, 2013). Given the problems that I had experienced, this left me with essentially two options - to address my poor interviewing performance or to fundamentally change the direction and tone of my dissertation to focus exclusively on the analysis and presentation of secondary data (Kumar, 2014). Given the feedback I had received from my academic support team and respondents (and noting the personal development that would accrue), I decided that it would be appropriate to maintain the direction of my dissertation and take action to develop and improve my interviewing skills (Bassot, 2016). A critical review of my reflective journal provided further evidence to support this approach, as I had noted the need to improve my inter-personal skills in similar settings in the past (Jarvis, 2012).

I used my academic course to identify and work with people who had faced similar situations in order to gain a broader understanding of how they approached the challenges presented, the feelings and concerns that they had felt and how they chose to prepare for their events (Cottrell, 2011). Given my learning preferences and personality type, I recognised that I would need significant support in this area if my performance was to improve and therefore

sought to create a 'community of practice' that would be able to provide me with an appropriate support group (Honey & Mumford, 2000, Lave & Wenger, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The discussions that I had with my peers within the support group that I created helped me to identify that my poor interview performance was fundamentally down to poor preparation. However, my unwillingness to prepare adequately was shaped by my fear of having to face such situations and that I therefore needed to build a learning and support intervention that addressed this issue (Jarvis, 2012).

I recognised that I needed to become more comfortable with being involved in a face-to-face interview scenario if I was to be able to collate and present the primary data needed for my dissertation (Kumar, 2014). If changing the tone and direction of my dissertation was unacceptable, then the only alternative was to remove the fear I felt in facing this unfamiliar situation by creating an operating environment that I felt more comfortable working within (Lave & Wenger, 1988).

ACTION PLAN

Having taken time to reflect on this incident (engaging the views of my peer support group to also challenge and critically examine my own perceptions and opinions), I was able to create a suitable action plan to help me address the issues identified (Williams et al, 2012). The key elements of this plan were as follows:

- I contacted the five respondents in order to apologise for my poor practice and to ask them if they would be prepared to repeat the interview. Three agreed and subsequent

discussions with these individuals allowed me to request feedback from them which help to measure/quantify my (improved) performance when I next worked with them.

- I attended a university-sponsored interviewing techniques course which helped to make me more comfortable in such scenarios. It also equipping me with a range of tools and techniques I could apply when conducting a qualitative research interview.
- Prior to the next series of interviews, I sought the support of my peer group/community of practice and carried out a number of 'role-play' events which helped me to structure my thinking and analytical approach.
- I created a less formal interview environment for subsequent interviews (a relaxed coffee area rather than a meeting room). This helped to ensure that I was more relaxed and the conversation/information flow improved.
- I reduced the intensity of the interview schedule to allow me time to reflect on my performance after each interview and continue to refine my skills in this area.

(Hoult, 2006)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The example presented within this paper highlights some of the key learning points I have captured during my period of study. These include:

- The need to understanding my learning styles and preferences, but not to be constrained by them.
- The importance of building a support group or network that I am comfortable working with, so that I can challenge and critically review my thinking, actions and behaviours.

- The need to view learning as an iterative process and the importance of reflective processes in refining my performance and in building a targeted training and development plan.

(Armstrong & Taylor, 2014)

REFERENCES

Armstrong, M., Taylor, S. (2014). *Armstrong's Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice*, 13th Edition, London: Kogan Page Ltd.

Bassot, B. (2016). *The Reflective Journal*, 2nd Edition. London: Palgrave.

Briggs-Myers, I., Myers, P.B. (1980). *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Brinkman, S. (2013). *Qualitative Interviewing: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cottrell, S. (2011). *Critical Thinking Skills: Developing effective analysis and argument*, 2nd Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic.

Honey, P., Mumford, A. (2000). *The Learning Styles Helper's Guide*. Maidenhead: Peter Honey Publications.

Hoult, E. (2006). *Learning Support: a guide for mature students*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Jarvis, P. (2012). *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Jasper, M. (2013) *Beginning Reflective Practice*. 2nd edition. Andover: Cengage Learning.

Knott, C., Scragg, T. (2013). *Reflective Practice in Social Work*, 3rd Edition. London: Sage.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Kumar, R. (2014). *Research Methodology*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Lave, J., Wenger E. (1998). *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., Thornhill, A. (2009). *Research Methods for Business Students*, 5th Edition. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

SurveyMonkey. (2017). Get answers with the world's leading survey platform. [Online], Available: https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/mp/take-a-tour/?ut_source=header [07 June, 2017].

Williams, K., Woolliams, M., Spiro, J. (2012). *Reflective Writing*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.