Critical reflection: Formulating the research question.

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1. Introduction

"The process of formulating a good research question can be challenging and frustrating", (Fandino, 2019). The aim of this extended abstract is to share the reflection journey during the formulation and indeed evolution of the research question for the DBA programme within LJMU.

Reflection can be defined as having an awareness of a perception, thought feeling intention, action, or one's habits, allowing the thoughts to wander and one can even reflect on oneself reflecting, whereas critical reflection implies assessing what is being reflected, (Mezirow, 1998). The latter can be either implicit which is a straight-forward choice between good and evil, driven by assimilated values, or explicit where the process of awareness is brought in to examine and assess the reasons for making a choice. Explicit critical reflection can encourage constructive challenge of general assumptions leading to significant personal transformation, (Gray, 2007).

Formally commencing in November 2021 by the submission of an abstract in application for the DBA and a further one in January 2022, next followed the attendance at the taught workshops in June 2022 after which a Mentor was allocated and up to and including the next set of workshops in November 2022. This journey picks up on key critical incidents defined as events and/or situations which mark significant turning points or changes in the life of a researcher, (Tripp, 2011). It is suggested this abstract could contribute to the critical reflection journey chapter in the DBA thesis.

2. Literature Review – formulating research questions (The what!)

The most significant element of the research process is to devise a good research question, which, should be narrow enough to address an important issue within an organisation, (Lipowski, 2008). Social research questions must also be considerate of the research design and research methods, (Bryman, 2007). As a researcher there further exists a desire for the research question to be interesting and one that spots and constructs a gap in existing theories and one that is likely to lead to more influential theories, and consideration of other factors such as general interest, relevance for practitioners, impact, and empirical findings. (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). "Conceptualising, developing, writing, and re-writing research questions are all part of a dynamic reflective qualitative inquiry process, (Agee, 2009, p.445). Writing and rewriting research questions also encourages the organisation and clearer presentation of thoughts, and forces one to continually ask important questions about purpose and clarity, and to learn from this process, (Zinsser, 1989). "Reflecting on and reformulating the research questions are central points of reference for assessing the appropriateness of the decisions you take at several points", Flick, (2006, p.105). In summary, devising research questions is an, "interactive inquiry journey", (Agee, 2009, p. 432) which can be treated as navigational tools requiring continual development and refinement.

3. Theoretical Basis of the Bitesize learning model (The how!)

Schön (1983) advocates two types of reflection: in-action which is the quick thinking and reaction that takes place during an activity, and on-action where the activity is considered after the event, generating a new understanding of the experience, a change in the situation, and unexpected outcomes. Manen (1995) asserts the process of being reflective is not straightforward during the lived moments of an activity within working lives. Comparing the two, the former restricts reflection beyond what is going

on as the activity is taking place, hence a critical reflection framework is recommended for a wider and more in-depth reflection, drawing on past and future actions, (Eraut, 1994). Nugent et. al. (2007) suggests incorporating mindfulness, within reflective practice, discounting the two former types of reflection resulting in a third type of reflection: 'tactful action' which aims to offer space in which to be curious and the task to be progressed.

The 6 step Bitesize Learning Model, (Jariwala, 2022) incorporates the principles of mindfulness and critical reflection aiming to provide the "how to" when working towards a particular piece of work. Driven by the high incidence of anxiety in students during COVID 19, and inability to focus, concentrate, amongst too many priorities, and feelings of inadequacy, this model gently coaxes a new habit of study amongst a plethora of abrupt change of normal routines, and uncertainty. It is this model that has been consciously and implicitly applied during the journey of formulating a good research question.

The 6 cyclical steps are:
1. Start by **reading** for a minimum of 5 minutes. Your time will build up slowly.
2. **Reflect** - Think about what you have read, while you are cleaning skirting boards!
3. **Write** - Make a note - write something down, anything, – could be a plan/notes/drawing.
4. **Rest** – get distracted! Do not think about the work you are doing. Allow the neurons in your brain to make the new learning connections. This is the cooking stage, enhancing understanding of new perspectives/subjects, constructive challenge of general assumptions.
5. **Review/amend** – Go back to what you have written and review/amend.
6. **Reward** - chocolate, biscuit! pat on the back, a treat. Internal sense of achievement!

Start the cycle again!

4.   The findings (What happened?)

The journey comprises many emotions and feelings ranging from pensive thought, frustration, overwhelming sense of foreboding, overthinking, confusion, numbness, denial, positivity and eureka moments all in a non- linear fashion. There was a mixture of in action and on action reflection leading to both progress and paralysis.

The commitment to work towards the DBA continues to be a series of stops and starts. When overwhelmed (which happens continuously) the model helps to restart the engagement allowing for manageable bitesize interactions. A new understanding achieved, that editing is a yo-yo never ending activity and that can be ok!

5.   Critical incidents

1. A sense of relief and a little confidence was experienced at the submission of the abstracts in application for the DBA programme which was the first critical incident in that an idea was acknowledged and accepted.

2. Meetings with the allocated mentor whose impressive ability to listen and guide gently whilst providing challenge completing uprooting current ideas to shape the thesis aligned to identified personal interest and have impact, is welcomed. The result is change of focus to understand and define impact.

3. First meeting with one of the Tutors at the first workshop who from the application, saw a theoretical framework! A eureka moment!

4. Feeling overwhelmed with current work and home priorities and pausing for a couple of months and not progressing.

5. Articulating the research question with DBA colleagues and Tutors resulting in a refreshed air of reengagement, overcoming of fear to work towards and completing the extended abstract and poster.

6. Limitations of the 6-step model

The model assumes the critical reflection to be an individual activity. The critical incidents experienced in isolation were linked to writing albeit achieved in writing retreats too. However, the progression of ideas which led to the feelings of euphoria were following discussions and feedback with the allocated mentor, and at the taught workshops with fellow DBA friends, and tutors.

Therefore, the findings show most of the critical incidents occur within a community of practice. According to Reynolds, (1998, p.189) community of practice encourages critical reflection in a social setting allowing the questioning of assumptions and is concerned with emancipation. Therefore, one can assume social dynamics can influence critical reflection and hence the model can be further developed to incorporate this.

Result so far - A working research question in existence with some related methods in mind!

7. **References**

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