

A critical reflection on quantitative research

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1. Introduction

The context of this paper is the research process I have undertaken in the past year for my doctoral thesis which is entitled *Experiential marketing and the Wild Atlantic Way: developing a framework for practitioners*. As part of my primary research, I decided to carry out quantitative research via an online questionnaire, as an exploratory study of marketing practices amongst SMTEs on the Wild Atlantic Way. I found this task to be one of the most challenging processes I have undergone since beginning my DBA. As a nascent critically reflective practitioner, I thought it would be a useful and enlightening action to write about this difficult experience.

Dewey described reflective practice as the ‘active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends’ (Dewey, 1933). This definition has been expounded on by many scholars (Kolb David, 1984, Schön, 2017, Boud et al., 2013, Honey and Mumford, 1989, Reynolds, 1999) and has been adapted as a core component of such diverse disciplines as healthcare (Fragkos, 2016), sport (Cushion, 2018) and teaching (Horton-Deutsch and Sherwood, 2017). All doctoral students on the DBA programme are required to demonstrate that they have become reflective practitioners as they progress through their research. Whilst the very act of producing a doctoral thesis may be seen as an act of reflective practice in itself: gathering and analysing data, seeking expert feedback, drafting and redrafting one’s work (Johnson-Leslie, 2009); DBA students at LJMU devote significant time to producing a reflective account outside of the main body of the dissertation to evidence their critical reflection skills.

This paper will use Reynold’s (1999) four characteristics of critical reflection as a framework for this reflective account. These are: a concern with questioning assumptions, a focus on the social rather than the individual, an emphasis on the analysis of power relations and a concern for emancipation. This structure has been used previously by Lawless et al. (2012) as a framework for analysing masters level students’ reflective accounts. The methodology is a form of autoethnography, an approach which has been described by Ellis et al. (2011) as one which challenges canonical methods of doing research, focusing as it does on personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. Anderson (2006) notes that self-proclaimed autoethnographers tend to write about “emotionally wrenching experiences”, a view challenged by Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) who claim that autoethnography can be both evocative of emotion and analytical.

2. Analysis and Findings

2.1 Questioning Assumptions

Critical reflection is widely seen as a system of challenging current assumptions in order to come to a new understanding or way of meaning (Jensen-Hart and Williams, 2010). As a DBA student, my experience prior to this period had been a largely positive one. The initial stages of developing a research proposal, writing a literature review, and drafting my research methodology had been interesting even pleasant at times. Feedback from my supervisors was generally positive. I assumed that the next stage of my research would be ‘more of the same’. How naïve that view proved to be. Work I

expected to take a few months consumed over a year of my time. From the very beginning I struggled to understand what others seemed to find the most basic of concepts. What were independent and dependent variables and why did it matter? Despite endless patient explanations by my supervisors, the questionnaire became my bete noir. This situation was unfamiliar and unsettling for me. My sense of self, that of a diligent and productive student was being steadily eroded. Every stage of the research process seemed to bring a new set of afflictions: trying to get responses from busy tourism operators in high season was naturally quite difficult, but that paled into insignificance beside the horror of SPSS analysis. My initial reaction once this part of my research was over was to shut the entire process in metaphorical box, only to be revisited when essential to do so.

However Mezirow (1998) reminds us that critical reflection means challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning. This is not an easy process; in fact, it can be quite painful. The presuppositions I had held – that of the ‘good’ researcher, the capable DBA student had been tested and found wanting. Rather than dwelling on negatives, I gradually realised that I could gain valuable insights from my supposed failures. My assumptions about my quantitative research abilities had been incorrect, but because of this I had become a more perceptive researcher, one who understands a little more about what it means to be a reflective practitioner.

2.2 Social construction of reality

Reflective practice focuses on social learning and communities of practice. The concept of communities of practice is largely attributed to Lave and Wenger (2004), who argue that learning does not simply rest with the individual but is a social process contextually situated. They state that a community of practice can be created with the objective of gaining knowledge related to its members' field, learning from each other through the process of sharing experience and information, with the opportunity for both personal and professional growth. The DBA programme acknowledges the importance of social learning and as a member of Cohort 9, I can attest that the times our group has been together have provided truly memorable and enriching learning experiences. However, to be successful, a community of practice must be an active system. Unfortunately, opportunities to come together have been infrequent. There is no doubt that my cohort would have supported me, both with practical knowledge and friendship. But for several reasons: perhaps geographical distance, lack of organised activities and my own sense of inadequacy over this issue, I did not feel part of a community of practice where I could seek support. This is something I need to address in the pursuit of becoming a more critically reflective practitioner. Support from one's peers is an extremely powerful factor in the DBA process, and something which should not be allowed to atrophy.

2.3 The analysis of power relations

Accepting that critical reflection involves itself with why behaviours occur (Khalil, 2019), questions of power and knowledge, and how one's perspective is influenced by their position in the power hierarchy must be addressed. Reynolds (1999) argues that critical reflection must highlight the elements of power and ideology that exist in the social fabric of organisations, and how power inequalities impact on all its members. The main players in the doctoral system are students and their supervisors. The role of the supervisor is often stated to be that of a ‘critical friend’: advising and guiding the student on how best to navigate their own research journey. I sometimes think this over-simplifies the relationship. By nature of the system students are hugely dependent on their supervisors' knowledge and experience. Many times during my recent research experience I wondered why I had landed myself in a situation where I spent an inordinate amount of time on a relatively minor section of my thesis. It simply did not occur to me, a naturally inclined qualitative researcher to question why I was doing quantitative research. I think I assumed that the answer would be “Because you should”. And undoubtedly my two excellent

supervisors were totally correct in having me do this research. The question I must ask myself as a reflective practitioner however, is why I never probed this decision in any depth.

2.4 Concern for emancipation

One of the underlying aims of critical reflection is that of becoming a more just society, reflected in both work and education (Reynolds, 1999). The belief is that critical reflection can become the vehicle for a society based on fairness and democracy. Whilst it is difficult to see how my recent research will help achieve this aim, I must not lose sight of the fact that this is one piece of a much larger study, whose aim is to help smaller businesses which lack resources to market effectively. A tenet of the DBA is that research must contribute to practice as well as knowledge. My research may ultimately help resource-poor businesses on the Wild Atlantic Way to prosper through more effective marketing, something which dovetails nicely with the above aim.

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