The utilisation of qualitative methodologies in Work Based Learning [WBL]

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This paper will present the case for the deployment of qualitative research methods, typically found in many social science degrees, to the processes of work-based learning [WBL] which is itself a typical component of degrees in business studies amongst others. A range of qualitative techniques will be discussed and their salience for work-based learning will be evaluated. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the application of the concept of ecological validity to work-based learning and argue the case for methods of preparation and assessment of WBL which incorporate qualitative techniques.

Qualitative Methodology modules in degree programmes

Although all courses in the social sciences will contain a methodology component, the same is not necessarily true of courses in business studies. Whilst all business studies degrees will introduce students to a variety of quantitative and statistical tools, the extent to which such techniques are embedded in wider programmes of research methods is variable. Whilst quantitative techniques are generally offered as core modules, techniques of data collection, interpretation and analysis might be offered in a variety of associated modules including, for example, general modules in research methods, specialist modules in market research techniques and methodology training more specifically oriented towards the final year dissertation or project. If the course designers have not included a specific module in qualitative research methods, then it is argued here that some of the most salient features of a qualitative methodologies need to be presented to students who intend to undertake periods of work-based learning. Of course one would not expect the degree of theoretical sophistication to be found in a fully developed module. Rather, students will be sufficiently appraised of qualitative methodologies and tools of analysis to enable them to add a degree of rigour and sophistication to the analysis of their own WBL experiences.

Work Based Learning [WBL] components

The *National Centre for Work Based Learning* Partnerships at Middlesex University is acknowledged as having pioneered developments in the formulation, assessment and accreditation of work based learning partnerships. The key elements of a WBL studies programme are detailed as follows: (Doncaster,2000)

- Recognition and Accreditation of Learning [RAL] which earns academic credit by reflecting on past experience and constructing a portfolio detailing key learning achievements.

- Programme Planning in which the learning aims and requirements are considered to form a Learning Agreement

- Research Methods to help formulate a proposal to undertake specific work based projects

- The Work Based Project, determined by the programme aims, and subsequently written up and defended

These elements will also be represented within WBL programmes designed as part of an undergraduate programme. In consultation with college tutors and the individual student's employer, the possibilities afforded by the work experience will form the elements of a Learning Agreement. Students will themselves be taught the skills necessary to identify their own learning styles (Belbin, 1993), to develop modes of reflective thinking and to construct defensible portfolios. Typically, these will contain the results of a work based project or projects and it is important to convey the essential methodological principles in order to successfully collect, interpret and analyse relevant data.

Traditional work-based placements have generally required the production of a synoptic report (whether or not students have been engaged in particular projects), in which students would analyse the organisation structure and functions, their own job placement and their own performance within the organisation. In order to assist them in these activities, students are typically required to keep regular notes in the form of either a diary, ethnographic 'field-notes' or a learning log. The element which students have traditionally found most difficult to write are those elements that call for a degree of critical self-reflection of their own performance and development over the period of the placement. This task may well be made eased if students are sensitised to using the whole of their placement experiences as a resource of documents, experiences and events which can then be structured and analysed using methods and techniques familiar to qualitative researchers.

The tools of qualitative analysis

A résumé will now be given of the most typical tools used by qualitative researchers, together with an examination of their role in work-based learning.

Ethnography

Ethnographic techniques applied to a work organisation assumes that the researcher regards the whole of the setting as 'anthropologically strange' It is evident that the social anthropologists who first studied simple or pre-industrial societies in the 19th century could use the resources provided by the accidents of a colonial history to examine many different societies which, to the outsider, would have strange or exotic elements. We could cite Evans-Pritchard's (1937) examinations of witchcraft beliefs

amongst the Azande of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan as a prime example here. But when social anthropologists and sociologists turned their attention to sub-cultures within industrial societies, they retained the ability to examine these in a similar, non-prejudicial way. The modern ethnographer will therefore always seek to enter an organisation with the question 'What goes on around here' or in a more phenomenological mode, seeks to understand the basis of 'common sense' knowledge within the organisation. The student as observer is often in a prime position to gather the interesting facets of organisation that first present themselves to the 'outsider' before they themselves becomes immersed in the institutional culture which constitutes 'how things get done about here'. The ethnographer will seek not just to gather data but to make sense of it by structuring, ordering and relating it to an existing body of theory. This theory may be implicit rather than explicit but the ethnographers are aware that their own biological attributes of age, gender and ethnicity will undoubtedly act as a filter for the sense impressions received.

Latter day ethnographers are likely to use techniques of 'thick descriptions' which are defined by Denzin (1989: 83) as follows:

> *...thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts of...experiences. These accounts often state the intentions and meanings that organize an action. ... Thick description contextualizes experience. ... It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another... It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.*

Whilst thick description is a specialised tool in the hands of qualitative researchers, the essentials of the method, combining as it does detailed description with attempts to enter into the social and mental world of the participants, is an interesting analytical tool.

Observation

Structured observation may, paradoxically, be harder to perform that at first anticipated. Social psychologists tell us that our observations of any event are typically fitted into a pattern of prior experiences such that we rarely form judgements in a complete vacuum. Hence there is an interplay between observations of behaviour and our categorisation of it – we learn to interpret raised voices and particular gestures as indicators of dissent, for example. What exactly, though, is to observed ? The most evident units are those of social interactions between peers, between members of workgroups, between managers and the managed as well as interactions with customers. It has been reported from the quality management literature that those staff who feel they have been treated badly by their own managements are less inclined to give a good service to their own external customers. Observations may also relate to how people distribute themselves in space (seats taken around a table), the presentations of self, interpretations of dress code. Richardson (1994) suggests that ethnographic notes can be made under four headings :

Observation notes ('fairly accurate rendition of what I see, hear, taste and so on',
Methodological notes ('messages to myself regarding how to collect data'),
Theoretical notes ('hunches, hypotheses.. critiques of what I am doing/thinking/
seeing') and
Personal notes ('feeling statements about my research, the people I am talking to.. my
doubts, my anxieties, my pleasures')

A recent development with antecedents in earlier anthropological work is a renewed
interest in the role of *story telling* within an organisation (Finlay and Hogan, 1995;
Reason and Hawkins, 1988). The stories often reflect decline, injustice and despair
but the repetition of stories helps to add stability and purpose to organisations and
departments. The telling, re-telling and embellishment of stories helps to contribute
to group solidarity and support and may give an insight into the evocation of a
supposedly glorious and stable past ('the good old days') or to a sense of pronounced
injustice, replete with tales of the ways in which wronged individuals have caused
embarrassment or the downfall of their oppressors. Students can be alerted to the
ways in which *story telling* features in the modern organisation and use this as an
index into current sources of strain or discontent.

Participant Observation

Participant Observation is often held to be the ethnographic method 'par excellence',
involving as it does the full commitment and involvement of the researcher. The
participant observation phase often starts with a period of observation before the
researcher in his/her organisational role is fully accepted as a contributing member of
the group. It may well happen, however, that the researcher becomes so fully
committed to their work role that they lose some of their objectivity and capacity to
observe. As William Whyte (1943) graphically states in a classic study 'Í began as a
non-participating observer. As I became accepted into the community, I found myself
becoming almost a non-observing participant'. Participant-observers have devised a
series of stratagems to enable them simultaneously to participate and to record their
observations, chief amongst which is acting as a minutes secretary. Whilst the
method calls for a degree of skill in combining the roles of observer and participant,
there are ever-present concerns over the quality, integrity and reproducibility of the
data. How are we to assess that the observer has not given a completely idiosyncratic
account, unlikely to be replicated by another observer? There are some data, of
course, to which the respondent is generally denied access (the conversations that take
place in the toilet areas reserved for the use of the opposite sex) making any
observations partial. These difficulties may be overcome in part by a conscious
attempt to *triangulate* the data by drawing a cumulative view of the data drawn from
different contexts. For example, a company's mission statements described in
documentation or in company procedures may be observed in action. The student on
a work placement is in an excellent position to undertook the participant observation
role. Whilst a fully worked out research project involving participant observation
may involve a time-scale taking months or years, the student may be employed for
only a few months. But even under these circumstances, it is possible to make valid
observations and derive useful data, particularly if issues arise such as role-conflict,
supervisory style or negotiations in which the student is personally involved.

Interviewing

The interview is seen as one of the most common techniques most for data collection and is deployed in both quantitative and qualitative modes of analysis. When interviews are highly structured in the form of administered questionnaire, they lend themselves most readily to pre-coded answers of the 'tick the box' variety which lend themselves most readily to statistical analysis. Many criticisms have been made, however, of this mode of data collection, the most damning of which is probably the fact that the analyst has no way of knowing whether the marks observed on paper are the result of sustained periods of thought or the most cursory of efforts to dispense with the questionnaire rapidly. Such a case hardly engages the thought processes or feeling states of the subject and neither does the trivial or derisory response which is also not likely to be of much value. Interviewing in the qualitative tradition, however, is a more skilful affair in which the researcher whilst starting off with a research agenda must ensure that the research instrument captures the nuances and flows of the data, whilst not getting diverted from the major focus of the investigation. This calls for a degree of practice and skill in which the researcher needs not only to establish rapport with the interviewee but also needs to listen 'with an inner ear' so that responses may be analysed as they are uttered and interesting theoretical or promising lines of enquiry pursued. Dilemmas are involved at every stage, not least whether to capture the material on audio or videotape (with potential problems associated with transcription) or to gather the relevant material in note-form.

It is not uncommon for students as researchers to be ill-prepared for their tasks as interviewers. They may well have been asked to undertake some interviews as part of course-work or feel the need to gather material via interviews for their final year project or dissertation. However, the analysis of such material may leave much to be desired with, in the worst instances, a project indicating that the interview material 'supports' a hypothesis or, even worse, 'proves' a case. This indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the status of the data gathered by the researcher. The best examples of interviewing in practice are respondents chosen by reference to a list of criteria rather than availability (e.g. personnel managers in a large or SME differentiated by sector such as manufacturing, service industry, public sector). The data is then analysed by reference to coding themes which come out of the data once the researcher has had a chance to read and reflect upon all of the gathered material. These themes may then be examined to explore continuities/discontinuities with the published literature. The student also needs to be alerted to the fact that by 'listening with an inner ear' the interview material should contain nuggets of ideas which would contain excellent sources of quotations for their final report. Interviewing, as with many skills, is improved with practice and ideally students should be given the opportunity to practice and enhance these skills before embarking upon the exercise for real in the workplace.

Documentary analysis

Organisations abound in documents of all sorts including mission statements, strategic plans, annual reports, policy documents, publicity and advertising, procedure manuals, minutes, memos and emails. These can constitute a rich if over-abundant source of data to the assiduous researcher. Students are typically encouraged to immerse themselves in this material so as to gain a good insight into the organisation in which

they are located and often make extensive use in the appendices of their reports and projects. Here again, though, the tools for the analysis of such data have often been communicated implicitly and more guidance is required to make good use of such resources. The skills associated with a *historian* rather than a social scientist are often required i.e. a recognition that the provenance of a document needs to be established and analysis needs to take into account the socio-cultural climate in which it was written, the audience for whom it was intended, the structural location of the author in the organisation as a whole and so on. Documents can be used to map changes in an organisation's core values or mission over time. More typically, documents are subject to *content analysis* in which themes are categorised and perhaps measured quantitatively e.g. the amount of column inches devoted to foreign affairs in a range of newspapers. Students and their work colleagues are themselves generators of documents and from this mass of seemingly mundane material, the astute analyst can derive much of value by subjecting it to a more penetrating examination. Data collected by interview once converted into a transcript is evidently amenable to similar processes of analysis.

The case study

Case studies typically involve the intensive examination of one organisation, department or group of individuals. As such the case study is best utilised
   -   to generate hypotheses concerning future lines of enquiry
   -   to examine in depth the interaction of several social processes
Students often use case studies either singly or as contrasting studies to illustrate themes developed in their reports or projects but a typical failing is that description crowds out analysis. The techniques for analysing a case study do not differ markedly from those used to analyse interviews and observations and 'thick description' is also available to the more competent analyst. The case study is typically cited in business courses as compelling sources of received wisdom but difficulties do remain concerning the transferability of findings. One is reminded of the fact that only 20% of the companies cited in Peters and Waterman's (1982) classic study remained excellent some 15-20 years later.

Integrated approaches

One of the finest pieces of ethnography quite applicable to many industrial settings is *Boys in White*, the study made by Becker *et. al.* (1961) of students undergoing medical training. Becker noted that some students used the word *crock* in situations in which patients described vague and ill-defined symptoms. These presented severe challenges to students whose own diagnostic skills were incomplete. As a way of handling the uncertainties involved, the word *crock* (implicitly 'of shit') was used to compartmentalise and share these experiences with fellow students. Learning what a crock was involved careful unravelling of the multiple meanings of a simple word. Becker even deploys what he terms *quasi-statistics* to measure the instances and occurrences of the word, demonstrating that it tended to be used not by students at the start of their training (insufficiently exposed to patients), nor by final year students (on the eve of graduation who felt themselves to be physicians in all but name) but by those students whose initial exposure to patients was proving a challenge to their developing professional identities. Practically every qualitative technique detailed

above can be found in this study, indicating how an alert and informed social scientist can make illuminating and generalisable observations from apparently mundane settings. Becker also alerts us to the fact that the *argot* (or specialised vocabulary) of a subculture is an interesting starting point at which to gain insights into wider social functioning.

Deployment of qualitative methodologies in Work Based Learning

Active involvement and deep learning of students

Students undertaking WBL have much to learn – not only are they required to learn the demands of their day-to-day work but they also have to learn how to find their way around a new organisation, presentation of self, the intricacies of new IT systems amongst other things in addition to the stamina demands of a 9-to-5 existence. It could be argued that adding more prescriptions to the requirements of a placement places even more demands and strains upon students. But the position argued here is that students if adequately prepared can make much more of a placement than the sheer demands of the job might imply. It is understandable that some students may want to relapse into the security of a routine in which they become accustomed to, and then absorbed into, the culture of their immediate work environment. But were this to be happen, then the full potential of the experience will be missed. Indeed, students if alerted to their *de facto* role of participant observers, will always be listening with an 'inner ear' to the minutiae of office gossip, the styles of management deployed and the organisational styles and cultures of their new work-groups. In this case, students will be much more actively engaged in their work processes and so doing, simulate the processes of deep learning to which they have been exposed in their college courses. Part of the skills involved here is not only having their questions asked, but working out for themselves the questions to which answers should be sought. Adopting this position means that even fairly short periods of work experience can generate the benefits typically associated with much longer periods of attachment. The pattern of 48 weeks of work-experience typically found in the conventional sandwich degree model has been progressively reduced and refined such that a double credit's worth of work experience (one half of a semester) can now be completed in some 10-12 weeks (50-60 days) of employment.

Self-reflection and learning styles

The educationist Dewey (1933) is credited with the original concept of the function of reflective thought in learning from experience but the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' emanates directly from the work of Donald Schön (1983).. The term is not unambiguous, however, and Newman (1999:p.158) cautions against the 'certainty of one meaning implied by the single term reflective practice' Nonetheless, we can follow Schön in seeking to understand how professional work is grounded in taken-for-granted 'theories of action'. Schön argues that a gap has developed between our conception of professional knowledge (as developed by the professionals themselves) and the actual competencies required of practitioners in their work. In order to bridge this gap, Schön proposes reflective practice as a way of understanding what he calls knowing-in-action (how theories are developed), reflecting-in-action (the on-going dialogue between reflection and practice in our lives), and professional practice (how

professional-client relationships are developed). It is particularly the second of these facets in which we are most interested for the student-practitioner. The student may well be involved in project work or particular scenarios in which they can argue to themselves that performance on a future occasion will be enhanced by learning from their own prior experience.

Students may be aided by a typologies of team roles such as the widely utilised Belbin model (Belbin, 1993) but should be aware of the fact that this has been criticised as overly simplistic and capable of 'pigeon-holing' of individuals. Nonetheless, it may be a useful starting point for self analysis. Honey and Mumford's (1986) typology of Learning Styles as well as the Kolb (1984) learning cycle and the Deming (1986) PDCA cycle are also conventional starting points for students examining their own learning styles and performance within a group.

Garner and Portwood (2002: p. 80) report that the process of self-reflection can be especially difficult for the undergraduate student. However, there is a congruence between the demands for the ethnographic researcher to be aware of their own 'personal equation' in social interactions and the recognition that the performance of one's role is capable of examination with a degree of detachment, even though one's own shortcomings and failings might be made painfully apparent. Students can be assisted in this process, though, by the suitably anonymised accounts of other student accounts so that they, too, can start on a journey of self-examination and self-discovery which will assist them in the fullness of time to become more mature and effective practitioners. As Moon (1999: p. 58) notes 'most work experience modules involve reflective writing on issues and specific events identified by the student in the work place and the process of reflective writing may mediate much of the learning that is intended to occur'

Personal Development Planning

The Quality Assurance Agency has defined Personal Development Planning as a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and / or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. The primary objective for PDP is to improve the capacity of individuals to understand what and how they are learning, and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning, helping students:

- become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners;
- understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context;
- improve their general skills for study and career management;
- articulate personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievement;
- and encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life.

Quality Assurance Agency (2001), 'Progress files for Higher Education', London, QAA
Available at:
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/contents.htm

The intention is that all students will have the opportunity to undertake PDP by 2005. In the context of WBL, students undertaking work experience will develop their Personal Development Planning portfolios in close association with college tutors and intended employers. More specifically, particular learning outcomes may need to be specified for those students claiming credit for WBL modules to ensure that the undergraduate education that they receive retains coherence and integrity.

Preparation of reports and portfolios

At the conclusion of a WBL experience or project, a defensible claim has to be made for the appropriate academic credit. Such credits will require an evidence base such as a learning journal or a placement report although it may well be supplemented by other types of evidences such as employer and tutor reports and a formal presentation to the peer-group, perhaps involving a degree of peer-group assessment. In such portfolios, students will be expected to demonstrate a degree of methodological expertise to indicate how and upon what basis evidence was collected, the relationships observed between theory and practice and the processes of critical self-reflection in which it has been incumbent upon the student to 'learn without a curriculum'. New cognitive skills of synthesis and analysis may well be required and it would not be surprising if, initially, students used to more structured environments find this to be a daunting task. However, once exposed to a new paradigm of learning in which self-reflection and learning from experience become core rather than peripheral issues, then students will be well placed to examine such epistemological issues as the nature and validity of the knowledge they have gained and insights into the social construction of knowledge and professional activities. One might add that these same methodological principles will prove to be invaluable were they to undertake further small scale empirical investigations as part of a final year project or dissertation. In this way, such projects can be seen as a natural extension of relevant work experience and may well be stimulated by issues that arose initially in the work place.

Ecological validity

The term *ecological validity* is used predominantly by naturalistic or qualitative investigators who wish to preserve the integrity of the phenomena they are studying (Bracht and Glass,1968). In particular, ecological validity is likely to be threatened once a concept or indicator is generalised far beyond the circumstances in which it is located (external validity). To use a biological example, a bluebell would best be studied in relation to other flora and fauna, conditions of heat and shade in its natural habitat than picked and studied experimentally under laboratory conditions. For qualitative researchers, ecological validity is enhanced by a study of the interrelationship of factors in naturalistic settings. The student researcher would be encouraged, therefore, to examine the ways in which behaviour patterns or work flows are themselves located in particular historical and socio-economic subcultures. So, for example, management supervisory style should not be divorced from a conditions prevailing in the labour market in which the balance of power may have swung decisively in favour of employees in boom times or employers in times of recession. The concept of ecological validity should alert student-researchers to the necessity to study the complex interrelationships of factors to be found in case studies

or in their own WBL and therefore to exercise caution in the degree to which generalisations are capable of being drawn.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for the importance of qualitative methods of enquiry to be communicated to students intending to construct personal development portfolios whilst they undertake work-based learning. Although relatively few degree programmes in business studies may address qualitative methods specifically, the growing importance of WBL and Personal Development Planning agendas underline the salience of such methodologies. Exposure to qualitative methodologies should facilitate much more active approaches to learning in WBL as students enter worlds that may initially be anthropologically strange but are a rich source of new learning opportunities. As such, the notion of the 'worker as investigator' provides methods of approaching even mundane work tasks in a new light and opens up possibilities for even independent (casualised) work experience to be a fertile area for learning opportunities. E-learning now provides possibilities for a rapid availability of materials and collaborative learning which may be facilitated by the provision of examples of good practice. The extent to which such methodologies have been internalised and utilised in reports, presentations and projects can be specified as a clear criterion in the assessment and grading of student work in this area. The key process of self-reflection which some students may initially find painful can be mediated once students have identified their own particular learning styles and learning opportunities within their own WBL.

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