Reflections on the Research Process: Creativity and Identity

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Abstract: This paper argues that we should better encourage our students to represent organisational life and their experience of it. Two options are discussed, the first one of which is to consider the adoption of a reflexive posture, in which the researcher reflects both on their own behaviour and of those they meet. The second might be to adopt some form of the clinical method employed by the psychotherapist. Whatever the options that are considered we should be working to foster the creation of case studies and narrative.

INTRODUCTION

My wish to address the issues in this paper has emerged firstly out of my doctoral work which considered among other things creativity, identity and survival in the micro-business, and latterly out of concern about the approach of some dissertations and other student work I have seen in recent years.

In dealing with the entrepreneur we confront highly intangible issues, the very nature of creativity, the organisation and its emergence. When listening to entrepreneurs and owner-managers many of us are struck by impressions and feelings that are extremely difficult to deal with privately let alone in relation to the management literature. Yet attempts to investigate these issues quantitatively seem to me to be laboured, unconvincing, and of limited assistance to those of us trying to make sense, understand or to improve our professional practice.
REACTION

How can we as educators address this conundrum? For some years now, coursework in my small business and entrepreneurship modules has been designed to ensure that students meet small business owner managers and entrepreneurs off campus. On the negative side, this for both students and academics means engaging increasingly with the bureaucracy of ethics procedures that is growing up around any research activity involving ‘human subjects’ as they are so attractively referred to. This it seems is now applied to coursework as well as larger scale projects such as dissertations. On the positive side, however, students report that they gain a significant amount from these encounters in terms of additional understanding and deeper insights.

My reaction is hard to express even here. In general, the work that results seems to me to be both boring and flat, highly structured and impersonal. Students express concern about their own potential bias and yet stress how much material they have obtained and how much they have learned from this direct contact.

THE VALUE OF SUPPORT

At my particular institution, in an effort to improve the general standard of student dissertations at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, we have been placing more and more stress on the provision of supporting modules in research methodology. In some respects the dissertations seem to have improved as a result. However, I have been struck by several related issues to do with our teaching and research methodologies:

Firstly, students on small business and entrepreneurship courses produce coursework and dissertations that often read badly in the sense that they seem uninformative and contrary to their own views, often uninformed by their own research.

Secondly, former students who go into business for themselves have stated that academic courses have done little to prepare them for their subsequent experience.
This raises a number of long debated concerns about the role of business schools and the function of academic courses. Do business schools exist to provide academic education or business and management training? Carson has argued that this debate has never been satisfactorily resolved and that as a result academics do neither well (Carson 2001).

The content and emphasis of research methods texts and modules are of particular concern in postgraduate courses where many of the students often have significant business or management experience. Some, as owner-managers of SMEs and consequently are researching their own environment with a vengeance. Objectivity in the traditional sense is therefore simply neither possible nor desirable, an issue that may hold the key to learning.

What makes many undergraduate/postgraduate dissertations so lifeless and boring? I would suggest that it is a combination of some or all of the following. Firstly, the use of the passive voice. Comments such as ‘interviews were held’ may if not clearly supported leave the reader wondering who carried out the interviews and even how far the student was involved, a relevant issue for many placement students who may for part of their project be working as a team member with responsibility somewhat spread.

Secondly, the logical frameworks and structures are supported by rational language. The subjective and the emotional get edited out. Thirdly, it is likely that management theory itself with its range of lists and frameworks can itself frame and constrain observation. Plans and ‘instruments’ can hinder as well as help (Hirschhorn 1990:243).

It is common to find literature reviews that virtually omit evidence of the student’s own opinions. Judgements of relevance tend at best to be implicit, those at the level of inclusion and omission of material. Finally, even in those dissertations which are of the nature of management projects, planned to end with conclusions and recommendations for action, it seems rare to find the student who constructs a section that is very lengthy or weighty in relation to the extensive stretches of the supporting material. Content may frequently be limited to two pages or fewer in dissertations ranging to sixty pages. This is true not just at undergraduate level but even at placement or postgraduate level where the student concerned has management experience to a greater or lesser extent. The obvious reaction is to note that from primary school onwards we are drilled to control and perhaps even minimise use of the word ‘I’. As a result, in our management coursework, dissertations, and academic papers it seems hard to write ourselves back into
the picture again as participants and as actors. But simply writing ourselves in is insufficient, the student needs to understand and appreciate that he or she is in there too.

**ACTION**

I recently set undergraduates the task of producing coursework relating to a case study of an entrepreneur, an assignment that was to fall into three parts. There was to be a case study written in the style of a newspaper, an academic review relating the case to academic theory and frameworks, and a personal statement of learning, this final unit not to be graded. With very few exceptions those who chose to put effort in to all three sections reserved their most interesting comments for the personal section, although the writing in the style of a newspaper article was almost uniformly of a good standard. The academic section, on the other hand, was stodgy to read and had been bleached of almost any personal judgement or life, other than that implicit in the simple choice of material and focus.

This whole apparatus may then lead one to ask of the student and their work, where is the experience? What about the personal involvement, the relationships? Many students in company placements will in the meetings with their supervisor talk fluently and even excitedly about the emotions, the tensions, the political conflicts and all the stuff of daily life in an organisation. But it sometimes seems as though the student sees it as their task to identify whatever represents the surprising, the quirky and the counterintuitive and to eliminate any sign of it from the final dissertation.

What can we do about this? What approaches can help us make sense? In attempting to make sense of business activity, an almost bewilderingly wide range of methodologies has been used. Nevertheless there continues to be much criticism of qualitative approaches. Attempts to devise metaphor and prescriptive frameworks seem of limited use. There has been criticism of oversimplification and of its partial nature. Yet the sheer difficulty of the task seems considerable. Outsiders commenting, for example, on the deal-making process comment on how intangible it can seem and difficult for the outsider to make sense of (Ascherson 1997).

In most cases, certainly in terms of the solo self-employed, one must try to make sense in some detail of what is a succession of one-to-one relationships, intervening and participating in what is an extremely complex,
commercially sensitive and personal process. More traditional research approaches such as those using questionnaires or formal interview techniques have been interpreted as defence mechanisms (Hirschhorn 1990:243). These instruments, Hirschhorn argues, then tend to block out the lived experience which is little talked about in organisations and in business school courses.

One option to take greater account of this need is to adopt a reflexive posture, in which the researcher reflects both on their own behaviour and of those they meet. In this way they can take greater account of the interactive and emergent nature of the process we are both studying and helping to co-create. It has now become perfectly acceptable in the social sciences to move from the objective observing and quantified positions to the participative and the qualitative. Examples include action science (Argyris & Schön 1974; Argyris et al. 1983; Schön 1983); participative inquiry (Reason 1994; Heron 1996); and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987). Reflexivity is important in all of these approaches, that is, the reflective questioning of the inquirer’s assumptions.

A further step in this development might be to adopt some form of the clinical method of the psychotherapist. The distinctive feature here is the reflexive use of one’s own feelings to make inferences about the lived experience of others. The intersubjective psychoanalyst, Stolorow, refers to his understanding of this approach as empathic inquiry (Atwood & Stolorow 1984; Stolorow et al. 1994). Validation here lies in the response of the particular client. Resulting insights about human behaviour are not generalisable but accounts of relationships could resonate with the experience of others and so provide them with insight into their own unique experiences. Such a methodology would attempt through narrative ‘pictures’ and reflections to convey a sense of empathic inquiry into the lived experience of innovators. It would not produce much in the way of generalisation and to the extent that it produces anything worthwhile, it is through the reader’s resonance with the material from the perspective of his or her own experience. The judgement as to the worth of such material cannot, therefore, be the validity of generalisations it produces. The judgement has to turn on whether the reader feels a deeper sense of what it means to survive in business. What is important to such a person and what is not? What motivates such a person? How does such an individual innovate?
I end therefore by making a plea for more of us as educators to consider how we might better encourage our students to represent organisational life and their experience of it. We should be working to foster the creation of case studies and narrative. We should be asking about material co-created in the here and now in our conversations with entrepreneurs. We should consider banning the use of the passive voice in management writing. We should be encouraging students and ourselves also as academics to think in terms of approaches that use the keeping of a diary or reflective log, reflexive approaches, and storytelling. We should be trying to set academic exercises that offer genuine opportunities to be creative as well as simply the act of writing about it. We should stress wider definitions of creativity itself and underline the fact that the research and writing can both be creative processes of a high order. We should be asking students to reflect on their coursework wherever possible, bringing out its strengths and weaknesses for themselves. In short, what about the personal and the subjective, the participative and the qualitative: ‘the I in science’? (Brown 1996)

REFERENCES

Ascherson, N. (1997), A look, a gesture, and the deal is done - but you'll never hear the words, London: The Independent on Sunday.


