Chapter XLIX
Methods and Methodology:
A Study on Work–Based Learning Research Tools for Career Development

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews the innovative programme developed in 2004 between the Work-Based Learning unit in the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The scheme enables probationary officers to develop new skills by means of an Advanced Diploma in Work-Based Learning linked to the traditional training in operational policing. This new programme not only creates a new approach to police development, but also allows for the accreditation of the Work-Based Learning. The focus of the entire learning experience is within the real world context. Its objective is to enable students to reflect on their own work-related experience, to develop their understanding of appropriate work-based research approaches and methods and to identify and design a work-based project. The aim is to explore the evidence of the positive experience of trainees who have embarked on this new method of learning. Using interviews, observations, focus-groups and questionnaires, a review has been conducted on how the programme is attempting to contribute towards a positive change regarding the abilities of the new police officers.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this research is to test if we can get students to organise their knowledge and exercise their critical powers in dealing with problems within the realm of their working practice. In a police learning context we are looking at the education of adults as a unified process allowing for both teacher-centred and learner-centred activities.

Choosing the most appropriate research instrument is important in addressing reliability and

validity. To this end, a multi-method approach was encouraged to obtain views of the information desired to meet the research objectives. Furthermore, this avoided exclusive reliance on a single method of research that may bias the researcher's picture, or the reality of what is being investigated (the more methods contrast with each other, the greater the researcher's confidence).

BACKGROUND

The researcher is, however, warned that this tool in itself will not suffice regarding the final accuracy of the results. The respondents' comments need to be checked for accuracy against other observations that the researcher will be making known as the method of triangulation. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods of triangular techniques to map out more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and in doing so by making use of both qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore the use of triangulation was paramount in this evaluation of a process of change. Silverman (2007), continues by stating that this will be '..a means of securing a fit between interpretations and some external reality.'

It is impossible to do empirical research without data. This data must be gathered, after careful consideration has been given to the data gathering strategy. Before deciding on the data collection methods in this current study, (interviews, observations, focus-groups and questionnaires), all available alternatives were considered by their strengths and weaknesses and the research techniques employed, were then chosen on their own merit. Kairuz et al. (2007), emphasize the importance of the researcher establishing a valid premise for the chosen method of data collection by considering the advantages and limitations of the method(s) when conducting the study and when evaluating the results.

Deciding which research method to choose depends on the purpose of the study, the questions to be answered, or the hypothesis to be tested. In general, the choice of data collection methods is determined by facts such as sample controllability, accessibility to data sources, availability and literacy of subjects, and penetration of communication vehicles (e.g. telephone, fax, internet and e-mail).

Masters et al. (2006), describe qualitative research as a phenomenon which generates theory, relates a historical event, or explains a culture by exploring life experiences as perceived by the individual. Interview techniques, observation, or document reviews are commonly employed to explore the meaning ascribed to a particular phenomenon. The data is organised into narrative descriptions, stressing the major themes, patterns, understandings and insights that have emerged (Patton, 2002).

Quantitative research, on the other hand, is explained by Masters et al (2006), as a process to describe a situation, correlate two, or more elements, test relationships, examine cause-and-effect interactions amongst variables, or test hypothesis. The researcher uses tools, or instruments to quantify data and employs statistics to determine statistical significance (i.e. results that are not due to chance).

PRESENT PERSPECTIVES

Interviews are one of the most common ways of obtaining primary data. They highlight the role of human interaction and the importance of the social context in generating knowledge. They allow for greater depth, more nuanced description of participants' experiences and opportunities to clarify misunderstandings experienced by the interviewee, than other methods of data collection.

For interviews to be successful, the interviewer must have good, well developed, talking and listening skills and an appreciation of the potential

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