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ACCOUNT OF PRACTICE

Reflections of a "late-career" early-career researcher: An account of practice

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This account of practice describes the journey of an 'accidental academic' through the Doctoral programme in Business Administration. It reflects on her experience of action learning and lessons learned to better embed action learning in future DBA teaching and assessment. The account is told from the perspective of a mature student straddling business and academic interests. DBA students represent a mature cohort with significant business experience and responsibility. As such, they have an implicit understanding of action learning. Action learning for these individuals should be re-activated rather than re-learned for their doctoral studies. Suggestions are made for improving the utility of action learning for DBA students and their willing engagement in the action learning process.

"We shall not cease from all exploration

And at the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time."

(Eliott, 1944:43)

Introduction

This is the account of practice of a 'late-career' early career researcher; one who had never expected to reach the dizzy heights of a doctorate. An 'accidental academic', I arrived in academia via a circuitous route, having begun with a bachelor's degree at 35 years of age with three small children. Higher degrees followed, always around my own entrepreneurial career and the priorities of my family commitments, culminating in a DBA, completed alongside a full-time job. Through this very personal tale, I am inviting the reader to step inside my account of practice, to relive experiences through my eyes. This is in a similar vein to Humphreys who sought "… to construct a window through which the reader can view some of the pleasure and pain associated with an academic career change in middle age" (Humphreys, 2005:842). To do this, my narrative utilises critical incidents where this is useful, to highlight notable events.

Through this account, I am keen to explore my contributions, those of my fellow travellers and my communities of practice, and in particular the action learning, that have impacted on my DBA sojourn.

Discussion

Critical reflection is stated as a core element of the DBA programme with action learning prescribed as a teaching and assessment method. Following a teaching session on action learning, all students were encouraged to form into sets intended to meet regularly, either physically or virtually. The express intention was for us to create a peer support network where we could discuss problems and opportunities, learning with and from each other. To this end, a reflective diary was mandatory to document each student's progress and facilitate their action learning by recording obstacles and successes for sharing with the group, as well as allowing reflection on those events and our learning from each other. When exploring our experiences, alone and in our set, we were encouraged to critically reflect on the overall value of those experiences, making suggestions as to how the learning achieved might be applied or further developed, within the professional context. While I have published an account of practice with my action learning colleagues (Mendonca et al., 2015), I believe that a critical reflection dedicated to my own journey may be of interest, to demonstrate the distance I have travelled, the adventures I have experienced and the lessons I have learned. The approach utilises a variety of sources, including my reflective diary and input from 'critical friends', including supervisors and action learning colleagues.

The rise of professional doctorates, with their focus on contributions to practice as well as knowledge, has led to a growing interest in critical reflection in postgraduate programmes. Reynolds (1998) identified four key characteristics, which distinguish reflection from critical reflection. The first of these is the questioning of taken for granted beliefs and values, especially those which have become unquestioned or 'majority' positions. An example of this is my taken-for-granted assumptions about the essentialness of education which has, in part, fuelled my DBA journey. The second characteristic refers to the social and collaborative nature of critical reflection, rather than the focus being entirely on the individual. This includes an exploration of my action learning set within the DBA process but could easily be situated within my other communities of practice, such as my work team. The third characteristic concerns the analysis of power relations, especially the relations between power and knowledge. In this case, the reflection focussed on the 'doctoral journey', the process of learning to operate like an academic, along with the elitism and expectations of the academic community, and the balance with practice that the DBA provides. The fourth and final characteristic identified by Reynolds is the emancipatory agenda, the hoped-for outcome of the DBA and the critical reflection in particular. This leads to a questioning of my practice, with an especial focus on questioning the assumption that research data and established theory are necessarily the most significant bases for learning. An example of this would be the juxtaposition of the positivist perspective adopted by the study and the action learning, ethnographic perspective, which is intrinsic to the outlook of my Director of Study.

There is a growing trend that applies critical reflection to existing practices within management learning, and especially within postgraduate management programmes such as the DBA. Indeed, it is implied that it is the very criticality of reflection, such as that developed through the action learning sets, that leads to higher-level learning. Reynold's

(1998) four characteristics of criticality provide the criteria for reflective learning that is embedded in the current account of practice.

Reflection on the Journey

In considering a starting point for my account of practice, I realise that I have already adopted the metaphor of a journey. This has a starting point and a destination, joined by a narrative arc that unfolds across a set pattern. The 'hero' is called to awaken and begin her journey, meeting a helper to encourage her and provide the necessary tools and gifts. She duly crosses a threshold into new realms of experience, which she discovers to be guarded by a gatekeeper, with whom she must negotiate in order to continue on her way. The 'hero' subsequently encounters unfamiliar forces which might challenge or aid her and, which, once overcome, lead to transformation, growth and illumination. Finally, the 'hero' returns to the world, to share what she has learned and to live 'happily ever after'.

The metaphor has strong parallels with the process of obtaining a doctorate, although it is not without its pitfalls. The adoption of metaphor can open up new ways of conceptualising a situation and allow its creative exploration, however, the taken-for-granted sub-text of that metaphor should be acknowledged to help to manage its impact on the insights gained by using it. In opening one creative avenue of exploration, others may be simultaneously closed. In my selection of the journey metaphor, I realise that I run the risk of casting myself as the 'hero' of the narrative. In this account of practice, I feel that it is important to separate the 'hero's journey' from the 'hero' because of the 'superhero' connotations common in popular culture. A feminist reinterpretation of the 'hero' was offered by Noble (1994), who notes that the term has a different meaning in myth than in everyday usage. She states that the heroes of mythology are known

> *". . . for their great capacity for life and for pursuing higher goals. They are expected to develop their resilience, autonomy and self-reliance, and to approach the challenges in their lives with intelligence and creativity, and to act with integrity in all endeavors. Their quests challenge them to roam in the inner or outer worlds in search of new knowledge and to use that knowledge to serve their fellow creatures."* (Ibid:6)

This description is one that I feel far more comfortable with and which better describes my role in the journey. The following section returns to the narrative arc, utilising this as a vehicle for my account of practice, exploring my support systems and travelling companions, my communities of practice, and before concluding with suggestions about how to more usefully integrate action learning in the learning experience of other DBA students.

A threshold is crossed

Without wishing to labour the metaphor, for me the threshold to my journey was submitting the DBA proposal. The critical incident most prominent in this process relates to the struggle I encountered in the definition of the proposal, a trait that appears more than once along the way. Looking back over the notes I made during that time, I am reminded of the incipient panic bubbling beneath the surface during the final two weeks before the submission deadline. At that time, I was coming towards the end of my first full year of teaching, which had included not only the start of my DBA but also the completion of my PGCE as a contractual obligation of my role. It would be easy to remark on being overcommitted and being 'pulled in too many directions' but the truth is that I was treating the DBA as an overgrown masters thesis. Rather than starting with the literature, I had some

quite well formed ideas about entrepreneurs, which I now realise were being used in an attempt to justify my proposal. As a result, I had cast my reviewing net wide and shallow and, as the deadline approached, found it increasingly difficult to 'land' in a meaningful way. While my initial mentor believed that what I was doing was adequate for the proposal and could be remedied at a later date, I could not reconcile myself with what I had written and a week before the deadline, I undertook a brutal review and 'culling' process. To paraphrase (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004), I had already moved from listening to the sermon at undergraduate level to understanding the scriptures and being able to choose which ones to utilise to tell a story at masters level. In this critical incident, I believe that I was beginning to demonstrate an awareness of the inadequacy of this approach for doctoral research. While being able to utilise appropriate scriptures to deliver a sermon is useful, I suggest it may be possible to extend Anderson and Thorpe's metaphor to doctoral level study, which requires an understanding of church history, cultural context and spiritual inspiration, in order to provide a truly fresh insight and contribution to the Christian tradition. This level of insight was yet to be developed.

An adventure is had

Traditional in the journey metaphor is the encountering of difficult individuals or situations such as dragons or fire swamps, and tools and helpers such as magic lamps or woodcutters. It is the encountering and successful negotiation of these that forms a crucial part of any journey and mine was no different. One notable Fire Swamp (Reiner, 1987) again concerned the issue of definitions. Defining the terms to be adopted in my DBA sounds innocuous enough but it nearly derailed me. At an early supervisory meeting, I began by presenting my proposal and outlining my plans for carrying out the research. I believed that had prepared thoroughly and was acquitting myself well, up to the point when a question sought clarification of the term entrepreneur. The particular focus concerned the relationship between entrepreneurs and SMEs. While the response to this question appeared superficially rational, in my head a realisation grew that I could not answer the question to my satisfaction. The question was thoughtful and designed to elicit a critical and considered response, yet, the 'fieriness' of this particular Fire Swamp grew and instead of the intended increase in motivation, I left the meeting feeling panicked. It was only through the process of reflection that I came to acknowledge my emotional response to a perceived inadequacy. This validation allowed me to begin to 'see things differently'. My taken-for-granted belief held that part of my role was to acquiesce to the authority of my supervisory team. Coupled with this taken-for-granted view was another of Reynold's (1998) four characteristics, a failure to analyse or challenge the power relations in a situation. To return to the church metaphor, I perceived that the exploration of definitions was a questioning of my sermon, by challenging the scriptures I was using to relate my story. I failed to tackle this situation effectively for two reasons. Firstly, because I believed that my supervisor had a better 'biblical' grasp than I did and secondly, because at that early stage, I lacked sufficient critical skills to defend my work. That is, I was learning scriptures to tell my story, without having gained a fuller appreciation of the cultural, historical or other wider context, which might have enabled me to engage in the robust academic discussion of the topic that the question deserved.

The magic lamp of critical reflection helped to deepen my learning, by dragging me out of the Fire Swamp and sending me on my way. A number of travelling companions helped me to find, clean and wield the magic lamp. This rag-tag band of people composed my

community of practice and each of them provided crucial clues with which to navigate the Fire Swamp and avoid the Rodents of Unusual Size (RoUS) (Reiner, 1987). I believe that my position at the "articulation of related communities" (Lawless, 2008:127), for example my simultaneous identity as a student, as well as that stemming from a variety of current and past occupations and a variety of social communities, was typical of the practice-based perspective of my DBA colleagues. This position allowed me to draw on a rich variety of experience and supports Pedler's (2005) view of action learning sets as part of a wider network, rather than a stand-alone entity.

The DBA cohort was encouraged to form action learning sets during the initial taught weeks. While participation in such learning communities has been consistently linked with higher levels of student achievement, learning and success, my encounter with this formal learning set was less immediately successful. There seemed to be a reluctance within the group to engage in the action learning process, preferring instead to focus on the 'proper' work of writing the DBA. As we were geographically disparate, my set initially agreed to meet by Skype once a month on a Saturday morning. From my perspective, the meetings felt aimless, rather like a reporting of dry facts and without a discernible focus. My colleagues shared my perspective and the meetings quickly dwindled (Mendonca et al., 2015). The action learning sets were not formally facilitated although I have no doubt that facilitators could have been found on request. Seeking out a facilitator to support the group through to effectiveness was not considered as a course of action, and I am not sure it would have helped in our case. Beyond the DBA, in which our topics of study were wildly different, we had no points of contact, physical or geographical, and our failure to consider facilitation was reflective of our lack of belief in and commitment to the action learning process. Instead, in this perceived vacuum, I instinctively built up an informal community of practice (Wenger, 1998) from among selected work colleagues. Among this group were my Director of Study, a student from an earlier DBA cohort, who was 18 months into his study, a number of work colleagues, one of whom was undertaking a DBA and another who had completed his PhD. My network also comprised a student from an up-coming DBA cohort and an informal supervisor who gained his PhD a number of years ago and who became involved because of his interest in the topic area. This apparently random group of individuals became my community of practice for the duration of the DBA journey. They each provided varying degrees of challenge, encouragement and opportunities to explain my work, all of which helped me to develop critically and move towards becoming an 'expert' in my chosen field.

While this selection of travelling companions might at first appear random, each had their role in developing my awareness and ability. Some individuals, who were at or near doctorhood, encouraged me to question practice and provided proof that the journey could be completed. Others encouraged a questioning of taken-for-granted beliefs and a critical analysis of power relations. They each provided a safe space to explore differing constructs and, at times, walked with me in the Fire Swamp, pointing out the Rodents of Unusual Size. Contemporary travellers or those slightly behind me on the doctoral journey, provided the opportunity to articulate what I had learned, to refine it, to demonstrate my ability to use the lamp and to summon the genie. It was the action of discussing what I had discovered with a variety of audiences and in a variety of ways, across the breadth of my community of practice, which began to cement my learning.

Reflections on lessons learned

Looking back on my journey, I am struck by the initial failure of my formal action learning set, where my informal one appeared to thrive. One of the explanations provided for this (Mendonca et al., 2015) referred to the task-focussedness of individuals within the set and the conflicting priorities of those who had demanding managerial or technical jobs. What is equally noteworthy is the way in which the set began to function as soon as a task of sufficient perceived importance was adopted. The DBA specifies that a critical reflection chapter be included as part of the thesis but that, where a suitable account of practice has been accepted for publication, this can be used instead. As each member's thesis progressed, attention turned to the reflection chapter and, following the final DBA teaching week in February 2015, the group coalesced to produce an account of practice. Once this clear task was agreed, the group, myself included, duly engaged and delivered in a speedy manner, while providing mutual support and critical feedback. In true Pedlerian (1991) fashion, we finally had people who took responsibility for their actions on the completion of an account of practice to a publishable standard. The sudden appearance of deadlines and word count, resulted in a corresponding increase in group engagement, seeing each member of the group providing mutual support and challenge. According to Pedler's definition, it was only at the end point, with the adoption of a discrete task, that the group became an effective action learning set. This suggests that the earlier judgements made by the group's participants on the ineffectiveness of the group, were premature and certainly demonstrated a lack of insight into the action learning process.

On reflection, I am convinced that the completion of a DBA is more complex task than the simple acquisition of another academic qualification. While the research and learning processes are important, it is equally important to develop wider critical thinking and to hone this approach through repeated practice and engagement in action learning.

At the crux of the matter is that DBA students, as busy professionals whose work requires strategic prioritisation of tasks, need to be enabled to realise the power of action learning as a central tool for their success, rather than a mildly interesting adjunct to the journey. Once this realisation is arrived at, their own agency and ability will inevitably result in the engagement required for successful action learning.

Recommendations

Returning to the journey metaphor, the final phase of the narrative arc requires the 'hero' of the story to return to the world and to share what she has learned. I realise that I am still uncomfortable with the label of 'hero' and have to remind myself that I am arriving towards the end of this part of my journey not through any extraordinariness but through sheer bloody-mindedness or as Noble (1994) more respectfully terms it, resilience, autonomy and self-reliance. I return from my journey of learning, reflection and action with a number of recommendations, which may be of use in increasing the utility of action learning in the DBA context.

Firstly, attention should be given, early in the DBA process, to encourage the students to explore their unique communities of practice, and to the validation of their "position at the articulation of related communities" (Lawless, 2008:127), which inevitably accompanies their status as both experienced professionals and doctoral students. The process of widening the action learning construct by relating it to previous experience is likely to increase its validity and value in the eyes of these individuals by allowing them to draw on

past experience, to reflect on earlier successes. This will consequently increasing their confidence and secure an earlier engagement in the process.

Secondly, while teaching on the theory of action learning was present in the DBA, the missing ingredient in the early stages of my formal action learning set was a clearly articulated task with sufficient common value to the group. An early opportunity to practice with a real or devised task of sufficient value would have demonstrated the utility of action learning to the members of the set. Once this utility was established, the immediate value of action learning as a magic lamp to illuminate the path, to motivate individuals and remove barriers, would have become apparent. This may then have engaged my task-focussed and busy group to invest in the action learning process throughout, rather than writing it off as something that may deliver results a number of years down the line when the mythical beast of 'critical reflection' must be slain.

I share these musings and suggestions as one returning from an arduous mission with tales of fabulous exploits and derring-do. My account may be of value to students, supervisors and administrators of doctoral programmes, especially those whose cohorts comprise part-time and professional individuals, and certainly those wishing to pass safely through the fire swamps on their own action learning adventures.

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Biography

Catherine Groves is a recent DBA graduate from Liverpool Business School. Her research is focussed on the role of the individual within entrepreneurship. She is a senior lecturer and business psychologist with extensive experience in business coaching and management consultancy.