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My three-year PhD research journey: reflections on learning

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This paper is my analysis and reflection of more than three years of experience as a doctoral student. I maintained a reflective diary throughout the research journey as it enabled me not only to learn, recognise and reflect the effect of my own experience as a researcher on the research process (Jootun et al., 2009; Rice and Ezzy, 1999), but also to gain a better understanding of dynamics of research from collection and analysis to interpretation of the findings. Reflexivity, according to Reay (1996), is defined as a critical examination of the researcher's effects on the research and research process. As Johnson and Van Deen (1992) argue, students are not totally prepared for new environments, and often they do not have any opportunity to influence how things should be in terms of meeting their personal and professional goals. In this account, I will examine some of the issues to be considered while undertaking a PhD using Gibbs' reflective model (1988) as a framework for discussion (**Figure 1**). The rationale for using Gibbs' model is that its components give a descriptive account of what actually happens, and an event is assessed, analysed and evaluated. In addition, Gibbs' model aids reflection on past experiences, which is a fundamental part of adult learning (Kolb, 1984). To conclude this account, I will relate an event to draw out any relevant implications and key learning for future research.

Description

Since I started my PhD, there were many 'ups and downs'. My first director of study (DoS), who 'looked after' my project nearly up to the middle of the project had left, then my second supervisor and I had to wait for a while to complete that 'transition'. It took almost two months to get a new team member and to gain momentum. Initially, as a research student I was a bit anxious about how the transition would develop as two out of three supervisory team members were new to me; furthermore, I was concerned to immediately start work by leaving for Nepal for field research. The 'healing process' went very smoothly as if I were with the new members from the beginning.

Another problem I encountered was to refine the project into a manageable size, as my first proposal was a bit ambitious. Having graduated and worked with clinical sciences, and often trusting in 'numerical values' rather than 'contextual-narrative statements', and being fond of 'playing with data', it seemed impossible to change my thinking process from the quantitative paradigm to the qualitative. After having a series of meetings and discussions and attending a variety of related seminars and conferences, I finally decided to choose a small number of people to understand the perspectives and perceptions of service users and service providers in four primary healthcare services in a particular district (Chitwan) by employing a qualitative research method. In fact, it was a big challenge and something of a shock to change my traditional beliefs. Wider reading of both textbooks and relevant journals, and communication with subject experts helped me a lot in the process. Finally, I accepted the value of qualitative research in health service research, and this

triggered me to do something in this area, which led to my presenting a paper on 'Qualitative or Quantitative: which one is the Best?' in an international conference in Leeds (Regmi, 2009). Similarly, I encountered another problem, namely underestimation of time and workload in the fieldwork research, in terms of transcribing, translation and transliteration and then editing, writing and so on.

Assessment and evaluation

In trying to evaluate and make sense of this 'journey', I think that a few good things came out of this experience, despite nervousness and my lack of prior experience of working in such a large scale in terms of time, effort and volume of work. I realised that, in practice, the whole experience of the research process is a powerful learning experience. It made me engage with putting research theory into practice. I had to examine, refine and revisit the research aims and objectives, methodology, and tools for data gathering and processing regularly; it surprised me that I found my experience valuable as it allowed me a lot of 'self-discussion' and 'internalisation'.

Although I provisionally identified individuals and groups of respondents and the areas of discussion, it hardly worked out as planned. I therefore had to adjust my plan according to the respondents' time, need and interest. Initially that made me a bit annoyed as planned meeting, especially with government bureaucrats, didn't happen due to their busy and unpredictable schedules. That started me thinking differently about the research process as I felt that flexibility in research and the research process is important, leading to a unique learning experience for a novice researcher like me.

On one occasion, I was conducting a focus group discussion with health professionals and had noticed that the head of the particular health service was a friend of mine and we both studied the same medical course. With his being a head (GP) of the service and perhaps being familiar with my skills and knowledge, he wanted to discuss the impact of decentralisation on one of the aspects of the clinical sector i.e. reduction of maternal mortality conditions from his own research work. However, given the nature of the audience – GPs, nurses, paramedics – this issue might not be of interest to all, therefore I had to stop him and continue discussion on my agenda. I said, 'Yes, I am quite interested in the findings of your research; can we sit down and talk about it in detail after this meeting?' He agreed and I moved on. Reflecting on this particular incident, I felt good that such a strategy did work and I found it a powerful method in some instances, especially when I needed to stop and move onto the original context. I now felt that I also played the role of good negotiator or communicator, otherwise the whole process might be unproductive. Horsburgh (2003), therefore, emphasises that the researcher is intimately involved in the process and the product of research (outcome) as this involves being aware of the relationship between the researcher and respondents (Giddens, 1976).

Once I proceeded with this discussion with other groups of people, I then gradually developed my confidence and become more positive. The fact that my knowledge gained through this experience in practice and theory concerning 'self-reflection' and 'interactive discussion', for example with other respondents, co-students and supervisors, has enabled me to acknowledge that the event has been a learning experience for me.

Analysis

Managing of the research journey in the research process is probably one of the most important aspects in doctoral study, as it demands a high level of academic integrity. It is also essential to consider other dimensions, for example, the personal and social and the environment which might play an integral part in the learning process, rather than just a means of assessment (Boud et al., 1984). On the other hand, it can be argued that just because someone can write a competent academic paper, this does not necessarily demonstrate that they have the skills or abilities to use this knowledge in a way that enhances their professional practice. Therefore, it has been argued that academic research work should be designed in a way that allows researchers or students to demonstrate application to practice through reflecting their skills and experiences. Quinn (2000) supports Gregory's definition of reflection as essentially a psychological construct that is closely related to a range of internal cognitive processes, such as thinking, reasoning, consideration and deliberation (1997, cited in Quinn, 2000, p.568). Reflection, according to Jay (1995), heightens self-awareness and enables the individual to gain an increased understanding of the effects that past experiences have on the learning process. As reflected in this account, several issues concerning my own understanding of theory and practice gaps in research and the research process, and the potential role of future teacher and/or researcher were identified. Gaps in my knowledge on the research topic were also identified by this experience in terms of knowing the strengths and boundaries of the subject matter.

Conclusion

Reflexivity allows the researcher to be more aware in understanding the possible influences of their perceptions and beliefs, as well as their role in the research process. Research is an intellectual activity which often occurs in dynamics between the researchers and respondents. Therefore, developing and maintaining of any interpersonal relationships is counted. I do believe that improving research and communication skills, developing critical thinking and strengthening the knowledge-base are key learning issues in the research process. Therefore reflection and maintaining the skills of reflexivity should form part of the process of knowledge construction and clarification of meaning, which can be considered as fundamental to the learning process. These are also fundamental skills for authors, which is the next essential step in disseminating knowledge to the wider scientific community. Although I felt this exercise was a wonderful experience, I still feel I need to be cautious in its use. This account concludes that reflexivity contributes to learning and practice which leads to improving the contextual understanding of research and the research environment, clarifying the position of the researcher in the journey of the research process. As a result of this experience, I revised my contextual knowledge on decentralisation and will continue to reflect on situations of decentralisation, how it affects access to and utilisation of services, and how it might improve health services in the context of Nepal and other similar socio-political nations.

Key learning points

- Maintaining neutrality in the research process from the stage of inception of the project to implementation (fieldwork) and interpretation (transcripts and translation) is crucial but challenging, as it might be influenced by the experience and knowledge of the researcher
- Reflexivity: keeping a reflective diary is important so that researchers can record what they learnt

and how they could do things differently next time. During the process of developing research transcripts (transcribing, translation and transliteration) it also encouraged an element of reflexivity as data and transcripts might need to be revisited, revised and refined regularly

□ Regular meetings with research supervision team would help to refine the whole research process (finalisation of research project, drafting questionnaires and conducting research), product (write-up, publications, dissemination of findings) as well as knowing the researchers' boundaries.

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