

Role Plays and the Learning Process

Introduction

Learning events in Guardian Financial Services traditionally involve a range of various training methods that include some or all of the following: workshops, video, presentations, flipcharts, workbooks, quizzes or overhead projectors. Research suggests that role plays have a part to play as a learning tool whilst I have tended to hold the personal view that role plays prove daunting for learners and have consequently never used this method. However, the purpose of the research is to explore the use of role-plays within the training environment and consider their viability and effectiveness and whether these can add value for learners to the whole experience.

This document sets out the steps involved in the process of conducting the research into role-plays.

The Process

Blaxter et al (1997) identified 2 different methods for designing and doing a research project, their 'research families' (P58) of qualitative and quantitative methods. Cohen and Mannion (1998) go a stage further and view qualitative research as a search for understanding in which '...the principal concern is with ...the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself or herself.' (P8) Researchers who adopted this qualitative approach, responsive to individual perceptions, were felt by Bell (1993) to '...seek insights rather than statistical analysis.' (P6)

Quantitative research on the other hand cannot literally be seen as being subject to quantification, Bryman (1989), rather the suggestion from Bell (1993) that there is more to this method. '...quantitative researchers collect facts and study the relationship of one set of facts to another.' (P5) She goes on to add. 'They measure, using scientific techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, generalizable conclusions.'

The approach to this research project will be on a qualitative basis and whilst there are a range of disadvantages to this method, including, as identified by Anderson (1990) – the ability to collect a large number of replies, allow for easy collation and cheap and readily available, Anderson did identify advantages with a qualitative approach. Significantly, when gathering data and information Anderson held that a qualitative approach enables the researcher to really understand another person, and qualitative research tends to focus on learners, central to the research project, and their views of the world. The research project is based upon the consideration of role-plays within the organisation and as such will not lend itself naturally to a quantitative or scientific basis.

To some extent, the research design depends on what Barnes (1992) highlights as either a deductive or inductive approach to the project, with action research a key method of the latter. Barnes takes the view that when using action research, '...the outcomes...are generally increased knowledge, understanding and improved practice.' (P114) The implication from this is that action research has a relevance for what I

will be undertaking and indeed Blaxter et al (1997) confirm this by pointing out that ‘...it is well suited to the needs of people conducting research in their own workplaces, and who have a focus on improving aspects of their own and their colleagues’ practices.’ (P64) Cohen and Mannion (1998) also focus their thoughts on this work-related aspect of action research by suggesting that it ‘...is situational – it is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context.’ (P186) Although action research as a basis suits the needs of my project as shown above, there are a number of criticisms about the method, often reflecting Cohen and Mannion’s comments that it is not scientific, ‘...its sample is restricted and unrepresentative...its findings ...are restricted to the environment in which the research is carried out.’ (P193)

Research data will be accumulated by the use of interviews with colleagues, questionnaires completed by learners and observation of individual learner performance. Given that the project is small-scale and may only involve a relatively small pilot exercise, are three different methods of obtaining the information necessary. This common multi-method approach is referred to as triangulation, as originally identified by the works of Elliott and Adelman (1976), and has been defined in Open University course 811 Study Guide (1988) as ‘...cross-checking the existence of certain phenomena and the veracity of individual accounts by gathering data from a number of informants and a number of sources and subsequently comparing and contrasting one account with another in order to produce as full and balanced a study as possible.’ (P54)

Although the research project is relatively small and will not run over a lengthy period the use of triangulation will go some way to meeting the need for the data collection techniques to be both reliable and valid. Reliability ‘...refers to the consistency of a measure’ (Bryman, 1989:P55). Blaxter et al (1997) summarise the issue of reliability in simple terms as considering whether ‘...you have carried it out in such a way that, if another researcher were to look into the same questions in the same setting, they would come up with essentially the same results ...’ (P200) Validity is identified in a similar tone by the same authors, ‘...to do with whether your methods, approaches and techniques actually relate to, or measure, the issues you have been exploring.’

Despite the use of apparently straightforward data collection techniques, interview, questionnaire and observation, there are strengths and weaknesses with each and issues to be considered. Cohen and Mannion (1998) describe the research interview as ‘an unusual method in that it involves the gathering of data through direct verbal interaction between individuals.’ Whilst McKernan (2000) holds that the research interview ‘...is one of the most effective modes of gathering data in any inquiry...’ (P128) and its structured or semi-structured format ‘...allows for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection.’ (Cohen and Mannion, 1998:P272), there are potential difficulties. Cohen and Mannion argue that a disadvantage ‘...is that it is prone to subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer.’ (P272) As the main purpose of the interviews is to gather the personal thoughts and views of colleagues I intend to use a semi-structured interview which has the added bonus, as Bryman (1998) puts it, of being able ‘...to check the validity of information from other methods.’ (P150) An extra consideration with an interview is the effect of bias largely because, as Sellitz et al (1962) puts it, ‘...interviewers are human beings and not machines.’ (P583). Whilst there are a range of techniques to reduce the effect of

bias including, according to Cohen and Mannion (1998) ‘...careful formulation of the questions so that the meaning is crystal clear (P282), Bell (1993) contends that ‘...it is easier to acknowledge the fact that bias can creep in than to eliminate it altogether.’ (P95)

The second method, the questionnaire approach, is felt by McKernan (2000) to be ‘...the most commonly used method of inquiry. It is a form of interview by proxy, with the interviewer removed from the face-to-face contact of the interview method.’ (P125) In its most simple format the questionnaire is easy to use, quick to fill in, easy to follow up and will provide feedback on attitude (Hopkins 2000:P136). However, there is a range of issues when using questionnaires, Bell (1993) suggesting that ‘It is harder to produce a really good questionnaire than might be imagined.’ (P75) McKernan (2000) endorses that view and warns that amongst the disadvantages are the amount of time taken, compiling successful questions and low response rates. (P125). Nevertheless, the use of questionnaires will provide direct access to the learners and add balance to the interviews with colleagues.

The final data collection technique will involve direct observation of the learners in the role-play situations. As Bell (1993) points out, ‘Direct observation may be more reliable than what people say in many instances. It can be particularly useful to discover whether people do what they say they do, or behave in the way they claim to behave.’ (P109) From this, it can be surmised that observation can clearly add ‘real evidence’ to the perceptions and thoughts of interviews and questionnaires. The quality of the output from observational studies requires skill in handling to produce effective data with which to work. McKernan (2000) concludes that there are a number of other disadvantages including the size of group observed and quantifying the gathered data. (P62) Direct observation as a non-participant of the group will add to the range of techniques used and strengthens the reliability of the overall techniques. Learners will be consulted regarding the observation and issues discussed with them as there are significant difficulties in conducting covert observation, summed up by Bryman (1998:P144) as ‘...highly controversial because of the suggestion in many quarters that it is an ethically dubious practice.’

‘Researchers endeavour ... to collect information from a smaller group or subset of the population in such a way that the knowledge gained is representative of the total population under study. The smaller group or subset is a ‘sample’.’ Cohen and Mannion (1998:P87) point out the need to consider sampling when dealing with the potential group involved in the research project. Bell (1993) concludes that the question of sampling is resolved as follows, ‘The number of subjects in your investigation will necessarily depend on the amount of time you have.’ (P83) Cohen and Mannion put forward a range of sampling tools including probability and non-probability, random and stratified samples (P87) whilst Bryman (1998) argues the case for a representative sample using a type of probability sample. (P107) To ensure that each unit in the population has an equal probability of inclusion in the sample the research group will be drawn at random from the payroll list.

‘Any research project is likely to raise ethical issues. This is particularly so if it involves people directly, but may also be the case even if you conduct your research entirely on documentary evidence.’ (Blaxter et al 1997:P146) Bell (1993) goes further and adds ‘People will be doing you a favour if they agree to help, and they will

need to know exactly what they will be asked to do, how much time they will be expected to give and what use will be made of the information they provide.' (P52) This view is endorsed by McKernan (2000) who adds that 'It is crucial for all participants to know what their rights are in research of any kind.' (P241) Hopkins (2000) identifies a range of principles that may be observed in the commitment to action research including, observing protocol, involving participants, reporting on progress, maintaining confidentiality and obtaining authority before using quotations. (P221/2)

'One point that should be underlined at this stage is that writing is not the only mode of communicating experience of an action research project. Countless other effective methods exist: oral presentations ...' reflects McKernan (2000). Whilst there are a range of different styles and formats for the written report such a document will be produced on completion of the project and used together with oral presentations as a means of disseminating the results.

Summary

The rationale outlined in this report has been compiled with the specific objective of producing a research project that will provide the data capable of providing answers to the questions posed as part of the proposal:

Will the use of role-plays produce greater learner satisfaction with the training provided?

Will the use of role-plays add value and improve the results of the learning process?

Although the project timetable covers three months only, from inception to report, approval is required within the next week in order that the project may be launched.

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