

Ed.D

Module Two: Lifelong Learning

“The use of narrative methodologies in considering the development of conceptual-level learning in small-business owner/managers.”

Abstract

This paper seeks to determine the appropriateness of a narrative methodology when researching managers of small-businesses. Using interviews from two small-business owner/managers, it explores the use of narrative and auto/biographical methodologies in a management research context and argues that the illuminative characteristics of such methodologies are entirely appropriate to such studies.

The paper also examines the importance to small-businesses of ‘conceptual-level learning’ (CLL), or logological learning, in which learning is conducted through ‘mindful abstraction’. It is contended that CLL is a result of a conscious or unconscious positive appreciation of the need for lifelong learning and, as such, has a major impact upon the ability of small businesses to resist failure by thinking strategically.

Introduction

This paper seeks to determine the appropriateness of a narrative methodology when researching managers of small-businesses. The primary research question in this paper considers methodology rather than research-subject profiles. Narrative-based research methods are unusual in management research papers in that quantitative, positivist, research has traditionally provided measurable and, above all, *useable* answers. The research questions in this paper seek to debate this rationale, and interviews and autobiographical data are used in order to provide contextual depth in an arena that conventionally lacks such insights. It explores the use of auto/biographical methodologies in a management context, to test the benefits or dis-benefits of doing so and looks at the use of such methods for future, larger enquiries.

Additionally, this paper is the second in a series intended to explore the subject of conceptual learning and thinking within the setting of small- and micro-businesses. The first paper (Watts, 2006) reviewed the requirement and availability of conceptual-level education (CLE) for small firms and concluded that whilst the requirement may be established, the availability was not in evidence. This paper takes the subject one step further. Having established the term CLE, referring to the *formal* educative process of developing conceptual-level learning transfer, references are now made to a “conceptual level of learning” (CLL) indicating the students’ ability to conceptualise problems and solutions. Conceptual learning is seen to be the “...application of knowledge resulting in concepts and symbolic representations not previously in the individual’s knowledge network” (MacLellan, 2005).

The development of conceptual-level learning will be shown to be important in maintaining a stable business and previous research into profiling small-business managers appears to indicate that, whilst individual key factors within a profile may influence the ‘success potential’ of a person, their successfulness is often attributable to a body of influences, opinions and circumstances rather than just one (Hankinson et al, 1997; Watts, 2005). In this regard, the ability of the manager to conceptualise problems and solutions could be seen as the single greatest asset in their strategic management inventory. Whilst it is a separate issue to determining whether there may be a direct link between conceptual-level thinking skills and *business success*, this

paper merely seeks to determine to what degree CLL is in evidence within small- and micro-businesses and if it is affected by a positive attitude to lifelong learning.

It is my contention that a primary indicator of the development of conceptual-level thinking is to be found within a subject's attitude towards continued, lifelong, learning and a positive regard toward new experiences and situations. This inquiry seeks to question a very small group of practising managers from small-businesses in order to find out how the concept of lifelong learning is regarded by those in small or micro-businesses and whether there might be a relationship between those who engage in continued learning and those who can conceptualise business strategies.

Lifelong learning influences

Lifelong learning is a diffuse and, arguably, misleading term. Whilst the term itself has been around for some years, its meaning has come to spread like an umbrella to engulf several themes of learning (Sutherland & Crowther, 2006; Gorard et al, 1999). Most people would agree that lifelong learning, in its most simple form, represents the idea of learning across a whole lifetime, and this is the term used within this paper. Sadly, this sometimes is narrowed in both the scope of context and educational genre: sometimes it is seen as a political rhetoric without real-life foundation (Edwards & Nicoll, 2001). Other examples show, by the authors' ontological commitments evident in the language used, that the term is used to represent purely vocational education (Anis et al, 2004; Rae, 2005). In both these cases, although the term encompasses the focus, it isn't limited to the focus in question. Using such a term, then, could be seen to be an advantage as it forces the enquirer to define more carefully exactly what the term means in relation to the research.

Auto/biographical influences

In considering that the manager's personal ethos toward learning, making mistakes and establishing working practises thereby, influences their ultimate chances of sustainable profitability, I believe that understanding the relationship between learning and good management is required if business failures are to be reduced.

This conviction stems from personal experiences in running small businesses: I have owned and run three small businesses during my life (the first was an abject failure, the second is successful and continues to this day, and the third was created and sold on at a profit after 36 months) and consider myself to be a serial entrepreneur. During the late 1990's I created a small limited company that sold notebook computers by mail-order. In considering its 'successfulness', it was reasonably financially successful, starting from a cash input early 1999 of £50 it produced a turnover close to a third of a million 30 months later. Also it tried to be socially responsible, employing four local people. However, I clearly remember walking into the office two and a half years after it first started and realising that the company would never become much greater than it was at that moment because *I didn't have the skills required* to make it so. At that time, I wasn't sure what it was I didn't know, just that there was a body of knowledge required to progress the company, that I didn't possess (conscious incompetence).

Faced with the reality of possible stagnation, which in a technology-based company leads to certain failure, the decision was made to sell the company in order for me to go out and acquire the skills I needed for the future. Now, looking back at the decision, it has become clear that the skills I needed were conceptual in nature – the ability to think and plan strategically, to conceptualise both problems and solutions and communicate the learning outcomes to others. Newly armed with my conceptual toolkit, I explored the results of my learning with other small business managers and found that the more successful ones often displayed similar attitudes towards learning: that it was a lifetime's activity and all knowledge, howsoever gained, may be good. Somehow they had acquired informally the skills that I had sought through formal education.

Auto/biographical and narrative-based research

The primary focus of this paper is, as has been mentioned previously, to explore the ability of an auto/biographical and narrative-based methodology to reveal more useful information from managers than would otherwise be gained by positivist research methods. West (1996, p18) has noted the academic resistance to phenomenological and subjective research methods and suggests that, indeed, such resistance was one of

the primary difficulties he faced when he began to use narrative-based research, questioning whether the results would be seen as ‘real’ research. It is to be expected that similar difficulties lie ahead for anyone seeking to use such methods in fields such as management where statistics and other quantitative means are traditional and trusted (Fillis, 2006). However, in using this research method, West claims a larger degree of information is available to the researcher allowing a finer contextualization of meaningful answers and consequentially greater illumination is brought to the research.

Llewellyn (1999) and Shamir et al (2005) have both considered the usefulness and uses of narratives within management and leadership research. Llewellyn, in drawing on a background in management accounting sees ‘projection’, or the practise of strategic argument-making, as the primary usefulness of narratives; the narrative ‘metastory’ (sic) is used to “...depict interview quotes from a certain perspective, embedding them in the theoretical stance of the paper...”. Llewellyn, like West however, notes the ability of narratives to provide contextual information otherwise unavailable. Shamir et al, in similar vein, propose that the themes held within stories, ‘proto-stories’, are more powerful than whole biographies as they potentially reach a wider audience. Hisrich & Drnovsek (2002) indicate that “...generally more methodological rigour would be required if the research results were to gain general acceptance”.

Given the ability of narratives to provide both depth and contextual meaning to small-business research, it seems appropriate that this methodology is used to discern the existence, or non-existence, of such an esoteric concept as conceptual learning in the research subjects. Fillis (2007) argues that biographical approaches to researching entrepreneurship have enabled researchers to emulate the non-linear practice of entrepreneurial behaviour. Hill & Wright (2001) also noted that researchers are often entrenched in ‘large firm’ positivist mindsets when conducting management research and thus focus primarily on survey methods. Goulding (1998) however, reasoned that on its own, quantitative research provides little sociological benefit and advocated an interpretivist approach in order to ensure the original context is maintained accurately. Whilst this paper considers narrative and biography as stand-alone methodologies, it

is recognised that a multi-method approach toward small-business and entrepreneurial research might be more appropriate when attempting to generate theory.

Research Questions

The research was conducted using two SME owner/managers as subjects. These managers were chosen arbitrarily in terms of their achievements or status, but were chosen more due to the similarity in business area and size. Both subjects sell confectionery, which evidently made research a pleasant experience. The first subject is female, has owned several businesses before and has business premises in which she sells sweets and sweet-related products. The second subject is male, produces hand-made confectionery which is then sold by him at market. This is his first business and is based at home where he has fitted an industrial kitchen. Both subjects are passionate about their work.

The research questions this paper set out to answer are as follows:

- Is narrative-based research useful when researching attitudes in management?
- What are SME owner/managers attitudes towards continued learning?
- Is there a link between positive attitudes towards learning and the development of CLL?

It is unlikely that these questions will be answered in any completeness with just two subjects; however it is felt that in using this research method to ‘test the water’ in a management context, the usefulness of doing so may be measured to ascertain the further use of such methodologies in similar contexts with larger samples.

Key Areas Covered

Thus far, this paper has introduced the concept of narrative-based research as a potentially insightful source of information within the field of management. The purposive use of these techniques in considering the relationship of lifelong learning and conceptual-level thinking, has been established as worthy of examination. The decision to research this particular client group has been reviewed briefly; their

overall importance in terms of economic and societal contribution has been acknowledged and the role the individuals play in terms of business ownership and management has been outlined.

Additionally, the complexity of topics and the indeterminate nature of some variables in relationship terms have been recognised and, in particular, the difficulties to be expected when conducting research that traditionally requires measurement and quantitatively presented data. A diagram for representing the usefulness of information gained from interview has been presented and, finally, the research questions have been stated.

Learning, conceptual learning and knowledge transfer

Cope (2003) regarded the nature of entrepreneurial learning as a continuum within which he recognised the development of an hierarchy being promoted within the literature on learning theory. The concept of different ‘levels’ of learning, according to Cope, fits realistically into the empirical, observed, nature of small-business owners. He notes the distinguishing characteristics of ‘lower-levels’ of learning that take previously learned knowledge or experiences and apply them to new and different situations. However, by definition, these new situations are perceived to be contextually similar to those previously experienced and require only minor modification of understanding to be useful by the individual.

It is Cope’s understanding of ‘higher-level’ learning seen by him to be learning in which “...new understandings and new cognitive theories of action...” are generated, that is probably more pertinent here. This type of learning, maintains Cope, is only achieved as a result of ‘discontinuous’ learning events, requiring a transformation in the understanding of the individual in order to deal with the non-routine event. By the very nature of the business start-up process, full of discontinuous events and ‘crises’, it is clear that Cope’s understanding of higher-level learning would indicate an almost constant learning experience for the would-be entrepreneur.

Whilst Cope researched entrepreneurial learning, Effie MacLellan, Reader in the Department of Educational Studies at University of Strathclyde (2005, p132/133),

looked at the acquisition or attainment of knowledge in Higher Education students. Her conviction in the strength of a psychological perspective in understanding student learning stems from the belief that only by understanding the fundamental nature of the subject, can the potential for improvement be seen:

“[But] if teachers want to understand what learning is and how it takes place (in order that they themselves can determine methods of teaching), such understanding of learning rests on psychological knowledge.”

MacLellan raised the issue of learning and conceptual learning, and the differences between the two. She maintained that, whilst important, experience doesn't necessarily mean learning and that the adaptation of past knowledge to new situations doesn't necessarily occur:

“...Thus the common sense notion of learning as the all-pervasive acquisition of new behaviour and/or knowledge which is made vivid by experience, is an incomplete characterisation because it assumes, firstly, that acquisition constitutes learning without reference to transfer; and, secondly, that the learning of behaviour and the learning of knowledge are indistinguishable”.

Thus the issue of knowledge transfer, the ability to generalise and extend previous learning to new situations, can be determined to be of increasing importance. MacLellan, drawing on work conducted previously by Salomon & Perkins (1989) and Pascual-Leone & Irwin (1994), sought to adopt the term 'low-road' learning to indicate transfer involving "...low cognitive functions and referring to concrete, experiential or infralogical" learning, and 'high-road' learning to indicate transfer involving "...high cognitive functions and referring to abstract, conceptual or logological" learning. With conceptual learning ("high road" learning), the transfer is through "mindful abstraction" (ibid.) and as such there is no automatic transfer of knowledge from one situation to another. Most important, is the ability to create conceptual constructs which may be used across a wide variety of situations and thence the ability to recognise the appropriateness of such constructs in a given situation.

Methodology

Research Problems

One of the greatest challenges in researching this paper was the interdisciplinary nature of management learning; the research subject covers management, entrepreneurship and education, not so say anything of knowledge transfer and biographical and narrative methodologies. It is probably due to the size of the subject in question that a narrative approach has been taken; raw, quantitative, data would not necessarily reveal the nature of the answers, whereas providing a contextually detailed framework within which to present the answers appears to be far more appropriate.

Whilst the use of such methodologies is on the increase as the benefits of deeper, contextually accurate information availability are recognised, it is still restricted in use generally. The use of narrative and auto/biographical research methods in management fields is particularly limited.

One of the primary criticisms of case-studies and other narrative-based methodologies is the difficulty in determining usefulness and generalisation across other contexts or situations. Whilst these concerns are historically valid, this paper retains the position held by Pierre Dominicé (2000, p22) that

“...the methodology of educational biography must be a mode of reflection rather than an if-then statement of proof.”

Dominicé further argued that accepted methods of analysis were not sufficient in terms of retaining the fundamental meaning of the narratives supplied. Other classical methods of social science research would, he felt, have detracted from the richness and quality of the overall study and were thus deemed inadequate for the purpose:

“...progressively, I (sic) understood that everything I was doing in order to compare the narratives was in many ways resulting in transferring their meaning to an objective other than the one for which they were made.” (ibid)

It becomes evident that with the complex, interrelated, nature of management *and* education, that this essentially holistic research methodology is required in order to achieve the deepening understanding desired. West (2006, p32-33, p46-47) acknowledges the marginality of biographical and life history methodologies in education research communities, however he clearly stresses the increasing use in Europe of such methods and their intrinsic worth. Patton & Applebaum (2003, p63-66) note that case-studies in management are currently rare but are able to deal with a full variety of evidence and produce or promote understanding from this.

The difficulty, in research terms, for any management query and analysis lies in determining ‘discernability’ and measurability of factors (Watts, 2005). Finding what characteristics, attitudes, processes or other factors are discernable as having an influence or impact upon the research subject is a primary focus. ‘Understanding’ and ‘insight’, as terms of qualitative research, are often ignored in management research as they are hard to measure and harder to discern the point of origin. Once it has been determined as discernable, whether it relies on other factors or not, the focus changes to whether it can be measured. The table below shows the Factor Inclusion Tool (FIT), used to help determine what management-profile factors could be included in research in which data collected using qualitative methods of collection, were then analysed using quantitative methods. Jankowicz (2000, p263) described the difficulties in this approach:

“...In particular, qualitative research questions are ‘scored’ to make use of the mathematical analysis that benefits those utilising quantitative research, rather than true phenomenological analysis.”

	Not Measurable	Measurable
Not Discernable	Not Usable	Not Usable
Discernable	Not Usable	Usable

Figure. 1 Factor Inclusion Tool Showing typical discernable/usable values in quantitative research

	Not Measurable	Measurable
Not Discernable	Not Usable	Not Usable
Discernable	Usable	Usable

Figure. 2 Modified Factor Inclusion Tool Showing additional discernable/usable values in narrative-based research

Figure 2 (above) shows a modified FIT in which those factors that can be discerned but not necessarily measured may now be included in the overall body of knowledge using narrative-based methods of research. Of course, the tradition of auto/biographical research is grounded in the importance of *understanding* and based on symbolic interactionism which, according to the above table, may be included within research as it is clearly discernable, just not necessarily measurable.

Design

The questionnaire used to collect the largely quantitative data, is one I have used before in a previous small-scale SME enquiry (Watts, 2005 p33-42) and centres on the personal profile of the subject. Drawn from a large international SME enquiry (Hankinson et al, 1997) the data categories were formed using a grounded ‘microanalysis’ approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 p57-59). Using this methodology allowed initial subject responses to be compared to previous respondent data, and therefore, quantitative analysis in addition to purely narrative interpretation. It was hoped that this would ensure that responses that fell outside of previously ‘mainstream’ data responses could be scrutinised further to ensure no loss of data integrity. Thus, should a respondent declare an answer that was unusual or

unexpected in terms of normative social interaction or entrepreneurial discourse, it would be easy to spot during analysis allowing further exploration or clarification.

Interviews were led, structurally, by the questionnaire. Primarily this was intended to ensure the major areas of research were covered within the interviews. This had benefits in that it ensured a comprehensive coverage of potentially relevant data, but dis-benefits in that interviews were therefore channelled quite closely which may have affected the final output of responses by the subject. Predetermined open-ended questions were added to sections within the questionnaire and were used to encourage a greater degree of discourse.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in private, using a tape-recorder and microphone. Additionally a flip-chart was positioned, in front of the subject, which contained the answer-scales available to the subject for any particular question. I made notes of answers on a questionnaire sheet, leaving narrative qualification for transcription at a later date. Every effort was made to ensure the subjects were reasonably comfortable and that they could see and understand the answer-scales.

The first difficulty with this kind of research is finding subjects who fit into the overall research requirements and who are available. By their very nature, most small-business owner/managers are busy people whose time is often precious to them. Having found an appropriate subject and determined adequate times for interviews, the subject and interviewer both have to be satisfied that confidentiality can be maintained; in seeking to determine appropriateness of the subject to the research, the distinctive nature of the subject's work may lead to inadvertent recognition. Therefore a fine line needs to be drawn between gaining the most from a personal narrative and breaching the trust that has been established in conducting the interview, through overly specific questioning. Therefore, within both of the respondents 'stories' details such as names, places of residence and work, have been changed. In some cases I have added structure with the use of square brackets to ensure the context has not been lost. Similarly I have removed narrative where I thought it would aid clarity of reading and have replaced it with a series of three dots.

Analysis & Commentary

Story One – Fiona

Fiona, the subject of the first story, is a thirty year old married mother of three whose introduction to business stems from her husband's business interests. The owner/manager of a small retail outlet selling a wide variety of sweets and confectionery, she has built her business over a period of approximately two years and considers herself a 'proprietor' rather than a manager. She is currently looking to sell her business as a going concern, in order to concentrate on other business areas.

Fiona's husband, who is a very influential figure in her business life, has a variety of businesses in local towns including night-clubs and pubs, to which Fiona has 'apprenticed' herself during the past few years. These businesses too, are in the process of being geared for sale. O'Conner et al (2006) notes the importance of family influences on entrepreneurs and laments the lack of research conducted in this area, the significance of which, they maintain, translates into quantifiable business benefits: "*Spousal support is also being recognised as an important source of competitive advantage which can facilitate the success of a business especially in the initial stages of set up*". Interestingly, Craig & Lindsay (2002) argue that, whilst empirical evidence pointing to the successfulness of family-owned businesses suggests otherwise (O'Conner et al, 2006), the concept of family (group focussed, committed to continuity etc) appears to be almost diametrically opposed to the concept of entrepreneurship (individualistic, comfortable with rapid change etc).

Fiona admits to having no academic or vocational qualifications; her poor learning experiences at school she felt, 'pushed' her towards an entrepreneurial lifestyle that she regards now as somewhat unconventional. Labelled a 'wild-child' at school, her experiences there clearly impacted upon her need to experience life outside formal education:

...school wasn't a priority...I was asked to find alternative education. Which I shouldn't snigger about, but that is probably the politest way for the tape to take it down. The world was my oyster and I wanted to get stuck in as quickly as I could.

Gordon (2001) argues that unofficial and voluntary exclusions account for the vast majority of school exclusions in the UK but are hard to quantify as they are “...sometimes portrayed as child or parent-friendly strategies”. Later in the interview, Fiona admitted that she felt ‘let down’ by her school as her needs (sic) for academic stimulation were not considered or met:

The excuse I was given was that I was too intelligent and wasn't being stimulated enough and therefore found alternative entertainment – I became the class clown – which wasn't my capabilities at all. In fact I just got bored very easily.

Charlton et al (2004) note that ‘disaffection’ with the offered curriculum of study can ‘depress interest’ and ‘precipitate’ exclusion. Gordon (2001) also notes that the majority of excluded pupils may be frustrated with education generally, leading to ‘disruption and...poor behaviour’. This subject was obviously quite painful for Fiona to talk about and, although I skirted the issue once her feelings became apparent, she later returned to the subject:

I've been back to college twice and had to stop because of financial circumstances, before I met Phil (husband). I had a three day [college] course...But financial commitments said I had to give up the three days of learning to bring in three days more earning. And I have always said to Phil I won't go back. It's the feeling of being a failure; I don't like it at all. Although personal circumstances meant that I had to sacrifice college although that was only a short term gain financially.

Within this was a clear sense of self-failure as well as a great deal of anger primarily directed toward those who, she felt, had let her down. There was also, in subsequent conversation, a sense of anger that she had not had a reasonable opportunity to learn, as other events in life, such as having children, had prevented her from reaching her

potential before now. When asked if she would like the opportunity to return to college or university to earn some qualifications she said:

Yes... I always wanted to do child-psychology. I love psychology. But like I said to Phil (husband), I won't go back to any kind of education until I know I can start one day at the beginning of the course and finish on the last day of the course without having to stop for whatever reason in between... Talking to little old ladies is lovely, but the old brain-box is starting to turn to mushy peas.

Fiona's experiences at school evidently have provided an additional source of motivation for her, as she feels she has '...something to prove...' if not to her husband, then to herself. Hammond (2004) proposes that attitudes and motivation toward lifelong learning may be directly related to psychological resilience. It is possible that Fiona's relationship to lifelong learning may be influenced by her psychological robustness or 'confidence'. Norman & Hyland (2003) noted that confidence may affect an individual's ability to maintain a positive attitude towards learning throughout their entire lifetime (although situational variances were conceded). She notes the reasons for this very eloquently:

Phil had primary school, onto grammar, onto university - good job straight away. Whereas my personal circumstances as a wild-child were slightly different to his - of being an A-star student, pegged down, played rugby for the school... As far as I was concerned, I needed to measure up, because we did used to have certain areas of personal likes that were slightly disagreeable with the fact that if I made a decision, or if I chose to do something ... the fact that he had what he classed as a 'good' education meant that he had the power to say "no". As I sometimes said to him "you might have had the education, but it doesn't mean to say you are always going to be right".

Once Fiona had left full-time education, she then had to consider income as she fell pregnant with her first child. It was at this point that she chose an entrepreneurial career, rather than any of the other choices available to a teenage single mother:

...running my own business made sense... I got to see other people and I'm a bit of a control freak.

The need or desire for control appears to be a personality factor shared by one in six of small business owners (Watts, 2005). Certainly it may be a deciding factor at critical moments, such as Fiona's, when the desire for control over one's future is seen as preferable to the continuation of a 'safe' but unfulfilling lifestyle. Whilst it may be seen by some as a step *into* the unknown, Fiona regarded it more as *removing* the unknown as it was her choices that would determine her successfulness.

Autonomy, the need for independence and control over one's own time, working practises and type of work, are all seen as major attractors in the motivation of entrepreneurs to start their own business (van Gelderen & Jansen, 2006; Watts, 2005) and may be seen either as positive attractors (e.g. self-governance, high personal motivation), negative attractors (e.g. escape from poor current working conditions/employer) or neutral attractors (e.g. greater flexibility in life). The subject of independence and being in control was also raised in terms of Fiona's current motivation:

I guess that's what frightens me now – it's the fear of the unknown – again the control thing. If I don't know exactly what's going to be happening, that's it...

During the interview, the tensions that might have been expected when dealing with someone who freely admits to being '...a bit of a control freak' were not evidenced. It is possible Fiona was promoting a characteristic of herself that she felt established a boundary, or in reflecting upon her own personality, she may have just been judging herself too harshly. Markmen & Tetlock (2000) note that one of the characteristics of a need for control is the ability to create counterfactuals, (i.e. what would have happened if events transpired differently). In particular, although counterfactual

excuse-making has negative connotations, Markmen & Tetlock describe the potential benefits of doing so, “This work has shown how thoughts about what might have been can yield useful scripts for future behaviour and heighten success-facilitating intentions and corresponding behaviours”. However, it became apparent during subsequent talking that this characteristic, possibly having evolved as a defence mechanism during her formal education, now affected her daily life:

If I'm not in control of a situation, I'm out of the situation. It's as simple as that! And that's what I found at school; the fact I wasn't in control. I couldn't leave if I wanted to leave and I had other people telling me what I could and couldn't do. I wasn't going to stand that for very long. [Even now] we go out for a meal and I'm known as the driver, because I would rather be in control of getting home safely. I don't do 'drinking' because I don't like the feeling of being drunk and losing control.

For Fiona, the benefits of entrepreneurship are evidenced in the remuneration and lifestyle she expects to enjoy once her business sells. Walker & Brown (2004) argue that whilst lifestyle and personal factors may be the greatest motivator toward business start-up, economic success is usually considered the most appropriate measure of a business. Fiona's language indicates agreement with Walker & Brown in that her determination of 'success' is a business strong enough to be sold on the open-market, and her personal vindication is the financial benefits and social placement that would give her:

We still have two nightclubs in (town); we're closing one down but we still have the building. A pub and cinema in (town), a pub in (city) and a club in (town). It looks fantastic on paper but for us, the same as everybody else, you still have to make the mortgage at the end of the month. When they all sell then yes, it'll be the difference between comfortable and having no mortgage at a very early age because I'm 30 and Phil is 34, so in the next two years at 32 years old I'm

mortgage free, which not a lot of people can say. But, at the moment, we're still the same as everybody else

However, Fiona is candid about the route she has taken towards entrepreneurship. Her self-styled apprenticeship in her husband's businesses still hadn't prepared her fully for the demands of running a solo business:

I've made a lot of mistakes. This is my first business and I have made fundamental mistakes. (Such as) running before I can walk with my tradeshows – wasting thousands of pounds with my tradeshows when my market research was minimal. I should have, perhaps, researched them this year to look to do them next year. But I didn't, I just signed the paperwork and sent the cheques off. I spent silly amounts on stock...and the plan was, at this stage, that I had enough in the pot to say "ok, you're the right applicant. You go and take care of outlet number one, I'm off to open outlet number two. Hence the name 'business-name UK'. World domination next!

In reflecting, it was evident Fiona was verbalising feelings she hadn't previously admitted to. Deakins et al (2002) contended that in many cases where learning has occurred within a micro-business, procedures or 'routines' are established to ensure future adherence. Watts et al (1998) liken this process to growing pains and, similar to the discontinuous event-triggers that Cope held to be the genesis of logological learning, the test in real-terms is one of successful adaptation. I was reluctant to pursue this, but she had no reservations and freely accepted that her plans hadn't quite come to fruition:

But it hasn't worked out like that. It's a good little business if it is run properly, and hasn't had the [financial] pressures put on it that I have put on it...It still looks good on paper. I still get a good trade; I've got a lot of regular customers.

This expectation, whether realistic or not, was challenged finally by the understanding that she experienced about the need for continuity and resilience in small-business (Hind et al, 1996). The psychological contract seen as fundamental to organisational behaviour required organisational commitment (stubbornness) in the face of negative experiences such as failure, to ensure customers could enjoy a continuity of service. Kinder & Robertson (1994) noted that whilst resilience is a required personality factor in entrepreneurial people, it is hard to quantify and may have disadvantages in terms of increased stress-levels. Fiona's experiences in the 'safety' of her husband's larger businesses evidently did not highlight for her the requirement for 'stubbornness' – the need to be there and to be seen to be there over a period of time:

It needs somebody to go in and say "do you know what; I'm going to do this six days a week!" Not being a snob and this is going to come across really snobby, but that isn't enough. It just isn't enough. If someone else wants to go in there and have regular people that want to chat, if that's enough for somebody, this business would be fantastic...and sometimes I just can't be bothered with the mundane chat of it all...but... when I am there I enjoy it!

It became evident, during the conversation, that Fiona already understood that one of her greatest weaknesses appeared to be in the planning of her business. Certainly, during the creation of my first business, failing to plan adequately was a primary cause of many problems during its first year. Many researchers (Regan & Ghobadian, 2002; Stonehouse & Pemberton, 2002; McCarthy, 2003) note that planning in small businesses is often informal, but also argue the advantages can determine the ultimate strength of the organisation. With only vague ideas as to how she would expand at a later date, or even when the later date would be, Fiona could see that it may have been this area that was most in need of attention. When asked what advice she would give to someone considering starting their own small business, she was emphatic:

Research! Research is a definite. Go into it with your eyes open really... I mean I was a bit of a nightmare for it... I was very guilty when it came to, before we actually opened the shop – I had no real

direction. I wanted to be a wedding planner. But, as it was explained to me, it is seasonal... So, it's alright having an idea, but it's got to be a realistic idea – it's got to be realistic for the community and area you are in. So, had I not had the guidance and advice of somebody that has experience of this, I could have made some monumental mistakes! So, again, it's the research to make sure you know what your area wants.

It was difficult in the interview, at times, to distinguish the extent to which Fiona felt her husband had influenced the successfulness of her business. It was clear that she considered his input in a complex way; he provided the much needed business consultancy and yet her need for recognition independent of his success, helped motivate her to make important decisions without his input:

I think that...is what drove me to not be a failure. The fact that he (husband) said "y'know, we need to number-crunch this", yep, ok. To me at the time it felt like he was pooh-poohing any ideas I had. Although he wanted me to do something because I was costing him a fortune in shoes and handbags and driving him mad. "Go and get a job, love", he didn't actually, really, if he's honest, want me to do anything, because he's the successful one. And he does like to keep that superiority, but he's always...his parents are old-school and he's very old-fashioned in the way that he's the bread-winner. Although I could have had a little...hobby, if you like, the idea was, was that it wasn't meant to go as far as it did. And I think he expected me not to go and pull it off the way I did. And the pure fact that I knew deep-down that, although he didn't want to see me fall flat on my face, he also didn't expect me to come home and say "guess what love, I've got a shop". His chin hit the floor! "What do you mean you've got a shop?" I said "I've got a shop!", "what are you going to do with it?" I said "I don't know!" and he just shook his head and said "you are mad".

It is evident that these experiences have made a large impression on Fiona. It could be argued that she has learned more about small business from running this one, than from all of her previous apprenticeship with her husband. That she was able to do so in an environment which could be considered relatively safe, is very much to her advantage.

But it has also given me insight whatever I want to do for the future, to know that it's ok me wanting to do something and it's ok me thinking it's going to be a fantastic success, but rather than me doing my usual 'of course it will be', there has to be that element of market research before you commit to something.

Story Two - Terry

Terry is a fifty year old married man who lives with his wife in a mid-terrace house in the South East. His introduction to business came a year ago when he and his wife Barbara set up a small business making high-quality chocolates from a recipe discovered in a diary kept by her Grandmother. They have built their business successfully over the past year and perceive their business as a 'family firm'; however Barbara continues to work full-time until they reach a stage where the income from the business can take over as their primary wage, a common feature of family-owned start-up firms (Hankinson et al, 1997; Watts, 2005). This intuitive realisation of an organic growth model appears to be well founded as O'Conner et al (2006) suggests that family firms often outperform non-family firms financially. The confectionery business is located at home, however their kitchens have been upgraded to a commercial standard and their products are sold at craft-fairs and farmer's markets during the week.

Terry's background is varied; he apprenticed, and qualified, as a Gas Fitter but for the past twenty years has worked as a driver to the film industry; he is full of anecdotes about famous names and is very easy to get along with. Although this interview took place with Terry by himself, Barbara's influence is apparent and, as with many married couples, many of the consequential business decisions are taken jointly.

Terry likes to cast himself as a 'rough diamond'. He has a strong East London accent and is emphatic in his dislike of modern standards and what he sees as the gradual slide of social etiquette. Terry is very much a plain speaker and he quite happily reflects upon his non-acceptance of the politically correct:

So...I have Intermediate and Final City and Guilds for gas fitting, but now it would be called gas engineering, as a dustman is now called a refuse engineer. I think you have already gathered anyway, I am 'old school'; I am stuck in the past! <laughs>

Given Terry's somewhat unorthodox route into business, certainly whilst not at an early stage in life, it was evident that he didn't fit into a 'serial entrepreneur' bracket; this was his first 'real' business (although he has 'dabbled' before) and he had every intention of it forming his career for the rest of his life. Reid et al (1998) noted the difference between 'growth' family-firms and 'lifestyle' family-firms, and this was resonant with Terry's outlook as the decision to start a business appeared to be more a matter of lifestyle, or quality of life, than the need to make a great deal of money. I found myself considering what experiences he might have had during his early life that could have helped prepare him for the demands of running his own business:

No, nothing helped me during my school years. And the apprenticeship with the gas board was there purely to get you through the gas world... It didn't give you any insight into the rest of the world, like private business, because they didn't want you being in business, they wanted you to work for South-Eastern Gas Board. So no, that wasn't part and parcel of it.

He admitted that previous experiences in 'doing his own thing' had given him some limited insight into running his own business:

I have also made and designed a couple of chess sets. Which is a subsidiary business that I have tried to get off the ground many, many years ago. And I have ended up with two, solid bronze, chess sets.

When asked how this business came about, Terry explained it was as a result of his love of military history:

Well, I found a model maker years ago. It's my design. I used to be quite heavily into chess, but not to any standard. I used to play with good friends, that sort of stuff. And we were just talking and a little pet subject of mine was the Zulu wars, the British redcoats; Michael Caine and all that sort of stuff. And we were just talking, me and my mate and I said "I have never seen a Zulu war chess set" and he said that he hadn't, and Barbara, just flippantly turned rounds and said "well, why don't you design one, why don't you make one?" And that was it. A couple of years later I sat down and got all the books out and I designed this chess set.

Although he was treating the subject quite irreverently, it was clear that this meant more to Terry than he was prepared to admit at first. This follows Fox's (2004, p42-43, p62-70) rules of 'Englishness' in which self-effacement is an expected ritual and 'Not Being Earnest' is of paramount importance in polite society. However, I pursued the matter as I was intrigued as to how someone with little or no training, gained the skills to design, make and market such a product:

I can't even draw properly... I just draw stick men drawings. But I met this model maker, and he is a military historian too, so we just gelled. I mean, the hours just flew by when I was speaking to him, it was ridiculous. And he could interpret my thoughts and my designs into the plastic wax. Anyway, as the years rolled over and more money, because it's quite expensive to get each piece made, I ended up with this beautiful Zulu War chess set, but expensive! It's in the higher brackets. I mean you're looking at about two and half thousand pounds for it.

Barbara too, had had experience of running a small business prior to the chocolate company, which may have positive implications for the long-term survival of the business (SMS-4) as well as significance in terms of owner/manager profiles (Watts, 2005), which suggest that less than ten percent of all entrepreneurs come from a background of owning their own business:

She was running a quite successful bead embroidery business, up in the West-end from home, but things like <example given>, well she did all the beading. Do you remember <famous person>'s birthday several years ago? Well, that big coat he wore was all beaded, all stones on it. My Barbara did that. She was quite a big name in the bead embroidery business in the West-end.

Later in the conversation, Terry's self-doubts surfaced, which highlights some of the many difficulties faced by those looking to start their own small business:

But, as you can understand, I'm not a salesman, I'm just a bloke. I'm not a salesman. And I'm looking for these companies that go out and sell things for you...marketing companies. But it is a bit difficult. I've had people go out and say "Oh yes, I can sell that for you!" and they get all enthusiastic and then they realise it is a bit harder than they thought. But, it has been going on for years, and I'm still waiting for someone to come along and say "I can sell that for you!" So I've sort of given up on it, trying to sell it, because I just can't. I'm not a salesman, I can't knock on people's doors, or go to big companies; I just can't do that sort of stuff. But it's there, and if somebody's good at selling, they will be able to sell this.

Like many small business owners, Terry had found that running a small business has unforeseen demands on time (Heaney, 2001), and as such, can strongly impact upon family life:

I don't know how to answer; I am here...if I'm not doing anything with truffles, it's because I'm either in the bath or asleep. Y'know, my conversations are all about chocolate bloody truffles these days <laughs> we used to gaze longingly into each others eyes, but now we're looking longingly into the fudge pot! So yes, for us it's more or less taken over our lives.

The business was, he conceded, very demanding, when asked to gauge how many hours a week he worked he was unequivocal “Seven days a week, twelve hours a day”, which is excessive even for start-up organisations (Hankinson et al, 1997). At the same time, he went to great pains to ensure I understood that, whilst this degree of time and effort was considerable, the end result would be worth it:

Well, at the moment there's not enough hours in the day <laughs> The lord should have made it 36 instead of 24, as far as I'm concerned. No, it's difficult because I'm turning work away...I can't make enough at the moment. But there's a reason for it... it's because it's our own little business.

Whilst Karatep & Tekinkus (2006) suggest that a depletion of emotional resources caused by conflicts between work and family commitments, increase the likelihood of feelings of frustration, fatigue and emotional exhaustion, they also note that intrinsic motivation, such as Terry displays, may greatly reduce the risk of ‘burn-out’. Lewis (2003) however, notes that working long hours and integrating work with family commitments are very much ‘life-choices’ and are influenced by perceptions of personality, professional identity and “...wider societal contexts that equate self-worth with intense work involvement...”.

Time, business and personal time, was revisited by Terry several times during the conversation; it wasn't evident whether he was looking for reassurance that his approach to a work/life balance was similar to others, or whether he was merely keen to ensure I understood how seriously he regarded his business.

The past year, the truffles are, well it's not twenty-four hours, but it's all the time I'm awake, I'm more or less doing something with truffles. When I have stopped, Then I will sit down for an hour to watch the news, something like that, and then I will go to bed, get up and start with the chocolates again, or get up and go to a market. And then, when I come back from the market, I'll have an hour's break and something to eat, and then start truffling again.

Notwithstanding the influence on the interpersonal relationships within the house, the growing business has also affected their personal living space as they have invested in additional white goods as a direct result of a greater understanding of their manufacturing process:

Yeah, so we have been going eleven months and, as you can see it has taken over the house basically. Well, what with all the equipment... if you look through there <indicates> we have got one upright fridge and an upright freezer... But that is where it has now started to take over the house, the big upright freezer, the fridge and all this sort of stuff. So yes, for us, it is taking a strong influence.

Several times during the conversation, Terry attempted to show me the relationship he enjoyed with Barbara in terms of their business. In most cases, this placed him firmly in the role as 'worker' rather than 'manager':

... if possible, I try to get Barbara to do the paperwork, the phoning and all that sort of stuff, because she is very clued-up... And she's the one who saves us because I'm hopeless, I'm just a driver, y'know, for twenty years I was in the film industry and I don't know too much more.

I began to suspect, that some of the reasoning Terry employed to adopt his position was partly due to his stated non-acceptance of modern life and attitudes, and

wondered if it might have more to do with language than with attitudes. This became apparent when I asked him about his time-management:

You are going to have to excuse me here because my Barbara comes in with all this sort of language from the office and I honestly, my chin drops to the floor, my eyes widen and I say “What did you just ask me?” <laughs> Run that by me again?

Given his response, we explored the use of language in business; the role of academic qualifications such as MBA's in adopting a language of their own that start-up entrepreneurs could, potentially, find excluding. It is possible that my use of language unfamiliar to Terry created a barrier, however I worked hard to minimise that risk once I became aware of it; I adjusted my use of formal management terms and acronyms and endeavoured to employ terms Terry had already used. Rowe (1998) determined that management as theory would probably evolve a language or terminology of its own, thereby promoting a barrier to understanding to wider society. Williams (1998) expanded on Rowe's position and argued that current usage of language within management theory, whilst offering meanings often specific to topic, were in most cases derived from other social sciences; the challenge, evidently, is to become aware of the differences in meaning:

It is...it is a different language and I don't understand it... you see, I am old school and very direct. Now, people will talk to you this day and age without actually asking you what they want to know from you. They put it down to you to work out what they are trying to ask you. And I say to my Barbara, “what was he talking about?” and she'll say “well what he was trying to say was...” and I'll say “well, why didn't he just tell me that?” And back in the seventies, ‘Life on Mars’, I understand that programme 310%, because they don't talk around anything, they talk at you, to you and you know what was being asked of you. I don't understand the language in my own country these days...

This then, appeared to be a major contributing factor to Terry's insistence of Barbara's primacy in terms of 'business relationships' and business culture. Barbara's experience of dealing with other businesses as peers, evidently led her to, in Terry's eyes, a more advantageous position:

Yeah, so all this sort of stuff, if possible, I try to let Barbara do, because one, she is far better at it than I am. And two, she has embraced the technology and language that people use, because she works in an office...I mean she, she is a very clever lady, even though I say so myself. She is very clever, she just adapts to things.

In these terms, what I had previously considered a possible case of reluctant acceptance of modern business demands, suddenly became apparent that as a couple Terry and Barbara were actually accepting they both had areas of expertise; a classic example of contingency management (Cole, 1990). Hamilton (2006) asserts that one of the primary difficulties in analysing family or spousal-partnership firms without accompanying narratives is that often they have a gender-dominant discourse producing 'heroic male entrepreneurial narratives'. Within Terry's story, it can be seen that he is quite firm in his belief that both partners contribute equally in different ways; however, without the narrative to contextualise the practise of business, Terry's firm may well have confirmed Hamilton's assertion.

Having gained some insight to Terry's background and the hard work he is engaged in at the moment, I wondered whether he had time to plan strategically for the business. I was aware, at this point, that I would need to be circumspect in my use of terms that were unfamiliar to Terry, and talked around the issue of 'business meetings':

Now that's a good one. Because Barbara and I will often... we don't actually sit down and say 'this is a business meeting' but our conversations are about the truffles and everything else obviously, and there has been a bit more progress since the last time you came here. We have the fridges and freezer. Now, that to me, I just say that is Barbara and me talking, but Barbara says "No!", she said "This,

because we are a business, this is a business meeting!” and all I’ll be doing is stirring the fudge and saying “Look this is a good idea if we get a fridge, blah, blah blah” and, apparently that is a business meeting. Me, I haven’t got a clue, we were just talking.

I asked Terry if he felt that the use of a ‘different’ business language was important, as the business of running a small firm was evidently being conducted in terms of planning, reflection and query, just perhaps not with the labels attached:

This is the difference between us, in the twenty-first century that is a meeting; to me I’m just talking to my missus about our business...But I am stirring my fudge; I’m not sitting down talking. But it is still a business meeting...Sometimes it will be all evening about this that and the other.

Terry and Barbara’s experiences in business so far, have given them a more realistic insight into the nature of their customers and the overall field in which they trade. Often, they would reflect on the merits of the day’s trading and discuss how they might improve sales. This self-assessment or reflective practise and the ability to put the findings into practise immediately, is one of the primary strengths of a small-business (Deakins & Freel, 2003: p56-60). The ability to adapt to new or changing markets is part of the robustness that small-businesses such as Terry’s can employ. Not for the first time, I consider that the crux is the ability to see the opportunity in a situation, the advantage of pursuit:

And I seem to be fairly good at it, because business is growing...it is getting there. Yeah, between us I reckon we could write quite an interesting book. Yeah there’s certainly a book in me, and there’s a book in Barbara too! So maybe we’ll have another chat in five years time! <laughs> Because I might want a pension out of my story!

Conclusion

Within the workplace of a small firm, it is arguable as to whether either of the two subjects could be said to have gained from formal education. Indeed, by their own statements, both subjects have already stated their belief that school and/or college did not prepare them for life post 16, and almost certainly would argue that their small-business' has not benefited from compulsory education. Whether this is true or just a perception gained from, perhaps, their negative feelings directed towards academe, is debateable. Certainly it is possible that the generic skills required to run a small business, such as financial acuity, interpersonal skills and personal motivation, could be attributed to compulsory education in some part. However, it is also likely that many of those same profile attributes have been learned experientially, either whilst in business or in previous employment.

In both stories, there was clear evidence of knowledge transfer. With Fiona, the latitude she experienced in being able to make mistakes without fear of financial ruin, gave her a large degree of personal confidence that she felt had not and *could not* have been gained whilst at school. It was the ability to make mistakes and learn from them, in real-world situations, that was her most evidenced claim to success. Terry, on the other hand, honed and consolidated his interpersonal skills whilst working as a chauffer for twenty years and sees his business more as an extension to his current range of skills, rather than learning completely new skills (trade-specific knowledge notwithstanding). In either case it could be said that their overall profile has been modified in terms of entrepreneurial experiences and, with these experiences, have come new understandings of both business and people.

The majority of evidence of knowledge transfer thus far, falls within the infralogical or 'low-road' learning type. Much of the stories relayed by the respondents, appeared to indicate knowledge attained by adapting previously gained knowledge to contextually similar situations, and then enhanced or modified to suit the further needs of the new business. In particular, at the very end of her story, Fiona expressed a 'new' understanding she had gained regarding the difference between desired and actual outcomes in business. This level of learning had been won through harsh and costly experience at the customer-facing edge of her business and, arguably, this

could perhaps be attributed to earlier learning in her adult life where she was faced with challenges for her time at college, home and work. In this instance, superficially different but fundamentally similar circumstances, require similar reactions and whilst Fiona believes the learning to be new, it may merely be a question of presentation.

Terry's infralogical experiences are easier to see in that, aside from the technical knowledge required to manufacture confectionary, the majority of his work is seen by him in terms of interpersonal relationships. There are obvious parallels between this and his previous employment and the contextual resemblance Cope demanded in 'low-road' type learning is clear as Terry engages with his customers in much the same way as he used to when driving.

Evidence of high-road or logological learning is somewhat more difficult to state unequivocally. Terry, in his role as down-to-earth Londoner, certainly wouldn't admit to thinking in abstract concepts as the language itself would form a barrier to expression. Terry, in this matter, is perhaps more reactionary than Fiona in that he intends to grow his business 'organically' and carefully, surmounting obstacles as they arise and reaching new markets as they present themselves. It is a hard-won view of real-life issues such as cash-flow, customer service and product placement that has taught him to take the risk out of growth where possible, by accepting a slower rate of growth.

Fiona, by contrast, deals mainly in concepts and strategies. She has a very good safety-net in place in the form of other incomes and, as such, feels able to take risks on a larger scale, which has resulted in some of her greatest losses but has also resulted in some of her most important learning experiences. Conceptual thinking, for Fiona, is a daily pastime and engages her attention often. Delineating the difference between conceptual thinking and daydreaming is remarkably difficult here as MacLellan's requirement for 'mindful abstraction' is, arguably, applicable to both. This may be an area in which further work is required in order to differentiate the two concepts if, indeed, delineation and differentiation are required; on the one hand, it could be said that the terminology itself is the primary distinction. On the other hand, however, the concepts of 'wastefulness' associated with day-dreaming may present an

alternative dissimilitude. It can be seen that whilst the differences may be minor abstractions, the colloquial associations are less forgiving and may demand an alternative implementation of language if the concepts are to be regarded as useful.

Subjectively there is clear evidence to suggest that, despite her fear of further academic ‘failure’, Fiona’s positive attitude towards lifelong learning correlates to her ability to conceptualise and construct abstract paradigms. Her willingness to engage in strategic scenario-building appears to be a result, in part, of her continued desire to learn. Certainly this ability, if not encouraged by her attitude towards learning, has not been discouraged by it. Terry, however, would not appreciate such a description directed towards him; whilst open to the idea of learning, Terry is very much a pragmatist and, being a typically busy entrepreneur, would regard education only in terms of its immediate business usefulness. If he could see a reasonable argument as to why he should learn, he would learn it to the best of his ability, but it would need to be demonstrably useful to the business at hand. For this reason, it appears to me that Terry’s ability to conceptualise is limited to those times that Cope would term ‘discontinuous events’, i.e. crises.

The primary research aim of this paper was to look at the overall usefulness of a narrative methodology in management research. Whilst there have been some notable exceptions, there has been little use of narrative and story within the field of management. As previously stated, much of the reasoning for this stems from the need to deliver hard, actionable, data that managers and strategists could implement with a minimum of interpretation. Narrative methodology, of course, does not allow this immediacy. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the depth of information and the insights available because of this, it is reasonable to conclude that it is more the presentation of the results that requires more thought, than whether the methodology itself is useful.

The presentation of Terry and Fiona’s stories has been justified, in auto/biographical terms, because they subjectively represent a condition, or set of conditions that I can identify with. I too have experienced Fiona’s desire to “get out and prove myself”, have experienced her self-doubts and have had revelations, as she has, regarding

business decisions and practise. Terry's story also struck chords with me; there were several times during the interview when the similarities in personal experiences were very close indeed, particularly in terms of personal ethics and moral choices.

The difficulty with both stories is in seeking to gain data with which to work; information that can be useful, either in terms of immediate use or in terms of nurturing future research. West advocates this methodology as one of illumination, and in this I find a suitable answer. Used as an adjunct to more 'traditional' methods of management research, narrative methods are a powerful tool with which to gain awareness and new understandings.