Critiques of two or more pieces of empirical work

(1) Cope, J (2003), "Entrepreneurial Learning and Critical Reflection". *Management Learning*, 34(4), 429-450

Cope sets out to build a deeper understanding of management learning within a small-business and builds a case for the use of 'critical reflection' in learning, when faced with significant, discontinuous, events to stimulate 'distinctive higher-level' (sic) learning.

Research questions posed

Cope used four research questions to shape his enquiry, the first two of which seek to pay regard to the psychosocial dimension of the participants; perception, epistemological understandings and feelings towards their experiences are considered and challenged. The third question looks directly at the concept of discontinuous events in entrepreneurial learning, and it is here that one feels Cope's interests truly lie as the paper's direction, philosophy and tone pay deference to this subject throughout.

One of the greatest challenges in researching a subject as large as Cope has set out to do, is in making the research useful to some degree. The question of the usefulness of research such as this has been raised many times and it appears that Cope's fourth research question submits to the demand of those who demand usefulness as it regards the relationship of business growth and entrepreneurial development. Sadly this question appears misplaced and somewhat unnecessary as it neither contributes to our understanding of critical reflection in entrepreneurial learning or to the debate regarding discontinuous events as developmental triggers. The question as phrased is nebulous and could easily take a whole paper on its own, but appears to be a pre-emptive response to the need to show a direct benefit to research and productivity.

Methods used

Cope used in-depth, unstructured interviews with six participants, all of whom were practicing entrepreneurs. Cope is not specific as to how many interviews were conducted with each participant. However, his use of the singular term would

indicate one interview per participant. West (2001) and Dominice (2000) have suggested that phenomenological narrative methods could be regarded as unreliable in cases where singular interviews are conducted, as validity in meaning, depth and interpretation come from repeated iterations of questioning.

Cope also sought to explore the 'lived experience' of the individual by using interview questions that were unrehearsed although that were categorised into several themes. Whilst this allowed for a flow of rich, descriptive data, it can be seen that in terms of repeating the research in order to prove results, it would be very difficult indeed. Additionally, Cope describes his role as researcher as "…not a passive one…" which raises further questions regarding the reliability of the data.

However, in overall terms of the suitability of the method to answer the questions asked, I would suggest that whilst his execution appears flawed, the underlying premise of using a narrative, case-study approach to seek the subjective and personal experiences of the individual, is adequate and appropriate.

Scale of data gathering

As mentioned previously, Cope interview six participants once each. Whilst acknowledging the fluid and multi-faceted nature of narrative entrepreneurial research, the depth and validity of the data gathered should be questioned when using such methods with a small sample. Although Cope conducted interviews across at least four separate dimensions of focus, providing arguably twenty-four separate data sets with which to work, it is not clear from his paper how structured this was and how clearly defined the dimensions were.

Cope pays attention to other means by which data could be gathered to triangulate his findings such as personal logs and 'critical incident technique', but suggests that these were too structured to be of use, preferring instead a facilitative, reflective approach. Whilst this has some merit, it is questionable whether these methods would be too restrictive given his first three research questions, particularly if modified to a format acceptable to him. This might have provided additional data that could have been replicable and seen as having as great a value as his other data.

Modes of analysis

Cope uses an interpretive narrative style in keeping with the methodology he has chosen. Providing a case background to two of his participants, Cope utilises their meta-stories (Llewellyn,1999) to add weight to his argument and relates individual events to theory from Argyris & Schon (1974) and Mezirow (1991) in an attempt to underline the distinction in types and impact of entrepreneurial learning.

Whilst the analysis of each case by Cope is an interpreted account of a story, Cope has earlier expressed his ontological commitments and is consistent in his analysis. Whilst he has a propensity to make statements that are presented as inarguable truths, the thrust of Cope's arguments appear reasonable and his analysis appropriate.

We are not given further insight to the remaining four interviewees, but the two shown suffer from a lack of depth. This could be expected in cases where interviews were isolated and not followed-up, but presents Cope with the difficulty of extracting appropriate 'proto-stories' (Shamir et al, 2005) from a limited amount of data. Thus in Case Study 1, the 'story' from the individual could be interrogated further for a greater depth of understanding, rather than a summary of their experiences leading to an extended interpretive discussion.

Presentation of results and conclusions drawn

The case-studies Cope presents are useful and insightful. However Cope prefers to reduce their direct input and present his interpretation of their experience instead. Whilst I can understand his reasons for doing so, in that the interpretation of experience will highlight the relationship to theory and therefore is more likely to answer the research questions, it appears an almost cavalier treatment of the available data that should be further explored.

Copes concludes with the view that discontinuous events can, indeed, trigger specific learning outcomes and a higher level of learning, but given his declared intentions to find such a relationship the conclusion is a given. He acknowledges the nature of

context and appropriate use of contextual information, in terms of entrepreneurial learning and notes the relationship of critical reflection to the usefulness of learning outcomes. These themes were indeed highlighted during his analysis and his understanding of the subject appears competent and well-founded, even if their presentation appears somewhat disjointed.

Relationship to other published work

Cope presents an interesting paper and highlights issues that may significantly impact upon our understanding of entrepreneurial learning. His area of interest is one in which concepts of higher-level and lower-level learning types are becoming more prevalent, but in which current research is still quite scarce. Maclellan (2005), Pascual-Leone & Irwin (1994) and Salomon & Perkins (1989) are dominant in this field, albeit from different contexts and perspectives, and all have considered the existence and impact of concepts of learning types. With this in mind, Cope's paper still has a place in terms of exploring the subject of significant events that may shape an individual's learning. Building on work from Taylor & Thorpe (2000) in discontinuous events as learning triggers, and on Sullivan (2000) regarding higher-level learning during critical incidents, Cope notes the usefulness of his methodology in illuminating the subject and provides some weight to justify his stance.

This paper has some significance in terms of its contribution, but could be regarded more as dissemination of the concept than providing new knowledge. A deeper analysis of a greater range of data may have provided such, but as it is, Cope's call for further research into the subject area appears appropriate.

(2) McCalla, R (2002), "Getting results from online surveys – Reflections on a personal journey", *Electronic Journal of Business research Methods*, 1(1), 55-62 [online] available from: http://www.ejbrm.com

McCalla submits a personal reflection of the use and effectiveness of an online questionnaire. McCalla used this approach in her own studies and presents her experiences alongside those of one of the respondents.

Research questions posed

McCalla questions the role of the internet as a resource for surveys and seeks to show those researchers whose online questionnaire experience may be limited, that the pitfalls of such methods may outweigh the benefits. In this, McCalla doesn't pose questions that need to be answered as such, as her paper is an extended result of empirical work conducted for other research. This paper then, is merely the by-product she felt would be useful to disseminate so that others could learn from her experiences.

However, there are clearly questions that the paper attempts to answer: what exactly are the pitfalls a researcher new to online methods should be aware of? In what way do these impact upon the research undertaken? And, should they be used at all? These questions were all answered during the paper in a clear and unambiguous style, aimed evidently at those needing useful and immediate answers.

Methods used

McCalla considered the theoretical benefits of online approaches, together with an appreciation of the advances in internet technology. Arguing the merits of the input medium, she suggests the new researcher balance the "…numerous research priorities" in order to determine the usefulness and appropriateness of online methods. In this she cites Schonlau & Fricher (2001) who note there to be several circumstances in which online surveys are proven to be useful. This citation is the only one in this section and leaves one feeling that there must be more than just this one paper advocating the use of the internet, suggesting therefore that McCalla's reflections are either incomplete or under-researched.

McCalla used a reflective account from her understanding of the process she used during the creation of the online questionnaire, together with an account from one of the respondents. In this the dual perspective is helpful and gives an insight otherwise unavailable to anyone not used to these methods. The passage containing the respondent's experience, however, is very limited and amounts to only three hundred words, with one direct quote. This could be seen as lacking in terms of a genuine input from the respondent as the contextual information and narrative depth has been lost.

However, McCalla had piloted the process well and her questionnaire was validated by an 'expert' panel prior to implementation, a level of planning and competence suggesting that the data she presented was not necessarily limited by her but rather by the amount and nature of the data itself.

Scale of data gathering

The research intended to engage responses from 20,000 individuals who had been targeted by means of professional membership and invitations to complete an online questionnaire submitted via the body's monthly e-newsletter. With these numbers and using conventional approaches, McCalla could reasonably have expected several hundred responses (Section 3.1 p57). Sadly, the initial response rate was in the units and, subsequent to the original research project closing, there had been few further completed questionnaires.

The response rate to the questionnaire could therefore be seen as worthy of research in itself, but rather than follow this line of enquiry with interviews or focus-groups, McCalla determines many of the problems that led to the failure of the original project herself. Whilst she is positioned well to comment on the inadequacies of the implementation, her views are subjective and it is questionable whether she has explored the respondents' views adequately. In section 4.7.2 she notes that "…a number of respondents were contacted…" which does not provide us with any further information with which to judge the validity of her findings. However, she observed only one gave a 'detailed' response. Whilst it is accepted that contacting targeted

individuals to ask why they didn't respond to the original request may not be a comfortable occupation, without this data the research remains subjective and one-sided.

Modes of analysis

Critical reflection is the primary analysis tool that McCalla has used in this research. As suggested above, the reflective account is largely based on her own experiences and relies only superficially on the experiences of people other than herself. Individual's involved in either the preparation, execution or delivery of the survey could have contributed to the paper and McCalla's findings, but appear not to have been consulted, leaving a gap in the comprehensiveness of her report.

However, despite the singular point of view, the analysis is well structured and is clear in its language. McCalla goes some way toward finding some objectivity in determining what went wrong, how the mistakes occurred and what could be done to prevent similar problems in the future. In constructing her analysis, she is careful not to criticise individual's (including herself) but has used her reflective notes clinically and with care.

Presentation of results and conclusions drawn

McCalla's reflections on the events she experienced are presented in a format likely to be useful to a researcher newly coming to the area of online surveys. Section 6 of her paper gives a table, listing clearly the pitfalls she experienced and a 'summary of lessons learned' together with her key findings. This section, above all, is of most practical use although section 4 is of value in understanding the process itself.

McCalla concludes by suggesting that the benefits of online surveys can only be realised when the underlying problems of technology and implementation are addressed. Once these difficulties have been considered, she notes the ability of e-questionnaires to reach a large number of carefully targeted people and groups. In itself, these conclusions are hardly revelatory, but they serve to underline the message

her paper contains throughout: that understanding the medium of presentation is as important as the design itself.

This is a useful paper and addresses its intended audience appropriately: it focuses on providing clear evidence of some of the pitfalls experienced by McCalla and in this intention it achieves its goal.

Relationship to other published work

This paper does not seek to define how online surveys should be conducted; nor does it purport to identify a range of "do's" and "don'ts". Its aim was merely to reflect on the methodology of one particular piece of research and in this it has some merit. It stands amongst those texts that consider management research, notably those by Easterby-Smith et al (1999), Jankowicz (2000), Remenyi et al (1998) and amongst those that consider technology-based research methods such as Tse (1998) and Miller & Dickson (2001). In these terms the paper positions itself squarely in the middle; it seeks to present a truth clearly acknowledged to be subjective, whilst presenting a message of common problems rather than a 'how-to' guide for use. As such it is somewhat on its own – it lacks the academic rigour one would expect of a paper determining theory, but competently examines the data available and gives adequate guidance based on that.