Instruments developed for a particular issue together with accompanying rationale and guide to analysis (2,500 words).

Context

The nature of learning in the context of a small-business

Learning experiences are often achieved through informal means. Informal learning, that is the learning encompassed in 'background' learning that 'changes a persons capabilities or understanding' (Gorard et at, 1999), may include conversation (Baker et al, 2005), experience (Lohman, 2000) and exposure to risk (Watts, 2006) in a range of non-traditional settings. Gorard et al note the apparent decline in informal learning but recognise that the variation may relate to a change in *recognition* of informal learning situations or methods. Lohman supports Gorard et al to some degree, but focuses on the environmental barriers to informal learning suggesting that the most common approach of actively facilitating informal learning groups, may disrupt the natural informal learning and thereby 'decrease individual and group learning'. Similarly, Watts noted the role of the perceptions of risk in assisting learning in informal settings. Advocating the use of reflective teaching, that is the careful use of environmental reinforcement to promote a considered learning outcome, Watts argued that perceptions of risk by the individual could influence the degree of learning taking place. Additionally, the ability to reflect upon the event, incident or experience, may only be beneficial if a degree of relevance to other situations can be found; significant in the distinction between infralogical and logological learning in the small business. However, Baker et al also note that the use of others in this process may be useful as the process of conversation promotes a reflective learning process.

Management learning and reflective practice

When using a methodology that requires critical reflection upon past events and choices, it can be seen that the mere act of asking questions may form bridges between previously separate information held by the subject. What links are made and the depth of their effect are unlikely to be foreseen by the researcher, however the research should be conducted in the knowledge that reflection and reflective practice are commonly used in many social sciences to aid learning and improve procedures.

It is contended that the vast majority of managers learn their jobs through a complex mix of engagements such as "…training, practice, understanding, analysis and reflection" (Nixon & Murr, 2006). Of these the reflective, analytical, manager is the type encouraged and promoted by much of the management development industry today. Who else would read books by successful entrepreneurs, if not the manager hoping to apply the '*management-guru's*' techniques to their own circumstances? In wanting to adopt others' practices, managers are required to reflect upon their own understanding in order to make the model proffered, fit. This reflexivity lends credence to the process of management learning as it encompasses the notion of criticality and the act of critically appraising ones own competence. Barnett's (1997) writings on this subject are relevant to the methods used in this research as his 'matrix for critical being' (*fig. 1*) may help frame the sources of knowledge gained (also Ford et al, 2005).

Rationale for method

Research methods – why this methodology?

This research will use a narrative approach to explore the complex methods and reasons by which managers and owners of small businesses, learn to manage in an arena where formal learning is traditionally absent. The feasibility and usefulness of such a method was discussed in a previous paper (Watts, 2007) which sought to determine the appropriateness of narrative and biographical methodologies in this area. The paper found significant advantages in terms of the ability of the method to illuminate the area in question, but determined the wider usefulness of the resulting analysis to be questionable noting the lack of immediacy in interpretation that other practitioners could act upon. The paper concluded that this lack of immediate usefulness was not due to fallibilities in the method used, but rather the researcher's ability to present results that were actionable.

Positive and negatives with this methodology

The need for an interpretivist approach toward narrative research has already been discussed (personal statement), in which it was suggested that some level of interpretation of the data must be assumed and which also suggested that without interpretation, the data would not be particularly useful. Thus in attempting to present results that are useful as well as illuminating, it can be seen that a greater degree of interpretation may be needed. It is to be expected that the tensions in this approach will be difficult to manage: on the one hand the data needs interpretation in order to make it useful and on the other hand the greater the degree of interpretation, the less replicable and therefore less valid the conclusions are seen to be. However, with constant reference to the original data and with iterative rounds of interview, transcription, classification and analysis, it is hoped the interpretation will be transparent, logical and useful.

Structure (Interviews)

It is expected that each respondent will be interviewed three times during the course of a year. The first round of interviews will follow a semi-structured format, allowing the respondent enough scope to provide detail she/he thinks appropriate whilst maintaining an overall balance of themes including (but not limited to): personal biography, academic background, professional achievements and personal philosophical orientation. It is hoped that the data resulting from this initial interview round will provide some degree of common or shared experiences that can be drawn between respondents. This method does not use a grounded approach and axial coding of interview data will not be necessary.

The second iteration will allow the interviewer to focus on particular areas that may have emerged from analysis of the initial round. Using the emergent themes, the interviewer can facilitate a process of reflection by which the respondent may explore further the learning he/she has experienced. An informal conversational approach might be appropriate here, depending on the individual and the situation. This round of interviews may be seen as the most noteworthy for two reasons: first, the primary themes have been identified and this round seeks to reveal the significance of those fields (to the interviewer if not the respondent); secondly, the depth of interview at this stage should increase as the researcher/respondent relationship becomes established. This means that the data forthcoming from the second round should be greater in quantity and to a greater depth of perception.

The final round of interviews seeks only to clarify issues. Where comments may have been misinterpreted or unclear, this round gives a further opportunity to both researcher and respondent to ‘tidy up’. Given that the respondent will have been encouraged throughout the past year to become reflective in their practice, it is possible this stage may be the most unpredictable as the principles of reflection are accepted and the respondent feels able to contribute further.

Instruments

During the research project, a diary will be kept detailing the progress of the project. Given the nature of the study (i.e. narrative) it is fitting that the style of the diary is similar to the research and will be a critically reflective account showing the strengths, weaknesses and learning outcomes involved in the research, the researcher and the processes.

First stage interviews

It has been established in previous projects using similar methods of research (Watts, 2005; Watts, 2007), that a clear understanding of what is going to happen, what it will entail and how the process will work, is essential in establishing trust and a free flow of information between respondent and researcher. An explanatory letter of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) will be sent to the respondent prior to the first interview and covers subjects such as "What will happen to me if I take part?", "What do I have to do?" and outlines some of the risks and advantages to the respondent of participating.

The aims of the first meeting are to establish a working rapport with the respondent and to gain some initial insight into their background regarding their position as a small business owner/manager. Questions fall into nine broad categories:

1. Identity
2. Lifestyle
3. Formal Education
4. Post-schooling education
5. Business genesis and activities
6. Professional skills and capabilities
7. Influences on management style
8. Knowledge transfer within the business
9. Future outlook

These have only been separated in this fashion for convenience and do not necessarily reflect their origins or encompass the whole of their meaning. For example, the answer to an open-ended question rooted in probing for evidence of discontinuous events, may fall into category seven (C7) as well as category six (C6) but this may not be evident at the time of interview and may only be uncovered in later analysis. Thus the separation of categories is subjective and changeable. Examples of first stage questions are given below:

- Do you believe your formal education prepared you for entrepreneurship?
- How long have you owned/managed your current business?
- Where do you believe your primary business skills lie?
- How/where do you believe you gained your primary business skills?
- How could you improve your business skills?
- How has your learning benefited your business?
- What would you say are the necessary skills to ensure business survival for the next five years?
- What would you say to anyone considering starting their own business?

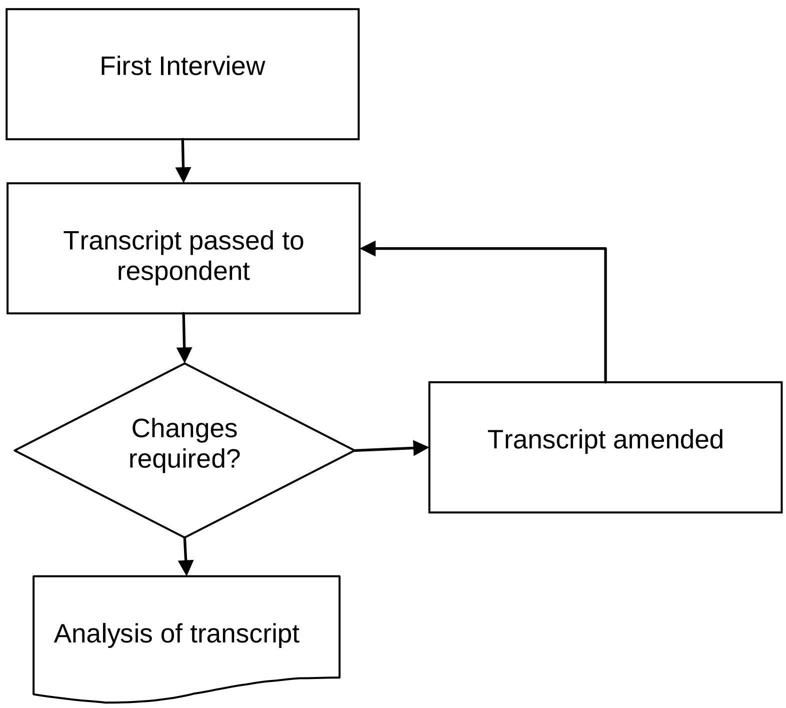

fig.1 Diagram showing work-flow of first stage of interview and

Second stage interviews
Prior to the second interview, the respondent will have had the opportunity to read, amend (if required) and agree their first-stage transcription. By using the transcript to prompt further questions, a consistent and logical progression of enquiry can be evidenced. The aims of the second meeting are to develop the themes identified from the analysis of the respondent's initial interview and to encourage the respondent to reflect on individual instances that might demonstrate evidence of learning type (logological or infralogical). It is difficult to specify example questions for the second stage as by nature they need to be fluid, but they would be drawn directly from the respondent's own previous answers in context to the research questions. For example, given evidence of a discontinuous critical event that may have precipitated original

(logological) learning (C7), questions surrounding the extent to which this learning helped the respondent's business (C8) would be appropriate: "how do you believe this event influenced your early days as a manager?" might allow the exploration of the effects of the event in terms of personal learning, whereas "what effect did this event have on your business?" would be slightly more organisation focussed and could show the practical outcomes of the event.

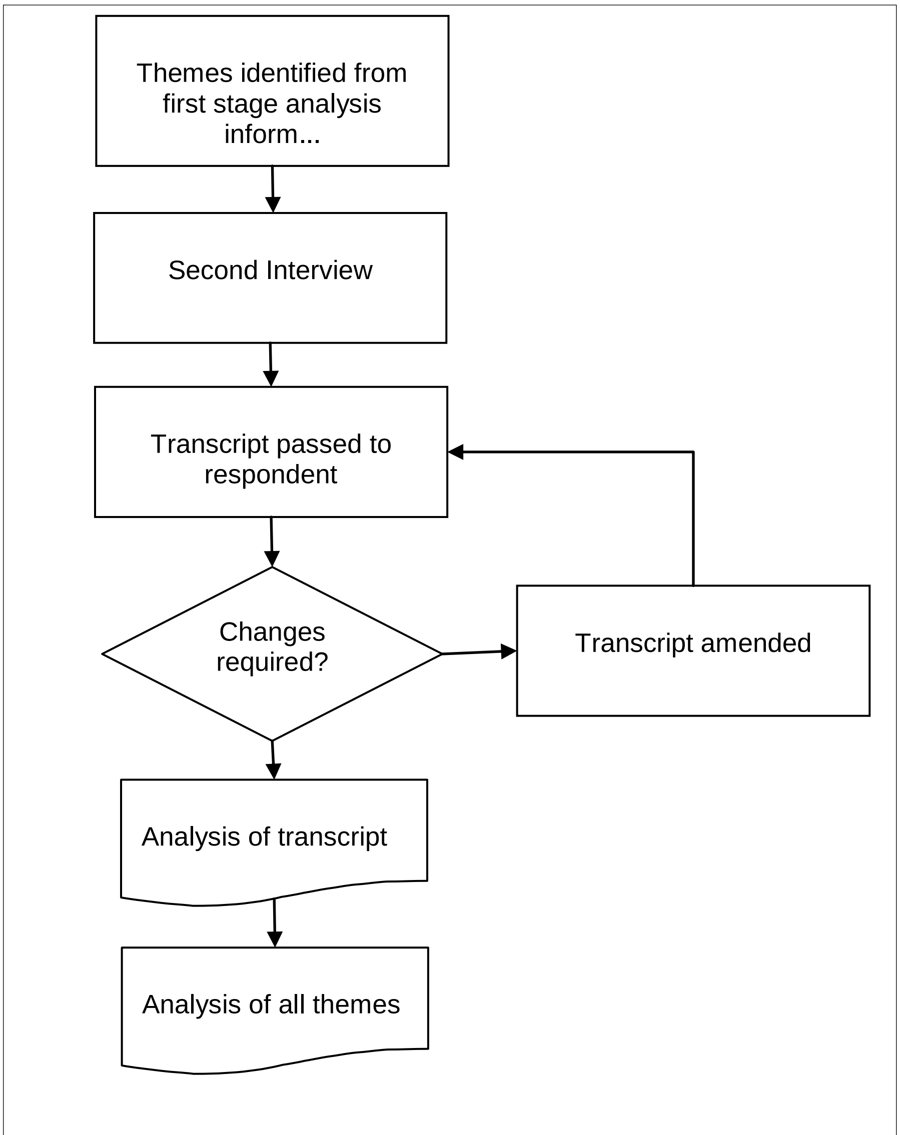

fig.2 Diagram showing work-flow of second stage of interview and

Third stage interviews

Although the style of the third stage interviews will remain the same in terms of open-ended questions and an encouragement towards reflection, the questions will be sourced differently. Following the second stage analysis, in which the individuals' emergent themes would be reappraised for contextual accuracy and overall contribution concerning the research questions, the themes from all of the respondents will then be pooled to provide a meta-index of themes. Thus between second and third stage interviews, similarities and patterns can be established ready for exploration in the final interviews. This means that questions may explore territory not covered by previous interviews and may therefore ask the respondent to consider particular areas in a more directed fashion. For example, continuing the hypothetical examples given previously of a discontinuous critical event, the possible emergent theme could be extended to suggest some owner/managers may have experienced a death of a close family member during early childhood. In this event, it might be of value to explore issues of other types of trauma and its impact on learning and how this could have affected decisions within their business. It must be remembered that this is speculative and the theme notional, however it serves to demonstrate the way in which emergent themes can be explored to try to reveal factors that influence learning. For example, in pursuing the theme of motivation provided by traumatic childhood experiences, "what influences did childhood events have on your career choice?" might be a sensitive method of opening the subject area, and "how do you believe these events affected your approach to your business?" could be used to explore the issues further.

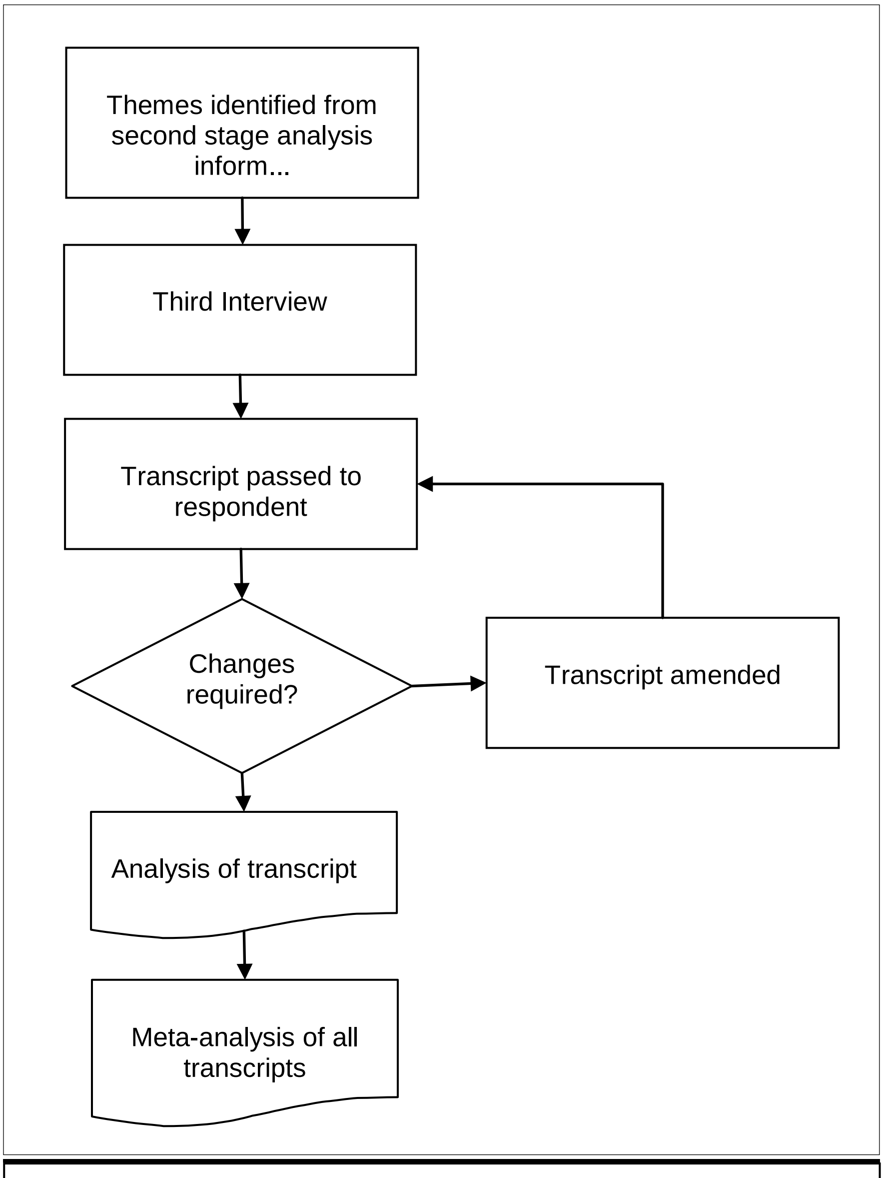

fig.3 Diagram showing work-flow of final stage of interview and

Analysis

Within each stage of data collection, analysis of the transcript takes place prior to continuing to the next stage. This is important in order to develop themes of enquiry that will inform the final analysis. Thus at the end of the first round of data collection, transcription and amendments, themes within each transcript will be identified. Areas in which further clarification are required will also be examined at this stage so that the second interview can aim to build upon those areas considered most significant or pertinent to the enquiry. Detailed analysis is not required at this stage as the overall aim is to identify general themes of learning style, educational background and pedagogical influences within the business environment. However, the analysis should highlight issues that are relevant to the research questions and should provide a sound basis on which to progress to the second round of interviews.

The second stage analysis will be similar to the first in that the subjects explored in the interview will add to the themes identified. At this point the themes from all of the transcripts will be brought together in order to share commonalities and patterns of behaviour. This should show the relevance of the areas in terms of answering the research questions and should reveal the areas in which the most useful data has been found. By combining the themes (convergence) and looking at the most contextually productive areas, questions for the third set of interviews can be created. In this way, areas that have been identified as significant but have not been researched with an individual, can be seen and then flagged to be pursued during the final interview (coverage).

Following the final set of interviews, the data should comprise of several themes that should have a relatively comprehensive depth of enquiry for each respondent. Using a grounded analysis methodology, individual stories can be further analysed to determine the significance of events and their relationship to the learning of the individual. This stage is expected to take the most time due to the nature of the analysis technique, however it may also require clarification from the individual respondent which may also add to the length of time.