Conference Paper

The Basic Social Process of Perceptive Familiarizing: Making a Difference with Scenario Assessment in Executive Education

Green, J

Recommended citation:

Green, J (2018) 'The Basic Social Process of Perceptive Familiarizing: Making a Difference with Scenario Assessment in Executive Education'. In: Proc of Organisational Learning, Knowledge and Capabilities, 25-27 April 2018, University of Liverpool, UK. Available at: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/management/conferences-and-events/olkc/programme/ 3

The Basic Social Process of Perceptive Familiarizing: Making a Difference with Scenario Assessment in Executive Education

ABSTRACT

Stakeholder data gathered during the pre-validation stage of an Executive MBA programme revealed a skill deficit from the perspective of both sponsoring employers and students. The omission is practitioner application and behavioural techniques expected in a corporate setting. Relevant literature, of which a summary is provided, indicates support for the problem. A basic social process, a technique from classic grounded theory, is used to indicate a sense of progression in solving the problem and is conceptualised as perceptive familiarizing. Recommendations to develop scenario assessment with increased frequency conclude the paper.

KEY WORDS: Executive education, scenario assessment, basic social process

Name of corresponding author: Dr Jan Green
Institutional affiliation: Glyndŵr University, Plas Coch Campus, Wrexham LL11 2AW
E-mail address: jan.green@glyndwr.ac.uk
Telephone numbers: 01978 293286 / 07721 780296

1. LEARNING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

A key element of the validation process for an academic programme is the consultation process with a range of stakeholders to ascertain views related to the content and delivery of the programme and the extent to which the planned revisions of the programme will meet expectations and aspirations over a five-year period.

In relation to this study consultations with employers who had sent staff on an Executive MBA programme were positive in terms of relevant knowledge acquisition, insights into the way the business operates and an ability to construct an evidence-based critical report. Several of the reports were assignment briefs and subsequently resulted in a range of changes being implemented within the organizations to improve performance at a systems level. One employer remarked: "*It is clear that our employee thinks in a different way, following attendance on the programme.*"

Students were forthright in their feedback and a further catalyst for this particular study results from the comment: "*theory is easy; putting it into practice is hard.*" A further interesting comment made by a student was: "*I want to be like you!*" This generated additional probing into what the student actually meant and she went on to describe behaviours in terms of confidence and authority within the lecture arena and she said it was clear who was in charge without being over bearing. The ability to scan the room and ensure everyone had an opportunity to contribute and comment was a further skill that was identified.

From these gentle opening comments the student went on to articulate that her cohort felt able to write a critical assignment which includes relevant academic references but the ability to present, summarize and support a point of view verbally was more difficult. She stressed this was not compiling a power point presentation and reading the slides. It was far more; it was credibility, it was having a presence of sufficient standing that peers and senior members of staff would listen and incorporate stated views and recommendations into the corporate decision making process.

Armed with the student feedback, the programme team discussed ways in which the Executive MBA could incorporate learning to make a difference in the areas identified by the students. The insights were endorsed by research undertaken by the World Economic Forum (www.weforum.org) in relation to the top ten skill requirements for jobs in 2020, with complex problem solving in first place

The outcome of the discussions resulted in additional visits to local and regional employers being arranged to ask about managerial behaviours as distinct from subject knowledge. Employers appreciated the opportunity to examine these views and confirmed that there was often a catch-up period for staff, particularly when newly promoted. Individuals identified for promotions were frequently those who attended the Executive MBA.

As a result of these interactions a problem or deficit had been identified and this paper explores the manner in which this aspect of a successful manager's portfolio of skills could be addressed. The outcome was the development of an inclusive learning experience through the use of scenarios which is demonstrably enhancing employability within the corporate sector, thereby making a difference.

The paper is structured in a sequence which identifies the stakeholder concerns with the usual format and delivery of Executive MBA programmes, which is the research problem and has been introduced in this section. The aim is to propose a solution to this

knowledge gap, or concern, using classic grounded theory. Many other methodologies refer to a research question, in this instance the concern resolution emerges from the question: does the use of a scenario assessment result in learning which is of greater relevance to practitioners than more traditional approaches?

Relevant literature, to provide an insight into management education shortcomings, difficulties and assessment styles is reviewed followed by an introduction to a segment of classic grounded theory methodology, namely the basic social process. The paper concludes by indicating the elements of the emergent basic social process and finally discusses ways in which the concern is resolved before concluding with areas for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning is multi-faceted and, according to Meyer (2016), may be troublesome as it leads to transformation and integration. There is a synergy of expertise and experience (Tomkins and Ulus, 2016) during learning which may be supported via simulation games to provide a route creating an alliance between subject matter and the learner through participation in a play out scenario. Olsson, Bjöörn and Jönson (2008) refer to learning awareness and interchanging with others as a route which secures the knowledge.

Within the higher education sector learning is measured through the process of assessment, which has no one precise definition, however a widely used interpretation is: "any processes that appraise an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills" (www.qaa.ac.uk, 2012:4). The QAA also note that assessment should be an integral part of learning; it is a source of motivation for student study and employers may use an individual's assessment record as one means of establishing suitability for employment.

According to Race (2014) higher education needs a richer mix of high-quality assessment formats with less measurement but the measurements are enhanced by using a wider spectrum of students' evidence of achievement, with a broader, more versatile set of tools. This view is endorsed by the comment: "To know about a specific situation is not enough," Mateu and March-Chordo (2016:2441) who used an experimental methodology to assess business models which go beyond intuition. Their work involved 77 participants and began with a traditional theory and practice session before dividing the sample into smaller groups. The requirement of the group works was to generate and select a proposal, followed by the preparation of a presentation which was delivered to the entire cohort using an assessment scale developed by the authors. The findings suggest that the group able to present a complete solution was subsequently the most successful and there was evidence that the work encompassed resources and customer trends; this went far beyond intuition.

"Literature on the effectiveness of assessment methods in higher education in general, however, identifies two main aspects – the effect on the learning experience and the fairness of student classification." (Bamford, Karjalainen and Jenavs, 2010:1494). Whilst the use of problem-based learning is expanding, Bamford, et al (2010) comment that there are few studies on their effectiveness and their study relates to an undergraduate model, it is clear from the findings that the approach requires significant changes in assessment practice.

In 2005 a survey of 100 students undertaken by London Business School led to the realization that the MBA focus was too exclusively focused on technical and functional knowledge, the requirement was effective interaction (Hurn, 2006). An interesting view of excellence in business education is "usually considered in relation to balanced performance levels in pre-defined performance dimensions," (Anninos and Chytiris, 2011: 883) which supports business action. The excellence concept entails: "broad education, critical approach, ability to reflect on the impact of management in a wider context and constantly improve." (Anninos and Chytiris, 2011: 887). However, these authors argue that a focus on the provision of strictly specialized management education, using a functionalistic approach, fails to develop a mentality of excellence in students and the de-legitimization of management as a profession.

An insight into the developments of management education suggests that it is perceived by students as the: "acquisition of a commodity as if management knowledge was a technique like double entry bookkeeping" (Wilson 2015:25) which is taught via insular disciplines and is validated when leading to an enhanced economic circumstance. Wilson (2015) argues that management education has an over emphasis on academic studies that frequently do not connect to the chaos and complexity of 21st century organizational life. This could be addressed via additional vocational education and recognition of the value of critical thinking to encompass context and change over time.

Wilson (2015) concludes that learning how to talk about complex issues so that the student is able to communicate ideas that may be imprecise and possibly non-rational to others. To achieve this may require the inclusion of elements of cause and effect and an acknowledgement of the difference between proof and opinion which requires "untangling the threads of complexity," (Wilson, 2015:31).

Undertaking experiential learning, defined as: "the development of personal understanding and skills through the analysis of, and reflection on, activity" (Moody, 2012:16) which, when made explicit and shared with others, adds value to the learning (Cunningham, 2006). The use of scenario assessment in a role play setting has the potential for learners to experiment by initiating links between academic theory and practice as memorable experiences occur (Moody, 2012) with the potential to continue beyond the immediate learning.

Meyer (2016) eloquently refers to threshold concepts related to a particular social construct where a concept is a matter of disciplinary consensus. In order to develop learning that goes beyond a grasp of threshold concepts, a basic social process occurs. Boyatzis (1982) had previously referred to threshold competencies as deductive reasoning and memory, which need to be adequate, but repetition at this level does not enhance professional effectiveness.

In more recent work Boyatzis, Rochford and Cavanagh (2017) undertook work with engineering graduates suggesting that a shared vision is of greatest value in acquiring organizational effectiveness and subsequent success. This is underpinned by the view of others in terms of reputational effectiveness, convincing others by getting support from key peoples and the adoption of an overall strategy to cope with unexpected results. The acquisition of these skills or traits via emotional and social intelligence indicated a dramatic improvement in older professionals on an executive programme where the "image of the desired future becomes a magnet, dreaming is the key" (Boyatzis, et al. 2017:82).

Several rationales for attending and participating in an Executive programme have been identified by Narayandas and Moldoveanu (2016) to address the volatility, uncertainty,

ambiguity and complexity of the prevailing business landscape. Views are based on the acquisition of skills which are applicable, relevant, useful and address the elusive goal of skill transfer. It is clear that a wide range of outcomes are both anticipated and expected as a result of attendance. Amongst the outcomes is a complex mix of elements which include persuasion, acting and argumentation skill which "fit with a way of being" (Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2016:29) and encapsulates teaching which utilises patient guidance found within the approach of savvy coaches to encourage dynamic, social and personal learning.

There is some evidence of deeper insight into moving beyond the learning threshold in the view that "competency development may be viewed as outside the domain of management educators – particularly in university settings," (Buckley and Monks, 2008:147). The system designed by these authors specifically transferred learning back to the organizations that are "relevant to the 'swampy lowlands' that most managers inhabit," (Buckley and Monks, 2008:147). This view concurs with the suggestion that executive education should address: "the radical difference between the make believe civilized setting of the executive classroom and the 'reality laden' messy, political setting of the corporate suite." (Moldoveanu and Narayandes 2016:31). Executive teaching should, therefore, subsequently enhance higher-order competencies that drive other skills and abilities which have similarities with the notion of cross-understanding of others mental models (Huber and Lewis, 2011). Adopting this approach should not occur in isolation but should clearly link to changes occurring in the immediate environments of their learners. This requires the practice of developmental dialogue (Buckley and Monks, 2008) which is life-centred rather than subject-oriented; as would be expected when considering career progression. It is the view of Morais-Storz and Nguyen (2017) that it behoves the manager not only to learn how to survive in an environment where turbulence and uncertainty are ever-present qualities but to thrive in it. Learning would encompass discarding of old routines and introduce a social process of problem formulation. Novelty incorporation with the aim of disrupting the tried and tested approaches that managers use when seeking to solve problems requires the ability to interpret and apply concepts and frameworks that has clear similarities to habits of mind referred to by Wilson (2015) and a metamorphosis as old routines are discarded and new ones acquired (Morais-Storz and Nguyen, 2017). It is acknowledged that, when incorporating development dialogue, the delivery team rescind total control over the outcomes of the assessments as the focus shift towards situational learning.

Ensuring that knowledge translates into action through viewing "managers as practical investigators and performing actors" (Berggren and Söderland, 2011:383) is the best fit emerging from the literature in relation to the research question and emphasises the importance of articulation and visualization of key findings, which is supported through participation in a knowledge theatre. Encouraging these aspects of learning strives to achieve memory-building presentations which are both knowledgeable and imaginative that subsequently leads to diffusing and sharing knowledge and later implementation. Berggren and Söderland (2011) propose that articulation plays an important role in making experiences accessible and also provide a vital link to organizational development.

Building on the notion of a threshold concept being the initial stage of a basic social process, this paper proposes a greater use of scenario assessments as "professional skillsets used by managers in the workplace, business education is a relevant venue for considering additional forms of learning evaluation". (Burke-Smalley, 2014:274). The use of scenarios requires "an ability to make clear, concise and impactful presentations to others" (Boyatzis and Kilb, 1995:14) and is a skill where an individual innovates

within the prevailing environment and strives to initiate actions through the maximisation of time and efforts. Undertaking this type of activity goes beyond threshold skills to encompass managing group processes, acquiring positive regard from others and the utilisation of entrepreneurial persuasions.

Reference to assessment requiring a form of spoken word is acknowledge by Burke-Smalley (2014) as a good test of several aspects including depth of understanding, the ability to organize ideas and use language as a means of expressing ideas. In addition these authors highlight professional skillsets used by managers in the workplace and the relevance of considering additional forms of learning evaluation for business education.

In summary the literature suggests a shortfall in both the range and usefulness of assessment in relation to executive education in order to move beyond thresholds and work towards overall credibility within a range of management situations.

3. METHODOLOGY

Classic grounded theory techniques and principles have been adhered to during the compilation and conceptualization of the basic social process of perceptive familiarizing. This section presents an abbreviated introduction of the stand-alone methodology and progresses to provide a commentary on one aspect of classic grounded theory, the basic social process which is the nature of perceptive familiarizing.

The goal of classic grounded theory, which has the flexibility to be applicable to any study and a wide range of data types, is to discover and generate a conceptually integrated theory (Holton and Walsh 2016). This is achieved through obtaining, coding and analysing data systematically (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

This study is specific and based on a relatively small sample size of 16 respondents, where no previous theory resolved the concerns expressed. Grounded theory techniques were utilised and developed intimate links to data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to develop theory from the data.

There is no intention to prove a hypothesis or verify previous theories and therefore an inductive approach is the stance adopted by the researcher which avoids the imposition of existing research frameworks, (Maylor, Blackmon and Huemann, 2017) during the analysis of the empirical data. Induction supports the emergence of theory (Gray, 2017) a core element of grounded theory.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasise that a theory should support the prediction and explanation of behaviours; contribute to theoretical advances; be useful in practical applications, which assists in practitioner control and understanding of the situation. Theorizing, to create new insights requires imagination and discipline (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017) with a specific problem to be solved via thought trials to refine and select criteria of relevance to the problem. Furthermore, there should be a perspective on the behaviours in relation to the data and finally an offering of guidance and style. Therefore the research should commence with a defined purpose, which become modified as new theoretical positions or understandings emerge (Gray, 2017). In this study the defined purpose has been stated as generating a theory to resolve the managerial shortfall in confidence and professional behaviours for the Executive MBA student.

Progressing through grounded theory techniques requires an exploration of concepts by engaging in constant comparison. Careful reading of each data set is required to establish

meaning and concepts which are then compared with the next text to ascertain similarities and disparities (O'Leary and Hunt, 2016). A set of categories that can be linked to explain the process (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017) are collated as data collection and constant comparison proceeds and results in the illumination of a social process around which a core category is based. Theoretical sampling through the selection of similar cases, which is applicable to this study, helps to build validity in relation to the emerging theory (Gray, 2017). Due to the nature of the study the sample was based on purposive principles as the respondents required an insight to the nature of the concern. The participants were heterogeneous, or nested within a group.

The grounded theory in this study is substantive and empirical and relates to an area of sociological inquiry, namely the acquisition of executive business skills that are practised in the board room. It has relative endurance as the core concepts of the proposed theory are largely stable (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017). Substantiation is achieved by a comparative analysis between groups within the same area; this procedure was followed as all the respondents were enrolled on an Executive MBA programme at the time of data collection. In collecting the data: "One simply goes where a data cache exists." (Glaser, 2007:88), which, in this study, is the student cohort.

Comparative analysis places "a high emphasis on theory as process," (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:32), meaning it is developmental, and reflects the reality of social interaction. Publications present the theory as a momentary product.

The problem was studied without any preconceived theory dictates, enabling grounded theory procedures to be followed in order to generate a substantive theory, in the first instance, from the data. Subsequent actions are to establish "which of diverse formal theories are, perhaps, applicable for furthering additional substantive formulations." (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:34). This approach enhances objectivity and reduces theoretical bias as the cumulative knowledge progressively builds up from facts which are drawn from a search of the literature linked to diverse bodies of knowledge which are relevant to the study.

3.1 Basic Social Process

Glaser and Strauss (1967) allude to theory as a process, which was evident in this study following the data collection, coding and comparative analysis, thereby adhering to well-established grounded theory techniques. Social processes may be defined as: "observable and repetitive patterns of social interaction that have a consistent direction or quality" (Bardis, 1979). The form of a social process is similar to a series of frames in the roll of a movie, rather than a single snapshot and enables the dynamic aspects of human society to be further understood. .

According to Weiner (2007) a basic social process has a relationship with changes in conditions that result in patterns of action and interaction. This requires a movement from one phase to another, supported by a form of contact and communication (Green, 2016). A basic social process assists in the acquisition of a more complete picture (Charmaz, 2008) through the use of grounded theory methods to probe beneath the surface and raise description to abstract categories.

Glaser and Holton (2005) explain that a basic social process views a social problem from the perspective of continuing social organization and concur with Bardis (1979) that they are not static in nature. Within the social process there is contributory action which supplies behaviours to an unfolding, interpretive shaping of events.

3.2 Sample

To ensure a thorough insight into the problem was acquired, a purposive sampling approach was adopted to include respondents with knowledge about the subject being studied (Pergert, 2009) and in a similar situation (Jones, 2009). Selecting purposive sampling is "the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses. It is a non-random technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of informants." (Tongco, 2007: 147).

The majority of applicants enrolling on an Executive MBA programme have a mid-career profile and are, in the main, aspirational in terms of career progression and promotion. They may already have experienced employment in multiple organizations; they may have graduated or gained promotion through early personal performance. They frequently have an awareness of personal skill gaps from organizational appraisals or their own recognition. Therefore the sample has the expected criteria of purposiveness.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Individuals seeking an Executive MBA qualification during the period 2015 - 2018, typically have 14-years work experience (www.embac.org) and therefore will be aged from mid-thirties upwards. They have lived in turbulent times experiencing the demise of the university milk-round where employers actively enticed graduates to join them with an expectation of vocational and professional training, induction, a permanent position with a job description and clear terms and conditions. This anticipation would be followed by staged career progression, depending on performance, culminating in a satisfactory pension provision.

The Executive MBA student is still career hungry and has relevant insights into the business environment including the complexities and challenges and may have experienced working life in multiple organizations. Many have a first degree or gained promotion through their own efforts and have reached a stage where reflecting on future opportunities and alternative choices occurs. Potential students frequently have an awareness of personal skill gaps which may emerge from organizational appraisals or their own recognition.

A traditional post-graduate MBA programme should address the subject knowledge gaps and develop the ability to utilise the theoretical knowledge to solve problems of relevance to business and management, leading to improvements which are sufficiently developed that they indicate where and how they could be applied. Written work or a classroom based presentation has been the usual, traditional method of assessment; however these approaches omit to address actual corporate practice and it is also evident that many teachers and lecturers lack expertise in this area.

Usual practice, carried out over several years, was that during modular delivery, just beyond the threshold, the assignment is introduced and provides a framework for the learner to absorb the newly acquired knowledge and forge it, both individually and in a group or team setting, to craft a response to the assignment problem. At post-graduate level the expectation is to operationalize theoretical constructs and, for higher achievers, to synthesise which indicates the ability to demonstrate substantial realising of the assignment scenario which completes the basic social process of perceptive familiarising, illustrated is figure 1: the basic social process of Perceptive Familiarising.

Figure 1: Basic Social Process of Perceptive Familiarising

Direction of progress →

Inaugurating Practices

Substantial Realising

Absorbing

Forging
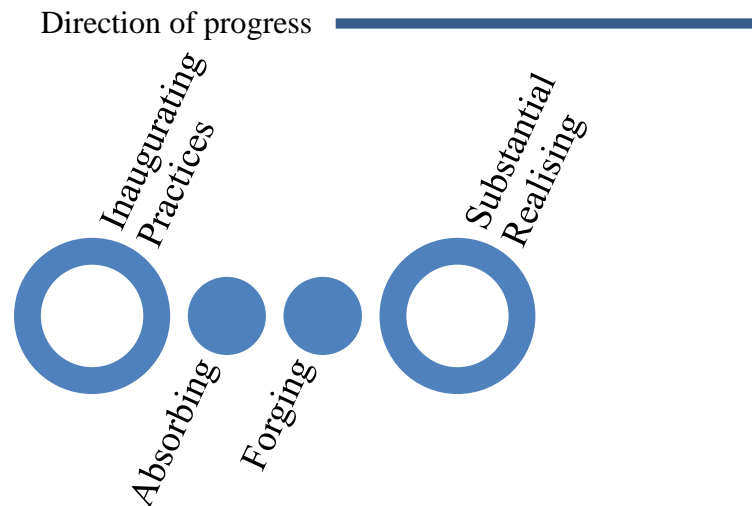
Undertaking a traditional written assignment indicates the ability to research the literature, select and apply theory, and draw conclusions. The remaining gap, identified in the pre-validation process, however, is the lack of the executive behaviours to persuade and align, with the necessary gravitas, within a management setting. Scenario assessment has the potential to close the identified gap.

This approach has been trialled in an Executive MBA programme where the cohort of 16 is made up of students from different organizations and a range of sectors; all of whom provided data for the study, resulting in a purposive sample.

The rationale for our choice is a deliberate approach in order to draw on the experiences and problems encountered by students. This foundation progressed to ascertain what activities and actions are required to design a solution. This emerged in the form of evidence throughout the data collection and subsequent analysis using comparative coding which complies with established grounded theory practice.

Levels of motivation are high and beyond knowledge acquisition student priorities are career development. The course and curriculum was designed to provide modular consultancy opportunities to solve organisational problems of relevance to business and management, linked to bodies of academic knowledge, but also to embed professional practitioner behaviours and skills.

In vivo data from the students includes the telling comments: "*theory is relatively easy, it is the practice that is difficult*" and "*I want to be like you, the pace at which you interpret, suggest and summarise – on the hoof –that is what I need to do back at work.*" Other feedback states: "*we use case studies, we discuss relevant material, but it lacks the edginess of how we operate at work*" A further data extract is: "*we have induction and some initial training in processes and procedures but nobody prepares you to respond and experience vocal disagreement that contributes to the live pressure of more senior management expectations.*"

Whilst the debate around the extent to which being a manager is a profession ensues, this was articulated in the data as: "*My doctor practices medicine and our finance department practices accountancy, I want to manage with the same status these careers are accorded.*" In terms of traits, the data set revealed: "*you have aplomb,*" "*there is an air of authority about you,*" and "*it is clear to me that your status is recognised, that's what I want.*"

From the data collection interviews the sub-category of inaugurating practices emerged as being a concern, from the theoretical knowledge, the students required an opportunity to be the equivalent of a junior doctor and practice what they had learnt. In the field of medicine a senior doctor is frequently available to answer questions or reinforce decisions; the Executive MBA student lacks this direct equivalent, in many instances. This is more noticeable as the evolution of organizational structures flattens away from the typical 20th century hierarchy made up of several layers with clear demarcation and seniority.

Therefore, it was becoming clear that the classroom requires an educational extension to enable inaugurating practice to occur, with interaction and feedback. To achieve the solution was the replication of a management meeting or board meeting, with formal behaviours and a less cosy or matey environment of team or group working to experience feelings that result from a situation where potential isolation and conflict emerge, in advance of resolution and decision-making. This depicts the concept of inauguration in this setting, a beginning of practice and clearly extends beyond the traditional boundaries of a prescribed case study or pre-prepared presentation focused on power point slides.

Learning in this practical manner, where the application of theory into practice is expected supports the notion of absorbing, which the data articulates as: "*I need to take it in, thoroughly*" and "*I need to know, then apply*". The practitioner takes in, soaks up, or absorbs knowledge due to the level of immersion and interest they have in the subject matter. They are required to be in a managerial state where preparing, participating, articulating, potentially defending and interpreting the views of others is a frequent task and reflects the working day of many management roles. Setting up a scenario where all these procedures are taking place whilst being assessed engenders a scenario that ensures practical and behavioural management skills are being put into practice. The speed of response that is expected is far more rapid, verging on being immediate than in the formal presentation situation, the environment in which the assessment takes is turbulent and encourages the development of resilience and self-adaptation as the balance of the situation changes and progresses.

Whilst the absorption of theory goes a stage beyond inauguration, the individual needs to then craft or forge their own practice. A data extract is "*it feels like hammering it out*" and "*I want to trim the theory so the relevant parts fit the situation.*" It is telling that one comment is: "*I don't feel like the finished article in our management meetings, I need styling, if that is the right phrase*" which links with: "*I still feel I have rough edges, there are gaps and hesitations in my style, it doesn't feel that I don't know my stuff, more that my spoken work needs to be better connected.*" There are similarities with the statement: "*My reflection is that I need to be more polished, I don't mean posh, I mean connected, with a clear flow.*"

The data merges through from knowledge absorbing, which is and individual process from external to internal when considering the notion of forging, which consists largely of reflection. From this position in the basic social process there is clear realisation, which requires substantiation to resolve the concern. In terms of executive education the students seek sources for this substantiation which, the data suggests, incorporates example, potentially in the form of a role model. Examples provided from the data are: *my line manager*, *a more senior somewhat distant manager*, *a character from a novel or movie*, *a lecturer* and *a family member*.

Beyond the identification of an individual per se the data collection encouraged the cohort to articulate what behaviours and visual elements were desirable in the identified individual. What emerged from the data is a range of visible behaviours that students

aspired to possess. They are: convincing, inclusive, enthusiastic, dynamic, and knowledgeable. Beyond this list there was having the confidence to ask for the views and opinions of others, being reliable, following-up, and the ability to be together. It was a clearly identifiable concern to the students that they wished to possess and practice these traits within the roles; they were perceived as being career enhancing.

To resolve the concern the students identified practise as the way to close the gap in their personal practice which is encompassed within the concept of substantive realising. However the over-arching core category is the concept of perceptive familiarising. This concept is made up of two elements, first the personal insight or perceptions which are provided by the data. There is an acknowledgement of entering a domain of knowledge, which would appear to consist of testing out, potentially in a tentative manner as the inaugurating stage is experienced. The use of a gerund, which is widely practised throughout classic grounded theory, suggests continuance, a movement from one place to another. When linking a gerund with the concept of substantiation the social process is abstract and devoid of time, place and people, therefore again complying with the recognised outcomes of a substantive grounded theory. To achieve a substantive position, in any walk of life, usually requires evidence of expertise and experience, in the case of the Executive, this aspect may also be supported by credentials.

Realising also has an emerging feel which may begin in a sporadic manner before gaining greater prominence and embedding as a precursor to action. It is the synthesis of the two elements which provide new knowledge in the area of executive education. The achievement of this state appears to be a shortfall in many current post graduate executive courses, which is a reoccurring theme in the relevant literature.

When assignments were presented as a scenario requiring research, discussion, evaluating, debate, challenging and ultimately agreeing a course of action occurred. The students demonstrated interpretation - the inaugurating practices - and focused on proposing actions as they absorbed the context and forged an individual response which required interpretation and the ability to prioritise, select and defend. The scenario content took over and students enacted the role they stated as a personal aspiration. In this way the students became more familiar with the ways in which a corporate discussion progresses, due to the nature of the scenario. There is a sense of recognition related to individual capability within a setting which is clear progression to a state of substantial realising. This may have previously been viewed as beyond individual scope and grasp. The range of visible behaviours such as proposing, decision making and offering viable solutions became evident during progress along the continuum of the basic social process of perceptive familiarizing and ultimately makes a difference to learning.

Classic grounded theory raises analysis from descriptive to conceptual and the goal is the generation of new theory. As an emergent concept perceptive familiarising currently lacks a presence in the literature, however an initial definition is the acquisition of learning through situational practice, which is individually shaped and leads to increased levels of perception, familiarity and ease with the skills and techniques being assessed via a scenario.

5. DISCUSSION

As a result of this research, the assessments for the Executive MBA programme have been revised and there are now a reduced number of written assessments and presentations which are prepared in advance of delivery to include scenarios.

The scenario assessment is written in a manner which enables students to conduct a business meeting where professional behaviours are a prerequisite and there is a clear problem or opportunity that requires decisions to be reached, followed by actions that are specified by the students. The outcome is a non-traditional, interactive assessment method and a proportion of the mark allocation originates from critical debate, insight and business behaviour. A trial to include peer responses and interpretations is planned as a result of the enthusiasm from the early cohorts. This further strengthens the developmental dialogue content and reflects organizational practice with a great degree of accuracy. Individual roles for the scenario are allocated through discussion and, in the absence of volunteering or agreement, the tutor would make the selections, though, to date, this has not been required. The roles may include senior positions within human resources, marketing, operations, finance, business development and a chair. Students are encouraged to select a role which they are interested in, or aspire to work within.

Anticipating the assessment being troublesome (Meyer, 2016) at times, reflects the chaos and complexity (Wilson, 2015) that occurs when attempting to convince others (Boyatzis, et al, 2017). However the aim is to ensure that a memorable experience occurs (Moody, 2012), to provide a pathway from threshold learning in a situation where the student is absorbing before pitching and forging responses that appeal to others. There have been occurrences of disagreement and discomfort which are familiar issues within the corporate arena and provide additional learning.

In undertaking the preparation, the student is expected to adopt a way of being (Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2016) which reflects business life in the swampy lowlands that most managers inhabit (Buckley and Monks, 2008) in that there is no one right or wrong answer or solution to the scenario and there is ambiguity. To enter the assessment arena students are guided towards the organization of their ideas (Burke-Smalley, 2014). Success is measured by achieving a consensus between the participants, supported by a clear and precise course of action that is documented. The assessment process is expected to incorporate developmental dialogue (Buckley and Monks, 2008) as part of the proposal scenario and a realisation that elements of the corporate world are embedded in turbulence and uncertainty (Morais-Storz and Ngugyen, 2017). Enactment can be equated to the notion of a knowledge theatre (Berggren and Soderland, 2011) which the literature acknowledges bears scant resemblance to civilised settings experienced within the classroom where the majority of executive programmes are conducted.

Assessment has been considered in many previous studies and the literature identifies there is a problem with executive assessment meeting the needs of contemporary business. To address this gap in practice it is proposed that greater courage is required in the design and setting of assessments to more accurately reflect business practice, where a theoretical insight may be used in order to explain, illustrate and even interpret, reflecting cross-understanding (Huber and Lewis, 2011). However, this is merely the foundation of debate and discussion as a means of practice to acquire higher order competencies expected in the board room arena. To achieve this change, which, experience suggests, has the potential to meet with resistance by conservative quality departments and requires combined and sustained effort by programme leaders of executive education. Approaching this aim in conjunction with the major stakeholder, namely the employer, demonstrates that academia is receptive to developing new educational processes and ensures an evidenced argument is put forward during validation events.

The initial findings are an enthusiastic response from the students who relish the opportunity to practice skills required at corporate level; and the scenario is addressing the concerns which emerged from the data. The level of task absorption and animated preparation being observed is exemplary. There are numerous occurrences of tenacity, the ability to prioritise, persuade, defend and reinforce with confidence to engage in professional debate leading to the co-creation of knowledge which is frequently lacking in other forms of assessment. The written reflections students are providing endorse this view and enthusiastically endorse the scenario initiative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The early scenarios have been written in a manner which encourages a cohort of up to 20 students to work in unity as this reflects the current size of student groups in the host University. To develop executive skills further it is recommended that trials be continued in order to gain additional feedback and contemporary to fine tune the method. In addition undertake scenario assessment in other bodies of knowledge, for example financial modules requiring a range of calculations to reach an outcome or solution to broaden the scope of the method.

Where employer relationships are established, potentially through knowledge transfer partnerships or consultancy, asking for actual business problems that could be anonymised, but still acknowledged, into an assessment is also recommended. This approach has the potential to result in greater benefits for industry and subsequent value to practitioners.

The success of the initial scenarios is clear in the basic social process and the various ways in which this type of assessment can be utilised should be expanded to other professional programmes. Training in writing scenarios of a contemporary and subsequently facilitating the assessment may also prove beneficial to members of staff in terms of marking schemes and provision of feedback to add value in the academic arena.

6. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Outcomes resulting from interactions with employers in order to collect additional data and encourage meaningful debate would strengthen the case for assessment revisions. This should be followed by courageous experimentation in the format and setting of assessment for executive education.

As the method receives greater recognition, ensure the scenarios continue to be fit for purpose in a business setting that is based on issues requiring attention to support the evolution of higher education in conjunction with business priorities and expectations of the sector.

REFERENCES

Anninos, L. N., & Chytiris, L. (2011). Searching for excellence in business education. *The Journal of Management Development*, 30(9), 882-892.

Bamford, D., Karjalainen, K. & Jenavs, E. (2012). "An evaluation of problem- based assessment in teaching operations management". *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, Vol. 32 Issue: 12:.1493-1514.

Bardis, P.D. (1979). Social Interaction and Social Processes. *Social Science,* Vol. 55, No. 33: 147-167.

Berggren, C. & Söderlund, J. (2011). Management Education for Practicing Managers; Combining Academic Rigor With Personal Change and Organizational Action. *Journal of Management Education.* 35(3): 377-405.

Buckley, F. & Monks, K. (2008). Responding to Manager's Learning Needs in an Edge-of-Chaos Environment: Insights from Ireland. *Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 32, No. 2: 146-163.

Burke-Smalley, L.A. (2014). Using Oral Exams to Assess Communication Skills in Business Courses. *Business and Professional Communication quarterly,* Vol. 77(3): 266-280.

Charmaz, K. (2008) Constructing Grounded Theory, Sage Publications, London.

Dominguinhos, P.M.C., & Carvalho, L.M.C. (2009). "Promoting business creation through real world experience: Projecto Começar", Education + Training, Vol. 51 Issue: 2: 150-169.

Garavan, T.N, Barnicle, B, & O'Suilleabhain F., (1999) "Management development: contemporary trends, issues and strategies", Journal of European Industrial Training, Vol. 23 Issue: 4/5: 191-207.

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research. Aldine Transaction, New Jersey, USA.

Glaser, B.G. (2007). Doing Formal Grounded Theory: A Proposal, Sociology Press, Mill Valley, CA.

Glaser, B.G. and Holton, J. (2005). Basic Social Processes. Grounded Theory Review, Vol. 4, Iss 3, 1-27.

Gray, D.E. (2017). Doing Research in the Business World, Sage Publications, London.

Green, J. (2016). Frontier Rescinding. RC33 Conference Proceedings, 9th International Conference on Social Science Methodology, University of Leicester, 11-16 September 2016. https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/sociology/research/rc33-conference/3_Green.pdf.

Holton, J.A, & Walsh, I. (2016). Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative & Quantitative Data, Sage Publications, London.

Huber, G.P. & Lewis, K (2011) Cross-Understanding and Shared Social Theory. *Academy of Management Review.* Vol. 36, Iss. 2: 422-424.

Jones, J. (2009) Selection of Grounded Theory as an Appropriate Research Methodology for a Dissertation: One Student's Perspective. *Grounded Theory Review.* Vol. 8 No. 2: 23-34.

Mateu, J.M. & March-Chorda, I. (2016). "Searching for better business models assessment methods". *Management Decision*, Vol. 54 Issue: 10, pp.2433-2446.

Maylor, H., Blackmon, K. & Huemann, M. (2017). Researching Business and Management, 2nd Edn. Palgrave, London.

Meyer, J.H.F. (2016). Threshold concepts and pedagogic representation. *Education & Training,* Vol. 58, No. 5: 463-475.

Millett, S.M. (2012) "Four decades of business scenarios: what can experience teach?" Strategy & Leadership, Vol. 41 Issue: 1:.29-33,

Moldoveanu, M.C., & Narayandas, D. (2016). The Skills Gap and the Near-Far Problem in Executive Education and Leadership Development. Harvard Business School Working Paper, No. 17-019.

Morais-Storz, M. & Nguyen, N. (2017) The role of unlearning in metamorphosis and strategic resilience. *The Learning Organization.* Vol. 24, Iss. 2: 93-106.

Narayandas, D, & Moldoveanu, M.C. (2016) Executive Development Programs: Enter the Digital Vortex: I. Disrupting the Demand Landscape. Harvard Business School Working Paper, No. 17-020.

Olsson, A., Bjöörn, U. & Jönson, G. (2008) Experiential learning in retrospect: a future organisational challenge? Journal of Workplace Learning, 20 (6): 431-442.

O'Leary, Z. & Hunt, J.S. (2016). Workplace Research: Conducting small-scale research in organizations, Sage Publications, London.

Pergert, P. (2009) Methodological Learning-by-doing: Lessons learned and rewards. *Grounded Theory Review,* Vol. 8, No. 2: 65-76.

Shepherd, D.A. and Suddaby, R. (2017) Theory Building: A Review and Integration, *Journal of Management.* Vol. 43, No. 1: 59-86.

Tomkins, L. & Ulus, E. (2016). Oh, was that experiential learning? Spaces, synergies and surprises with Kolb's learning cycle. *Management Learning,* Vol.47 (2): 158-178.

Wiener, C. (2007). Making Teams Work in Conducting Grounded Theory. The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory, Edited by Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, Sage Publications, London pp. 293-310.

Wilson, R.G. (2015). The Loss of Balance Between the Art and Science of Management: observations on the British Experience of Education for Management in the 20th Century. *Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 39(1): 16-35.

www.embac.org Executive MBA Council, electronically accessed on 19 December 2017

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/understanding-assessment.pdf

www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution