
Editorial

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1 Introduction

This Special Issue on Qualitative Methods and the Dynamics of Change seeks to offer new approaches to or extensions of qualitative research methods within the domain of organisational change and learning. Qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live (Myers and Avison, 2002). They are especially useful in exploring and capturing the dynamics of organisational change and learning, as they provide unique insights into the fabric of organisational life, processes and discourses which are not captured by other methods. These are pressing concerns for both practitioners and researchers – how might they design, conduct and evaluate organisational research that uses qualitative methods?

This Special Issue is in keeping with the mission of *International Journal of Learning and Change (IJLC)* which has as its prime focus the connections, inter-relationships and the methods and processes of learning and its impact on change. The journal lays

particular stress on the creation and implementation of knowledge (Liyanage, 2005, p.1). Its key objective is to “develop, promote and deepen our understanding of learning in technological, social and economic settings”. The journal covers contemporary issues in individual and organisational learning and change and the management of change. It addresses both theoretical and practical issues that have a high relevance to reforming and revitalising organisational capability, knowledge and intellectual assets. Learning is essential to individuals and organisations, whilst change is inevitable and needs to be managed wherever possible. The advancement of human knowledge and understanding of organisational learning and appropriate responses to the process of change determine social and economic progress. The journal is dedicated to both theoretical development and practical understanding of issues pertaining to learning and change, especially the process of learning and change in science- and technology-driven developments and applications. *IJLC* focuses on the sustainable development, efficacy, and ethics of learning and change. Organisational change can be facilitated by or can enable learning.

There are many different types of qualitative research methods, ranging from action research through to case study and ethnographic research. There are also different philosophical perspectives that can be taken, numerous ways of analysing qualitative data, and a variety of writing styles and genres of presentation. As Editors of this Special Issue, we took an inclusive and pluralistic approach. Authors were able to use any qualitative method or even use multiple method approaches. Submissions were invited which addressed aspects of organisational change and learning, with a focus on method rather than purely on results themselves. We sought analytical (not descriptive) papers covering any aspect of change and/or learning within any organisational context, with a methodological focus, with either a single method or approaches integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods in innovative ways.

2 Qualitative and mixed methods

Qualitative and mixed method research designs may be seen as approaches rather than techniques and, whilst the papers presented in this Special Issue focus on a variety of techniques, they have in common an emphasis on understanding the dynamics of particular phenomena rather than ‘freezing the world’ (Richards, 2005). They seek the actor or insider’s viewpoint rather than any objective stance. Our aim here is to offer papers that explore new or extensions of existing research methods, not merely tried and tested ones such as case studies. We believe that there is a need to highlight new contributions to the diversity of qualitative research options to researchers and to give guidance on developing new valid methods to early researchers. The body of qualitative research is evolving and growing in confidence – especially for young researchers – and there is more recognition of the importance of theory building and knowledge construction not simply theory testing. There is growing evidence in many areas, not just management research, of interest in how people actually think and create new knowledge, and what organisational processes stimulate and sustain these. With a wide choice of rigorous interpretative approaches to method within the qualitative paradigm, here we focus on a few innovative ones. These will, we hope, interest the practitioner and the established researcher but importantly, will provide new resources for those meeting qualitative data or the opportunity to collect such data for the first time. Like Richards (2005) we think that there is little help available to the novice qualitative researcher, with

some exceptions (Mason, 1996; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Richards, 2005; Silverman, 2004).

3 The papers

There are six papers presented here from international researchers at different stages of their research careers and a variety of academic disciplines. Strong themes that emerge from the papers are a focus on holistic approaches, on linguistic and narrative analysis, the major importance of multi-method approaches, especially the growing interest in and usefulness of action research, and the use of computer packages to assist in qualitative data analysis.

Annick Janson, Lester Levy and Robert McQueen describe a research approach that uses narrative analysis in a new way to study self selected leaders in an online environment. What is new about their approach is that it extends a narrative psychotherapeutic methodology in which in narrative terms, a re-authoring process resulted in leaders producing an 'archetypal' success story to inspire others towards engaging in change processes. Using a multidisciplinary approach the main contribution of this study is to integrate narrative elements of online collaboration into a description of the spontaneous emergence of virtual leadership. It also shows the strength of the narrative framework in its use for both data collection (i.e., interviews which are qualitative by definition) and data analysis – without the constraints of shifting paradigm between the two. Hence, an additional consideration for using the narrative approach developed here is its potential to act as 'scaffolding' for theory building/analysis.

The next paper, by Margit Raich also studies leadership, though using an approach to social construction which builds up a holistic view based on those of individuals. "How to Accept Complexity – How to Demand Simplicity: A Holistic View of Leadership. A Case Study", uses linguistic analysis to explore the social construction of leadership by individuals participating in an organisation. In the paper an analysis of leadership develops from knowledge systems of hierarchically organised *gestalten* trees, causal nets and individual evaluations, using a computer supported qualitative method-GABEK. The method helps to link individual values and organisational processes and demonstrates that leadership is expressed in the unique character of an organisation. Finally the paper points out the importance of alternative qualitative methods to provide further insights into the field of leadership research.

Liliana Erakovic also uses computer assisted data analysis to look at change in a public sector context, using a multi-theory and multi-method approach. Its contribution is to demonstrate how two different research techniques can be used to increase the robustness of research. Inductive content analysis of annual reports is performed using NUD*IST software. Content analysis enables the identification of themes and patterns in secondary data and interview data are treated as reflexive evidence of the respondent's construction of causality and relationships and are used to validate structured interpretation of organisational documents. Here a combination of content analysis and reflexive interviews leads to the development of the idea of change pathways and the study provides a unique contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of change in organisations during ownership transition.

Continuing the theme of mixed or multi-method, Vicki Little, Judy Motion and Roderick Brodie focus on action research-based approaches to knowledge creation, showing how a staged multi-method, action research-based approach can illuminate complex change and learning oriented phenomena. Such projects are challenging and complex to manage, though they provide deep and rich contributions to knowledge. They offer improved insights into managerial practices and are an effective means of building bridges between academe and the business community, and increasing the relevance of academic research. When developing knowledge about organisational behaviour and change, the authors argue that organisations and their operating environments should be treated in their entirety; studies of problems benefit from multi-method designs including multiple informants. Finally the paper examines how researchers can elicit both explicit and tacit knowledge through the use of multi-method multi-stage research designs.

Middel and McNichols use an action learning/action research approach to examine processes and develop a practical learning model to promote and facilitate inter-organisational change as part of a collaborative improvement process. The experiential issues in relation to inter-organisational action research are discussed and action learning/research is shown as a way to achieve a unique insight into the operational and learning patterns involved in a collaborative improvement process. Implementing a learning strategy is difficult in practice, however managers and their collaborative partners who fail to 'maximise the opportunity' to learn from mutual improvement processes are in danger of falling behind in the competitive marketplace. The authors argue that action learning is an approach designed to tackle the difficulties of organisational change and inter-organisational innovation in practice, and provides a practical methodology to instil a capacity for learning.

Finally, Liliana Erakovic, Thomas Forster and Suchi Mouly draw on a rich selection of cases to make interesting international contrasts which demonstrate that social actions that create dynamic endogenous change can be documented and robust conclusions drawn. The authors describe the use of qualitative research in the study of dynamic ongoing processes of organisational and industrial change in a variety of international settings, in each of which change arose from the corporatisation or privatisation of state-owned enterprises and industries in the wake of economic liberalisation. In the context of studying the change process, two defining characteristics of the qualitative research method, namely, the focus on interpretation, rather than quantification, and concern with the context are shown to be particularly important.

We would like to thank all contributors: we received some excellent manuscripts for the Special Issue and we regret that, due to time constraints, some good manuscripts had to be rejected. Our thanks also go to all reviewers, and especially Editor-in-Chief Shantha Liyanage, for all their help and support.

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