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Lyons, Kevin D.; Stolk, Paul; and Young, Tamara, "Reflective practice method in tourism research: A qualitative case study of engaging tourism enterprises in a quantitative research project" (2015). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 12.
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Introduction

Attempts to bridge the divide between interpretive and positivist research traditions and the methods they inform, have presented challenges for tourism researchers. The occasional foray into mixed method designs in tourism studies is one path that has sought to capitalise upon the strengths of both methods (Mason et al., 2010). However, mixed methods typically function as a form of triangulation with the qualitative phase providing depth and richness and the quantitative phase providing validity and generalizability of findings (Johnson et al. 2007). An alternative approach is considered in this paper using the critical lens that some qualitative traditions offer, to reflect upon research praxes that shape a quantitative research project. This paper describes and provides a case study example of a methodological approach to applying qualitative critical self-reflective processes in the context of a quantitative study.

Reflective Practice

The critical reflective approach described in this paper draws upon the principles of reflective practice developed by Donald Schön. Schön (1984) recognised that the dominance of a positivist epistemology had shaped the ‘technical-rationality’ that dominated the mindset and functions of practitioners in a wide range of professional settings. Schön (1984) proposed an alternative epistemology of professional practice in which the knowledge inherent in practice is a form of artistry developed through a reflective process.

To this end he proposed a process of reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action. *Reflecting-in-action* involves reflexively thinking on one’s feet, reflecting upon phenomenon and situations as they arise generating a new understanding of the phenomenon (Schön 1983: 68).

Reflection-on-action takes place after a phenomenon or situation has been encountered. The act of reflecting-on-action is a form of self-evaluation upon how one acted as they did, what happened and why. This reflective practice process provides the mechanism by which a practitioner can *assimilate new knowledge* into their existing professional practice. Likewise it can lead to a modification of future practice (Schön 1983).

The reflective practice framework has been utilised in a number of human service professional contexts most notably teaching, nursing and social work professions. Surprisingly, researchers rarely turn the lens on themselves and reflect upon their own professional practice. This is also true in the context of tourism research where reflection upon the research process is typically only undertaken in qualitatively inductive research projects most commonly manifest in the form of reflective research journals used in ethnographic studies (Decrop, 1999). What is missing is an attempt to apply this reflective method to the deductive research contexts that continue to dominate tourism research.

To illustrate how this critical qualitative method might be applied to a quantitative research context a brief case study of its application is presented. This research described in the case study focussed upon a quantitative research project undertaken by the authors. The case study describes how a parallel reflective practice method was concurrently employed.

Research Monitor Case Study

Research Context

The Hunter region is one the premier wine tourism regions in Australia. A well-established network of tourism service industries has consequently emerged. The network includes service sectors such as winery cellar doors, accommodation, restaurants, weddings and conference/events. More than 500 businesses are members of the local wine and tourism association (hereafter referred to as WTA).

As part of its strategic marketing role, the WTA contracted the authors to conduct the 'Tourism Monitor' project. The Tourism Monitor is an ongoing research and reporting process through which market intelligence is gathered, analysed and then shared to WTA members. The data is also used in reports and documents to demonstrate the importance of tourism to local and regional tourism policy makers. The aim of the Tourism Monitor was to collate, analyse and report on quantitative data submitted by members of the WTA. Within this aim, there were three objectives:

- (i) Provide a regular, detailed snapshot of key performance indicators for wine tourism activity in the Hunter Region;
- (ii) Analyse the performance indicator data to identify market opportunities and/or deficiencies specific to wine tourism activity in the Hunter Region, and evaluate the implications for local tourism resources; and
- (iii) Develop a template for regional tourism business monitoring and reporting that has the potential to be adapted to the needs of other local or regional tourism organisations in Australia.

The development and design of the research project followed a well-trodden approach to quantitative research design. Data was collected from WTA members on a monthly basis over a three year period, primarily through the distribution of a questionnaire survey. All of the questionnaires use a consistent, brief format (maximum of 3-4 questions), ask the same questions from one month to the next, and generate quantitative data. Essential to the validity of the data was a high and sustained participation rate among the WTA membership. Over the early phases of the study, it was apparent that attrition from the study was likely to compromise the data validity.

Reflective Practice Method

Concurrent with the quantitative research project, a reflective practice process was undertaken by the team to focus primarily upon the issue of sustaining high participation rates over a 3 year period. *Reflection in-action* undertaken by the research team focussed upon the challenges associated with building and maintaining a large enough sample to ensure results of the research were valid. Reflection-in-action included conducting several meetings where the research team met with local industry champions to explore why an industry that might benefit from the results of a robust research monitor program were not agreeing to participate. Insights about the dominance of SMEs in the region and the potential lack of relevance of the monitors to those who were primarily lifestyle entrepreneurs lead to the development of a series of outreach activities designed to and encourage participation was subsequently put in place.

The *reflection-on-action* process was undertaken after the first year of the project had been completed. This reflective stage lead the research team to look beyond the immediate issue of participant recruitment and retention and provided the research team the opportunity to step back and consider broader issues at play. One of the key insights developed during this period was recognising the role of the research team was one of industry education. It became apparent to the research team that they were playing a central role in educating the WTA about the function, nature and challenges associated with developing research outcomes that are valid and reliable.

The final phase of the reflective process involved the research team *assimilating new knowledge* and insights gathered through reflection in and on action into their repertoire as research practitioners. As a result of these reflective processes the research team re-positioned themselves from being a team of consulting researchers providing data to an industry body to recognising the role they played in what has been described as engaged scholarship (Douglas, 2012).

Engaged scholarship challenges the rigid and compartmentalised distinction between research and community service (Boyer, 1995). Rather, engaged scholarship is built on the principles of discovery, integration and application. Such an approach involves “... a fundamental shift in the way scholars define their relationships with the communities in which they are located” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 6). Alternate ways of doing and knowing, which are central components in the practice of engaged scholarship, are emerging and being embraced (Douglas, 2012).

Conclusion

The application of reflective practice method outlined here provides a valuable qualitative tool that can be applied by researchers as they undertake quantitative research. The strengths of such an approach is that it enables researchers to step back from the research project and to position themselves within it as active subjects – something that is atypical in quantitative research studies. Such an approach provides an alternative mixed method framework. The implications of the application of this method and its limits are explored further in the presentation of this paper.

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