

Investigating the Reciprocity of Interviews with the ‘Online Learner Profiling Questionnaire’ as an Instrument of Triangulation and In-Depth Data Acquisition: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to pilot a bespoke interview method that comprised of an interview schedule, an interview process, and the method of analysis. It has been designed to complement a prerequisite questionnaire instrument called the Online Learner Profiling Questionnaire (OLP) with the main objectives of investigating its compatibility in 1) confirming information collected from the OLP and in 2) generating new data expanding from existing information. The interview method was performed on selected participants of the previous OLP pilot study. The information and theoretical framework from the OLP pilot study allowed for the use of abductive reasoning in negotiating knowledge from the OLP questionnaire, Bourdieu’s theory and interview data. The analysis followed Saldana’s Two Cycle Coding method and employed the processes of Holistic Coding, followed by Initial Coding inclusive of In Vivo and Process coding techniques, and eventually Focused and Axial Coding. Through the use of inductive, abductive and deductive coding, this pilot study revealed that the interview approach is capable of adding further profundity to profiling learners based on their learning and technology dispositions.

Keywords: Online learning, two cycle coding, Bourdieu’s theory

1. Introduction

This pilot study is a sequential companion to a preceding quantitative study that investigated the use of a self-designed Pierre Bourdieu inspired quantitative questionnaire to profile online learners based on their dispositions [1]. Referred to as the Online Learner Profiling Questionnaire (OLP), the preceding study established an 8-factor model through Factor Analysis, which in turn defined its sample of n=149 respondents based on their dispositions towards learning, using technology, and learning online [1]. This interview pilot study is thus a continuation of the preceding OLP study to complement its empirical data with qualitative interview data through the method of triangulation and in-depth data acquisition via a two-cycle coding method [2].

As integrated in the OLP study [1] and elucidated in an accompanying literature review [3], Bourdieu’s theory of practice [4] is central to this research whereby online learners are suggested to have certain demographic and psychographic characteristics called ‘capital’ [3] which in turn manifest into a collection of behaviours and tendencies called ‘habitus’ [3] when interacting with a learning environment referred to as a ‘field’ [3]. The ecosystem within which these capital, habitus and field engage together is called ‘practice’ [3][4]. On a macro-level the mixed-method study collectively explore the effect of different combinations of capital and habitus on the learning experience of different learners. This pilot study, however, is a precursory mechanism to establish the reciprocity of the interview method with the empirical OLP.

The interview study has two objectives. The first objective is to validate data from the OLP study with regards to the truthfulness of the ‘capital’ and ‘habitus’ relationship [5]. The second objective is to generate context-rich data [6] that allow for the negotiation of a more nuanced understanding pertaining to the constructs not observable from a self-assessed questionnaire alone, viz. ‘field’ and ‘practice’.

2. Methodology

In educational research, interviews are widely used for data collection as they “enable participants - be they interviewers or interviewees - to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view” [7]. This is in contrast to self-assessed close-ended questionnaires like the OLP where respondents are not given the opportunity to add further remarks and explanations [8]. Thus, the interview method, other than being a triangulating

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mechanism, is an opportunity for a representative set of the sample to reflect and remark on their responses and opinions of not only the OLP items but also the findings generated by the OLP study. The rich information from interviewees is thus anticipated to reflect “repositories of facts, reflections, opinions and other traces of experience” [9] that can be triangulated against and therefore enhance the existing empirical data.

A hybrid three-sectioned interview schedule was designed consisting of a semi-structured, non-directed phase followed by a structured, focused phase and finally an unstructured, non-directed conversation phase conducted sequentially in the same session with the intent of adding in-depth information to existing statistical data, triangulating both data together, and providing an opportunity for new data to emerge respectively. The interview schedule had a maximum of 16 questions on learners’ dispositions towards learning, towards using online technology and using online technology for learning.

Sampling for an instrument contributing to mixed method research is different to that of single method studies whereby “one kind of sample precedes another and influences the proceeding sample” [10] and that the preceding “numerical data set the scene for in-depth interviewing, perhaps identifying extreme or deviant cases, critical cases, variables on which the results are either homogeneous or highly varied” [10]. The sample for this interview study was selected through purposive sampling whereby researchers “hand-pick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment of their typicality or possession of particular characteristics being sought [7]. 4 respondents from the OLP study sample of n=149 consented to be interviewed, and responses from two respondents were used in investigating the reciprocity of the interview data collection method. They are given the pseudonyms Alex and Cameron. There are several variants of purposive sampling but for this particular study, only typical case sampling was exercised [10] in which the sample is representative of typical types (as opposed to deviant cases) identified by the OLP.

The interview was set-up on Skype due to its cost effectiveness and not being constrained by geography and physical mobility [11]. The transcription of audio data followed the ‘verbatim’ style [12] where the analysis “is not much concerned with the details and expression of language use and is more interested in the factual content of what is said” [12].

3. Analysis

The analysis involved inductive data-driven reasoning through the use of In Vivo, Process and Initial coding during the first cycle to identify categories and create a coding scheme, followed by deductive theory-driven reasoning through Axial and Focus Coding during the second cycle to interpret the resulting information based on Bourdieu’s theory of capitals and habitus.

Each transcript underwent In Vivo coding whereby verbatim words and phrases were identified as codes denoting possible significance [2]. The transcripts were again analysed through Process coding [2] whereby actions and behaviours, indicated by ‘gerunds’, were identified denoting possible connotations towards dispositions. A third generic coding strategy using Initial coding acted as a failsafe mechanism to intercept remaining data that were not identified through In Vivo and Process coding. A data-driven coding scheme was generated which suggested several categories such as statements on ‘personality’, ‘online learning’, ‘support’ and ‘study habits’. Alex contributed to 95 codes while Cameron contributed to 109 codes.

The second cycle involved analysis through Focused Coding and Axial Coding [2], predominantly on the codes identified in the first cycle turning them into thematic categories. Firstly, through Focused Coding the codes of each interviewee were categorised into recurring themes as inductively informed by the data and deductively reasoned through consulting Bourdieu’s theory. Each category was scrutinised to interpret dominant characteristics, particularly those that reflect Bourdieu’s concept of capitals and dispositions. These categories are identified as demographic background, personality, support from family and friends, digital literacy, study habits, preferred digital and online technologies, and preferred online learning affordances.

4. Findings

The coding processes performed on both interviewees’ responses to semi-structured and open questions generated thematically discernible categories. Furthermore, with an informed understanding of Bourdieu’s theory, these categories were abductively coded to be juxtaposable against the dispositions that have been identified from the literature on different types of learner dispositions such as learning styles, study habits, technology acceptance, digital literacy and personality [1] as well as the Bourdieu inspired theoretical framework itself [2].



According to her OLP profile, Alex has dispositions towards studying habits that are familiar to her. However, during her interview when enquired about her set study habits she did not agree that she has dispositions towards specific study habits. In turn, when given the opportunity for her to reflect on this revelation, she reconsidered that her habits may have become intuitive. The interview revealed that she indeed has a study preference for being organised and having an organised study process, herself having an organised personality. She identified the preference for reading materials, learning in the library and exhibited skills related to information literacy, multitasking and problem solving to adapt to her challenging studies.

According to Cameron's OLP profile, he is ambivalent towards having easy and quick access to information. However, during the interview, he stated that having information at the end of one's fingertip is important to him. Cameron expanded his opinions on the importance of learning with and without the internet based on the ease of obtaining information.

The two-cycle coding process generated themes that are not only categorisable but also transposable on Bourdieu's theory of capital and disposition types. Essentially, the ultimate objective of this mixed-method design is in adding rich description onto the 8 factors identified in OLP. It is only through adding quantitative and qualitative based description to what is essentially a developing dossier of habitus types that their existence can become useful for further research or future profiling tasks. In other words, the OLP identifies how many different habitus profiles are present in the student population, while the rich description from this interview study established the differences between habitus types and the similarities between members of the same habitus type.

Admittedly, this pilot interview only analysed representatives from two habitus types. Nonetheless, the post-coding procedures by which the data that each have contributed throughout are transformed into new meaning, is applicable to any habitus type. It is expected with the same interview approach, the two-cycle coding method and abductive reasoning informed by the literature and the theoretical framework [1][3] all the habitus types identified in the OLP study can be described based on their preferences towards learning, towards technology and learning using online technology.

5. Conclusion

With regards to the interview as a triangulation and in-depth data acquisition instrument, this pilot study managed to establish the contribution and reciprocity of the interview method to the 8-factor model identified by its quantitative instrument counterpart. With regards to the analytical coding technique employed by this study, the findings established discernible themes and categories that agree with the themes and categories in the OLP and Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

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