Teaching Business Research Methods from an Autoethnographic Perspective

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Abstract

In Autoethnography research the authors view an issue from their individual experience. The authors of this article discuss conducting business research from the perspective of a librarian and a teacher. The authors discuss the process of conducting business research in the information age. The Internet provides a wealth of information, some of high quality and some erroneously presented as authoritative. The authors of this article identify how to use the World Wide Web for business research while holding to two tenets of quality research: validity and reliability.

Key words: Validity, Reliability, Research, Bias, Relevance

1. Introduction

There are many opportunities to use business research in decision making. A manager may ask a subordinate to write a SWOT analysis on three of the firm's competitors. A small business owner may want to know whether a new employee benefit will be cost-effective. An organization may need to develop a new training program for its employees. Business research is used to approach these tasks.

Every day, managers have to make decisions that have implications for their businesses in terms of time, money, and manpower. Managers need research on such topics as companies and industries, consumer demographics and behavior, legal requirements, industry standards, and regulatory issues (Sokoloff, 2012). In order to make the best decisions possible, managers need to know how to find the most valid and reliable information on which to base those decisions (Shwom & Snyder, 2016). Business research adds value in the workplace (Wang, Wang and Wang, 2009; Katz, Haras, and Blaszczynski, 2010). Business professionals will use research throughout their careers (Weiner, 2011). Research skills correlate significantly with employee creativity (Chang, 2014). Individuals skilled in research own a valuable intellectual asset and are valued in learning organizations (Senge, 2006).

2. Literature Review: The Language of Research

2.1 Facts, opinions and bias

Business research is based on facts. A fact is "something that has really occurred or is actually the case" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989) and is verifiable (Jordan, 1978). A fact is indisputable truth. Fact: Apple Computer was founded by Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak and Ronald Wayne (Leng & Nair, 2012). Fact: The official unemployment rate in January 2006 was 4.7% (http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_02032006.pdf). Fact: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a theory of motivation (Ho & Huang, 2015).

An opinion is a view or judgment formed about something that is not necessarily based on fact. "[A]n opinion [is] a statement that we have at least some doubt about.

We believe it to be true, but we are not certain; once we become certain, the statement becomes fact to us…. The level of our uncertainty is often an important factor to communicate" (Jordan, 1978). Opinions are formed based on interactions with and observations of the world around us (Davison, 2015). Opinion is based on individual perspective or perception and not always a portrayal of facts (Koehler, 2016). Examples of opinion without factual support: *The moon landing was a hoax. Abraham Lincoln was our greatest president ever. Herzberg's motivational theory explains employee behavior better than Maslow's.* Those statements are opinions. Supporting opinions with facts provides validity (Creswell, 2009). We all believe that our own opinions are true, but our beliefs may be incorrect. The difficulty this presents to doing research is that there are many websites on the Internet that exist only to allow people to express their opinions. Those opinions are often stated as if they are facts. Successful business research requires the discernment to tell the difference and to seek reliable evidence (Jordan, 1978).

Bias is inclination or prejudice in favor of one person, group or thing. "People come to the research endeavor with their own sets of biases and prejudices" (Trochim, 2001, p. 112). People have a propensity to agree with perspectives that are similar to their own. Someone seeking to sway a person can use this to selectively provide information, supporting a bias (Dukes & Yi, 2015). All company websites are biased in favor of their own company. All political websites are biased in favor of the website sponsor's political party. Bias on a company website might take the form of omitting certain information that portrays the company in a negative light. Bias on a political site might take the form of an out-of-context quote of an opposing politician's speech. Based on Duke and Yi (2015), bias affects individual perspective and may be used to unethically lead others to accept a given perspective. Bias has no place in business research. Successful researchers must not only be aware of potential bias in the sources, but also cognizant of how personal bias may influence their own findings and results (Jordan, 1978). Understanding the impact of bias, the researcher should identify bias when it exists and fairly present the varying perspectives.

2.2 Primary vs. secondary sources

A primary source is one that comes directly from the person or organization being studied. Primary research is carried out by the researcher interacting with or observing the subject (Shwom & Snyder, 2016). A company's mission statement, obtained from the corporate website, is a primary source. A YouTube video of a speech given by Steve Jobs is a primary source. An autobiography, written by an individual about himself, is a primary source. Primary research is documented evidence collected directly by the researcher, surveys, observation, scientific testing, etc. In other words, a primary source is one that comes *straight from the horse's mouth*.

A secondary source is at least one step removed from the primary source. It is research completed by another researcher and used to support new research (Shwom, & Snyder, 2016). A news article about a company's mission is a secondary source. Academic articles used by another researcher are considered secondary sources. A commentary on a speech is a secondary source. A biography, written by an individual about someone else, is a secondary source.

When doing research it is usually advisable to use a source as close to the person or object of study as possible. Using a source close to the person or object increases the reliability of the information (Creswell, 2009; Davison, 2013; Jordan, 1978). If the primary source is available, choose it rather than a secondary source. If you can listen to Steve Jobs' speech yourself, do that rather than read a commentary about it written by someone else. If you hear a story on the news reporting results from a study, try to find the original study rather than using the news report as a source. Using and citing the primary source, or the original source, adds reliability to the quality of the information (Creswell, 2009; Davison, 2013; Jordan, 1978) and the research findings.

Occasionally, it is necessary to use secondary sources. It may be that the researcher needs statistics collected by a secondary source, to review historic information on a subject, to triangulate findings, or because the primary source is not available. Secondary sources may be used to support the external validity of the information. External validity is the measure to which information is consistent with other sources (Davison, 2014). Sometimes the news reports on studies that are not yet available to the public. In these and similar cases, using the secondary source is acceptable. The principle is the same for using primary or secondary research: use the source that is as close as possible to the original.

2.3 Peer review and academic journals

Original research is reported in academic journals. A journal is a specialized type of magazine. The articles in journals are written by experts, often college or university professors, who do research in their fields of study. Academic journals may also be called scholarly, peer-reviewed, professional, or refereed journals. All of these terms mean essentially the same thing.

Articles published in academic journals are held to higher standards than are articles published in magazines like Time and Forbes. Peer review is the process by which articles are judged for inclusion in a journal (Pitt, Robson, & West, 2015). In peer review, a scholarly article is examined by a panel of experts in the field to see if it meets the standards of that journal (Pitt, Robson, & West, 2015). The article may be sent back to the author for revision before it is published. Many articles that are submitted to peer-reviewed journals do not qualify for publication (or inclusion). Research found in academic journals is considered to be of high quality due to the rigorous review process (Shwom & Snyder, 2016).

Peer-reviewed scholarly research is the gold standard for information (Herron, 2012). When making decisions, businesspeople should base decisions on the best research available (Cordell, D. M., Grange, E. V., & Langdon, T. P., 2012). That means, whenever possible, the information gathered should consist of primary sources and peer-reviewed academic research.

3   Understanding the research process

3.1   The research process

Why do research? Why learn the research process? Here are several reasons:

- To support an argument
- To answer a question
- To create best practices
- To learn something new

In this research article the authors identify five steps to the research process:

1. Identify and develop the topic. In business research, the topic is often assigned by a supervisor or an employer.
2. Learn about the topic by gathering background information. When writing about a company, read about the company from a wide variety of sources. When it is necessary to give a recommendation to a manager, the researcher should gather information about as many options as possible. Places to find background information, prior to beginning the research, include: corporate Web sites, competitor Web sites, financial filings, general Internet research, and academic research.
3. Do the research and gather the resources. These might include books, scholarly articles, news articles, websites, videos, podcasts, or personal interviews with knowledgeable individuals. Be sure to save all the sources located. Not all of the research will be used in the report, but it may be necessary to go back and refer to some of it later in the research process. The researcher should make copies of information from books, download electronic sources, and bookmark the websites. This can save a lot of time and frustration later, when compiling a list of the source information for the reference section of the report.
4. Evaluate the information. Evaluation of sources is discussed later in this article.
5. Cite the information used. Quality research gives credit to the authors and sources used. Citation and giving credit where due is discussed later in this article.

3.2   Getting the most from research

Reading a scholarly research article can be daunting. The terminology may be unfamiliar and the writing is more formal than in most news articles and websites. Here are some tips for understanding scholarly articles.

1. Review the abstract first. This is a one-paragraph summary of the entire article at the top of the first page. The abstract tells the researcher whether the article will be useful for his or her purpose. The researcher should always use the full text article. An abstract itself should not be used as a source.
2. Keep the research question in mind at all times during the research and writing process. Is the information in the article going to support the argument or answer the question? If not, move on to the next source.

3. Think critically about the information and consider how this information will fit into the argument. Critical thinking is a process of analyzing, inferring, and evaluating (Berger, Desai, & Higgs, 2016),
4. Read the introduction. This will give background information and tell why the authors wrote the article.
5. Read the methodology, if applicable. This tells how the authors designed and performed their study (Creswell, 2001). If the study used human subjects, pay attention to how many were used. The more subjects used the more validity the results should have. Also pay attention to how the study was designed. If surveys or focus groups were used, were the questions biased? If the study was an experiment, were the participants randomized? Was it a double-blind study? Was there a control group? All of these methodologies improve the validity of the study.
6. Read the results. Find out if the investigators prove their hypothesis or support their argument. Some articles prove the validity of the null hypothesis; the researchers' claim is true. Other articles prove the validity of the alternative hypothesis; the researchers' claim is not true.
7. Read the discussion. This is where the authors talk about what the results mean. The authors' interpretation of the results is an opinion of what the study identifies.
8. Read the conclusion. This is where the authors discuss what they learned.
9. Look at the authors' list of references. The sources should be no more than five years older than the article. Anything that is more than five years old is often too dated to be of use in business research. (There are exceptions. Often historical information is needed to compare with current information to strengthen the argument or demonstrate trends.) The use of a wide number of sources with many different authors shows the research is broad and reduces the likelihood of bias. The terminology used for this is triangulation (Trochim, 2001).
10. Take notes while reading for efficiency.

3.3 Developing a research strategy

The most important step in developing a research strategy is deciding what question needs to be answered. "Be sure you have a good understanding of your major research question or problem as well as the assumptions it is based upon (Shwom & Snyder, 2016, p. 259). Here are some typical business research questions:

Develop a SWOT analysis for Microsoft Corp.

- Which employee benefit is more cost-effective: wellness programs or dental benefits?
- Which franchise would be more successful at a particular spot in town: Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks?
- Explain how government regulation would affect the sport fishing industry.

After formulating the research question, review how the question is related to the desired outcome. If the connection is unclear, develop the question further.

Next, get some background information on the topic. Do some general reading: look at Microsoft's website to see what they are currently working on. Find out what is included in an employee wellness program. Find out how many Dunkin' Donuts franchises already exist in town. Read about the sport fishing industry to fully understand it. This reading can be from almost any source: the web, books, or newspaper articles. These sources may or may not be used during the writing process, but they are important in garnering basic understanding of the research topic. A researcher must understand the topic before delving deeply into the research and before beginning to write.

3.4 Selecting finding tools

The tools used to find information can vary greatly depending on the specifics of the research question and topic. Search engines such as Google, Bing, and Yahoo are finding tools. A library website is a finding tool. People are finding tools, if they have knowledge of the topic. Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) are helpful in defining an area of research opportunity. For gathering background information, search engines are clearly a useful tool. So are library websites. Books are often the best sources for background information as they gather an enormous amount of information in one place. For the research examples given above, a researcher might find a book on the history of Microsoft, or on the basics of employee benefits, or on franchising, or on the sport fishing industry.

One of the most valuable finding tools available is a librarian. At any point during the research process, it is beneficial to seek the aid and support of a librarian. The librarian can get the research on the right track, or point to a rich source of quality information.

4

At times specific tools are necessary, such as public or academic library databases. Due to the wealth of unverified or invalid information available on the World Wide Web, search engines are not always the best source of information. However, this does not mean search engines cannot be used for preliminary background research. It only means that websites should be used as starting points to provide direction for further research. It is acceptable to use a Web site when the information used from the Web site is supported with scholarly sources.

3.5 Searching

Searching is best done by using keywords. Typing any of the above research questions into a database search will not garner many positive results. That does not mean there is no information to be found. Library databases are constructed to search for key words. Choose the most important words in the research question - the key words - and use those as the search terms. For example, one might search for Microsoft strategy, cost-effective wellness programs, or government regulation sport fishing. Notice that none of those key words contain small words such as the, of, an, or by. They also do not contain question-related words such as which, how, why, when, or where, or words that describe the task, such as develop or explain. Avoid using words such as these in the search.

3.6 Modifying a search

Another concept that must be considered when performing a search is that of broadness and narrowness. A broad search is generally the best way to start. It is better to begin with too much information than too little. When a search is initiated and the results are limited, it may be that the search terms are too narrow. A search may be broadened by dropping a search term. Rather than sport fishing industry, use sport fishing. Rather than cost-effective employee wellness programs, use employee wellness programs. Sometimes the database is constructed to recognize one term better than another - for instance cost-benefit rather than cost-effectiveness. This may not be evident until the search is broadened.

After identifying a long list of results, the list can be narrowed or pared down. Narrowing a search can be accomplished by using the word AND in the search parameters. An example would be sport fishing AND government regulation. The search pages of most databases have boxes that allow this to be done easily. The result should be a list of resources that may be used to answer the research question.

Be aware that there will not be one perfect source that will answer the research question. It is necessary to gather pieces of information to construct the answer. Formulation of the answer is up to the researcher. For instance, there may not be an article that specifically tells whether wellness programs or dental benefits are more cost-effective. The researcher will find information about the cost-effectiveness of wellness programs, and information about the cost-effectiveness of dental benefits. Then the researcher will formulate their own conclusions.

4 Analysis of sources

There is a wealth of information available both in print and online (Shwom & Snyder, 2016). According to Shwom and Snyder (2016) "the challenge is to find those sources and to evaluate them to ensure that they are credible" (p. 263).Any source found while doing research should be evaluated for reliability. This is especially true for sources found on the internet. Sources found through a library have already been evaluated for inclusion in the databases. Peer-reviewed articles have already been evaluated through the peer review process. The evaluation process is important regardless of the research topic, and it is particularly crucial when doing business research. When making business decisions based on the research, it is imperative that the researcher uses a research strategy that identifies information which is current, reliable, relevant, accurate, and authoritative.

4.1 Currency

It is important for research to be as current as possible. Conditions change very quickly in the business world. One event, such as the 2008 economic crash, can upend conventional wisdom in the business world overnight. When doing business research, the researcher should try to only use sources that are five years old or less - but in general, the newer the better. Each source should be tested for the following: when was the information published or posted? Has the information been revised or updated? If there are links in a website, do they still work? If there is no publication date on a website or web article, look for a copyright date at the bottom of the page. The copyright date should be the current year. If it is not, the website is not being maintained and the information may be too old to use. When there is no publication date the source probably should not be used.

4.2 Relevance

A researcher may find a lot of information that does not relate directly to the research topic. If the researcher is going to use a source, it should help answer the research question. If a source does not contribute to answering the research question, the researcher should move on to the next source. The researcher must also determine the audience for which the source was written. Is the information at an appropriate level? Something written for children is not an appropriate source for business research.

4.3 Authority

Authority is arguably the most important of the criteria for judging a source. Who is the author of the piece? If there is not an individual author's name given, identify the publisher, sponsor, or other source of the information. The researcher must determine the author's credentials. Many articles on the internet sound authoritative, but are written by journalists rather than SMEs. Peer-reviewed articles include the author's credentials and organizational affiliations, and reliable websites do the same. If the researcher cannot find the author's credentials on the site, a Google search for the author's name may be used to find the credentials. For instance, if the author's name is Richard Smith, the search term should be "Richard Smith," being sure to use the quotation marks.

If there is no author, the researcher should find out as much about the organization responsible for the information. Most organizations will have a link somewhere on their page called About Us, where the researcher can learn more about exactly who the sponsor or publisher is. If there is no information, the researcher may complete an Internet search to test for validity.

Be wary of websites that are created by people with credentials in a field not related to the information on the site. For instance, an individual with a Ph.D. in physics has excellent credentials in physics, but is not necessarily qualified to write about psychology. An M.D. who specializes in kidney disease is not well qualified to discuss allergies. Look beyond the degree to make sure that the writer's credentials correspond to the information he or she is presenting.

Is there contact information on the website or article? Reliable websites will provide the opportunity for reader comment. Look for an email address or at the very least a phone number. Finally, check the URL for the domain. Is the site a .com, .edu, .gov, .org, or something else? Information from .edu and .gov sites is generally reliable, as long as it relates to the topic. If the site is a .com or .org, be particularly strict about vetting the source before using it. Of course, most company websites will be .com sites, and it will often be necessary to use those when doing company or industry research. The researcher must be cognizant that sites will be biased toward their own company, and therefore less trustworthy.

4.4 Accuracy

It can be difficult to judge the accuracy of information. The researcher should find evidence, via triangulation, to support the validity of the information. Do the authors cite their sources? If not, be wary. When reading an article that is primarily about another article, try to find the original source, rather than using a secondary source. Does the information agree with prior research or with what the researcher already knows about the topic? There may be various views and perspectives for a research topic. Therefore, the researcher should be careful about using any information that seems to be far removed from any other sources identified. Check the site or article for errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation, or typographical errors. If present, these errors decrease the likelihood that the information is accurate or comes from an authoritative source.

4.5 Purpose

When evaluating information, take into consideration the intended purpose of the authors or sponsors of the information being reviewed. Is it to inform? To teach? To entertain? To persuade? Or is it to sell something? Be wary of any site that is trying to sell you something directly from the site. The information may be biased. Are the authors' or sponsors' intentions or purposes clear? Or are they trying to make their site sound informational when their entire purpose is actually to sell? Analyze the information and consider whether the information is fact, opinion or bias. Keep abreast that fact is "something that has really occurred or is actually the case" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989); opinion is something we believe but have yet to support with facts (Jordan, 1978); and bias is inclination or prejudice in favor of one person, group or thing and may be used to sway opinion (Dukes & Yi, 2015). Quality information is objective and impartial. When a point of view seems reasonable it does not mean the point of view is impartial.

Researchers must watch carefully and test for bias. Bias may be political, cultural, religious, institutional or personal. Even information from news organizations may be biased. Institutional bias is seen in corporate websites. Negative news about a company may be dealt with in a biased manner, or may be suppressed entirely, on that company's website. Analyzing sources is time-consuming. Do not take short cuts. Using unreliable or invalid information reduces the reliability and validity of an academic paper and can cost money in the business world. Take the time to complete a thorough analysis. Test for bias is through quality research and comparing the information to the facts identified through the research.

5   Synthesis

5.1   Reading a research article

After collecting the research, the researcher must decide how to use the sources to construct an argument or answer the research question. One important point to remember in this step is that not every part of a source needs to be used in the paper or project. If a long research paper only has one paragraph that is applicable to the problem, only use that paragraph. The researcher does not have to incorporate the other ideas in the paper into the final product.

Reading a research paper can be somewhat daunting. Scholarly business journals often use jargon and language that may be unfamiliar. If the paper is based on a research study, there may be statistics that are difficult to understand. This does not mean that the researcher cannot use the paper as a source. Refer to the steps in the section of this paper called *Getting the Most From your Research* to work through scholarly sources.

5.2   Making and supporting the argument

After gathering, reading, and making notes on the sources, the researcher should have an idea of what to say in the report or project. If there is a particular argument to be made, the researcher should group the sources that support the argument. When possible the researcher should include sources that disagree with their conclusions. Refuting opposing views and arguments strengthens the researcher's position. Ethical research uses reputable sources, cites and documents sources, reports the findings accurately, and includes all relevant research (Shwom & Snyder, 2016).

6   Evaluation

6.1 Drawing conclusions

After collecting, evaluating, and reading the research, the researcher is ready to write the paper or report, to answer the questions and support the arguments. The researcher may agree or disagree with the some of the conclusions drawn by the authors of the information gathered. In any case, they should draw their own conclusions rather than relying on the conclusions of others.

A researcher must remain cognizant of the difference between a researcher's opinion and the facts the researcher presented. While the researcher should not treat others' opinions as fact, they are expected to have an opinion about the research they are doing. The conclusion drawn may be their opinion, but should be supported by the research. Researchers must be careful, however, not to restate someone else's opinion as their own. One researcher restating another's opinion as their own may be construed to be plagiarism.

6.2 Plagiarism

Imagine that you have written a song. You record the song and post it on YouTube. A couple of months later, you come across a video of someone else singing your song - and claiming the song to be their original work. Would that be acceptable to you? In academia, avoiding plagiarism is best done by teaching proper research skills, teaching students how to take notes on ideas found in the research, and providing references where others' ideas are used (Walker & White, 2014).

Using a source for research without giving credit to that source is plagiarism and is unacceptable and unethical. It is using someone else's work and taking credit for the ideas. Copying and pasting a paragraph from the internet without giving credit to the source is plagiarism. Using a sentence from a book or article without giving credit is plagiarism. It is considered plagiarism when done on purpose, or accidently (Walker & White, 2014).The following are examples of plagiarism if credit is not given to the sources:

1. Copying and pasting a phrase, sentence or paragraph from the internet
2. Using a phrase, sentence or paragraph from a book or article
3. Using part of a paper another researcher wrote

4. Paraphrasing someone else's words (when you put someone else's idea into your own words, it is still someone else's idea)

6.3 Citing sources

Authors of research articles give credit to their sources, both in the text of the paper and at the end. This is called citing the sources. There are various styles of citation, and different subject areas use different styles. The business world (along with education, psychology, science and medicine) uses APA style. There are many places to get help with citations. College writing centers offer support in this area. They provide personalized, one-on-one help with constructing papers and citing sources in APA style. Another excellent source is the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (Purdue OWL), found at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/. The definitive source for determining proper APA style is *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. APA style is dynamic, meaning it changes over time, and the researcher should use the most current edition. Most libraries will have a copy.

7   Conclusion

Business professors, teachers, and instructors have a purpose teaching the research process and for having students conduct research: it is to prepare students for the workplace. Every day, managers have to make decisions that have implications for their businesses in terms of time, money, and manpower. Managers need research on such topics as companies and industries, consumer demographics and behavior, legal requirements, industry standards, and regulatory issues (Sokoloff, 2012). In order to make the best decisions possible, managers need to know how to find the most valid and reliable information on which to base those decisions. Business professionals will use research throughout their careers (Weiner, 2011). Research skills correlate significantly with employee creativity (Chang, 2014). Individuals skilled in research own a valuable intellectual asset and are valued in learning organizations (Senge, 2006).

There are specific areas of importance in research. A researcher must behave an understanding of the difference between facts, opinions and bias. Research includes both primary and secondary sources. The use of peer reviewed or an academic journal is considered to provide high quality information due to the rigorous review process. Sources must be evaluated for currency, relevance, authority, and accuracy. There are several reasons for research: to support an argument; to answer a question; to create best practices; or to learn something new. Analyzing the reason for the research helps the researcher develop a research strategy and provides direction for how to use the sources to construct an argument or answer the research question.

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