

**A REFLEXIVE STUDY OF THE CONTINUOUS PRACTICE  
IMPROVEMENT OF A GLOBAL PROFESSIONAL**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the career of a global professional as he moves across three continents whilst working for a large multi-national organisation. It describes the circle of Academe to Corporate and back to Academe. It builds the narrative from that of a student, to a practitioner, on to a learner and finally to that of a reflexive practitioner.

The target audience for this thesis is both Academics and Practitioners. The single case study approach permits observations that can be utilised as building blocks in a theory of organisations and the individuals that work within them. This complex interaction of large numbers of variables produces chaos in some dimensions (in the sense that they are both un-forecastable and uncontrollable), undesirable consequences (through some deterministic interactions) and some predictors of success or failure at an individual level. This case study thesis is therefore applying a Grounded Theory methodology. Grounded Theory requires an in depth analysis of empirical material, it is not dependent on the ability to prove or disprove hypotheses.

Marx tended to look on organisations and their managers as all with similar objectives and approaches. Critical analysis rejects this perspective and this thesis attempts to show how individual conflicts of interest can lead to undesirable consequences at organisational and societal levels. This has implications for a wide slew of legitimate State interests, including corporate taxation, legal Structure, Society etc.

The thesis utilises an Action Research methodology employing a hermeneutic and interpretative approach. The stance taken is that of Critical Theory, that is to say with an objective ontology and subjective epistemology. It therefore rejects the Post-Modernism position of subjective ontologies and epistemologies whilst accepting that language is in itself value laden and requires careful interpretation. It is, however,

written in a Post-Modernist style. In a sense it is an emic ethnographic investigation into the field (or society) of Marketing. It does, necessarily, possess autobiographical elements in order to apply the action research methodology but it is not in itself an autobiographical study. The strength of the action research approach is that a wide range of data is presented and is then subjected to evaluation and an ever decreasing spiral of supportive data based on warranted assertions is then provided in order to produce fresh insights into the field of the researcher with his living-theory

Epistemology is a central theme within this thesis and the importance of warranted knowledge as an underwriter of validity and reliability is discussed. Similarly the link between tacit knowledge and luck is examined and found to be strongly connected.

The danger of reflexive research is that there must necessarily exist a correlation between the subject of study and the psychology of the researcher, therefore, without knowledge of both, fuller understanding remains unobtainable, without these insight is impossible.

Fundamentally the process of action, critical self-reflection and writing empowers the writer as a thinker and hence improving his capability of excellence in analysis and thus superior action in the future. The results produce insights both for future international professionals and also researchers and teachers in the field of business administration.

## ABSTRAK

Tesis ini membentangkan kajian berkenaan kerjaya seorang profesional global yang mempunyai pengalaman berkerja di tiga benua semasa bertugas dengan sebuah syarikat multinasional yang besar. Ia menghuraikan kisah dalam satu bulatan yang bermula dari bidang Akademia kepada bidang Korporat dan balik kepada bidang Akademia. Ia membangunkan sebuah naratif yang bermula dari seorang pelajar kepada seorang pengamal dan balik semula kepada seorang pelajar dan akhirnya kepada seorang pengamal yang refleksif.

Golongan pembaca yang ditujukan oleh tesis ini ialah dari dunia Akademik dan juga Pengamal. Pendekatan yang menggunakan satu kajian kes membenarkan pemerhatian dilakukan, yang menjadi asas kepada teori organisasi dan individu yang berkerja di dalamnya. Interaksi yang kompleks yang melibatkan angkuabah yang banyak melahirkan suasana tidak menentu dalam beberapa dimensi tertentu (dalam erti kata kedua-duanya tidak dapat di ramalkan dan dikawal), hasil yang tidak dikehendaki (melalui beberapa interkasi yang deterministik) dan beberapa ramalan kejayaan dan kegagalan pada tahap individu. Oleh itu kajian kes ini menggunakan pendekatan 'Teori yang dibumikan' (Grounded Theory). Pendekatan 'Teori yang dibumikan' memerlukan analisa yang mendalam terhadap bahan yang empirikal, dan tidak bergantung kepada kemampuan untuk membuktikan sama ada sesuatu hipotesis itu benar atau tidak.

Marx cenderung untuk melihat kepada sesebuah organisasi dan pengurus mereka sebagai mempunyai pendekatan dan matlamat yang sama. Analisa kritikal menolak perspektif ini dan oleh itu tesis ini berusaha untuk menunjukkan bagaimana pertelingkahan kepentingan individu boleh menghasilkan suasana yang tidak diingini pada tahap organisasi dan masyarakat. Perkara ini mempunyai implikasi yang meluas

terhadap kepentingan di pihak negara yang sah termasuk percukaian korporat, struktur perundangan, masyarakat dan lain-lain.

Tesis ini menggunakan metodologi Penyelidikan Tindakan (Action Research) berasaskan pendekatan hermeneutik dan interpretatif. Pendirian yang diambil ialah Teori Kritikal, yang bererti ianya ianya berdasarkan ontologi yang objektif dan epistemologi subjektif. Yakni ianya menolak posisi Pasca-Modernisma berdasarkan ontologi subjektif dan epistemologi yang subjektif tetapi menerima hakikat bahawa bahasa adalah secara sendirinya mempunyai nilai dan memerlukan pentafsiran yang teliti. Namun ianya ditulis dalam cara Pasca-Modernist. Dalam ertikata yang lain ianya adalah satu penyelidikan ethnografi ke dalam bidang (atau masyarakat) Pemasaran. Ia mempunyai elemen autobiografi supaya dapat menggunakan metodologi penyelidikan tindakan (action research) tetapi adalah tidak secara sendirinya satu kajian autobiografi. Kekuatan pendekatan penyelidikan tindakan ialah data yang banyak dibentangkan dan kemudiannya dinilai, dan seterusnya proses pengurangan data sokongan berdasarkan penekanan yang diperlukan untuk menghasilkan pandangan baru dalam bidang penyelidikan.

Tema utama dalam tesis ini serta kepentingan ilmu yang perlu sebagai asas kepada isu kesahan dan kesahihan dibincangkan. Sehubungan itu kaitan antara ilmu yang `tacit` dan nasib dikaji dan didapati mempunyai kekuatan yang tinggi, malah lebih tinggi dari apa yang diiktiraf selama ini.

Bahaya penyelidikan refleksif ialah perlunya kewujudan korelasi antara subjek yang dikaji dan psikologi penyelidik. Oleh itu tanpa kefahaman tentang kedua-duanya, kefahaman yang mantap tidak akan dapat dicapai. Tanpanya kefahaman yang jiu adalah mustahil. Secara asasnya, proses tindakan, cermin-diri yang kritikal dan penulisan memberi kekuatan kepada penulis sebagai seorang pemikir dan oleh itu dapat

menyumbang kepada proses penambahannya ke tahap cemerlang dalam aspek analisa dan oleh itu juga tindakannya pada masa hadapan. Hasilnya ialah kefahaman baru untuk golongan profesional antarabangsa dan juga para penyelidik dan guru dalam bidang pentadbiran perniagaan.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe thanks to many. I am particularly skilled at appropriating the ideas of others and if they seem of value I rapidly adopt them into my own Economist's toolbox.<sup>1</sup> Hence my list of acknowledgements is long, yet I fear that it but covers the surface of those who I owe gratitude to. For those who I have omitted I pray forgiveness, but I can promise that I truly do appreciate your contribution, advice, example or admonishment.

Firstly my Supervisors at Universiti (sic)<sup>2</sup> Malaya; Associate Professor Dr. Edward Wong Sek Khin & Professor Dr. Mohd. Nazari bin Ismail who have been supportive, constructive in their criticism and have invested much time in helping me improve my endeavours.

HELP University in the shape of my previous line manager Stephen Wu and Dr. Paul Chan, the Vice Chancellor, who have both encouraged and supported my studies.

My many line managers, all of whom taught me something – even the ones that I did not work well with. One in particular stands out – Peter Davies, from whom I learned a lot, it just took me a long time to realise it, partly as a result of my reflections in this thesis.

As my career progressed I have also found myself learning more from my colleagues, and I would particularly like to mention two mentors and life coaches at DHL – Tim Roberts and Chris Wright. They both helped me enormously in many ways as they battled through problems and issues that I also subsequently had to deal with.

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<sup>1</sup> As Professor John McGee, one of my Economics lecturers at London Business School once termed it.

<sup>2</sup> In Malaysia public universities are spelt in Malay as “Universiti”. Those in the private sector (such as HELP) are spelt as in English, e.g. HELP University.

Strangely enough all three of us held the same job rôle at different times despite coming from very different professional backgrounds. They both died early and far too young.

I also increasingly found myself learning more from my direct reports and more recently my Students. Too many to mention of course, but important nonetheless and as time has progressed, increasingly international in nature. (e.g. China, East Timor, Mongolia, Pakistan, Nepal, Kurdistan, South Sudan & Vietnam).

I would categorise these, using the nomenclature of Kay Distel (2013) as Critical Friends, holding up a mirror crafted by Jo and Harry and hence enabling me to glimpse slightly more of my worldview than would otherwise be possible.

My Father and Mother who apart from teaching me the value of education also inculcated a system of moral values for which I am eternally grateful and hope I have passed on to some extent to my children, Samantha and Gordon, perchance also my grandchildren; Oliver and Evelyn. My Mother (Hilda) and my Sister Fiona have both been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement in my endeavours. My Uncle Howard Dent (in conjunction with my Father) gave me my love of trains, transport, economics and travel.

Fortune has also smiled on me with regard to proof reading, my wife, Tray, as a teacher of English, has found and corrected a legion of, what would otherwise have been unnoticed grammar and punctuation errors. It would also be remiss of me to omit my ex-wife Fiona, she taught me a lot about subjectivity, feelings and leadership (on which she has published widely). After thirty years of marriage it is inevitable that some of her wisdom would eventually seep in.

I have had a variety of gurus over the past years, squash and chess coaches, karate senseis, language teachers (German, Dutch, Spanish and Malay) and dive & flying

Instructors. They have all taught me a wee bit about life, its problems and their solutions – and indeed philosophy.

If I have one regret I fear that it is an important one. I failed to recruit a mentor to assist me later in my career. I have included a section on serendipity (or luck) in this thesis, and sad to report – this mistake was mine, and mine alone. The untimely death of Professor Michael Beesley<sup>3</sup> was a heavy personal blow to me, he was my true mentor up until that time.

Needless to say, despite my appropriations of the ideas of others, the mistakes and errors contained within this thesis (and indeed omissions) are all my (existential) responsibility.

I read a great book a short while ago. The author prefaced his work with the words: “Made in Kilmarnock”. I would very much like to do the same, but as I only lived in Edinburgh for little more than two years after I was born and have been moving ever since a more accurate apposition for myself might be, perhaps:

## **Global Product**



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<sup>3</sup> Professor Michael Beesley, who .... died aged 75, was among the most gifted industrial economists of his time. He was among the first to recommend road-pricing and his views were influential on the privatisation of British Telecom and British Rail and on bus deregulation. His output was prodigious and his interest in students, especially research students, was legendary. Christopher Foster, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), Friday 8 October 1999.

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## List of Abbreviations and Definitions

AA	The Automobile Association. In the early 1970s and 1980s this was a non-profit making motorists' members club with its Headquarters in Basingstoke, UK
ABC	Activity Based Costing. DHL was particularly proficient in this area and used the analysis in preparing Customer quotations and RFQs.
ABX	Airborne Express. A US based Airline and Express Carrier. Bought out by DHL in 2002
B2B	Business to Business, sometimes referred to as Industrial Marketing
B2C	Business to Consumer, sometimes referred to as Consumer Marketing
BDP	Best Demonstrated Practice
CEO	Chief Operating Officer
Cf.	Latin abbreviation for Confer. Literally compare with.
CIM	Chartered Institute of Marketing, a professional body for Marketeers based in Cookham, Berkshire, UK
COBOL	Common Orientated Business Language. A programming language primarily used on large mainframe computers in a batch processing environment in the 1970s and 1980s. Still in use to some limited extent in 2015.
COO	Chief Operating Officer. In DHL a COO was responsible for a region of the World, e.g. International Americas, the USA, Europe & Africa, Middle East and Asia Pacific. The COOs report to the CEO.
CPD	Continuous Professional Development. Also an annual self-improvement programme run by the Chartered Institute of Marketing which enables the participant to use the designatory title of "Chartered Marketer".
C&L	Coopers and Lybrand Associates Limited, the consultancy arm of Coopers & Lybrand (in the UK) which subsequently has become Price Waterhouse Coopers.
DHL	Freight, Logistics, Express and Mail carrier owned by DWPN. The initials stand for the names of the three US founders; Dalsey, Hilblom & Lynn.
DHQ	Domestic Head Quarters. Euphemism for working at home in DHL Express (cf. WHQ) based on the internal usage of IATA or quasi IATA airport codes to denominate international locations.
Dissertation	I use the term 'Thesis' for higher degrees by research only, and

	‘Dissertation’ for higher degrees by coursework, including a research project.
DWPN	Deutsche Post World Net. The German post office. Logistics activities all based under the DHL banner.
FEDEX	Federal Express. US based Airline, Logistics and Freight company.
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods, a sub-set of Consumer Marketing
GCC	Global Coordination Centre. The DHL Global head office in the early 2000s.
Gestalt	German word meaning the overall or ‘big’ picture.
Halal	An object or action which is permissible under Islam
Haram	Sinful and hence not permitted under Islamic Jurisprudence
HR	Human Resources a.k.a. Personnel
HRD	Human Resource Development, a company programme designed to bring Managers up to date with the latest HR theories.
IATA	The International Air Transport Association is the trade association for the world’s airlines.
IRS	United States Internal Revenue Service
JIT	Just in Time, a key concept in logistics management which helps minimise inventory costs and increases efficiency particularly in a large scale production line manufacturing environment.
Kaizen	Japanese word meaning “Continuous Improvement”
MBO	Management by Objectives. Popularised by Peter Drucker.
MD	Managing Director
OGSMt	Acronym for the strategic planning process, Objective (singular and stated in one sentence), Goals (in numbers), Strategies, Measures (quantifiable) and finally (with a lower case “t”) tactics.
Pax	Travel industry jargon for Passengers. Used within this thesis to mean people, staff, colleagues etc.
q.v.	Quod Vide (Latin). See elsewhere within this work (thesis).

RFQ	Request for Quotation. Similar to the idea of a tender for a particular project or piece of work. The total document (in DHL) would typically be of 8 to 12 pages but could be far larger for more complex projects. Details could include; key personnel, routings, quality standards expected and costings.
RoMI	Return on Marketing Investment. A cross industry “club” formed by Cranfield University to investigate best industry marketing practice.
s/he	Abbreviation for ‘She’ or ‘He’. The second person singular without reference to gender.
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely. Acronym relating to the characteristics of a robust plan.
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures.
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.
Takaful	An Islamic concept based on co-operative insurance.
Thesis	I use the term ‘Thesis’ for higher degrees by research only, and ‘Dissertation’ for higher degrees by coursework, including a research project.
TINA	There Is No Alternative. A phrase popularised by Margaret Thatcher (former British Prime Minister 1979-1990) to describe the choice of strategy selected having no other feasible option.
TM	Transcendental Meditation.
TNT	Thomas Nationwide Transport. Australian founded freight and Logistics company partially owned by the Dutch Post office. Subject of an unsuccessful takeover bid by UPS in 2012.
TQM	Total Quality Management. A concept associated with W. Edwards Deming who introduced the philosophy into Japan immediately after World War II.
Updent	A qualitative improvement in a system or process (author generated)
UPS	United Parcel Service. A US based Airline, Freight and Logistics company.
WHQ	World Wide Headquarters, DHL Express, Brussels pre 1998
WWII	World War 2

## SYNOPSIS

This synopsis should be read in conjunction with the thesis abstract, I have endeavoured not to overly duplicate content. The primary purpose of this section is to link the five papers that I present and demonstrate how they combine with each other in my research programme. The papers were written over a period of about 3 years, although the publication dates do not reflect this. My research methodology is based on a continuous spiral of reflection and hence my position and understanding changed as I continued through the research programme (see diagram on the following page).

In this synopsis I detail the methodology and an explanation of how the published papers are linked together based on the paradigm of Critical Theory and utilising an Action Research methodology with interpretative and hermeneutic foundations. The overarching approach is known as Living Educational Theory as promulgated by Professor Jack Whitehead of the University of Bath.<sup>4</sup> The specific approach I use is referred to as “The Living Thesis”, the methodology that I have chosen to adopt is that of Wong (2007), which is that of a case study applying ethnographic reflection to my professional practice.

In all of the papers listed below I have been the primary author. My Supervisors at the Universiti Malaya, Professor Nazari bin Ismail and Associate Professor Edward Wong are my co-authors. I presented at the ALARA conference in Brisbane in September 2013 and have also had (subsequently) an article based on my paper published in their Journal.

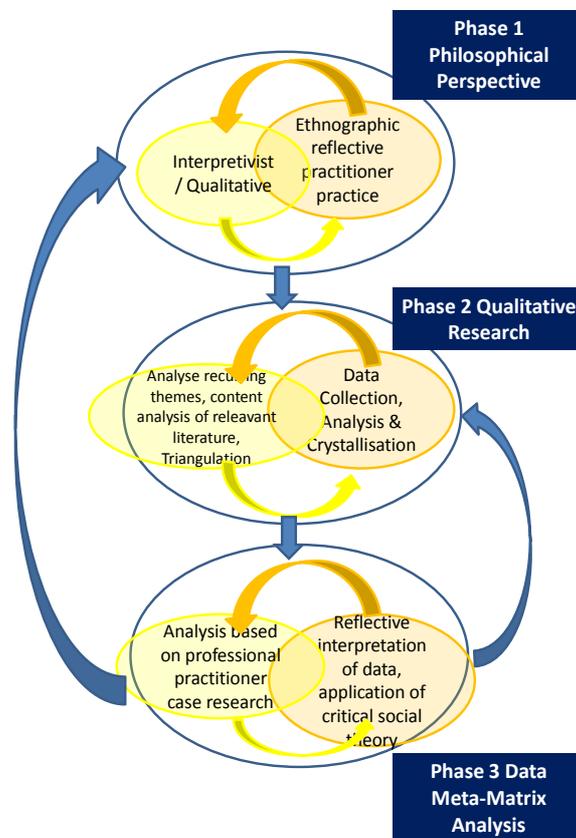
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<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the kind 'How do I improve my Practice'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19, pp41-52.

The Diagram below provides a concise overview of the methodology employed which is based upon an understanding of the philosophical constructs of this research methodology, reflective writing, triangulation with secondary data sources and literature and finally analysed as part of a meta data matrix

**A Qualitative Case Study Methodology, employing Habermas’s critical social theory perspective within a phenomenological, reflective practitioner approach.**

(adapted from Lavertu (2007)).



This methodology employs heuristics applying both depth and breadth of reflections on my experiential material thus producing insights into the field of international marketing. I feel that I have been consistent with brand map in which my espoused theory is mainly consistent with my lived theory (Whitehead (1993)), although I recognise that this has not always been the case. Self awareness is vital to the correct recognition and identification of the inconsistencies between espoused and lived theory

(Noffke, 1997). My writing is within what Jack Whitehead calls the “Living Theory Paradigm”, he asserts that the use of the first person singular (“I”) is not only acceptable, but also recommended, encapsulating as it does the subjectivity of the paradigm. Enquiries of “How do I improve what I am doing” involves the clarification and evolution in the cycle of action reflection, action plans, data and subsequent reflection on the effectiveness of the actions and then evaluation, this is then followed by the modification of the action plan and the cycle continues (Whitehead J. , 2012)

*The central problem that I start with is “How do I improve my professional practice”*

I see myself astride two complementary professions – that of an Academic and a Marketeer. I re-entered academia in 2009 after some 30 years in the corporate world. This was not an idle move, I had taught previously back in 1981 and it was always my intention to return.

The published articles all relate to the problem identified above, some cover the theory and epistemological foundations of my research, some the overall gestalt of my career and some cover vignettes illustrating critical moments or lessons learnt. All conclude with reflections on the implications for the theory of the philosophy of management.

The research methodology does not require the generation of new rules for behaviour or explanations of organizational behaviour, nonetheless three observations are made which may prove of value to future researchers. This is partly the role of Action Research, to provide fuzzy answers to fuzzy questions which can then generate more precise questions and research methodologies appropriate to the new problems identified.

As an output of my published papers and subsequent reflection I would put forward three observations relating to Critical Moments, the Gently phenomenon and the value of Tacit Knowledge.

### **Critical Moments**

Over time some events are quite momentous and others fairly insignificant. However, on reflection it becomes clearer that some were seminal and others merely bright shooting stars. These are also sometimes termed critical moments of decision. I would differentiate between critical moments, which I see as key decision nodes in one's life or career and critical events or incidents which relate to a change in one's external environment which result in a significant impact on one's planned or expected future.

### **The Gently Phenomenon**

Various writers on organizations (Back, 1992), (Bechtold, 1997) & (Black, 2000) utilise Chaos and Complexity Theories to posit a view of multiple dynamic interactions within a company. On reflection I now see this as even more complex still – there is also an industry dimension where the same actors come into contact with each other in different roles at different times in different organisations. I refer to this phenomenon in many of the papers. In the absence of a suitable name for this principle of interconnectedness I will refer to it as the “Gently” phenomena.

I refer to the Gently phenomena being the probability that in any one person's career that they will come back into contact with past colleagues in other organizations later in their career. Given, geography, educational background, the job specifications, age group etc. this (in my experience) is quite common. The way I would describe it

would be similar to that of the basic nuclear model, with the Organization represented by the centre of the atom with various professions (Marketing, Engineering, Finance, IT, HR etc) orbiting around each other. Any individual may be closely attached to his professional discipline or area of expertise or more closely attached to the organization itself. Nonetheless some people would leave and join other organizations - usually within the same discipline. The reason that the Gently Phenomena is important is because these individuals may know more about you than your current work colleagues (c.f. the Johari Window) which can provide either a positive or negative influence on your career.

### **Tacit Knowledge, Serendipity & the Science of Being Lucky**

I now realise that tacit knowledge is of critical importance, far more so than qualifications or time served in a particular role. The ability to anticipate the moves of others is the key to being in the right place at the right time. Many would describe this as luck, but I would reply that in many cases people (to a large extent) can make their own luck.

I have been described by many people as a very lucky person. And I do agree that, for the most part, life has treated me most kindly. The important question is why have I been lucky? I posit that my modus operandi, interpersonal skills and learning from past failures have equipped me to handle complex situations and extrapolate potential solutions as a result of the meditation and reflection. In other words experience and practice are slightly improving the probability of success. Indeed skill and talent can often be seen to be subordinate to practice (Syed, 2010). I attempt to illustrate these learning situations and critical moments at various points throughout the five papers.

One of the Agency planners gave me some advice early in my career – make friends before you need them. I think this has to be one of my key learning points from my own reflections.

The counterpoint to this would be the danger of a new line manager – particularly one who does not know you, has no loyalty to you and who may have conflicting objectives. In my case this has proved to my detriment on three separate occasions (once in the UK, once in Belgium and once in Malaysia). Whilst this is unsurprising the learning point is identical to the one above. Make friends before you need them. The difference is that between that of opportunities and threats. Maximising opportunities and minimising threats would be the mantra. Both require maintaining strong networks and creating favourable impressions but the latter may require more of an external rather than internal focus. After many years in not only the same industry (which was itself consolidating) but also in the same company I found that my external networks were actually quite weak. In retrospect I should have been more active with the Chartered Institute of Marketing and certainly monitored external job opportunities more closely. Networking and taking advantage of the Gently phenomenon could have proved serendipitous.