Generating ideas and formulating research topics: a*n investigation on sources and constraints.*

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a small scale research which investigates how researchers generate ideas to formulate their research topics for post graduate dissertations and the constraints they undergo in this process. Due to various misconceptions and restrictions, researchers usually face challenges in identifying potential topics for their research. Twenty one researchers in various disciplines of the faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna including the author, who are involved in post graduate research (both M.phil and Ph.D) were selected as samples for this study. The information about the sources for generating ideas and the constraints they underwent when formulating their research topics were elicited through a questionnaire and informal discussions and their responses were analyzed qualitatively in order to list out the number of idea generating sources as well as the constraints faced by the researchers. Thus this study provides insights into the process of generating ideas and formulating research topics at the post graduate level.

Keywords : Research topics, Scientific research, Research methodology, Post graduate students

Introduction

Tripathi and Shukla (1985) quote Charles Pierce, the great American philosopher for having spelled out four different methods to know about the facts or fixing our beliefs about various concepts, in their book 'The text book of research methodology'. Pierce's four methods are tenacity, consulting authority, intuition and scientific research. Tenacity is the tendency to continue to believe a proposition through habit or inertia, consulting authority is consulting an expert instead of holding on to one's belief, intuition is relying upon reasoning or self evidence and finally the scientific research is a process of knowing new facts and verifying old ones by the application of scientific methods to natural phenomena. Scientific research is defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as" a studious inquiry or examination and especially an investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws". Cooper and Schindler (2001), famous scholars in the field of scientific research methodology denote that research is a systematic inquiry that provides information to guide decisions. Sekaran (2006), in

his elaborated definition spells out that research is the process of finding solutions to a problem after a thorough study and analysis. Scientific research which is one of the characteristics of academic excellence is therefore empirical, systematic and involves critical investigation of hypothetical propositions.(Kerlinger 1983). The first step into this systematic inquiry is to gain insights into the process of generating ideas to formulate research topics. This paper deals with the sources and constraints related to this first step into the world of research that is generating ideas and formulating research topics, specifically at post graduate level.

Background

The University of Jaffna was first established in 1974, as the Jaffna Campus of the University of Sri Lanka, offering courses in Science and Humanities. With the implementation of the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978, it became an independent and autonomous university as the University of Jaffna. There are five faculties such as Medical, Science, Agriculture, Management Studies and Commerce and Arts at present and the initiatives are over to start the sixth one- faculty of engineering in 2014.

The Faculty of Arts has a staff population to cater the teaching needs of seventeen academic departments of both humanities and social sciences.

Each year a good number of permanent teachers in this faculty gain admission to continue their post- graduate research studies at various Universities in and out of the country. From the informal discussions with the faculty staff and the experience of the researcher who is also one of the post graduate students at Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Kelaniya under HETC window-3 project, it could be revealed that generating ideas and formulating research topics which is the first step into the world of academic research needs systematic and controlled brain storming as research topics should exhibit the skills, capabilities, attitudes and qualities of the researcher. The burden is solely on the researcher as the process of formulating research topics is usually done before the appointment of the supervisor. Thus this paper provide insights into the process of generating ideas and formulating research topics at the post graduate level by exploring and identifying the types of sources approached and constraints underwent by the researchers in the faculty of Arts University of Jaffna.

Literature Review

Petti Alasuutari (1995) expressed that topics for research are puzzles in need of investigation and the success of research depends on how researchers see them as riddles to be formulated and then to be un-riddled. Whatever topic is finally chosen, it should have the potentiality

of forming into a complete dissertation.

Let us now view how Jennifer Mason (1996) categorizes five main types of intellectual puzzles or in other words puzzles to be un-riddled as academic research.

Kinds of Puzzles	Description
Descriptive and illuminative puzzles a) Developmental puzzle b) Mechanical puzzle	Eg: How much of X exists or why did X develop? How does X work?
Co-relational and Explanatory puzzles a) Co-relational puzzle b) Casual puzzle	Is there any relationship between variable X and variable Y Why does X cause Y?
Ethno-methodological puzzles a) Essence puzzles	Why is X assumed?

Mason further points out that the above puzzles are influenced or

affected by historical movements, contextual milieu, comparative study, conceptual language and political stances. Thus the process of formulating research topic is a complex activity which demands sensible questions to be asked for the puzzles to be solved. In order to investigate into this complex area in the present study, the selected participants are the researchers from University of Jaffna that experienced many radical changes and hardships in carrying out academic research due to the socio-political scenario prevailed in the past. Avenues are now open to these researchers through HETC projects and thus these participants seem to be suitable for the investigation.

Participants

Altogether there were twenty one researchers who took part in this

survey. The profile of the participants is as follows:-

Research degree	Field of study	Number of participants
M.Phil	Education-2 Ling/Lang/Lit- 4 Fine Arts- 2 Social Science- 2	10
M.Phil leading to Ph.D	Education- 1 Ling/Lang/Lit- 2 Fine Arts- 2	07

	Social Science-2	
Ph.D	Education- - Ling/Lang/Lit- 2 Fine Arts- - Social Science-2	04
Total		21

Methodology

The above twenty one participants were the respondents of this survey to Investigate post graduate researchers' views on generating ideas and formulating topics for their research. The survey tool was a questionnaire with multiple choice prompts on how they generated ideas and formulated topics and open ended questions to explore their views and suggestions. The questionnaire was administered in the faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna.

Findings

To elicit the responses for the question how they generated their ideas the following options were given in the questionnaire. They are as follows:-

1. searched a problem in your professional practice

2. selected a topic that interests you by reading professional journals/ books/ other dissertations   3. selected from suggestions of other established research.   4. contacted experts in the field

5. had to select a topic from a given them.

6. Got help from friends/colleagues.

7. If none of the above please specify------------

79% of the participants (16/21) selected the first option that they searched a problem in their professional practice and 16% of the participants supported the third option that they selected from suggestions of other established research. Only one person (ie, 5%) responded that he or she selected a topic that interests by reading professional journals/ books/ other dissertations. Out of the seven options only three were selected.

Another question was posed with regard to what the researchers think about the process. Six participants revealed that it is the most difficult part of the research process and fourteen said that it is one of the difficult parts. Therefore, 20/21 ie; 95% agreed that generating ideas

and finding research topic is a difficult task. Only one person said that it is an easy task. Another interesting point is that 19 out of 21 researchers expressed that there were repeated changes or differences between the idea they generated and the topic they finally formulated. According to their responses the idea generating sources are limited and their main difficulty is to narrow down their idea to a specific topic that is researchable.

To investigate more on the constraints they face, the following questions were asked.

1) Did you find it difficult to formulate the idea into a research topic? If `yes' is your response please specify the reasons.

2) Were there any changes/ differences between the idea you generated and the topic you formulate? If `yes' is your answer please specify the reasons.

3) What additional measures, do you think, should be taken to make the above process easy?

Their responses revealed the following difficulties as the main constraints of the participants. They are lack of local information, (Eg: They find it very difficult to get access to local information related to their topic that is suitable to their literature review due to displacement,

loss of resources and lack of proper access to resources), difficulty in linking the specific area to the modern stances. (Eg: Those who do research in the field of Education said that the difficulty is to link their area to sustainable development), lack of modern methodological tools. (Eg: Researchers on fine-arts revealed that Praxis is a modern method developed for researchers of performing art but they have no access to it). Most of the researchers are of the opinion that there is difficulty in making the idea applicable to the contextual needs due to socio-cultural and political barriers ,ethical issues and accountability of the data available. In addition to the above constraints, some of the participants denoted that using English Language to formulate topics is areal constraint to them. The main difficulty they confronted is to convert their ideas into a language that they are not proficient enough.

As response to the question "what additional methods could be taken to ease the process", the researchers suggested that there could be awareness creating body and mechanisms in the university for various research fields to formulate topics that are very relevant and beneficial to the student population.

Limitation.

The main limitation of this study is that it was done with limited participants only from one faculty of a particular University. If the

study could be extended to other faculties as well as other Universities, more information could have been obtained.

Suggestion and conclusion

According to the views elicited from researchers and the writer's experience as a researcher, generating ideas for research and formulating topics play a crucial role in the entire process of an academic research. It is the initial step to the world of research and usually done by the researcher himself or herself before obtaining assistance from the supervisor. Therefore a beneficial and timely topic of relevance could be generated if the initial process is carried out in collaboration with the departments that demand such research and other researchers in the same area. Also a lot of literature review should be done before formulating the topic and proper guidance of experts should be sought at the initial stage.

Thus more insight into the above process is necessary particularly at the post graduate level.

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