



Unearthing dilemmas in thesis titles: Lived experience of a novice researcher in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This article documents in retrospect a 3 year lived experience of a novice Ph. D researcher in Sub-Saharan Africa using a Hermeneutics Phenomenology approach. One of the key findings indicates that the process of developing a meaningful thesis title is plagued with dilemmas that necessitates revision of the thesis title countless times. To this effect novice researchers should be prepared to mercilessly revise their thesis titles throughout the length of their doctoral study. Whereas changing from one thesis title to another could be a demanding and stressful task, it is during those moments that researchers begin to penetrate their personal worldview of knowledge creation and become innovators. Short of this, novice researchers operate at lower order of Bloom's Taxonomy and remain 'copy-paste' type of researchers. It is at deeper layer of learning where higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation reside. This then justifies the longer period it takes to arrive at a meaningful thesis title as it represents the highest order of cognitive reasoning referred to as 'create' stage as advanced in the revised Bloom's Taxonomy.

Keywords: thesis title, novice researcher, hermeneutics, phenomenology, dilemma

1. Introduction

This paper is part of the principal researcher's doctoral thesis. This article reflects the lived experience of a novice researcher in his quest for knowledge during his doctoral journey. In this paper, a 'novice' researcher refers to any researcher engaged in a research at doctoral level for the first time (Taskeen, 2014) [28] while the term 'dilemma' represents a situation requiring a choice between equally undesirable alternatives as well as any difficult or puzzling situation or problem encountered during the research process (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018) [3].

Whereas many studies have been conducted on the lived experiences of novice researchers during doctoral studies such as Gutteridge (2015) [10] and Nagel (2015) [21], very few exist if any, that focus on the thesis title generation process let alone in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this discourse, we provide a context within which the study was conceived, supported by theoretical underpinnings, literature review and methodology applied. Later we provide the research findings and discussion that emerged and implications of the study generated.

2. Context

The study is located in the southern part of the Sub-Saharan Africa represented by two public universities namely 'Sim' University (Pseudonym) and 'Sam' University (Pseudonym) from two countries who collaboratively worked on a joint project to offer postgraduate programmes. The period within which the study was conducted was from 2014 to 2017. The names of universities and countries are not disclosed for anonymity purposes, given the sensitivity of the research topic. Thus, Sim University (Pseudonym) was used to represent the university where the study was carried out.

Within the postgraduate partnership was a Doctorate of Philosophy (DPhil) or otherwise referred to PhD programme where the principal researcher under-took his doctoral studies whose mode of delivery was through the distance learning mode.

The Sim and Sam Universities collaborative programme was pitched within the South to South partnership mode. It should be observed here that the South-to-South collaboration represented a rare opportunity where countries of the south successfully collaborated to offer joint programmes on an equal footing. While Sam university provided curriculum and study modules, Sim university provided a comprehensive learner support services. The proceeds realised were shared on an agreed ratio based on individual university input in the collaboration. Consequently, students who graduated from the collaboration were 100% owned by the two universities as exemplified by two logos from the two universities on their graduation gowns and degree certificates.

The researcher happen to be part of an inaugural cohort of PhD students. Whereas the student was learning how to engage with his studies, the two universities were equally learning how to work as partners. Thus the learning process was both at individual and institutional levels. For instance, whereas both universities had postgraduate regulations in place to guide the development of research proposal development process, the two had not fully harmonized their regulations. Here, students did not know which regulation to follow while developing their research proposals. Equally, it took time for the research supervisors to be appointed by the two universities, as they had to deal with bureaucratic public systems within. Thus, time was lost as students kept on oscillating from one institutional regulation to the other. For

this particular researcher, the first two years were spent developing the research proposal while the third year was devoted to data generation and thesis write-up. During the 2014 – 2017 period, the researcher kept on changing one research topic to another eleven times.

2.1 Statement of the problem

While we acknowledge that to arrive at a meaningful thesis title is a demanding task, it is not clear what lived experiences exist among novice PhD researchers regarding the thesis title-making process. In addition, it is not clear why the process of arriving at a meaningful thesis title takes long. Further, there are no documented lessons from those who have done their PhD studies that other novice researchers could adopt to mitigate the title-making dilemma.

2.2 Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. Explore dilemmas that exist in title-making process, and
2. Document lessons learnt while engaged in title-making process.

2.3 Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its emphasis on establishing the lived experiences of novice researchers on title-making process. In this regards, the study may illuminate the discourse on the role of metacognition on thesis title-making process. In addition, the study findings may contribute to the discourse on the revised Bloom's Taxonomy higher order reasoning dabbled 'Creation,' previously referred to as Synthesis level. Consequently, the study could aid novice researchers and research supervisors navigate their way to arrive at meaningful research thesis titles.

3. Theoretical underpinnings of the study

The underpinning theoretical framework that largely guided this study was the revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001)^[1].

3.1 Revised bloom's taxonomy

In this study, the underlying theoretical framework that guided it is the revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001)^[1]. The revised model represents a shift in thinking from the 1956 Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy to that of Anderson and Krathwohl's 2001^[1] (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001)^[1]. According to Bloom's Taxonomy within the cognitive domain in its original sense, at lower level consist of Knowledge and Comprehension while the higher order starts with Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation stages as illustrated in figure 1 below.

Anderson and Krathwohl revised bloom Taxonomy. In their study, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)^[1] revised Bloom's (1956) classical study on cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. Within the cognitive domain, they renamed Blooms Knowledge strata with Remember, Comprehension with Understand, Application with Apply and Analysis with Analyse. In addition, they transformed Bloom's Synthesis into Create at the very top of the cognitive pyramid as illustrated in figure 1 above.

Pohl (2011)^[23] argued that Bloom's Revised Taxonomy

begins with Remembering as the lowest level of the thinking process. This takes place when students are able to describe, make lists, tell, and name aspects of the topic. 'Remembering' is followed with 'Understanding' level where the student understands what they have read. It happens when they retell, infer, interpret, explain and outline knowledge. At third level is 'Application' stage where use of knowledge in a new situation occurs. It occurs when the student demonstrate, implement, carry out, or describe a similar situation.

The fourth level is 'Analysis' stage where processes of breaking information into small segments takes place. It occurs when the student organises information and determines relationship between their previous knowledge and newly acquired knowledge. 'Evaluation' is to advance reason to support decision. It happens when the student judges, chooses, recommends, justify, critique about the text. Finally, Creating is the highest level. It occurs when the students design, construct, plan, and produce the new ideas Pohl (2011)^[23]. Higher order thinking skills are reflected by the top three levels (Analyze Evaluate and Create); lower order thinking skills are reflected by the lower three levels (Remember, Understand, and Apply) (Pohl, 2011)^[23]. In our current study, title-setting belongs to the higher order cognitive domain referred to as 'create'.

4. Literature Review

In this segment, we review related literature on thesis title development. Key within this section is a justification on why thesis titles matter, classification of thesis titles, challenges associated with thesis development and finally, strategies involved in title-making process. Generally, there are very few studies in this area dedicated to learning from the lived experiences of novice researchers on the subject of thesis title-making process. To this end, the literature reviewed are limited to a few isolated researchers gathered through the google search engine over a period of 3 years (2014 - 2017).

4.1 Why thesis titles matter

According to Bavdekar (2016)^[2] a title is the gateway to the contents of an article. It is typically the first segment of a manuscript that the editors and reviewers read. After publication, it is the first part of an article that readers see. Based on their understanding of the title, readers decide if the article is relevant to them or not. In addition, readers who are glancing through a database get to see only the title. The first impressions generated by the title, help them decide if there is a need to take a detailed look at the article (Bavdekar, 2016)^[2]. For Hairston and Keene observe that a good title helps the reader to predict content, captivate reader's interest, reflects the tone of the piece of writing and contains keywords that makes it easy to access by a computer search (Hairston and Keene, 2003)^[11].

4.2 Classification of thesis titles

Admittedly, there are various ways of classifying thesis titles. For instance, Vasilev (2015) categories thesis titles in three broad domains namely (i) declarative, (ii) informative and (iii) interrogative. According to Vasilev (2015), Declarative titles highlight the core finding or conclusion stated in the paper. Descriptive titles define the article theme, but without

divulging its findings or conclusions. For example, 'Investigation of grade one, Zambian Children and their ability to learn from paper based instructions. A case of Lusaka District of Zambia.' Even though, this makes the title rather long; it has certain advantages too as the readers get complete information about the article content.

Informative titles on the other hand contains several key words to inform the key findings emanating from the study. For instance, 'the dilemma of titling a PhD thesis' sends a signal to the reader in advance on the anticipated dilemmas in the article. Finally, Interrogative titles usually restate the research question in part or in full. For example: 'Does lead paint exposure lead to intellectual impairment among pupils?' Here, the title points the reader to the key area of investigation where knowledge gap is situated.

In general, descriptive titles are preferred, as they inform the reader about what a study entails but not about the study result. This helps maintain the suspense about the outcome. On the other hand, a declarative title states the outcome and it is assumed that a casual reader may then not have much curiosity left for reading the entire paper (Vasilev, 2015).

4.3 Why title-making process is a challenge

One reason to explain why novice researchers face challenges arriving at a meaningful thesis title process is the lack of higher order thinking skills. It has been observed that higher order thinking skills do not come easily for many students. For example, Healy (1999) ^[13] argues that the influences of the digital age have led to a generation that is more distractible, has reduced math and verbal skills in spite of higher academic results and has diminished ability to make discriminations between shades of gray when answers are not clearly black and white (Healy, 1999) ^[13]. The 21st century student may think that all the answers one really needs to know are found on the internet and there is no need to memorize a basic knowledge which forms a foundation for higher reasoning. Further, since cell phones mean that Mom or Dad can always be easily reached to help with decisions, 'helicopter' parents may have inadvertently trained millennial children to use electronic gadgets as a substitute for thinking for themselves (Somers & Stettle, 2010) ^[27].

In addition, title-making process demands for the application of higher order thinking skills which are challenging. In the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) ^[1], argue that to 'create' is to put elements together to form a coherent or functional whole. To create entails that users put parts together in a new way. It is to synthesize parts into something new and different creation. This process is the most challenging mental function in the revised taxonomy and represents the art of title-making process (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) ^[1].

4.4 How to develop a thesis title

According to Bavdekar (2016) ^[2], title is commonly one of the last segment to be written. Although this could be true, the work on the title could begin when a paper is being developed. For instance, it is a good practice to make a note of a few sentences, phrases or ideas that define the main theme of the paper; which could be later used in the title (Hamlin, 2015). one could go on refining these phrases, as new versions of the

manuscript are written. By the time writing of the manuscript text is completed the author could have a working title consisting of at least two or three key terms that can give readers a sense of the content and angle of the research paper. Such a strategy has another advantage: it helps the author to maintain and regain focus. It is not uncommon for the author to wander away from the main research theme, while writing and revising manuscript versions (Bavdekar, 2016) ^[2].

Building a working title while the manuscript is being developed could be useful in preventing the author from going astray. Those who wish to begin only after the entire manuscript text is ready can also write a one-paragraph summary of the manuscript as a starting point for selecting a title. They can then formulate a couple of sentences (working title) with key words and key terms that provide description of what the paper contains. The next step is to compress the title by getting rid of redundant words and refining it by making it easier to read, concise and catchy. Further, according to the University of South California Libraries (2015) ^[29], a title can be made attractive in several ways. These include using a famous quote in the title, twisting or playing with a quote, making a provocative statement and creating a new acronym or anagram, among others. The title should not be finalized in a hurry. Further, it is worth asking for colleagues' and friends' opinion. Their suggestions could help improve the title (Bavdekar, 2016) ^[2].

5. Methodology

This study was guided by Hermeneutic phenomenology which is concerned with human experience as it is lived (Heidegger, 1996) ^[14]. The focus is to illuminate particulars and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of constructing meaning and achieving a sense of understanding. In addition, Langdrige (2007) argues that our experiences can be best understood through stories we tell of that experience. To understand the life world we need to explore the stories people tell of their experiences, often with the help of some specific hermeneutic (interpretation) (Heidegger, 1996) ^[14].

5.1 Research Design

A case study research design was applied to study the lived experiences of a novice researcher using Heideggerian Hermeneutics Phenomenology lenses. Heidegger's thesis is on 'Being and Time', as advanced by Martin Heidegger and further expanded by van Manen's four reflective thematic areas on lived experiences as follows: (i) lived space – Spatiality; (ii) lived body – Corporeality; (iii) lived time – Temporality; and (iv) lived human relation – Relationality (van Manen, 2007) ^[30].

5.2 Sample size and selection criteria

According to Neuman (2003), qualitative research works focus on non-probability or a non-random sample, which entails that they seldom determine the sample size in advance. To this effect, sample size consisted of one PhD candidate whose thesis had been submitted for examination. In order to choose research participants purposively, an inclusion/exclusion criteria was developed adapted from van Manen (2007) ^[30]. The case study chosen conformed to the set

boundary (Neuman, 2003).

1. Lived with a PhD title-making experience (Corporeality).
2. Lived with a PhD title-making experience for three years (Temporality).
3. Lived with PhD title-making experience in a target university (Spatiality)
4. Lived with a PhD title-making experience in a company of supervisors and peer reviewers (Relationality)

5.3 Research Tools

In this study, the researcher used two main research tools namely: document review guide and reflective journal. Use of multiple tools strengthened the validity and reliability of the study findings as evidence was collaborated and triangulated from different viewpoints.

5.4 Data generation procedure

Data generation procedure assumed a four steps approach as follows:

1. At step 1, developed PhD proposal files were saved on the personal laptop and as email attachments sent to the supervisors over a period of three years (2014 to 2017).
2. At step 2, revisited and searched for saved PhD proposal versions on both the laptop and email attachments and then download and saved in a single folder on the laptop.
3. At Step 3, constructed a reflective journal matrix.
4. Step 4, reflected on the data and documented emergent themes on the phenomenon.

5.5 Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis of data in this study was concurrently done throughout the data gathering process using Inductive Data Analysis. Emergent reflection notes were reviewed from time to time to identify the emerging themes and patterns. The data were coded and analysed thematically and the identified themes were cross-checked by the co-researchers for validation purposes in line with Clarke and Braun (2013)^[5].

5.6 Trustworthiness

The study applied Guba's (1981) four criteria as follows: (i) credibility, (ii) transferability, (iii) dependability, and (iv) confirmability (Guba, 1981). Data generation process was triangulated using observation, reflective journal matrix and document review guide. The researchers used reflexivity approach to decipher meaning from generated data. In addition, data generation procedure and boundaries were documented for the purposes of ensuring transferability of the study findings to different settings. Further, given that the findings were presented verbatim coupled with participant checks on the research, the study meets the dependability and confirmability criteria as well.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

In carrying out this study, ethical issues as guided by Cohen *et al.* (2000)^[6], such as verbal and/or written consents from all participants were followed. Therefore, pseudonyms were assigned in place of actual names, to assure confidentiality and privacy (Cohen *et al.* 2000)^[6]. The pseudonym given were as follows: 'Sim' University and 'Sam' University. The pseudonym were assigned to hide the identity of the

respondents involved in the initial research study.

6. Findings and Discussion

Emerging from this study are a series of dilemmas bordering on (i) Positivism vs Interpretivism paradigm stands; (ii) Academic vs professional practice dichotomy; (iii) locally vs international reach; (iv) use of metaphors in academic paper; (v) National representation vs meagre research operational resources; (vi) Heterogeneous target research group vs geographical distribution; (vii) Objectivism vs Subjectivism and (viii) Disclosure of research site vs confidentiality of participants.

6.1 Dilemmas

6.1.1 Positivism vs Interpretivism dilemma

The first research proposal had the title 'Examining the Learning Styles of Distance Education Learners using Instructional Material Designers' Lenses at the University of 30' (03/11/14). The Principal researcher had been illuminated by literature review on Learning Styles (Franzoni & S. Assar, 2009). The chosen study area was situated within the principal researcher's work practice i.e. distance education where he was motivated to establish the learning styles in use among distance learners in order to enhance the learning process (Moore, 1983). The intention was innovate strategies of improving the quality of learner support available to distance learners informed by learners' learning styles (Rogowsky, Calhoun & Tallal, 2015). In the title, while to 'examine' and 'learning styles' called for the application of quantitative approaches, the researcher on the other hand was driven by qualitative axiological values (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000)^[6]. The researcher faced a dilemma of reconciling quantitative phenomenon using qualitative approach. Consequently, the proposal title had to be changed.

6.1.2 Academic background vs professional practice

In the second revised research proposal, the title was 'Making Open Distance Education inclusive (Kaputa, 2013)^[15] in Southern Africa' (23/10/15). The principal Researcher was illuminated by conference proceedings exposure on making education inclusive attended at the University of Malawi. Whereas the researcher's educational background was inclusive education, his day-to-day operations bordered on distance education. This then resulted in a dilemma of researching on professional practice (van Manen, 2007)^[30] while retaining postgraduate academic orientation of the researcher.

6.1.3 Research pitched locally vs international prospect ambitions

The third title was 'Transforming an exclusive education into inclusive Open Distance education: Southern Africa's Experiences' (20/11/15). The study title was motivated by the principal researcher's education experience generated at University of Manchester on inclusive education at masters level and work experience in ODL with a desire for a regional opportunities once done with his PhD. Whereas the researcher wanted to solve an identified problem of 'exclusion (Simui *et al.* 2017)^[25-26] among some distance learners' within his professional practice, he still had hidden ambition to provide a

research output at regional level to enhance international job

prospects. In this regards, the principal researcher faced a dilemma of combining education orientation in 'inclusive education', while researching on professional practice 'distance education' and creating a job niche 'Southern Africa.'

6.1.4 Metaphoric language vs Academic Language

The fourth title was 'Exclusion through the lenses of the marginalised in Distance Education in Zambia' (05/12/15). This researcher was motivated by a desire to make the title easily discoverable (Kumar, 2013) ^[16] once published online by introducing a metaphor within the title (Mungra, 2007) ^[20] and also wanted to scale-down the topic from southern Africa (regional) to Zambia (local). However, this led to a dilemma of combining a metaphoric language 'lenses' in an academic paper which a number of critical friends could not approve.

6.1.5 National representation vs meagre research operational resources

Another research proposal title developed was 'Inclusive education through the lenses of learners with disability (Kaputa, 2013) ^[15] on distance education programmes at selected Public Universities in Zambia (02/02/16). At this stage, the researcher narrowed the topic to public universities since they were charged with a responsibility of educating the public using public resources. Whereas the topic was much more narrow compared to the former, the researcher still faced a dilemma of pitching his study at national level while forgot about the available meagre operational research resources for data generation.

6.1.6 Heterogeneous target research group vs geographical distribution

Yet another title that emerged was 'Inclusive Education through the lenses of learners with disability on distance education programmes at University of XXX' (02/03/16). The topic was narrowed down to one from many public universities. However, the researcher still maintained inclusive education and distance education as part of the themes (Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu & Nyaruwata, 2017) ^[25-26]. In this particular title, the dilemma was manifested through researching on 'disability' phenomenon, which was heterogeneous in nature with target learners distributed across Zambia. The meagre operational resources available compounded this for data generation to cover the country (rural/urban). Eventually, a specific group of participants was identified as reflected in the final research title related to Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu & Nyaruwata's (2017) ^[25-26], 'Lived Experiences of Students with Visual Impairments (SwVI) at Sim University in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach' (08/09/17).

6.1.7 Objectivism vs Subjectivism within Phenomenology

Late in the second year, the researcher tilted the title towards phenomenology. The research proposal was entitled 'Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Learners with Disabilities on Distance Education Programmes at the University of XXX: A Phenomenological Approach' (08/09/17). Nevertheless, phenomenology (Lavery, 2003) ^[18] proved to be a diverse subject area with its origins leaning on positivism

(objectivism), yet the researcher value system remained in interpretivism (subjectivism). Hence, researcher had challenges on bracketing researcher prior knowledge as espoused by Husserlian school of thought (Heidegger, 1996)^[14]. In other words, the researcher faced a dilemma of reconciling Transcendental Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (objective) with his subjective research values. Hence, title was further transformed to lean on the works of Martin Heidegger's Interpretive (Hermeneutics) phenomenology (subjective), (Lavery, 2003)^[18].

6.1.8 Disclosure of research site vs confidentiality of participants

With further literature review, it became apparent that whereas the researcher wanted to be explicitly with the research location site, it was clear that a research on participants with disabilities was a sensitive subject (Christensen & Prout, 2002)^[4]. Most of the titles devised identified the location where the research participants were drawn from. The researcher yet again faced another dilemma as he had wanted the study to reflect the location yet on the other side was mindful of the negative implications of disclosing the research site on ethical grounds (Nuwagaba & Rule, 2015)^[22]. Further, principal researcher of the current study faced a dilemma to undisclosed participants on one hand yet had to include background to the study where research study rationale emerged. While researcher succeeded in not disclosing the identity of participants and their location, he still had a challenge on how much background information to disclose in the introduction chapter without disclosing the identity of the institution.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, while 'Sim' and 'Sam' Universities took time to nurture and harmonise their institutional regulations the novice researchers were grappling with their research proposals. In the process, as typified by the principal researcher in the current study, the novice researcher had to navigate his way through 11 thesis title from shallow to deeper layers before his study became meaningful. At each of the eleven stages, the novice researcher faced dilemmas, which had to be resolved before he could transform thesis title further.

We now know from this lived experience that the process of developing a meaningful thesis title is plagued with dilemmas. Therefore, novice researchers should be prepared to mercilessly revise their thesis titles throughout the length of their doctoral study. Whereas changing from one thesis title to another could be a demanding task, it is during those moments that researchers begin to penetrate their personal worldview of knowledge creation into innovators. Short of this, novice researchers operate at lower order of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Consequently, novice researchers are bound to remain 'copy-paste' type of researchers and not innovators and transformers. This then entails that novice researchers and their supervisors should be prepared to move from mere surface to deeper layers of learning. It is at deeper layer of learning where higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation reside. This then justifies the longer period it takes to arrive at a meaningful thesis title as it represents the highest

order of cognitive reasoning referred to as 'create' stage as advanced in the revised Bloom's Taxonomy.

Study Implications

Emanating from the discourse above are the following areas that novice researchers and their supervisors should consider in order to manage unavoidable dilemmas:

1. Research supervisors of postgraduate students should consider providing fertile spaces to their research students to reflect and generate research titles using higher order reasoning skills. Research supervisors should discourage 'copy-paste' syndrome of research titles among students and encourage critical thinking skills using higher order cognitive skills.
2. In the same vein, research students should be prepared to revise their thesis or dissertation titles countless times by constantly engaging with the practical reality on the ground. The reality could be in the area of personal conviction about the nature of research values, ethics, resource envelop and language barriers among others.
3. In addition, for institutions in higher educational partnerships especially at infancy stage, there is need harmonize regulations on proposals and thesis writing styles among partner institutions failure to which could adversely affect the academic progress of research students. In this study the student was torn asunder regarding which format to follow when developing his research proposal. Consequently, the student herein referred to as principal researcher had to revise his research proposal 11 times within 3 years.
4. Further, divergent views among supervisors regarding what constitutes a quality proposal at PhD level does negatively impact on student academic progress. In this study, the student herein referred to as principal researcher was exposed to rich knowledge in research from the three supervisors allocated to him. Notwithstanding the positives drawn from the supervisors above, there were moments when they exhibited sharp divergent views bordering on their paradigm stances such as pragmatism, positivism and interpretivism in their quest to guide the student independently. Consequently, the student has no choice but to modify the topic several times.

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