



# **Professional capital:**

The core of the learning process in multiple roles and contexts

Mary Ann Divinagracia

Thesis for B.A. degree  
International Studies in Education



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**  
**MENNTAVÍSINDASVIÐ**



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Thesis for B.A. degree in International Studies in Education

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Education and Diversity  
University of Iceland School of Education  
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and contexts

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## **Abstract**

The motivation for this study comes from a personal interest of mine. Particularly, in gaining a better understanding of the term professionalism. My argument is that professionalism can be applicable to any daily life circumstance. This study investigates the term 'professionalism' in my multiple roles as a student, a researcher and a team-member working on an action research project. For this study, I use the concept professional capital and its three dimensions of human, social and decisional to inform the literature review and analysis of my findings. These findings are developed by applying reflexive thematic analysis to five critical incidents that represent my experience of working on the action research project. The themes that I work with are: Recognizing the situation of feeling like 'a-fish-out-of-water'; the need for better communication, roles and responsibilities; the need for reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions; the importance of self-learning and reflection on existing knowledge; and the need to value my own personal experience, performance and participation. I conclude by presenting what I have learned from this study and possible research I can build on in the future.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 The handbook project .....	8
1.2 Research approach.....	8
1.3 The structure of my paper .....	9
<b>2 Literature review.....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Being professional & being <i>a professional</i> .....	11
2.2 Professional capital .....	12
2.3 Reflective practice.....	13
2.4 Summary of chapter two .....	15
<b>3 Methods.....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Critical incident technique .....	16
3.2 Thematic analysis.....	17
3.3 Ethical concerns & limitations.....	19
3.3.1 Interpreting the data.....	19
3.3.2 Lack of experience.....	19
3.4 My critical incidents .....	20
<b>4 Discussion of themes.....</b>	<b>23</b>
4.1 Theme 1: Recognizing the situation of feeling like ‘a-fish-out-of-water’ .....	24
4.2 Theme 2: Recognizing the need for better communication, roles and responsibilities .....	25
4.3 Theme 3: Recognizing the need for reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions. ....	26
4.4 Theme 4: Recognizing the importance of self-learning and reflection on existing knowledge.....	27
4.5 Theme 5: Recognizing the need to value my own personal experience, performance and participation .....	28
<b>5 Professional capital: The core of the learning process in multiple roles and contexts. ....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>31</b>



## Preface

This thesis is fairly personal to me and recaps my third year at the University of Iceland. I feel incredibly lucky and grateful to be part of a project which allowed me to use certain data to write this thesis. I have learned many things throughout my experience both professionally and personally. I would like to thank my thesis advisor for her support, and guidance. To everyone else who I have contacted for assistance, thank you all.

This thesis was written solely by me, the undersigned. I have read and understand the university code of conduct (November 7, 2003, <http://www.hi.is/is/skolinn/sidareglur>) and have followed them to the best of my knowledge. I have correctly cited to all other works or previous work of my own, including, but not limited to, written works, figures, data or tables. I thank all who have worked with me and take full responsibility for any mistakes contained in this work. Signed:

Reykjavík, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020

*Mary Ann Dívínagrácia*



## **1 Introduction**

During my studies in the Department of International Studies of Education (DISE) of the School of Education (SoE), formerly known as the International studies of Education program (ISEP), I have developed a growing interest in “professionalism”. In particular, I have become focused on questions related to what is or how to become a “professional”.

In part, these questions are the result of noticing that the term “professionalism” tends to be associated with certain jobs. It is used to discuss how people have been trained to do a job, how they perform in certain situations and in response to expectations of a given profession. This can be seen in recognised professions such as being a doctor or a teacher. Based on my experience as a student with a part-time job and more recently a member of an educational research project, I have come to recognise the value of the concept of professionalism as applicable to almost any daily life circumstance. To a great extent, this recognition is informed by the work of Andrew Hargreaves and Michael Fullan and in particular their definition of professional capital as made up of three inter-related dimensions: human, social, and decisional capital. They describe human capital in terms of the talent of individuals; social capital as the collaborative power of the group; and decisional capital as the wisdom and expertise to make sound judgments about learners that are cultivated over many years (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how their concept of professionalism can be applied to the way that I work as a team member in a research project that aims to draw on DISE student and teacher experiences to develop student handbooks. Prior to starting work on this project, I had no experience of working as a team member on a research project. Drawing on the experience of being part of a team that is comprised of two students and two teachers, I aim to use their concept of professionalism to analyse my professional development as a student/researcher/team member with the intention of compiling lessons that will inform my approach to any future endeavours, both professional and personal. I first start by giving an overview of the handbook project. This is followed by an introduction to the research approach and then I conclude by presenting the structure of this thesis.

## **1.1 The handbook project**

In June 2019 I was hired to work on a project that would change my whole third year experience as a BA university student. The handbook project is a two-year participatory action research supported by Rannsóknarsjóður Háskóla Íslands. The main purpose of this project is developing an online handbook for DISE students informed by the experiences of the students and teachers. The aim is to enhance equitable access to much needed information for new students, as well as supporting students' academic and social wellbeing. This is done in response to the increasing number of non-Icelandic students seeking higher education availability. There are number of distinguishing features in DISE (Books, Ragnarsdóttir, Jónsson, and Macdonald, 2011). One is the multicultural student population and attempts by teachers to respond to this diversity. Another feature is that English language is used as the language of instruction in order to provide higher education opportunities for students who are not proficient in Icelandic.

The handbook project is conducted by four individuals; two BA students (of which I am one) and two teachers from DISE. Together with my colleague, another student from DISE, I am responsible for taking the lead in the data collection process. The team will compile a first draft of the handbook, which will then be tested and introduced to the students in Fall 2020. At the end of the semester, feedback from students and teachers will inform further developments to the handbook.

The handbook project provides the context for my exploration of the concept of professionalism, and in particular my role on the project. I now introduce the research approach.

## **1.2 Research approach**

As discussed earlier, the purpose of this paper is to explore how Hargreaves and Fullan's three dimensions of professional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) can be applied to the way that I work as a team member in the handbook project. I have developed a research question to guide my exploration, which is: How is the concept of professional capital evident in my dual role as a student/researcher/team-member working on an action research project?

I answer this question by using critical incidents that I have identified during the process of the research project. I analyse these incidents using reflective thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019) as I discuss further in my methods chapter.

### **1.3 The structure of my paper**

This first chapter provides the context for my paper and includes the rationale for my interest in professionalism as a concept, the purpose, background information on the handbook project and an introduction to the research approach. I recognise that the scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth research study. However, it offers an opportunity to explore in depth the nature of professionalism and how the concept can enhance the way that I approach life both professionally and personally.

In chapter two, I provide a review of the literature with a focus on the concept of professionalism as defined by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), and how this can be applied to contexts other than teaching. I will also discuss the difference between being professional and being a professional and the importance of reflective practice. In chapter three I present the methods and explain my choice of working with critical incidents and reflective thematic analysis. This chapter includes ethical considerations and limitations related to my approach. In chapter four I work with my research question and the core reflexive themes I have collected based in the critical incidents from chapter three. This leads me to long findings and discussions chapter on what my understanding of professionalism is now and what I take from each cortical incident experience. I will also draw on the previous chapters and in particular my findings to develop a set of lessons learned to inform my sense of professionalism both in professional and personal contexts. In chapter five, I will include a brief overview of what I have learned from carrying out this study and possible further research that I can build on in the future.

## 2 Literature review

“What I realized is that I have no idea or had no idea before what the word professionalism meant. When I think of the word professional, I think of rules, policies and other fancy big words. There were a couple of questions in my head that popped up when talking about professionalism. One of the questions being, isn’t professionalism the same as work ethics?” Divinagracia, M. (2019).

The term professionalism is defined in the dictionary as qualities or aims that define our profession or that of a professional individual. It is also defined as the skill, polite behaviour, and good judgment an individual is expected to have. According to Maister (1997), professionalism is mostly down to an individuals’ attitude and not about the individuals’ set of competencies. With this meaning, he describes an individual who cares. In teaching, Kramer (2003) suggests attitude, communication and behaviour as critical elements needed in forming ones’ own professionalism. In nursing and midwifery, professionalism is about being accountable, being an advocate, being a leader, and being competent (“Enabling Professionalism” n.d.). For instance, the role of a professional in medicine is different from the professional in business. In medicine, ethics and bioethics is the main characteristics of professionalism (Vivanco & Delgado-Bolton, 2015). Meanwhile in business, appropriate boundaries and personal improvement are some of the characteristics of professionalism (Scott, 2019). This description brings me back to my quote above. Perhaps my own understanding of professionalism was strongly based on job experiences only.

The purpose of this chapter is to look deeper into the term professionalism in order to make links between the focus of my study, which is the role of professionalism in “reflective practice”. This will lead me to develop my own definition of professionalism, which is also informed by my second year at the University of Iceland. During this time, I studied a course called Professionalism in Education. As part of the class, I had to write a one-page paper about my own understanding of “professionalism”. The quote above is taken from the one-page paper. I use it to illustrate how I had taken for granted my understanding of the term and how I had tended to relate it to the realm of work.

The quote above shows how understandings of concepts can be developed through reflective practices, which include drawing on literature, as I do in this chapter. Initially, as

the quote suggests, my understanding of the term is informed by life experience. When I did the assignment, I began to think about my journey through life, all the people I had met and the experiences I have had. The deeper that I reflected, the more I questioned my assumptions about what the concept meant. I thought of professionalism only in relation to jobs and working. By the end of the course, I had come to the realisation that conceptualisations and terms hold deeper implications for a broad range of activities that take place in almost any daily life. These activities can be separate from the context of jobs and working.

In order to develop links between the role of professionalism and “reflective practice”, I first discuss the difference between being professional and being a professional. I then explain the term professional capital and its three dimensions (social, human and decisional). This allows me to present the role of reflective practice in developing professional capital. I then conclude the chapter by explaining how I will use this literature review in subsequent chapters.

## **2.1 Being professional & being *a professional***

The term being professional and being a professional are connected but are not the same (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), the differences between the two need to be developed if teachers are to reach the peak of their potential effectiveness. Although Hargreaves and Fullan focus on the teaching profession and in particular teachers, I find their work interesting and relevant because it can be applied to any aspect of life that demands reflective practice.

Being professional, according to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), is what we do and how we behave. They explain this in terms of being impartial, “upholding high standards of conduct and performance” (see p. 80). The concept refers more to quality and character. They give examples such as not getting personally involved with children, not gossiping about other education stakeholders and learning ways to give constructive criticism.

Being a professional is more about how people look at you and how you perceive yourself based on the perceptions of others. It is therefore less about what the person does and more about the perceived collective identity of the profession (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). For Maister (1997), being a professional has nothing to do with money or fulfilment.

This suggests that being professional is about ethics in terms of considering which actions are right or wrong from the perspective of an individual within the profession; while being a professional is more about the identity of the profession itself. Hargreaves

and Fullan (2012) believe that it is best to be both at the same time; being professional and being a professional allows for both autonomy and status (see p. 81-88). Being able to function autonomously is therefore dependent on or influenced by how the profession is perceived. This means that the notion of autonomy as freedom is restricted by the perceptions of others as regards how an individual should behave based on the understanding of what a professional is in the context of any given activity.

So, for the purpose of my study, my autonomy as a student/researcher/team member is impacted on by how others understand these roles and the expectations of professionalism associated with these. Before I discuss the implications as regards the relationship between reflective practice and professionalism, I will next discuss the three dimensions of professional capital – social, human and decisional.

## **2.2 Professional capital**

According to Hargreaves & Fullan (2012), professional capital is a view of the teaching profession that challenges the notion that teaching is underpinned by business-oriented goals or business capital (see p. 1-3). As I previously mentioned, although situated in the context of teaching, the concerns raised by Hargreaves and Fullan are relevant to my examination of my own professionalism as a student/researcher/team-member.

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), Professional Capital consists of three other capitals. These are Human, Social, and Decisional capital. They suggest that these three capitals, and ultimately professional capital, are the prerequisites for transformation within a professional role that has links to the notion of the common good. By this they mean that a professional's role must move beyond an individual perspective and have broader collective intentions; this involves positive impacts on the individual and the lives of others. This process involves developing human, social and decisional capital.

Human Capital can be traced back to the 1960s when it was understood as a financial phenomenon (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012: p. 89). At that time, this concept was largely referred to as the knowledge and skills that could be developed in people and particularly in the context of individuals through education and training. Human capital simply means investing in peoples' skills and knowledge development (see p. 89). According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), investing in people can lead to economic development. Human capital reflects our individual talent as human beings. While in teaching it refers to knowing your subject and how to teach it (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), in the context of my study it refers to the knowledge and skills that I require for my role as student/researcher/team member.

Social Capital broadens the focus beyond the individual towards the collective. Social capital can be dated back to the 1970s and is linked to the economist James Loury (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012: p. 89). Social capital is the network that individuals create within any given context and that connects them to a broader group. Developing social capital suggests access to new forms of knowledge and opportunity which can further develop peoples' human capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). By this they refer to working and interacting with others in ways that provide new forms of knowledge or skills. For example, through exposure to new ideas or experiences, to materials and resources or to learning by doing in collaboration with others.

Decisional Capital is the essence of professionalism according to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012: p. 93). Decisional capital provides for the opportunity or the capacity to make individual judgements in an unrestricted way. In almost all professions, there is always some form of judgement acquired (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013). In other words, you have the confidence to speak out and participate because of the context that you are working in that facilitates this process. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) state that professionals gather and acquire this capital through both structured and unstructured practise, experience, and even reflection (see p. 93). Decisional capital is key because it develops the capacity to deal with multiple contexts and situations and to work towards decisions that will move you forward.

Combining these three capitals is essential when it comes to being a professional and being professional (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). As I have mentioned, although Hargreaves and Fullan talk about teachers and the profession of educators, the three capitals are applicable to daily life. In the next section I start to discuss the role of reflective practice.

### **2.3 Reflective practice**

I acknowledge that there are many forms of framework and terms used in research and studies. However, for this study I will use reflective practice. According to Finlay (2008), the term reflective practice has multiple meanings. One of meanings is that reflective practice offers professionals the opportunity to engage in reflection that is personal to them and provides opportunity for a broader social critique. According to McGregor (2011), when in teaching, reflection is a tool for learning. It is therefore important to know that as teachers, reflection can be used to focus on the development of teachers (see p. 19). For Taylor (2006), reflective practice is both a gift and a curse depending on how we use it in our daily lives (see p. 7). According to Taylor (2006), one might use reflective practice to calm anxiety on one hand and plot revenge on another. For Davis

(2008), reflective practice leads to better learning (see p. 243). As with professionalism, reflective practice also has variations on the usage of the term. Reflective practice can be a powerful tool, and if done well and effectively can examine and transform practice and daily life. Reflective practice can be used to learn more about yourself as an individual in any situation. In their understanding of reflective practice, is split into two aspects. These are reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Reflection-in-action according to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), is doing the reflection while being right in the middle of the action; to be reflective whilst being in the action of the situation. Reflection-on-action can be simply put, reflection after the action (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Once the action is done, one might ask questions and ponder what had happened and why. When you pose these questions, reflection is taking place. These two types of reflection mentioned above here are central to professional practice. In the reflection-on-action practice, it would be ideal to have a mentor or coach. They can help to pull you back or to slow you down. Their feedback could help you even more on the reflection of what you have been doing, and ask you questions of why you have done things differently. By mastering the art of reflection-on-action, it might just enable you to start reflection-in-action more effectively (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

However, there is a problematic side to reflective practice. For Finlay (2008), four concerns about reflective practice comes to mind; ethical, professional, pedagogic, and conceptual. Starting with ethical concerns, these are for instance confidentiality, right to privacy, professional relationship, and informed consent. Individuals who practice reflective practice need to be aware of these concerns and possible conflicts of interest. One must also remember that reflection can have an emotional impact on the person reflecting and can possibly be harmful. Learners and educators both need support to manage ethical concerns regarding reflective practice (Finlay, 2008). Another concern with reflective practice would be the professional side. This is when reflection practice is done inappropriately or ineffectively. This also means that reflection should not be only used as an 'end-in-itself', but more as a general insight. Then comes the pedagogic concerns. Finlay (2008), calls out two main pedagogic concerns. Developmental readiness and forcing of an individual to reflect might be counterproductive. Finally, there is the conceptual concern. This refers to the limitations of effective practice. In the process of reflection, it can become distorted or 'lost in translation'.

According to Danielson (2008), the reason reflective thinking can be a difficult task is the complexity of documenting it in practice (see p. 131). For Rogers (2002), one of her concerns is assessing a skill that she describes as vaguely defined. Especially in recent



years where portfolios include reflective thought, she questions reflective practice by asking 'what, exactly, are we looking for as evidence of reflection?' (p. 3). Regardless of these concerns, we should not dismiss reflective practice or suggest that it should not be used in professional practice and education. Instead we should engage with reflective practice selectively and cautiously in the sense of being aware of the limitations.

## **2.4 Summary of chapter two**

In this chapter, I have attempted to draw out the core elements and concepts that are applied in my study. Starting with the three capitals, human, social, and decisional. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), these three are the dimensions of professional capital. Human capital is the skills and knowledge developed in people. Social capital is the knowledge and skills within a broader group. Decisional capital is the unrestricted way of an individuals' decision-making. To gain and better ones' own professional capital, it is important to develop all human, social, and decisional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

The other core element applied in my study is reflective practice, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action. Starting with reflective practice, although it has multiple meanings, it is important to know that this is a tool. A tool that can be used to reflect back on life changing experience or new learning experience. For Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), it is understood that reflective practice is split into two aspects. This is where reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action come in. Reflection-in-action is reflecting while being in the middle of the action. Reflection-on-action is reflecting after the action is done. These core elements and concepts that I have drawn out are important to my study. They are important as I will later on use these terms in my study and how I apply them. My next chapter is methods. In there I will describe my methods that I chose to use for my study and why I had chosen to use them.

### **3 Methods**

Earlier in chapter one, I introduced my guiding research question: How is the concept of professional capital evident in my dual role as a student/researcher/team-member working on an action research project? In this chapter I will begin by clarifying my chosen methods and why I chose to use them. I will introduce critical incidents technique and thematic analysis. I then move onto sharing my own data, which I will analyse by using the methods I mentioned. The data is from my own experience during the Handbook Project. Finally, to conclude this chapter by looking at the ethical considerations of my chosen methods and the limitations of my study. But first, I introduce my chosen methods.

#### **3.1 Critical incident technique**

My first chosen method is critical incident technique or CIT. This is a tool used to analyse and uncover human behaviour. CIT uncovers and focuses on problematic situations in the individuals experience. CIT can be helpful in exploring questions such as: What can be learned from this experience? What are the main concerns of these individuals? What can be done better next time? (Hettlage & Steinlin, 2006). In the context of this study, my critical incidents are the journal entries I have gathered during the Handbook Project.

When using CIT, one might be exposed to short stories of events, which raise concerns or aspects of an experience that worked or did not work for the individual. CIT does not have any rules, in fact it is flexible. Critical incident simply tells us what happened but does not tell us why it happened (Hettlage & Steinlin, 2006). Using critical incidents is a way to reflect on life experiences (Halquist & Musanti, 2010). It holds significant potential for uncovering participants' understanding of issues of power, structure, and relationships within the contexts of their lived experiences (Halquist & Musanti, 2010: p.458).

There are two reasons why I chose CIT for this study. The first reason is because I was advised to keep a journal throughout my experience during the Handbook Project. My journal included reflections, ideas, and personal thoughts, all of which were related to the Handbook Project. As a student/research/team-member this led me to a rich collection of experiences. I then took the contents of my journal and selected specific experiences which lead to my critical incidents. I believe my critical incidents can represent deep understanding of dual roles within an action research project. The second reason for

choosing this method of CIT is based on my previous classes where keeping a journal of any experience helped me to reflect back and learn from those classes.

As mentioned before in the previous chapter, I have chosen to use 'reflection-on-action'. This is a type of reflection after the incident has happened, which in this study would be my journal data collection. These critical journal data will be explored in more details in chapter four – but before that, I will now explore the second method in this study which is called thematic analysis. This method is thematic analysis.

### **3.2 Thematic analysis**

This section explores my second chosen method. Thematic analysis or TA is capturing "themes" or even patterns across qualitative datasets (Braun et al., 2019). According to Braun et al. (2019), it is imperative to understand how "a theme" is conceptualized. In TA there are two competing ideas (see p. 845). These are domain summaries and shared meaning-based patterns. For Patel (2018), domain summary is a summary of a data, e.g. a summary of a participants answers in an interview. According to Sud (2020), shared meaning-based patterns capture the essence of a meaning. Although both are considered themes in published literature, these two are not the same. It can be simplified like this; domain summaries are single words. While shared meaning-based patterns seek to unite data (Sud, 2020).

Similar to CIT, TA is also flexible. Braun et al. (2019), describe TA as an umbrella term because of its' use for different approaches. Underneath this umbrella are three broad approaches: a "coding reliability" approach, a "codebook" approach, and a "reflexive" approach (see p. 847). Coding reliability is when, "themes are often conceptualized as domain summaries (often derived from data collection questions), and as analytic inputs, as well as outputs – they drive the coding process and are the output of the coding process" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 847). Codebook approach, "is applied to the data by more than one coder, each working independently; for some, the ideal coder has no prior experience with or knowledge of the topic of concern" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 847). For this study I will be using a reflexive approach. I decided to use this approach as I feel that my study also surrounds the idea of reflection. I wanted to choose a method that was flexible enough for me as a student/researcher/team-member experience this for the first time. Reflexive thematic analysis has six steps or phases. Using this approach will assist me in getting the most out of the data that I have collected. These are the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019).

The steps of reflexive thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization

This involves familiarizing ones' self to the data. Getting to know the raw data. Be immersed in the raw data. Accepting it as is. Perhaps even making casual notes. Be curious about what you are reading. Re-read and re-listen (see p. 10).

2. Generating codes

Making sense of the data. Focused attention to the data. Be more detailed. Identify raw patterns (see p. 11).

3. Constructing themes

Create the prototype themes. Give them meaning. Do not get too attached, this is a sort of a 'test phase' for themes (see p. 12).

4. Revising themes

Let go of the themes that do not work. Prototypes are reviewed (see p. 13).

5. Defining themes

Make it clear. Make the themes relate to one another but also make sure they do not overlap (see p. 13).

6. Producing the report

The final step. Capturing what is meaningful about the data. Making sure the themes are well and complete (see p. 14).

Under step 5 that talks about defining themes, I decided to develop two guiding questions, which are different from the overall research question, to support the interpretation of the data into themes that are related and that do not overlap. The two questions that will be answered in chapter four to generate a discussion based on the themes are:

*How does the theme inform my understanding of being professional and a professional in the different roles and contexts of being a student/researcher/team-member?*

*What lessons can be learned about being professional and a professional in the different roles and contexts?*

I now turn to the ethical concerns and possible limitations of my study.

### **3.3 Ethical concerns & limitations**

So far in this chapter, I have mentioned my two chosen methods, critical incident technique and thematic analysis. In any study, and in particular a study that is based on reflective practice, it is important to discuss the ethical considerations and possible limitations in order to identify ways to limit the negative impact on my findings and lessons learned.

#### **3.3.1 Interpreting the data**

Since I decided to use critical incident technique, the first ethical concern of this study is using my private journal entries as critical incidents, which act as my data sets. My journal entries were written by me and at that time were only intended for my own viewing. These journal entries include private thoughts about myself and my experience during the handbook project. Using the journal entries as data creates an ethical concern in that I am opening myself up to the risk of subjective interpretations of private interactions. Informed consent was given by students and teachers during the data collection process; however, I am not using the data from these but the data from my experience of running these. I have been concerned that I am exposing too much detail, whether it was about myself, the participants or even my own team-members from the project. To address these concerns, I first had to view my journal entries as objectively as possible. By this I mean that I tried to work with the journal entries as data so that I could choose the most appropriate nothing and relevant journal entries to use to develop the critical incidents. This allowed me to create some distance between the journal entry and the data used for analysis because I came to see them as two distinct things. For this study, I was using data sets and not personal journal entries. This however, has created some limitations, which I now discuss.

#### **3.3.2 Lack of experience**

The first limitation is my lack of experience. By this I mean that this is the first time that I have carried out a research-based paper that has required me to develop an understanding of data collection and analysis processes. However, this limitation is also a strength, in that I used my lack of experience to deeply consider what I was doing, how I was doing it and why. Reflexive TA has the benefit of being user-friendly for first time researchers because it provides a simple structure using specific steps that I could follow during the analysis of the data. However, I acknowledge that my inexperience may be reflected in my lack of theoretical understanding of the method. By this I mean that by rigorously following the six steps, I may also have limited my analysis because I was more

concerned about getting the steps right than what they actually revealed. I am very aware that I carefully considered each step within reflexive TA and double-checked each step I took in my analysis. However, I address this limitation by reminding myself that it is important to consider that no one method is the correct method and to accept that greater experience on my part as a researcher would yield different results.

I have so far introduced the two main methods that will be used in this study, CIT or critical incident technique and TA or thematic analysis. I apply the six steps of reflexive thematic analysis to the critical incidents that I developed based on my experiences of working on the Handbook Project. These critical incidents represent my data set. I now present each one to conclude this chapter.

### 3.4 My critical incidents

Critical incident 1: Being a team-member
<p>I met my team around the month of June 2019. We had a meeting where we got to know each other and to explore why we were here. Even from the beginning I knew I had to be professional. Without even knowing what my role would be in this project. I stayed in professionalism mode throughout our first meeting. From day one of being a team member, I felt proud of being part of something important. Even though I felt personally that I had not much to share, as I was an inexperienced researcher, I felt important just being on the team. I felt this responsibility without even knowing what my responsibility was. Being a member, I sat there and thought about my other experiences in life and how I managed my 'professionalism' without even thinking about it. What was different now was that I had little knowledge of my role and almost no experience at all. I started playing these scenarios in my head of how I 'acted' professional in other experiences of my life. I tried to apply what I knew as best as I could. As the days went by, my roles and responsibility started to form. I realized some days I had to make a decision, such as finding a date for the next meeting and so on. I often think back. Maybe I was just lucky that I had great team members who believed in me.</p>
Critical incident 2: Organizing the student focus group
<p>The beginning of this whole experience was already a challenge. As far as I knew, we had 5-6 student participants. I was in charge of organizing the date, time, and venue. It took me many emails and many personal messages to get a time, and date. Throughout all this interaction, I stayed as professional as I could. Although having little understanding of the word or even experience, I think I did a decent job. During my struggle of endless emails and messages, I thought to myself: does this have to be a focus group? Wouldn't it</p>

be easier if I just booked a meeting with each individual and interview them that way? But then I thought there must be a reason for this. I found myself looking back at the articles given to me about 'Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews'. It helped. This highlighted things that I could do to make things easier. At one point I even expressed my frustrations to two of my teachers. Of course, them being professionals, I thought, they could give me some advice. Sharing my thought process helped. Eventually I found a date, and time that fit everyone's schedule. Little did I know, this was just the beginning of the many frustrations I would have.

#### Critical incident 3: The student focus group session

During the student focus group session, I felt nervous and 'shakey'. I started playing the scenarios in my head. I started practicing the words and what I was going to say during the session. I was obsessed with being as clear as possible so that we could cover all the answers within an hour. Unfortunately, that did not happen. I remember feeling nervous with the idea that we had more than five participants. I would have felt better with just five participants. Sitting there I had to remind myself to be 'clear as a professional' whatever that meant, it calmed me down. Since I was so obsessed with being 'professional' I decided to take initiative action. I told my partner that he should ask the first four questions and I would take the last four questions. Thinking back now, I may have taken control over things that I should have first discussed with my partner. I can say with full confidence, that I tried my best. I went about this session as professionally as I could. After the session, I went home. I recorded my thoughts about the interview and also took down notes.

#### Critical incident 4: Audio transcription process

I found myself still struggling after the focus group session. I was still very tense and on edge. I felt this massive responsibility. The responsibility of a professional, even though I had very little knowledge of it. I tried to stay positive. I thought to myself: what's done is done. During the transcription process, I thought about many things. I remember sitting there with the audio and thinking, why wasn't I clearer? I thought I was clear as I could be. Before the questioning, I should have told the participants to only speak one by one. I was conflicted. I was afraid it wasn't professional. I was afraid I might scare the participants that I was too strict. I was bombarded with questions in my head while I was transcribing. I thought, since I had such a bad recording, why didn't I move the phone to the one who is speaking. Again, I thought that wouldn't have been professional. I was afraid that it would be distracting. In all honesty, I felt uncomfortable listening to the audio and remembering all the things I would have changed. Then it came to the

questions. I had a hard time trying to navigate the conversations to stay on topic. I thought, maybe I should have written the questions down? Perhaps on the board, so that the participants could always see the question in mind. Wouldn't that have been professional? But then I was afraid that their answers would be too rehearsed. I don't know if that's what we would have wanted for this session. Should I have used visual aids? I found myself thinking about that article about focus groups. I was lost in my own questions. The audio transcription was a difficult task to do. I felt like I spent months just trying to transcribe. How would a professional handle this task?

#### Critical incident 5: Teachers' workshop

My nerves kept on going. The next couple of days after the student audio transcription, I found myself doing the same thing. I was in charge of finding a date, time, and venue for the teachers' workshop. However, I did learn something new from the past. Instead of stressing myself with the organizing, I found it easier to send the teachers' a Doodle link. It's a site that lets you make meetings much easier. I started to think, "maybe I could use this for my family gatherings". It would make things easier and I would save time from stressing out. Somehow, my nervousness and stress were doubled during the preparation for the teachers' workshop. I was scared of being a professional in front of actual professionals. I was afraid that I was in over my head. I was afraid that I might look ridiculous without having any practice of being a professional. I was absolutely terrified. The 'shakey' feeling started again. This time it was double than the last.



## 4 Discussion of themes

Using the five critical incidents that I presented in the previous chapter, I developed a set of themes based on the thematic analysis process. The five core themes represent the shared meaning-based patterns (Sud, 2020) across the multiple data sets. These are:

Theme 1: Recognizing the situation of feeling like ‘a-fish-out-of-water’.

Theme 2: Recognizing the need for better communication, roles and responsibilities.

Theme 3: Recognizing the need for reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions.

Theme 4: Recognizing the importance of self-learning and reflection on existing knowledge.

Theme 5: Recognizing the need to value my own personal experience, performance and participation.

As I explained in my methods chapter, I decided to develop two guiding questions, which are different from the overall research question, to support the interpretation of the data into themes that are related and that do not overlap. I now use these questions to generate a discussion of the themes. These are:

*How does the theme inform my understanding of being professional and a professional in the different roles and contexts of being a student/researcher/team-member?*

*What lessons can be learned about being professional and a professional in the different roles and contexts?*

These five themes have been carefully analysed to represent what I have learned in this process and what I take away from this experience. In this chapter, I explain each theme to illustrate the learning that has taken place by drawing on the literature presented on professionalism, professional capital and reflective practice. Chapter five is then used to conclude my study and present what I take away from this learning experience.

#### **4.1 Theme 1: Recognizing the situation of feeling like ‘a-fish-out-of-water’**

Recognizing the situation of feeling like ‘a-fish-out-of-water’ refers to when an individual feels uncomfortable in a certain setting or situation. The individual might feel lost and unsure of what they are supposed to be feeling, doing or even thinking. This was a feeling and a situation that I found myself in each of the critical incidents. However, this feeling is not just recognition as a process of the reflection-on-action; the analysis reveals that there is recognition taking place during reflection-in-action. I am aware of my surroundings and the context and the fact that I am feeling like ‘a-fish-out-of-water’. But is this the same as being ‘a-fish-out-of-water’?

This theme tells me that, professionalism is required in any role. This also tells me that, there are different levels of professionalism. This statement brings me back to my literature chapter. In chapter two, I talked about professionalism. This tells me that professionalism is indeed different in various jobs, just as my roles of being a student/researcher/team-member had different professionalism from each other. In the context of being a student, I recognized this feeling during my first meeting with my other team-members. As a researcher I recognized the feeling of ‘a-fish-out-of-water’ when I was conducting the student focus group. Finally, as a team-member I recognized the feeling of ‘a-fish-out-of-water’ when I had to report the findings from the student focus group. I found this theme to be relevant within all critical incidents. In these contexts, this feeling has come up due to the fact of being inexperienced. By recognizing this feeling one can reflect on it and improve one’s professionalism as discussed below.

The takeaway from this theme is, if there is a feeling of ‘a-fish-out-of-water’, it can be improved. Once this recognition has been made, a way to improve this is through professionalism. There are multiple ways of improving professionalism. One of the methods that can be used is reflective practice. By using reflective practice, one might reflect on what made them uncomfortable and explain the scenario. Followed by overcoming such feeling and finally finding a solution.

## **4.2 Theme 2: Recognizing the need for better communication, roles and responsibilities**

Recognizing the need for better communication, roles and responsibilities suggests that an individual might be confused or lost in knowing their own roles and responsibilities. There are a number of reasons for this including lack of clear instructions, clarification or misinterpretations of instructions. It could also be the result of an individual being confused about their limits or their boundaries and how far their roles and responsibilities expand.

This theme is interesting in that it suggests that professionalism or being professional or a professional is about more than having clear communication about roles and responsibilities. Lack of clear communication happens in all contexts. In chapter two, Kramer (2003), suggested 'communication' as being a critical element to forming professionalism. This theme clearly is a representative of that element. In the handbook project, as a student, I associated my role with the notion that I was there to assist and be a helping hand. As a researcher, I placed more responsibility on myself in terms of what I felt was expected of me: to take the lead in conducting the student focus group. This is a level up from being a helping hand. As a team-member, I felt a sense of shared responsibility that was not there when I thought of myself as a student or a researcher. I was trusted with confidential information from my peers and from teachers. I found this confusing and intimidating and it led me to not knowing fully and completely my roles and responsibilities within the project. I doubted myself because of my perception of the expectations of what a student, researcher or team member should contribute to the project.

The takeaway from this theme is that, in any role, being transparent and clear is much needed. It needs to come from both parties. Again, reflective practice can be a helping tool. As an individual one might reflect on roles and responsibilities which can be cleared up to the individual as well as a set of clear, specific guiding questions. These could be brought up on the next group meeting to steer the conversation and help make each participants' role transparent.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Recognizing the need for reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions.**

The previous theme relates to the need for reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions. As doubt creeps in, an individual working in any capacity will start to lose the confidence to make decisions. This may be from the lack of experiences, skills or knowledge. However, it is also related to the expectations and internalised understanding of what standards a certain role should perform to in any given context. As a student, or a researcher or as a team member, the level of performance should not differ because of the label that we have. However, this happens, as my experience shows. In all five critical incidents, I recognize the need for more reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions.

This theme tells me that professionalism is about recognizing, especially when doing something new for the first time, that there is the need for reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions. As a student, I needed more reassurance and support as this was my first-time being part of a project. As a researcher, I needed more reassurance and support that I was on the right track and that my tasks were done correctly. As a team-member, I needed more reassurance and support so that I could deliver on my part for the project.

The takeaway from this theme is that, by getting reassurance and support whether from team-members or superiors, can boost confidence and efficiency as well as help maintain a project on its' course. By using reflective practice, one might look back on strengths and weakness to identify where reassurance and support is needed.

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Recognizing the importance of self-learning and reflection on existing knowledge**

This theme is also linked to the previous theme. It suggests that it is not enough to recognize the need for reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions. There is also the need to recognize the importance of self-learning and reflection on the knowledge that we have already learned. An individual can learn knowledge from a number of sources, such as books, colleges and interactions with others. This knowledge should not only be valued but also used to inform how we respond in our roles irrespective of the label or the expectation attached to this role.

This theme tells me that, as individuals we are constantly learning and re-learning. When we talk about professionalism, we are talking about a steady flow of learning. As a student, I am knowledgeable; as a researcher I have past life experiences that can inform my role and as a team member, I am able to draw on experiences of working with others in multiple contexts. In my literature chapter, one of the descriptions of professionalism is personal improvement. This theme falls under that. This theme reminds me that searching within myself to find any knowledge that could benefit me in the role and the context that I am working in is a question of being professional and a professional.

The takeaway from this theme is that, in any role in our lives there is a flow of learning. I found it particularly important in a role where you lack experience to re-read information that could and eventually did prove useful.

#### **4.5 Theme 5: Recognizing the need to value my own personal experience, performance and participation**

This final theme is, in a way, the foundation stone of all the themes. The critical incidents suggest that there is a need for an individual in any context to value their own personal experience, performance and participation. This theme means that when an individual finds themselves feeling like a fish out of water, in context where communication is not effective, and roles and responsibilities become confused and blurred for whatever reason, it becomes important to not only rely on external reassurance and support and guidance to carry out instructions; it becomes important to value what one brings to the role that one is playing. Valuing personal experience, your own performance and participation in other activities or projects, can help to adapt to new challenges and situations.

This theme tells me that building confidence and trusting your own insight taken from personal experiences can help improve what we understand by being professional and a professional. As a student, I have relied on looking back on performances in other related situations. As a researcher, I need to value my organizing skills and ability to follow instructions. As a team-member I need to value my past experiences cooperating with others. What this suggests is that professionalism is not always about getting it right; professionalism is about accepting the challenges and valuing what we bring to the context and the role that we play so that it works to engage productively with these.

The takeaway from this theme is that whatever past experiences you may have, you can find value in them in any situation or project you work on. Using reflective practice can be a helpful tool to guide someone to understanding the value of personal experiences in any given situation to help better cope with it.

## **5 Professional capital: The core of the learning process in multiple roles and contexts**

In this final chapter I bring back my research question: *How is the concept of professional capital evident in and relevant to my role as a student/researcher/team-member working on an action research project?*

I conclude this chapter by attempting to answer my research question by referring back to the question: *What lessons can be learned about being professional and a professional in the different roles and contexts?*

Back in chapter two, I discussed the dimensions of professional capital (human, social, decisional). I have come to a conclusion that my professional capital is indeed evident in all of my roles as a student/researcher/team-member. As a student working on an action research project, I needed professional development, which called for training and support. As a researcher, I needed to develop my network through collaboration and mutual trust. As a team-member, I needed to develop my decision-making skills. I would argue now that no matter the role, the three dimensions of professional capital are evident and relevant. This experience has led me to a better understanding of professionalism. In particular, the lessons that I have learned from the five themes that I developed from the critical incidents are:

- Feeling like a fish out of water is not the same as being a fish out of water;
- Good communication should not be taken for granted; it needs to be developed and fostered as part of the responsibility of all concerned;
- We all need reassurance and support that we are contributing to a process irrespective of the role that we play in a collective group;
- It is not enough to expect others to take the responsibility for your learning and development; you need to find your own way irrespective of the role or the context that you are working in;
- You bring with you to any role that you play, and, in any context, your past lived experiences made up of valuable knowledge, skills and attitudes.

What I have realised is that my previous quote about professionalism is far off. I understand now that professionalism is a combination of various qualities and characteristics. Professionalism is about an individuals' skills and knowledge. It is their ability to collaborate with others and to draw on communication skills to allow for rich and critical dialogue with others. It is about being accountable and being confident in what they do. Ultimately, I have learned that in professionalism, it is beneficial to practice reflection. By practicing reflective practice, one might uncover many concerns along the way. As I have discovered through my themes, reflective practice is a recurring suggestive tool.

My understanding of professionalism in the context of being a student is that, as a student one must be honest about things that are new to them. By this I refer to being honest about strengths as much as about weaknesses. As a researcher working on an action research project, professionalism is about knowing there is value in honing your skills and knowledge. By this I refer to being open to challenges that require you as an individual to re-read and re-learn. Finally, as a team-member working on an action research project, it is important to remember that professionalism means that you can always look to your group for reassurance and support. Professionalism is realizing there is support (if needed), in your group and within your colleagues of community.

Writing this paper has been a challenge. By this I refer to a challenge not just in terms of writing this paper, but also in terms of viewing myself as a writer and student. What take away from this study is that there are many steps involved in being a professional and being professional; and these are not straightforward linear steps; the process is messy, complicated and hard work. I take away a clearer understanding of professionalism. Using critical incidents has helped me get to where I am now through a process of reflective practice. This has led me to understand my own professional capital, which has showed me the importance of human, social and decisional capital in my professional and personal development.

As I mentioned in chapter one, I will use this study to guide future projects and draw on what I know about myself, including my own limitations and strengths to be professional and an autonomous professional.



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