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My Ph.D Journey – A Reflection on My Experiments and Experiences!



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“Humility is the awareness that there's a lot you don't know and that a lot of what you think you know is distorted or wrong. This is the way humility leads to wisdom. Wisdom isn't a body of information. It's the moral quality of knowing what you don't know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation. Wisdom is not knowledge. It is knowing how to behave when perfect knowledge is lacking.” –

David Brooks, The Road to Character. (Lichtstein, 2021)

This epigraph profoundly summarises my research journey as it approaches the first milestone of completion of the doctoral degree program. These six years of transformational knowledge expedition are turning out to be nothing short of spectacular – a journey that witnessed three crucial aspects of research – unlearning-relearning to overcome ignorance, perseverance amidst uncertainty during the pandemic, and innovation impelled by limitation. These three aspects

(learning continuum, determination, and demonstrating novelty) are fundamental to every phase of the research process, from conception to analysis to dissemination.

The first step in the journey was to consider the reason behind what prompted me to embark on a formal research program. In this context, it is important to recognize that inspiration can come from a variety of sources, including both formal and informal knowledge. My journey began with profound reflections on the climax of the famous 2008 movie ‘Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull,’ which emphasized the valuable adage “knowledge is treasure.” Indeed, this axiom is true given that genetic knowledge has a paramount function in the evolution of life, and cognitive knowledge is essential for maximizing the performance potential of the brain.

By linking this movie precept with the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad’s *mahavaakya* (great saying), “*asatoma satgamaya... motorman amrtam gamaya*”, I realized that knowledge is not only a treasure but the treasure that is eternally present. Essentially, a journey exploring knowledge is the same as navigating the infinite during our finite lifetime leading to contributions that can immortalize research – “...*mrtayorma amrtam gamaya!*”

The subsequent stage in the journey involved contemplating a suitable research inquiry that was inspired by episode ten (The Edge of Forever, 2011) of the Cosmos: A Personal Voyage television documentary series. Carl Sagan presented this program that was originally aired in 1980. This episode intriguingly explored the topic of cosmology as discussed in ancient Indian scriptures. The author of the television series Cosmos also released a book that was a companion to the show (Sagan, 1983, pp. 283-85). Just as Cosmos popularly conveyed the intricacies of cosmology to a broader audience, the novel Origin (Brown, 2018) has similarly increased the appeal of the subject matter to a diverse readership. This novel not only addressed a pertinent subject matter but also served as a source of motivation for my doctoral research due to its perceptive analysis and literary composition.

The research question I selected was not only intriguing but also met the SMART criteria, which stands for strategic, meaningful, achievable, relevant, and transformative. Determining the topic was a crucial step as it dictated the chapter structure, the approach for conducting the literature review, the methodology, the data collection strategy, and the analysis. Remarkably, writing each chapter of the thesis involved the technique of deconstruction and reconstruction of the research

topic for a precise narration, where mapping the research objectives and outcomes was demonstrable.

Notably, the first-year coursework assignments and regular contributions to the University newsletter were instrumental in getting me into the habit of original writing at an early stage of my research journey. Moreover, they also provided the stimuli needed for conference papers, publications, and thesis chapters. Recognizing and beginning the writing process early allowed me to acquire the art of research writing by anchoring on CNT – three pillars of research. Throughout the research journey, a meticulous focus on Collecting Information (C of CNT) resulted not only in the responsible citation but also in identifying opportunities for my doctoral study based on openings from the RoL.

Furthermore, my doctoral work could demonstrate originality in Noticing and Thinking of Information (N and T of CNT) – observations and inferences. One of the crucial experimental practices that I consistently employed at every stage of the journey was metacognition, a technique that facilitates deliberate reflection (T of CNT). Metacognition deals with ‘thinking about thinking’ and plays a central role in regulating cognitive processes and simplifying erudition. Thus, metacognition enabled a faster acquisition through extensive reading, high-quality learning, and expedient transformation of learning into knowledge. This iterative process led to a more efficient accretion of knowledge generated through my research.

While introspective analysis using metacognition was essential for creating an engaging research narrative, rigorous documentation of the process was necessary to develop a coherent thesis. The key factor of research writing that I could unswervingly apply was balancing description, analysis, and interpretation – with description setting the tone, analysis, and interpretation brought out the unique value added by my research to the knowledge base. In order to powerfully present the research content, it was imperative to learn and apply various tools and techniques. Process maps, which integrated techniques like classification, cross-referencing, information mapping, and workflow, were precious in organizing thesis chapters.

One of the most memorable experiences in my research journey was publishing my first research paper in a SCOPUS-indexed journal. It was clear that the use of infographics in the paper helped in a favorable consideration by the Editorial. This experiment continued with all my papers, presentations, and doctoral thesis that used concept maps, mind maps, word clouds, and many

conceptual models to present my research data pictorially. While these were valuable methods, learning what to include and ignore in the thesis proved equally valuable.

It will be surprising if a researcher has not felt sluggish, vulnerable, or drifting along the journey. Much worse can be self-doubt whether one has embarked on a mistaken destination. All these challenges can become more pronounced when life around becomes significantly tricky and odd with mere survival depending on various factors, such as during the pandemic. Such situations can disturb our internal harmony. Consequently, research productivity can reduce and impede the ability to come up with innovative ideas or inferences.

Despite many exciting and original outcomes, my research journey was no different, and I faced several challenges and limitations, many of which were resolvable and some insurmountable. One of the most challenging periods was managing the health situation during the pandemic. This was when constant support and encouragement from guides and mentors were crucial in understanding the value of perseverance, the most fundamental of all virtues required in an enduring research journey.

Another key feature during the pandemic that sustained the motivation to continue the journey was numerous webinars and online workshops conducted by the University. Information exchanged during these programs ensued in a pensive disposition long after they concluded and offered another opportunity for the N and T of CNT.

Finally, discussing another one-of-a-kind experiment I undertook during my journey is of the utmost importance. This experiment focused on honing the ways in which I thought by shifting my mindset through the application of insights gained from fields unrelated to the subject of my research. The reinvigoration of my outlook contributed favorably towards advancing my learning abilities, especially in recognizing patterns. The mindset transformation also led to improved resiliency, a speedier recovery, and an enhanced capability to reset my research drive anytime I found myself procrastinating.

Let us continue our research journey with a renewed curiosity and rediscover our potential! In this regard, it is worth reminiscing the seven mindsets that will transform the ways we think, be the polestar of our research journey, and prompt us to deliver an excellent quality research output – everything is possible, passion first, we are connected, 100 per cent accountability, attitude of gratitude, live to give, and the time is now.

References:

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