File 20110107.0621: Weekly activity report 0170:

weekly activity report 170 (loughry)
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Sent: 07 January 2011 06:21
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Weekly activity report no. 20110106.2222 (GMT-7) sequence no. 0170, week -1 HT

I met with Dr Martin by video teleconference at 5pm (UK time) on
Wednesday.  Agenda emailed out before the call.  At the time of the
meeting I had not received a report from the assessors yet, though I
have received it now.  What I wanted to talk to Dr Martin about was a
plan for recovering and moving forward.  I got sidetracked, I told him,
chasing off after an idea that ultimately turned out not to be useful.
I said that I got a strong impression that the assessors do want me to
succeed, and gave me good advice.  The lowest-risk path, as I see it,
is to do precisely what the assessors asked for.

Dr Martin noted that the assessors' view is not the only view.  The work
I have done in the past year is not wasted and may turn out to be more
important than the data in the long term.  The reason, he said, is
because I seem to be on to a theory that can make predictions, a more
valuable contribution than data alone.  Dr Martin encouraged me not to
throw away the work I have done, but to look at the time available as
the controlling resource.  The lowest-risk path might not be the lowest
risk if it requires more time than is available.

I related that the assessors said at the time of the viva that they
thought I could accomplish the new data analysis if I could devote
nine months full-time to the task.  I reported that I am learning the
new tool for qualitative analysis but I do not have a good estimate yet
how long the analysis will take.  I plan to tackle the third case study
(R'') first, because the shape of that data is closest to the model of
well-structured raw data that I have seen (data obtained from Shamal,
the local expert on grounded theory in the comlab).  I do not have a good
sense yet of the relative sizes of the hermeneutic units of all three
case studies in terms of work required to code their textual artefacts.
Dr Martin asked what references I have; I reported that the seminal
work on grounded theory is a book published in 1967; I have a copy of
that book on order from Amazon along with two other books on grounded
theory and on coding of textual material.  Once those arrive and I have
read them, I will be able to estimate the work.  It is frustrating not
to have the university library close at hand.

The assessors told me that the data I have collected are paramount to
them.  I spent a lot of time searching for a predictive theory last year
because I was operating under the (apparently incorrect) assumption that
it would be improper to use that data directly, being as it were 'tainted'
by participation.  I thought I could use the data to get to a theory,
but not use the data directly.  The assessors had a different opinion.

Dr Martin encouraged to consider my models.  I developed two separate and
distinct models last year: the concrete one of accreditor behaviour in the
presence of differing security clearances and classifications---useful for
describing the constraints on accreditor actions---and the abstract one
that attempts to predict accreditor decisions.  He noted, in the context
of not throwing work away, that I have got some level of validation

in these models, an advantage over a purely data-focussed description of events. I replied that the concrete model has encountered widespread acceptance amongst the accreditors I have talked to about it, although the abstract model---with risks represented as masses and forces on a frictionless plane in risk space---is something that people are still a bit dubious about. But, Dr Martin asked, was I getting indications of predictive value? I think so, but I was just getting into that part of the data analysis when I met with the assessors, and they pretty well scared me away from that direction.

It occurred at this point in the conversation, prompted by an observation of Dr Martin's, that perhaps there is an opportunity here to use the qualitative data analysis to generate exactly the series of fine-grained events I needed to feed into the predictive model and exercise it. I have to explore the ATLAS.ti software more to determine whether it is possible, but it just might work. The bulk of the dissertation would still be the grounded theory data analysis, but to have a working predictive theory in addition would be a bonus. That would be a win--win situation according to Dr Martin. He said to be cautious about discarding the prediction theory, as it is the stronger result. Be careful about confirmation bias (it's no good to have a theory that perfectly predicts what it was derived from, but nothing else); think about using two of the case studies to predict the third. Even better, consider them pair-wise and predict all three. That would be a strong result.

I asked for and received some assurance in this supervisor meeting about deadlines. If it takes longer than the normal DPhil duration to conduct this research properly, can I get the time? I asked how hard the deadline actually is. If it takes four and a half years to do this research properly, can I get the time to do it right? Dr Martin conceded that it would be possible. It might require the intercession of my supervisor and DGS, and it might have to be approved at the MPLS division level, but Dr Martin is willing to sign the form to do it. 'Assume it will work', said Dr Martin. 'Now let us set out a schedule.'

The first thing I have to do---currently under way---is to learn a whole new methodology of qualitative data analysis and grounded theory. At this point, I know almost nothing about it. I am going through the software manual while I am waiting for the reference books to arrive; just figuring out how to use it is going to take a while. I don't even know at this point if I am supposed to have one grounded theory, or three. My thesis statement is undefined at the moment. (Dr Martin laughed.) I want to come back to Oxford in mid-March with a completed first analysis in hand and get some validation that I am on the right track. Shamal and the assessors can help with that. I asked whether it would be all right to consult with the assessors over the quality and form of the results. Dr Martin assured me that it would not disqualify them from being assessors. It is supposed to be a collaborative process, he said. I understand that, and I view the present ordeal as proof that the process works. While the rules are vague in places, leading to misunderstandings between student and assessors like the one I ran into, the purpose of confirmation is not to be adversarial, said Dr Martin---the final viva is more adversarial---but to help ensure that the student goes into the final viva with a solid dissertation. I should ask Shamal for advice; he is working on something weird about grounded theory and is probably the best resource. I have already been talking to Shamal. I should look at it as an opportunity to learn a new data analysis methodology, but be aware of perspective; the two assessors I drew have a very different perspective on what solid work looks like. The good news is that they told me exactly what they want to see next time. When I go back for confirmation of status, I will make sure that they

get precisely what they want.  Dr Martin said that I am now developing
a very concrete plan for finishing.  When I hit confirmation again,
I will be very close to finishing.  That is the ideal situation, and
what assessors are most pleased to see.

'Why' I got here is irrelevant.  What matters is the plan to get out.
I made some mistakes, but Dr Martin refused to let me call them mistakes;
dead-ends are part of doing science and you learn from them.  Besides the
upcoming trip planned for mid-March (we coordinated schedules so he will
likely be in town), I asked a few specific questions about trying to
publish [publishing can be a distraction; maybe I should just concentrate
on producing solid results; when the time comes that you have something
you just have to publish, the compulsion to do so will be irresistible].
The assessors did ask for one review paper to be published in a journal.
That paper, citable in the introduction of everything else, will set down
once and for all the background material that I keep having to explain
to nearly everyone I talk to about my research: what is a CDS, what is
accreditation, what are the constraints that accreditors operate under,
what are the circumstances of the case studies, and so on.  I asked about
the kind of journals that publish reviews; they are not as common as they
once were.  ACM Computing Surveys?  Dr Martin looked up the name of one
journal where a recently published paper appeared: IEEE Communication
Surveys and Tutorials.  I promised to locate the information.  Dr Martin
asked when I intended to write the paper, and suggested that it might
serve to keep me sane during the grounded theory analysis.  I think
staying sane is a good outcome.  I am looking around for source of
guidance on how to write a good review paper.

We discussed meeting more often than we have in the past, but that
depends on progress and results.  I am applying for one more round of
student loans to ensure my funding during the time required to do the
grounded theory work.  I am liking the new software so far, and feel
that it provides a useful framework that was lacking.  I am going to hew
more closely to home from now on, to avoid getting sidetracked from the
current plan.

Reading group starts up again next week; John suggested a paper.
I received the assessors' report this morning; it contained no surprises.
I concur with the assessors' recommendations in all respects (with the
proviso of the new idea that we developed in yesterday's supervisor
meeting).  If anyone wants to read the assessors' report, email me.

My current tasks, in priority order, are:

1. Study grounded theory and qualitative data analysis.

2. Learn to use ATLAS.ti software.

3. Begin coding R''.

4. Search for good examples of review papers.

I am also considering whether to use a project tracking tool to plan
and monitor the the schedule.

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End of WAR 0170.

# References