

File 20110105.1057: Notes from meeting with Dr Martin this morning at 10am.

I met with Dr Martin by video teleconference at 5pm (UK time) on Wednesday. Agenda emailed out before the call. No report has been received from the assessors yet, unless there is a paper copy in my folder in the post room. What I wanted to talk to Dr Martin about was a plan for recovering and moving forward. I got sidetracked, I said, chasing off after an idea that ultimately turned out not to be useful. I said that the impression I got was 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 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 that they thought I could accomplish it if I could devote nine months full-time to the analysis. I reported that I am learning the new tool for qualitative analysis but I do not know yet how long the analysis will take. I plan to tackle the third case study (R") first, because the shape of the data in that one is closest to the model of well-structured raw data that I have (data obtained from Shamal, the local expert on grounded theory). I do not have a good sense yet of the relative sizes of the 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. Handicapped by not having the university library close at hand.

The assessors told me that the data I have collected are paramount. I spent a lot of time searching for a predictive theory in 2010 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 the data directly.

I developed two separate and distinct models: 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. Dr Martin 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 received 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 people are a little more dubious about. But 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 to me 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 the series of fine-grained events I needed to feed into the predictive model and exercise it. I have to explore ATLAS.ti some more to determine whether it is possible, but it just might work. The bulk of the dissertation would still be the grounded theory, 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 that 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), but think about using two of the case studies to predict the third. Even better, he said, consider them pair-wise and predict all three. That would be a strong result.

I asked for and received some assurance that if it takes longer than the normal deadline to do this research right, that I can 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 take the intercession of him and DGS together, 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 is 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. 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 able to be assessors. It is supposed to be a collaborative process, he said. I understand that, and I think of this whole ordeal as showing that the process works. While the rules are vague and contradictory in spots, leading to misunderstandings between student and assessors like the one I ran into, the purpose of confirmation is not to be adversarial—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. 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 a fact of life in science and you learn from them. Besides the upcoming trip planned for mid-March (we coordinated schedules so he will probably be in town then), I asked some 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], but the assessors did ask for one review paper to be published in a journal. That paper, citeable in the introduction of everything else I write, 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, and so on. I asked about journals that publish reviews; they are not as common as they once were. ACM Computing Surveys? Dr Martin looked up the name of the journal where a recently published paper appeared: IEEE Communication Surveys and Tutorials. I promised to go 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. Looking around for source of guidance on how to write a good review paper.

We discussed meeting more often than 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.

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.

References