

Chapter 11

Towards an Understanding of Knowledge Sharing in Indigenous Communities of Practice: A Phenomenology of Practice Approach

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing is broadly an act of communication, and in indigenous communities of practice, knowledge sharing can be viewed as a cultural symbol making process. This process is facilitated by indigenous language as the communication tool. The characteristics of indigenous languages that include being dynamic, constantly changing as people adjust to their life circumstances and being personal, tacit, and experiential renders it closely tied down to the person who knows the language. Thus, the most appropriate way to understand the use and exchange of such knowledge, that is, the communication phenomenon of indigenous knowledge, would be to extricate the personal experiences of individuals involved in the use and exchange of the indigenous knowledge. This can be done using van Manen's phenomenology of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology is one of the theoretical approaches that have influenced the way in which researchers in Library and Information Science (LIS) have sought to address issues of both practical and intellectual interest (Budd, 2005). As observed by Wilson (2002), there had been an increase in the number of LIS researchers opting for phenomenology. He attributed this to an increase in LIS researchers who had begun to adopt qualitative methodologies. However, the assertion by Wilson, is not supported in literature. For example, Ullah and Ameen (2018) found that only 2% of the documents the authors surveyed had used

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phenomenology. The study was a systematic review that synthesized secondary data from 58 literature reviews published from 1980 to 2016, which included journal articles or pre-prints shared through social media or institutional repositories reporting empirical research in English. The authors found descriptive quantitative methodologies to be most popular. Similar results were reported in the previous year by Togia and Malliari (2017, p. 55, 56) in a review of 440 publications in five prominent LIS journals that included 343 empirical studies. Of the studies, 70% had used quantitative methodologies, 21.6% qualitative and 8.5% mixed methods. Among the studies that applied qualitative methodologies, only 2% had used phenomenological methodologies. Ullah and Ameen (2018) went on to conclude that while they had established the popular methodologies, it however was “also possible that researchers do not give enough thought to other possibilities, or are not aware of them ... [The less popular methodologies could] inspire researchers to consider new approaches, especially when exploring new kinds of research questions” (p. 58). Ngulube and Ukwoma (2019) found that quantitative research methods predominated library and information science postgraduate research in Nigeria and South Africa between 2009 and 2015. None of the studies that were produced used phenomenology. Hence, the focus on phenomenology in this Chapter; specifically, the applicability of phenomenology of practice as a method of inquiry in knowledge sharing which is a phenomenon of human information behaviour.

The context within which knowledge sharing is discussed in this Chapter, the indigenous communities of practice, qualifies the subject matter to be treated as indigenous research. Thus, it can be studied using indigenous research methodologies. However, researchers in indigenous knowledge systems do not seem to agree on the standards for the methodologies for indigenous research. What is agreed upon is that indigenous knowledge paradigms are different from the western paradigms (Keane, Khupe, & Muza, 2016, p. 165); and observations are that most indigenous research “tend to follow a conventional academic format with underpinning scientific modes of knowledge validation, including contractual ethics, an objectivity stance and a distancing of the researcher”. Hence, a call by Keane, Khupe and Muza (2016) for the inclusion of the researcher’s voice because, together with the researcher, participants are co-creators of the research design and interpreters of the research data. Such a concern can be addressed by using interpretive phenomenology. Keane, Khupe and Muza (2016) concluded by advocating for participatory research that is embedded in a relational ontology (p. 165). Other researchers like Ngulube and Ngulube (2017) observed that “scholars who claim to indigenise research methodologies still base their knowledge claims on the western research tradition of constructivism and interpretivism ... based on multiple worldviews and epistemologies [and that there is yet to be] developed a language and justification strategy associated with a purely indigenous paradigm”. The authors recommended use of descriptive phenomenology in indigenous research. In view of the concerns on appropriated indigenous research methodologies, some of which are highlighted above, this Chapter, proposes the use of van Manen’s phenomenology of practice in understanding the dynamics of knowledge sharing in indigenous communities of practice.

The main aim of this Chapter is to explore the extent to which phenomenology of practice can be considered as the best method of inquiry to understand how to explicate the essences of knowledge sharing experiences in indigenously-rooted informal business organisations, which are a common feature in developing countries, from a LIS point of view. The significance, as observed by Ullah and Ameen (2018), is that “knowledge of methods used in a particular discipline is invaluable for researchers who want to choose among appropriate methods in the conduct of reliable and valid research” (p. 54). Also, notes Wilson (2002) about the importance of adopting a method of enquiry in information science research when he states that:

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