



Chapter 12

A Conversation Regarding Ethics In Information Systems Educational Research

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Should ethics be a significant importance in information systems educational research? In this chapter, I reflect on my heuristic and psychologically-oriented self-study concerning some ethical improprieties which I committed during the data collection phase of an information systems educational research programme. As part of this heuristic reflection, I engaged in a number of self dialogues in the form of a conversation between various characters. Reported in this paper is one of these dialogues, concerning broad issues of ethics and research and discussing the notion of wisdom, maturity, meaning, and virtue. I begin by asserting that this is even more so when considering research investigating and using new media, such as the world wide web, in which acceptable ethical practices have yet to be established and consolidated.

INTRODUCTION

From 1991 to 1995 I conducted qualitative research with the implicit hypothesis that *open discourse* could balance *technicism* in the University Business Computing classes taught by myself and three colleagues. I was progressively a tutor, then a lecturer, then the Course Coordinator facilitating the reform of a first-year Undergraduate Business Computing Course for the Bachelor of Business degree. The basic idea of the reform was to encourage communication and discourse about the meaning and purpose and wider societal implications of business

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computing in addition to the narrowly technical aspects. I discontinued the research on realizing, through a reflective self-study, that I had acted unethically. To address this breach of ethics, I conducted an heuristic inquiry, from 1993 to 1996, to delve deeply, using heuristic reflection, into the nature, and possible healing, of the causes of my research short-comings both in theory and practice. The change in research approach and direction rested upon my growing awareness of the importance of ethics, reflective practice, art, symbolic interpretation of experience, and spirituality.

In this chapter, I present a conversation concerning the general issue of ethics in research, structured loosely around an idea of wisdom with some keywords of maturity, meaning and virtue. This discussion is presented in the form of a conversation between several persons. I coordinated an exchange of comments, concerning qualitative research, between Mr. Craig Standing, Dr. Peter Taylor, Dr. Peter Standen and myself. With their permission, I extensively edited, expanded, and added to the dialogue to change the themes and content to suit my own purposes. To protect my colleagues, and to clearly signal the fictive nature of the dialogue, I used the names Thales, Heraclitus, and Auguste Comte for the participants. Thales (around the early sixth century B.C.) was “one of the Seven Wise Men of ancient Greece” (Hammond, 1972, p. 179) and thus I use his name to present balanced moderation in the dialogue that follows this section. I use the name of Heraclitus (around 500 B.C.), a curious blend of systematic and also brilliantly intuitive thinker, named *the Obscure* (Gould, 1972), to present the more esoteric ideas in the dialogue. Because of Comte’s (1798-1857) belief that objective scientific laws are the only basis for the social sciences, I have taken his name to present the positivist opinion that only explanations derived from objective examination of phenomena themselves should be considered worthwhile (Knapton, 1972).

A HEURISTIC CONVERSATION

Mark: Friends, let us begin our discussion of ethics when conducting educational research, especially when using web-based information systems.

Heraclitus: Why “especially when using web-based information systems?”

Mark: It seems to me that some folk, including those that are normally wise and ethical, act in an unusually “loose” manner when using the web. I have experienced cases when researchers, not only students, act with gay abandon in copying and plagiarising material from the web. It is my opinion that ethical procedures and practices take considerable time to become established and consolidated in new media and new situations. Also, some researchers are so concerned about research rigour that, it seems to me, they sometimes neglect important

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