



Chapter VII

Vulnerability and the Aware IS Practitioner: A Reflective Discourse on Unfinished Business

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Information technology (IT) projects regularly fail. IT projects fail rapidly, spectacularly and with monotonous regularity. IT and related information systems (IS) projects seem more prone than other technology-based interventions to prove to be enormously risky ventures for companies and government agencies to invest in. If this phenomenon is pronounced in so-called industrialised economies - the issues and problems around failure multiply when such projects are undertaken in transitional and developing economies.

In all this failure the role of the IS practitioner appears invidious. On the one hand there are rapidly developing technologies and opportunities for change while on the other there are organisations often unable to express what change they desire or to articulate the difference between what they would like and what they feel able to cope with. It is little wonder that the IS practitioner—given the responsibility to manage the change process by analysis and design and other mediating strategies, can end up as the victim of technology failure, organisational inability to make up its mind and half-developed applications.

In all this muddle the role of the action researcher (AR)—deeply involved with the processes and relationships within the research context is oddly empowered to deal with change while appearing even more vulnerable than his or her more managerialist or technologist colleagues.

This chapter, by means of a reflective discourse representing my own learning, attempts to develop the theme of the vulnerability and power of the action research IS practitioner. Using current case study material drawn from working in transitional economies, the chapter indicates lessons learned in the value of the AR approach to analysis and design and the real benefits and powers which can arise from vulnerability such as autonomy and viability.

A key lesson in my own learning will probably appear to be very simple to the reader. The lesson is that articles and chapters and books which academics write are always the

summation of all that has gone before, plus the development from this basis and the inclusion of something new (we hope). We carry our intellectual baggage with us into new situations and so, to some extent what we write later in our careers always builds upon and extends (and sometimes, in courageous cases refutes) earlier arguments. This essay is no exception to the rule. In what follows I develop ideas which germinated years ago in my academic and practitioner initiation into information systems and have been reflected upon in years of applying systems analysis to information systems contexts. This has involved learning from where I have been and the mistakes and insights I have made or have been gifted by the teams and stakeholders I have been privileged to work with. Further, I draw out what I feel are some fairly humanising elements latent within my experience of what works and what does not work in IS development.

The following chapter develops along the lines set out in the box below—and these themes are then used in the chapter as the section headings to the reflective discourse which I am constantly having with myself. Initially I began by writing this essay as a conventional academic chapter but I was troubled by the format—the content did not seem to fit. I wanted the essay's format to be a suitable receptacle for what is after all a developing and as yet unfinished discussion resulting from reflection on practice (an activity which has developed for me from a range of sources but the main influences to date are as follows: de Chardin, 1961; Russell, 1986; Briggs, Myers, Kirby et al., 1994; Horney, 1994; Dryden, 1996; Flood, Weil et al., 1997; Wilby, 1997; Esperjo and Stewart, 1998; *Systems Thinker Newsletter*, 1998; Moon, 1999). The discourse structure I provide is given in total in the box below. It is intended that the essay's main discourse can be read as a few sentences—a kind of abstract. These lines are then used as section heads and developed and expanded in more conventional section contents. The device is not intended to be unconventional—I have seen it in use in the development of course material by colleagues and it seems to work in terms of engaging the reader. Rather I used it as a means to help me make sense of my reflection—holding the contents of the essay to the main themes which I wanted to talk about.

- It is generally asserted that IT is progressive and dynamic yet
- IS projects are failure prone -although definitions of failure are not uniform.
- and global variation is also evident.
- IS Practitioners
- are vulnerable within this risky world and
- to reduce this vulnerability we have methodology as a means to manage our IS projects but many conventional methodologies do not seem to be a guarantee against problems however
- it seems that useful methodology needs to braid theory and good action research practice within the framework of an inclusive approach to undertaking the IS project but
- this requires the practitioner of methodology to be actively engaged in learning and developing upon practice but
- this is not enough either - methodology needs to be implemented in such a way as to engage the users of IS but
- this means that learning, and tools for developing the means of intervention must be central elements of IS methodology.
- Or is this a partial view in need of further braiding?

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