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Hermeneutic Phenomenology: A Useful Tool for IS Educators?

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ABSTRACT

Much of the work carried out in the formative years of IS/IT focussed on the articulation of paradigms and research frameworks rather than the development of the *discipline* (Hirscheim et. al. 1996, Weber, 1997). Discipline maturity brings introspection, critical reflection and an increasing emphasis on professional practice (Benson, 2003). This paper discusses an extreme and subjective qualitative methodology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology (hereafter HP). The author examines the role of HP in reflective practice for IS academics and the problems associated with establishing a case for legitimacy in the IS education community. It is concluded that HP is an effective tool and that complementary methods enhance its usefulness.

INTRODUCTION

Information Systems/Information Technology (IS/IT) has long been obsessed with a quest for both identity and respectability as a discipline (Weber, 1997). This has led to serious inquiries into the ontological foundations of the discipline and the adoption of research methods from other disciplines to sustain a "publish or perish" mentality. We can regard technology per se as being largely objectivist and schools of thought regarding the development and management of technology as being largely subjectivist. Burrell & Morgan, (1979) were concerned with the sociological elements of corporate life and the use of coherent frameworks for their analysis. They developed a taxonomy of research paradigms (see also Keen, 1980, Banville & Landry, 1989). This is shown in table 1.

Each of the 4 schools of thought in table 1 has its own ontological foundations. The individual ontologies may overlap to some extent but since each has its own codified grammars and rules for the presentation of research findings it is possible to classify papers (and researchers) as belonging to particular quadrant. Although this classification may seem to entrench attitudes by forcing researchers to endorse a particular set of assumptions, communication between researchers is improved since relative positions can be clearly understood. Genres of research may also be defined in terms of what they are not, so that each quadrant in figure 1 serves as a referent for the other three. For the purposes of this paper I will consider the Neohumanism quadrant. The focus here is on the realisation of human potential, and issues such as emancipation, participation and empowerment are significant. The use of human rationality as a tool for overcoming dogma is a key concept in this genre. Neohumanists strive to reduce the barriers that prevent the realisation of human potential. Neohumanism is based in subjectivity and accordingly must address such issues as phenomenism. Honderich (1995)

provides a detailed history of the evolution of Hermeneutics (strictly the science of meaning), noting its relation to phenomenism. The combination of the two forms a powerful method of enquiry, Van Manen (1991, pp 180). The higher level introspection offered by HP seem to make it an ideal technique for the exploration of social, managerial and cultural interactions and hence as a method of enquiry into the teaching of IS/IT. My concerns were to present my findings so that they had relevance to other academics/practitioners whilst maintaining credibility and respectability. According to Van Maanen, (1988) researchers tend to adopt a Realist or Confessional style. In the Realist style authors tend to claim "interpretive omnipotence - closing off or nailing down an interpretation without allowing alternative views to creep into view" (op cit. pp. 53). In the confessional approach the researcher "presents his or her own view to the exclusion of others". Van Maanen (1988) proposes an "impressionistic" narrative style which embraces dramatic storytelling, novelistic description of events, and the use of different voices for different narratives. Even the analysis of the research is regarded as another tale to tell. Taylor (1997) goes further, arguing that as in impressionistic art, representations are not idealised nor meant to be accurate, features may be exaggerated in order to make a point or to enhance the emotive content or impact. It is this subjectivity which is both a strength and weakness; a strength because it allows authors the freedom to enhance, omit detail, use metaphor etc. and a weakness because these things have the potential to undermine the credibility and validity of the conclusions.

SOME COMMENTS ON THE VALIDITY AND CREDIBILITY OF HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENISM.

It is easy to criticise qualitative research for its selectiveness and lack of objectivity. Yet in a realist paradigm statistics are routinely filtered, thresholded and manipulated. Since the grammars associated with realist approaches are better defined and are more amenable to reason and logic, they are more easily accepted. The problem lies with the subjectivity of human language and the burden of semiotics. It is not enough to present evidence, it is necessary to build a case. As Dawkins (1987) comments:

You have to become an advocate and use tricks of the advocate's trade.

While mathematics is the most coherent of all the disciplines, there are arguments about the nature of truth and proof. David Hilbert took the view that everything could/must be known (*Wir müssen wissen. Wir werden wissen*) (Reid, 1970) Around the same time Gödel published proof of his theorem which, put simply, says that only the universe is big enough to understand the universe - no single theory can describe it all. The assertion, "I can not be disproved", is true if and only if it can not be proved. Essentially things not can be proved from the inside. As Pirsig (1976) observes:

when you try to discuss [these] modes of discussion you get involved in what could be called a platform problem. You have no platform from which to discuss these things other than the modes themselves. (pp. 65-66)

In short, Gödel provides objective proof of subjectivity and Pirsig provides a subjective argument for objectivity. The impressionistic approach places emphasis on achieving resonance with the reader not

Table 1. A taxonomy of research paradigms (adapted from Burrell & Morgan, 1979)

Conflict	Radical Structuralism	Neohumanism
Order	Functionalism	Social Relativism
	Objectivist	Subjectivist

on absolute proof. My research focussed professional practice and HP provided an integrating framework. Following Denzin and Lincoln (1994), I adopted a multi-method approach and was able to use statistics, survey data, interviews etc. to inform my inquiry. Despite gaining an award for excellence for my research, I found that I was obliged provide colleagues with background in the methodology and criteria for assessing the goodness of results. Even so, I encountered a high level of suspicion and resistance, the main concern being "where is the rigor?".

Whitehead (2003) poses 5 criteria to test the validity of self-study research in education with a focus on evidence. (evidence of: generation and testing of educational theories from the embodied knowledge of researcher; transformation of the embodied values of the researcher into the standards of judgement that can be used to test the validity of accounts; emergence of educational research methodologies as distinct from a social science methodology in enquiries; and logic of educational enquiry; educational influence in educating oneself, in the learning of others and in the education of social formations) In HP writing is an integral part of both the enquiry and the reflective process. Taylor (2002)

Ethnography is no longer pictured as a relatively simple look, listen and learn procedure but rather, as something akin to an intense epistemological trial by fire - all assumptions, values and methods are subject to scrutiny and challenge. Van Maanen (1998, in Taylor, 1997)

The researcher is not detached from the subject under investigation, but rather is an integral part of it. Van Manen (2002) comments

Reading interpretive texts, if done properly, simulates the process of reflective writing. The reader must write what the author forgot, overlooked, could not "see" or "hear" or remember. The text invites us into this interpretive reflective space: to deepen, to enrich, to personalize our understandings

My statistics and interview data were accepted by my peers almost without question. The reasons behind this seemed to be based on familiarity with the methods and a rigorous grammar associated with the functionalist paradigm. Resistance to HP seems to hinge upon unfamiliarity with its informal grammar and research process. However, when discussing project failure, most academics and practitioners of my acquaintance were happy to agree that systems seldom failed on their functional aspects. It was quality and human factors that contributed most heavily to their demise. Equally, my colleagues were happy to use case studies in their teaching despite their lack of rigor or quantitative methods, on the grounds that they encouraged critical reflection in students. The gap that exists between teaching, theory, practice and pedagogy is a fruitful source of enquiry for the qualitative researcher.

CONCLUSIONS

HP and Impressionism are especially valuable in situations which describe management and culture. They are grounded in the real world where doubt and uncertainty prevail. At a personal level they may be used to derive a deeper understanding of professional practice. On a wider plane they can be used to inform others and cause them to question their own professionalism. Acceptance of the methods in the wider IS forum is limited, but then again so is acceptance of qualitative approaches generally (Walsham, 1995). Weber (1997, p. 24) comments

the quest for methodological rigor has begun to drive out relevance, creativity and especially risk taking. High levels of dustbowl empiricism have been the result.

However it is important to note that HP and Impressionism are not incompatible with positivist approaches, each can inform and improve the other. In the short term this may be the only way that the methodologies will find any sort of acceptance in the IS community. The immediacy and accessibility of the methodology combined with a search for resonance and relevance rather than proof offers a useful paradigm for IS researcher. The main difference is one of perspective, HP is experienced as much as it is applied. The real danger for researchers to adopt one of the quadrants in figure 1 as part of a personal belief system. As Keen (1991, p. 42) noted "Methodology is a choice – not a tyranny". Our focus should be the applications of the methodologies to relevant issues rather than the methodologies themselves..

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