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Kathy Blashki
Monash University

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Telling It Straight:
narrative research methods and the linear imperative in IS/IT

Kathy Blashki

School of Multimedia Systems
Monash University
Melbourne, Australia
kathy.blashki@infotech.monash.edu.au

Abstract

This paper will investigate the capricious nature of the researcher's hitherto venerated semiotic armament manifest in concepts such as "reality", "validity" and "reliability". Such notions have become heavily contested cultural sites in our (post) postmodern world as we have sought to reinscribe their meanings within a semiosis/ology previously unthinkable prior to the advent of "multimedia" and its accompanying, ever-increasing, technological growth and sophistication.

This paper seeks to explore the repercussions implicit in such transformations upon the representational practices previously utilised to demonstrate, and expound upon, our research findings.

INTRODUCTION

Begin at the beginning, go on until you get to the end, then stop.

Whilst such a paradigmatic methodological route (the hallmark of rational scientific discursive practice) may have assisted Alice in negotiating her way through Wonderland, such linearity of purpose is neither appropriate nor expressive of research in praxis.

In this post modern world the traditional authorial voice of the "expert" researcher is deemed a construct of the subject and thus subsumed by that which Tierney (1994) describes as the "ideology of doubt". Richardson (1984) further elucidates this essentially deconstructive aphorism,

> *The core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the "right" or privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism suspects all truth claims as masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural and political struggles … The postmodernist context of doubt distrusts all methods equally. No method has a privileged status. The superiority of "science" over "literature" – or from another vantage point, "literature" over "science" – is challenged.*

(1984:517)

If we are to participate, and indeed to contribute to, the contemporary debate that surrounds the postmodern interpretation of such traditionally accepted concepts as "reliability", "validity" and "reality", then a requisite acknowledgement of research texts of a rather more inventive construction is critical. Thus, dramatically transfigured, our research texts traverse across the "genre" wars that privilege some traditions such as positivism, (even postmodernism!) and declare others as intellectually and ideologically impoverished.

This crisis in our representative practices, that is, who are we empiricists, ethnographers etc?, thus challenges and undermines our most venerable notions of that which we revere as "truth" and "discipline knowledge". Our practice thus becomes rife with questions

regarding the authorial voice, academic discursive practice, previously held bipolarities of fact/ fiction, quantitative/ qualitative etc.

As responsible researchers of whatever philosophical stance we cannot escape this compelling, and inevitably defensive, issue of authority. What we can do however is acknowledge that our role unavoidably transfigures our research and that our texts delineate/ limn the textual, social, cultural strategies we employ to exercise a scholarly power that inevitably and inexorably seeks to privilege the texts of some and descries (via omission, via silence or non-inclusion) the texts of others.

Such incursions upon the sanctity of traditional research semiology offer us a new way of framing/ situating ourselves within the research experience. If the role of the "author" can no longer be relied upon, what then does our role become? Bereft of our traditional tools of the trade where do we turn? How do we transgress the boundaries of knowledge traditionally jealously guarded and in doing so alter the perception of the construct "academic text"?

Clearly, relevance, academic rigor and integrity are integral to our view of our discipline. These are the codified paradigms via which we select both that which we choose to research and how we research it. Our discipline plunders and pillages theories, models and methods from a plethora of established disciplines such as; physical and social sciences, psychology, humanities etc. As Keen notes (1980:10) our discipline is characterised by a "fusion of behavioural, technical and managerial issues" which require a multi-disciplinary approach.

Accordingly, as a discipline without an accepted sole paradigm, we may have imposed requirements of rigor and relevance somewhat harshly in a defensive move to somehow contain our discipline within the strictures and structures of accepted paradigms governed by the rules of positivist conventions.

REPRESENTATIVE PRACTICE AND THE TRUTH IMPERATIVE

The Role of the Researcher

As academics we are compelled to contribute to an accepted and acknowledged store of Knowledge. Much of that which we research and write (and this paper is no exception) attempts to shape that body of knowledge by restricting the meaning of reality and validity, and reproving (silently or *in absentia*) those who are not privy to the secret language (subject jargon) of the "club". (Of course any postmodern text would never truly pass the test of postmodernity unless prepared to acknowledge the very fragility and tenuous nature of the its own constructions of reality.)

The conventional format of the research report is consequently determined and shaped by paradigmatic expectations of the content and structure of the discipline's knowledge foundations. It is these expectations that ultimately mandate the *grammar* and semiology employed by the researcher. In the halcyon days of positivism, knowledge claims were revered for logical conclusions akin to mathematical reasoning, and thus the inevitable product of a hypothetical-deductive process. A "true", and thus inevitably reliable and valid, knowledge statement was assured of logical certitude by virtue of the *process* through which it had survived intact. In accord with the nature of mathematical solutions, the validity of the positivist research findings were assumed to be independent of both the researcher and the audience to whom the knowledge claim was to be proffered. Accordingly, research produced in such pristine ideological conditions was/ is deemed rational and hence "true".

As Pinar argued (Tierney *et al.*, 1994), rationality is a governing convention imposed on our deepest symbolic structures and the imposition of such conventions has resulted in the divided self. Such a dissociated, abstracted cognitive *reasoning* self must necessarily cast the *non-reasoning* self as "Other". Such a Cartesian formation thus perpetuates "othering" only via the sacrifice of the self and anyone outside the boundaries of the designated "knowable".

Much of our research methodology and the techniques that preside over our investigations, seek to impose constructs of normalisation upon the knowable by means of perpetuating the "otherness" of the unknown for example if it cannot be tested, surveyed or calculated it fails

to be accounted for as "real" research as it is thus unknowable. (This researcher has been the recipient of such an accusation regarding a qualitative analysis of teaching practice) Editors and reviewers of journals are particularly vigilant in their declarations of "important" and "legitimate" knowledge and view their guardianship of such as a very serious business indeed.

Many of the systems and structures we design, analyse and implement are consistent with this imposition of normative paradigms. Essentially, such systems are boundaries designed to contain the chaotic, the *un*systematic, boundaries into which several of the more recent discipline areas such as multimedia, do not easily nor willingly fit. Such paradigmatic conventions could be viewed as the tyrannical monopoly of Scientific Rationalism, which has held sway since Aristotle.

Our understanding of that which characterises "knowledge" and the process of its validation have altered. We have progressed from a positivistic philosophy of science through a phase of "posts" – postpositive, poststructural, postmodern post-postmodernism (!!!) As a result the frameworks in which we situate our research are far from objective, dispassionate and transparent but rather reflect quite specific (and often fierce) epistemological alliances. Knowledge statements in the form of the documentation and presentation of our research can consequently no longer be sanctioned as mirrored reflections of "reality", as "rational objectivity", but rather become constructions of our own model or map of reality.

Habermas (1979) suggests (and many who followed, in their haste to be post-positivist) that knowledge can best be understood as an agreement reached by a community of scholars. Knowledge thus evolves as the account of "reality" about which the scholarly community has reached consensus. The review process for conferences/ journals etc. is essentially the formalisation of such power strategies and the hitherto standard format of the research document/ report is an expedient means through which the "community of scholars" evaluate the validity and authority of the knowledge claim against established criteria.

The Research Text as Construction

The research report states (stakes?) a knowledge claim and attempts to justify its authority by the presentation of information/ data. The purpose of the report is thus not simply to inform the editors of the claim of the researcher but more importantly to convince the editors, the "community of scholars", of the validity of the claim.

As researchers we are thus compelled to submit our knowledge claim to the scholarly community not in order to promote discussion and engagement with the work, but rather in order for its validity to be tested, evaluated and judged. According to this criterion of "validity" the editors and reviewers determine if this claim is to be added to the discipline's body of knowledge and subsequently earn the researcher DETYA points by publication in a referred journal. Thus the format of the research report is designed not to communicate a knowledge claim, but rather to communicate its *validity.*

Of course, many knowledge claims submitted for review are deemed to be unacceptable and thus are not received into the fraternity (and may I add that the use of the masculine form is not accidental). Publication of a knowledge claim signifies that the custodians of the discipline have approved it. Accordingly, its appearance in a journal is not in order to present the claim for judgement by the readership of the journal, but rather, to merely distribute that which has already been deemed conventionally accepted wisdom. "Successful" knowledge claims, those accepted for publication, serve other, more insidious, functions as well. The numbers of knowledge claims that have survived this peer review process through to publication ultimately determine promotion and tenure decisions.

Despite our protestations of objectivity, reliability validity etc. we cannot as researchers maintain such objectivity whilst purporting to acknowledge the postmodern paradigm. Indeed we are actors within our own research texts: inscribed, interpellated into the very meanings that we decree as valid, reliable and objective. Meaning is always constructed, events and actions no matter how positivist the intention with which they are imbued, have no meaning apart from the signifying system that generates them. Our "data", the very substance of our research, is "created" rather than "discovered" and our reader (the reviewer/ editor/ conference-goer) has learned to recognise it as "data" rather than creative manipulation by

textual strategies employed by the researcher. The significance and meaning of the research results are thus integrally related to the process that produced them and thus, inevitably retain traces of both the structure and the activities that created them.

Perhaps more pertinently, our understanding of knowledge is transformed by our subjective participation as an actor within our own (and others') research texts, thus conclusive statements that emerge from such research could hardly be asserted as mirrors of the research reality. Whilst they have indeed undergone a mimetic transformation, that mimesis results in constructions and deconstructions of reality. Accordingly our research is only ever a series of authorial representations that contribute to a multi-participant contestation of reality (also known as the "journal" or "conference").

Narrative Research in Praxis

The conventional research format confines the presentation of findings to a logically, linearly ordered justification of results and ignores the authentic, non-linear, often serendipitous process of discovery and decision making that is essential to the production of research and the hallmark of investigative practice. As a corollary to this insistence on retaining the conventional format in which to recount our research endeavours, such accounts maintain a synchronic perspective of the knowledge development.

The diachronic research report is premised on an assumption that research is *practice*, that is, the product of human (the researcher) action. Researchers become the protagonists in a drama of their quest for knowledge. This drama consists of a non-sequential "composting" of decisions made, actions taken, chance occurrences, interactions with the subject/s and debate/ discussion with colleagues. Inevitably, throughout the composting/ composing process the researcher's values, inadequacies, abilities and personal distinctiveness will emerge at various points in the researcher's "performance". A "methodology" premised on a narrative account of our research practice effectively chronicles the "production" over time with a beginning, middle and end. Research is thus performance carried out by investigators or actors. As performance, it is executed within a context of normative "scripts", that is, customary social practice.

Bourdieu (1977) describes three features of social practice:1) it is situated temporally, that is in time and space intrinsically defined by its tempo; 2) tends to be guided by tacit understanding and assumptions rather than a process of rational decision making that is logically derived. This locates Bourdieu's notion firmly in the realms of that which Epstein (1993) refers to as an *experiential* system. Epstein distinguishes between the rational system and that of the experiential, which he determines as holistic, associative and where processes transpire, "instantaneously and normally outside of conscious awareness…[with the result] that people are generally unaware of intervening interpretative and affective reactions and assume they react directly to external events" (Epstein, 1993:428). Accordingly, any action in the social world, is inexorably grounded in the experiential and as such responds to varying contexts without recourse to a more measured approaches i.e. "stop and think". In the light of Bourdieu's account, practice/ praxis could therefore be characterised as fluid and indeterminate, or as Bourdieu suggests, "the art of the necessary improvisation which defines excellence" (1977:8); and 3) social practice is defined by purpose and the implementation of strategies for attaining goals. Thus, despite Bourdieu's assertion that practice is without conscious deliberation, it *is* both strategic and goal oriented. Consequently, practice is a product not of a codified set of structural rules but rather emerges as an artefact of the actor's/ researcher's strategies, as a consequence of,

> *The interplay of culturally given dispositions, interests and ways of proceeding …individual skills and social competences, the constraints of resource limitations, the unintended consequences which intrude into any on-going chain of transactions, personal idiosyncrasies and failings and the weight of the history of relationships between the individuals concerned and the groups in which they claim membership.*

> (Jenkins, 1992:69)

The above discussion of research as practice, as *social* practice, significantly diverges from the descriptions we are accustomed to and those of the accepted wisdom of research textbooks.

The conventional research format confines the research performance to a series of rationally premeditated actions that impel the investigative process forward toward the establishment of a knowledge claim. As researchers we require a format that expresses the depth, complexity and contextual nature of our endeavours and communicates something of Bourdieu's temporal, tacit and purposeful qualities implicit in the production of knowledge.

The improvisational and diachronic characteristics of our research would thus seem to be more closely allied with a narrative form. As Ricoeur (1984) contends, narrative is the most appropriate discursive form for describing human action. Bruner (1990) has similarly argued that narrative is the apposite mode through which humans choose to make sense of their lives and actions.

> *People do not deal with the world event by event or with text sentence by sentence. They frame events and sentences in larger structures.*

> (1990:64)

Narrative transforms a mere sequence of actions and events into a coherent entity in which these happenings acquire meaning and relevance as contributing factors to a common purpose and objective. Thus narrative research collects the diverse events that contribute to the research outcome, the findings, into a story. Narrative thinking, argue Robinson and Hawpe (1986) is the most operatively effective mode of arranging and systematising action. Correspondingly, Polkinghorne (1998) maintains that the significance of narrative discourse resides in its ability to transform a list or sequence of apparently disconnected research events into a story unified by thematic concerns. Narrative grammar performs this transformation via "emplotment" (Ricoeur, 1984). Emplotment consists of a gestalt-like organising feature that focuses on the unfolding of the project as a holistic whole rather than on the individual research events. As gestalt psychology focuses on the formation of holistic patterns, narrative grammar similarly frames research actions and events into elements of a whole located somewhere between the initial research idea and its denouement. By means of the synthesising capabilities of emplotment, the narrative research document readily accommodates and assimilates various factors that influence and impinge upon the progress of the research and its documentation. The narrative research report is thus a history of the research project.

Conversely, it is not an unmediated documentary *reality TV* experience, depicting the process as it happens. As Schön (1983) similarly describes, the meaning of the events flows from the deployment of semiotic techniques such as *narrative smoothing* (whereby the extraneous and contradictory are removed), and the representation of those in the researcher's reflections. Accordingly, a research report drawing on narrative methodology is not the equivalent of a carefully crafted work of fiction. Narrative structure does not impose just any emplotted order on the events selected by the researcher, rather the final research "story" is necessarily constrained by the events however may convey an order and significance not necessarily evident at the time of the events. By imposing narrative structural principles, researchers incorporate Bourdieu's three foundations for the logic of practice. The *temporality* in which actions affect, constrain and contribute to subsequent events in the research project can be readily expressed via narrative methods, indeed it is perhaps the mode with which narrative is routinely identified and understood. As Gergen and Gergen (1986) suggest,

> *Perhaps the most essential ingredient of narrative accounting (or storytelling) is its capability to structure events in such a way that they demonstrate … a sense of movement … through time.*

Actions and events guided by inference or *improvisation* at the time of their occurrence attain significance when observed retrospectively as an element within an holistic entirety and in relation to ensuing developments in the research project. Accordingly, narrative not only ensures the preservation of the temporal sequence but also links research events

associatively as joint contributors to the fulfilment of a shared and *purposeful* goal – the knowledge claim.

CONCLUSION

The customary (and accepted) format for the research report (to which we were all required to adhere in order to have papers accepted for ACIS) is a fundamental artefact of the information science disciplines. Thus, modification or experimentation with this accepted format necessarily must include acknowledgement of the "web of delivered discourse, social practice, professional requirements and daily decisions" (Schrag, 1986:4) in which the information systems professional is compelled to work. As the "Keyword Classification Scheme for IS Research" (1993) indicates, our research relies on a plethora of reference disciplines. Clearly any research output is thus already a product of an intertextual contextualisation of available (accepted) knowledge.

How do we break this codification of what constitutes an academic text?

The way forward in the development of a diachronic and non-linear narrative methodology is to move out from under the thrall of the conventional research format. Undeniably, there has been ongoing experimentation in the research techniques we utilise, such as data collection and analysis via qualitative means, however researchers have been rather more reticent to explore new ways of *reporting* their research.

In this paper I have explored the possibilities of a narrative methodology in which research is understood as social practice. It is my contention that the diachronic format best represents research as praxis encapsulating both the temporal nature and essentially human activity that characterises much of the IS research activity.

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