

OUT OF THE BOX AND ONTO THE STAGE: ENACTING INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH THROUGH THEATRE

Panel

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Abstract

The quest for digital innovation leads to consideration of new ways to infuse creativity into research and practice. One approach is to import techniques from artistic disciplines such as theatre. This panel explores the benefits and pitfalls of importing theatrical techniques into IS research. The nonlinear and holistic approach of the artistic fields facilitates incorporation of the emotional, subtle and implicit aspects of IS research. Theatre can also serve as a generative research method that can facilitate the reframing of the way the world is seen and understood. But skeptics argue that the use of theatre might lead to the blurring of the lines between “fact and fiction” to the detriment of the scientific research tradition. This panel presents four different ways to increase IS research creativity by incorporating theatrical techniques into the process. The audience is invited to join the dialogue in search of productive creativity.

Keywords: Creativity, communication, innovation, innovation processes

Introduction

The quest for digital innovation in the service economy leads the information systems field to consider new ways to infuse creativity into our research and practice. One approach is to import techniques from the artistic disciplines such as theatre. The purpose of this panel is to explore the potential benefits and pitfalls of importing theatrical techniques into IS research. In contrast to the linear and logical tradition of the scientific disciplines the nonlinear and holistic approach of the artistic fields would facilitate incorporation of the emotional, subtle, and implicit aspects of IS research. Theatre can serve as a generative research method that can facilitate the reframing of the way the world is seen and understood. On the other hand, skeptics might argue that the use of theatre might lead to the blurring of the lines between “fact and fiction” to the detriment of the scientific research tradition. This panel presents a creative response to the widely acknowledged view that IS research needs to become more creative. Given that need, the panelists present four different ways to increase IS research creativity by incorporating theatre. It considers the issues and needs in IS research that can be addressed through the use of theatre. In addition to considering the various facets of what theater can bring to the IS community, it also considers its limits. The audience is invited to join the dialogue in search of productive creativity by elaborating aspects of one or more of the positions, developing a unique position, or being an opponent of “contaminating” IS research in the name of creativity.

Cast (in Order of Appearance)

Theatrical Performance as a Mode for Reporting IS Research

Eileen Trauth demonstrates the use of theatre as a legitimate vehicle for presenting the results of IS research in order to overcome the constraints imposed on the presentation of scientific knowledge when it is reported in scholarly publications. The research narrative constructed for the archival literature is a linear process, beginning with an orderly review of the scientific literature, identification of a clear knowledge gap within it, and the presentation of research findings that logically fill that gap. Such a representation of the research process privileges the logical over the emotional, the explicit over the implicit, the orderly over the messy and the linear over the nonlinear. Further, conference proceedings and journal page length constraints privilege the explicit over the implicit and the quantitative over the qualitative. Hence, what is de-emphasized or missing from these accounts is subtlety, emotion, holistic understanding and contested interpretations as they relate to the phenomenon under study. In response, she describes her project to introduce an alternate venue for the reporting of scientific findings, to enable greater creative expression. Her project on theatre of social engagement, *Addressing Gender Barriers in STEM through Theatre of Social Engagement* funded by the National Science Foundation under the grant scheme Communicating Research to Public Audiences, demonstrates a theatrical way of communicating research findings about a theory of barriers imposed and internalized by women and underrepresented minorities who aspire to information technology careers. Because scholarly journals cannot accommodate the powerful emotions expressed by participants regarding subtle barriers that are often unconsciously internalized, Trauth has developed a creative, dramatic outlet to give voice to research results that would remain silent in conventional dissemination venues (Trauth 2012; Trauth et al. 2012). On this panel she describes the effect of presenting staged readings of her play *iDream* to audiences at the National Science Foundation, and theatres in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Theatrical Performance as a Generative Research Method

Michel Avital believes that performance and theatre can serve as a generative research method that extends the arsenal of IS researchers. Theatre-based techniques can provide different kinds of data than the commonly used methods in IS research. Play, performance, and theatrical acts have a generative capacity, that is, they enable performers and observers to reframe the way they see and understand the world and to challenge the normative status quo in a particular context of inquiry (Avital & Te'eni, 2009). Theatre-based techniques are engaging and consequently they are beneficial in studies that call for

authentic, embodied and experiential data. Theatre-based techniques are also evocative and thereby they are valuable in studies that call for dialogical, expressive and illustrative data. A theatre is an antithesis of a research laboratory, which is designed to provide the controlled settings that are required in confirmatory and close-ended experimental research. In contrast to a laboratory, the theatre stage is a space for ostensible exploratory examination through enactments of lived experience, envisioned scenarios, and social interactions. Subsequently, as illustrated in part in Avital & Vandenbosch (2000), theatre-based techniques can be used for studying dispositions, perceptions, experiences, narratives of group identity, as well as interactions with technology and in technology-rich environments. Engrossed in performance, participants become spontaneous and free to re-live past experiences as well as to live envisioned scenarios. The theatrical genre helps one to reconcile the co-existence of multiple realities and to embrace the dynamics of the unfolding events. Theatre-based research techniques work like a focus group on steroids and can be added to the portfolio of research approaches that aim to generate situated genuine accounts of participants' experiences and how they interpret them (Schultze & Avital, 2011).

Using Drama and the Theatre Metaphor as a Way to Understand and Interpret Information and Human Systems Research Phenomena

Julie Kendall shows that theatre as a metaphor is a powerful way to understand and interpret information systems research phenomena and is highly useful in framing and presenting research findings in journal articles. She believes that information systems researchers should reframe and apply methods used in the theatre. Such methods include *mise-en-scène* analysis, workshopping, and other techniques. She believes that in this way, theatre can serve as a reference discipline for IS. Julie believes that it is now time that the theatre metaphor be recognized and employed consciously (rather than implicitly) to understand, interpret, frame, and present our research findings in information systems. The theatre metaphor entails actors, scripts, the playwright, a director, an audience, and critics. This position is grounded in over four decades of research successfully using the theatre in management and organizational research. For example, Bryant (1993) and Crosnan et al. (1996) extended the theatrical metaphor organizationally. Companies have also been characterized as stages for action in which the roles of organizational actors are put together theatrically for role-playing and for constructing a carefully manicured and stage-managed image (Mangham & Overington, 1987). A variety of metaphors has been discovered and used successfully in IS over the years. Hirschheim and Newman (1991) embraced the role of myth, metaphor, and magic in understanding symbolic action in IS development. Kendall and Kendall (1993; 1994) used a metaphor approach to understand the language of information systems users and systems development methodologies to users' metaphors. Kendall, Kendall, and Lee (2005) used a theatre metaphor to describe aspects of disaster recovery planning for information systems that are not evident when disaster recovery is considered on its own. They extended the theatre metaphor by comparing disaster recovery planning to the concept of "workshopping" for theatrical productions. In 2007, Kendall, J. E., Kendall, K.E. and Kah used fantasy theme analysis looking at the dramas that chain out through interaction to understand ICT policy advisors' discourse in a virtual organization. Julie believes that the theatre metaphor, when chosen and used deliberately provides an endlessly rich, deep, and resilient metaphor for IS researchers to understand, interpret, frame, and present their research findings.

IS Researchers as Storytellers and Performers

Kenneth E. Kendall notes that "The smell of the greasepaint, the roar of the crowd," is an idiomatic expression that describes the rush of an actor whose routine of performing in front of a live audiences helps creates a habit-forming desire to be back on stage as soon as possible. Ken, who has served in various roles himself, including theatre award nominator, playwright, lyric writer, theatre Board Chairman, and researcher in theatre management (Kendall, J. and Kendall, K., 2009), examines organizational storytelling from the research point of view. Ken feels that it is essential to study the stories that are told within an organization to better understand the needs, design, and implementation of information systems within organizations. He explains how stories can be told and retold in organizations to the benefit of the organization or individual, but he cautions against the storyteller who falls to the temptation to embellish a story. One of the master storytellers of our times is Mike Daisey. His recent

monologues *How Theater Failed America*, *The Last Cargo Cult*, and *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* were based on ethnographic research. In *The Last Cargo Cult*, for example, he reveals what he observed on a trip to the remote Pacific island of Tanna and used the islanders' value system for possessions and practices to explain the recent international financial crisis. Most recently he travelled to China and visited one of the Foxconn factories. He told stories about a series of abuses that permanently affected the workers and placed much of the blame for these offenses on Apple. In these monologues Mike used a constant barrage of memes and metaphors to get his point across. But he also used presumption and conjecture. He received so much attention that news agencies began to investigate Mr. Daisey's claims and found that he fabricated many of the stories. In March 2012, Mike Daisey apologized for saying "onstage that I had personally experienced things I in fact did not," (Daisey, 2012). Ken explores the nature of organizational stories and argues that researchers who are receptive to stories will find a treasure of information seldom discovered through other means of information gathering.

Panel as Improv

Richard Boland moderates this panel in improv style, in keeping with its theatrical theme. Members of the audience are asked to write a short statement about a current project and its research question on a 5x8 card before the panel begins. Following panelists' brief description of their engagement with theatre, the moderator draws one card and recruits two volunteers from the audience. The two volunteers and two of the panelists then propose how one or more of the uses of theatre from the presentations can be applied to that project. They are encouraged to improvise a presentation of their proposed use. This process is repeated as long as time allows. The rest of the audience has the opportunity to vote on the best ideas.

Biographies of Panelists

Eileen Trauth is Professor of Information Sciences & Technology and Women's Studies at Penn State University. Her research is concerned with societal, cultural and organizational influences on information technology and the information technology professions. She is particularly interested in the linkages among diversity, social inclusion and economic development. She has conducted over 200 life history interviews with women working in the information technology field where she has collected stories of barriers and support. She has also explored the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class through a survey of 5000 contemporary university students. With funding from the National Science Foundation, she has written a play, *iDream*, as a way to communicate research results to the general public about gender barriers in the scientific and technological professions (<http://idreamtheplay.com>).

Michel Avital is Microsoft Chair and Professor of IT Management in Copenhagen Business School. Design and innovation are the leitmotif of Michel's work. Building on alternative genres and especially positive modalities of inquiry, his research focuses on information and organization with an emphasis on the social aspects of information technologies. He has published articles on topics such as generative systems design, creativity, innovation, collaboration and competition, green IT and sustainable value. He is an editorial board member of seven leading IS journals and serves in various organizing capacities in ICIS, AOM, ECIS and other topical conferences. Michel is an advocate of openness and an avid proponent of cross-boundaries exchange and collaboration. Further information at <http://avital.net>

Julie E. Kendall has researched theatre, metaphors, and information systems for over 20 years. She has published many studies on ecommerce and nonprofit theatres, focusing on the development of Web presence. In addition she has published numerous research papers concerning IS and metaphors, and also a paper using the theatre metaphor of workshopping as a framework to understand IT disaster recovery planning. She recently published articles on how the concept of colonialism and the third space as it applies in the theatre world. Julie is a Vice President of AIS and an AE of the *Communications of the AIS*. Julie has served the theatre community in many ways: as official nominator for The Drama League, Patron of the Atlantic Theater Company and Manhattan Theatre Club, Partner at the Public Theater, and lifetime member of the American Theatre Wing. Julie is past Vice President of EgoPo Classic Theatre in Philadelphia and continues to serve on their Board. Julie can be found at www.thekendalls.org.

Kenneth E. Kendall is a Distinguished Professor of Management in the School of Business-Camden,

Rutgers University. He is one of the founders of ICIS and a Fellow of the Decision Sciences Institute (DSI). He is a Past President of DSI. Ken served as Chairman of the Board for EgoPo Classic Theatre in Philadelphia. He also served as an official nominator for the Drama League in New York City, where he evaluated both Broadway and Off-Broadway plays and musicals in order to select which plays, musicals, and actors were nominated for the Drama League annual awards. The Association of Information Technology Professionals named Ken “Educator of the Year” in Information Systems for 2010. For more information about Ken and his research see www.thekendalls.org.

Richard Boland, Jr. is the Eliz. M. and Wm. C. Treuhaft Professor of Management and Department Chair of Information Systems in the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. He studies how individuals design and use information, and make meaning from interpreting organizational situations and data in reports. He has studied this hermeneutic process in a wide range of settings and professions, but primarily regarding how managers and consultants turn an ambiguous situation into a problem statement and declare a particular course of action to be rational. He has approached this in a variety of ways, including symbolic interaction, metaphor, cause mapping, frame shifting, language games and exegesis. Most recently he is fascinated with narrative and design as modes of cognition which are systematically undervalued yet dominate our meaning making.

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