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Panel 20 The Merits of Three Qualitative Research Methods

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PANEL 20

THE MERITS OF THREE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

Panel Chair: **Michael D. Myers**, University of Auckland

Panelists: **Heinz K. Klein**, Binghamton University
Duane Truex, Georgia State University
Eleanor Wynn, Oregon Graduate Institute

There has been growing interest in qualitative research methods and their application to information systems in recent years. Since 1990 panels and/or workshops on qualitative research methods have become a regular feature of ICIS. Prominent among the variety of research strategies which have been suggested in the research literature are case studies, grounded theory, ethnography (Harvey and Myers 1995; Wynn 1991), phenomenology, semiotics (Klein and Truex 1995), hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics (Myers 1994) and critical theory approaches.

However, in this discussion there has been little consideration given to the differences between and respective merits of these research methods. While all of the above methods are often labeled "qualitative," they are significantly different and are, in some ways, opposed. Some of the methods have different underlying philosophical assumptions, espouse competing values (ethics of research), and advocate different quality criteria.

The purpose of the panel is to compare and critique three qualitative approaches to information systems research with regard to their underlying assumptions and quality criteria or ethics of research. The three that will be discussed are ethnography, semiotics and critical social theory approaches. The panelists will review and debate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Michael D. Myers, the Panel Chair, will introduce the panelists and open the discussion by reviewing the issue of differences and possible contradictions between qualitative research methods. Each panelist will then discuss a specific qualitative research method.

Duane P. Truex III will discuss a method for the formal analysis of text-based records of organizational events — called Discourse Analysis (DA). He will argue that DA allows a researcher to empirically filter and measure theoretical constructs which have not been amenable to formal testing. As such, DA provides an important development in examining the efficacy and truth claims made by broad theories now being applied to social organizations such as critical social theory and structuration theory. It also allows the organizational researcher a means to examine and compare frames of references such as language games, ideal speech acts, and organizational emergence. As all text-based methods are themselves imbued with epistemological and ontological assumptions which constrain their general applicability to certain conditions, Dr. Truex will also analyze what actually qualifies as a "text," and what forms of filtering of these texts are appropriate and meaningful.

Eleanor Wynn will review features of ethnographic research applicable to IS domains and distinguish between theoretical and methodological issues relevant to the domain as opposed to those that overburden the IS researcher with scholastic concerns. She will then focus on the use of ethnographic semantics and tools from the study of language behavior that disclose work practices and organizational frameworks to be included in IS development efforts. Dr. Wynn will argue that it is important to understand the logic of the situation, and will discuss how conversation analysis can be used to reveal the background of practices. While conflict may be inherent in a situation due to the differing interests of the parties, conversation analysis is still useful for sorting out the redundant and rhetorical from structural and necessarily opposed interests, and may lessen the gulf between stakeholders.

Heinz K. Klein will discuss the potential contribution of interpretive research to empirically-based Critical Social Theory (CST) research in information systems. The problem he will be considering is to what extent interpretive forms of language analysis can be used as research methods for CST and thus build a methodological bridge from CST to empirical field research.

This should be possible because CST has incorporated basic concepts from the philosophy of language, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Dr. Klein will focus on CST's ontological-epistemological principles that should be kept in mind when using these methods in order not to contravene the internal consistency of CST.

The panel chair will conclude by structuring audience involvement in what promises to be a stimulating and lively event on important issues of qualitative research methodology.

About the presenters

Michael D. Myers, the Panel Chair, is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Management Science and Information Systems at the University of Auckland. He is the Editor of the *ISWorld Section on Qualitative Research*, an Associate Editor of *Information Systems Journal*, and an Associate Editor of the *MIS Quarterly* Special Issue on Intensive Research.

Eleanor Wynn is Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Oregon Graduate Institute of Science and Technology, Portland, and is the owner of Interactive Intelligence, Inc. She is the Editor of *Information Technology & People*.

Heinz K. Klein is Associate Professor in the School of Management at Binghamton University. He is on the Editorial Boards of *Information Systems Journal*, *Information Technology & People* and the Wiley Series in Information Systems.

Duane P. Truex III is Assistant Professor of Computer Information Systems at Georgia State University. He has published articles in various IEEE Transactions, IFIP Transactions and conference proceedings. His doctorate in Information Systems used language analysis research methods, and his current work examining the cultural alignment of high-performance IT organizations relies heavily on text-based analysis techniques language.

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