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Scholarly Personal Narrative as Information Systems Research Methodology

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly personal narrative is a constructivist research methodology that recognizes the researcher's personal experience as a valid object of study. Drawing from information systems research demonstrating the value of storytelling to knowledge management, we suggest scholarly personal narrative offers IS researchers a new tool to enhance research relevance, scholarly discourse, and pedagogy. We suggest IS research scenarios where researchers might successfully apply new methodology.

Keywords

scholarly personal narrative, research methodology, relevance, knowledge management.

INTRODUCTION

"The state of IT-oriented research is downright dismal.... Much IT-oriented research is neither comprehensible nor practical.... The journals in which academic IT research is published are rarely read by practitioners.... They are often unfathomable, even to other academics.... [The] publications contain pseudoscientific jargon, arcane statistical techniques and slavish footnoting" (Davenport, 1997; cited in Ho, 2000).

Twelve years after this stern critique, academic journal articles on information systems (IS) remain abstract, impersonal, occasionally impenetrable. Neutral objectivity has its place, yet context, voice, and even the identity of an author can be valuable tools for conveying a message. If information systems researchers seek relevance, they need to some extent to communicate in more personal, real-world language that demonstrates "connections between lived experience and theory, one's work and one's life" (Freedman & Frey, 2003).

Scholarly personal narrative (SPN) is a research methodology that offers IS researchers the opportunity to reach beyond the scientific jargon and strictly objective worldview that too often separate this research field from the rest of academia, practitioners, and the general public. SPN seeks to share knowledge the way mankind has since, quite literally, the beginning of history: by telling stories and inviting conversation. SPN researchers study, frame, and share their personal experiences in clear, contextual, first-person language. SPN researchers resist the urge to convey answers and instead share their stories with the hope of helping others do the same.

We do not presume to write a scholarly personal narrative here. Yet our belief that SPN can improve the relevance of IS research stems in part from the personal experiences that gave rise to this paper. We, the authors of the paper, had a conversation about a presentation by Robert J. Nash, who advocates scholarly personal narrative as a research methodology in his own field of educational philosophy (Nash, 2004). We each described certain relevant elements of our experiences in our disparate academic programs (information systems and student affairs). As we spoke, we discovered points of generalizability in our individual experiences. By the end of our conversation, these unexpected but enlightening commonalities helped us construct a workable initial understanding of SPN and its implications for our academic disciplines. Connecting that initial understanding to existing formal knowledge led to this paper, our effort to identify a gap in information systems research, define scholarly personal narrative, and propose ways to use SPN to enrich IS research.

THE GAP: ABSENCE OF VOICE IN IS RESEARCH

Information systems researchers often address the tension between rigor and relevance (e.g., Mårtensson & Lee, 2004; Lyytinen, 1999). The failure of much information systems research to reconcile rigor and relevance is evident in the language academics use to communicate their findings. Ho (2000) samples some of the criticism practitioners level at academics:

Too much academic research on IS is unusable, irrelevant and unreadable. Most professors seem content to write about jargon-filled frameworks, vague theories and marginalia rather than help solve today's nagging problems... (Alter, 1997).

Various authors have suggested that one solution to a lack of relevance in IS research is clearer, more everyday language that focuses less on describing methodology and more on context and practical advice (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999). Some researchers respond that attempts to be “simple, clear, and concise” may “emasculate” certain challenging and complicated concepts (Lyytinen, 1999).

As debate about the proper balance of rigor and relevance continues, so does the prevailing practice of abstract, impersonal language in IS research. For example, decision support systems researchers point to a “crisis” of relevance developing over 15 years of DSS research, as articles increasingly lack practical context (Arnott & Pervan, 2005). With respect to referring directly to ourselves and our experiences, MIS Quarterly declares that “writing in the first person is acceptable” (MISQ, 2008), but few scholars write this way, or give their students liberty to do so:

The paper should be written in the third person, although the first person may be used in the Opinion section. Do not use "I," "me," "my," or "mine" as well as "you," "your," "we," "our," and "us." These words are confusing to the reader (Saint Francis University MIS Program, 2009).

First-person language rarely appears in APA-style articles, “unless the writer is a senior scholar who has earned some credibility to speak as an expert in the field” (Neyhart & Karper, 2009). IEEE style not only seeks to remove first-person references (even from acknowledgments) but also can replace names of referenced authors in the text with bracketed numbers (IEEE, 2007).

We find that academic journal articles still read like, for the most part, academic journal articles, speaking in rigorous yet abstract language deliberately scrubbed of practical context and clear personal voice. Speaking of one’s own experiences and doing so in the first person is at least unusual, if not eyebrow-raising.

This resistance to identity and personal context leads scholars in many disciplines to adopt their own form of “neotribal” language, an academic “baffle-gab” that confirms their membership in the academic tribe (Keyes, 2003). Such language by design speaks only to insiders and excludes outsiders—the practitioners, the new students, even scholars from diverse backgrounds who could learn from more relevant research. This approach also excludes a valuable body of knowledge from scholarly consideration: our own narratives.

THE NEED: STORY AS KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Storytelling is the original knowledge management tool. We as a species have long recognized that telling about our experiences and listening to the experiences of others is a useful method of constructing new knowledge. Storytelling is a valuable tool for revealing experts’ knowledge, especially tacit knowledge, to entire organizations and allowing other members to build useful understandings from that knowledge (Nielsen & Madsen, 2006; Swap et al., 2001). If the information systems discipline is an organization (however loosely bounded), and if IS literature is the discipline’s knowledge management system, it is curious that IS researchers would deny themselves the use of a knowledge management tool that their own literature says works.

THE RESPONSE: SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE AS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Scholarly personal narrative (SPN) accesses the power of personal storytelling to build knowledge and meaning in scholarly research. SPN writers speak in the first-person, incorporating deep reflection upon their own experiences. SPN differentiates itself from other methodologies in presenting the researcher’s own experiences as a valid object of study, as something that “signifies” (Nash, 2004, p. 24). The three words in its name represent equally essential parts of the methodology:

- **Scholarly:** No mere larkish adventure in rambling autobiography, SPN demands a rigorous framing of experience to identify the most informative and relevant elements and the themes they form. “Joining the personal and professional, analysis and emotion, ‘self and other’” still demands scholarly rigor. “The exposure of the self... has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not self-exposure for its own sake” (Freedman, 2001, p. 206).
- **Personal:** SPN “puts the self of the scholar front and center” (Nash, 2004, p. 18). SPN is a “self-interrogation,” addressing not merely the personal background and biases that might affect the scholar’s choice of research methods and interpretations of the objects of research, but also the scholar’s own life and the significance of the scholar’s own actions, choices, and values for the scholar’s field and the world at large.

- **Narrative:** SPN tells a story. SPN offers not simply a journalistic account of events but a literary product that says, “This is who I am and how I have created meaning. What do you think?”

This autobiographical methodology lacks and resists a “well-established research template,” as autobiography, like all stories, are “always profoundly personal and unique to some degree, never replicated in exactly the same forms by anyone else” (Nash, 2004, p. 55). However, Nash (2004) identifies ten “tentative guidelines” for SPN:

1. Establish clear constructs, hooks, and questions.
2. Move from the particular to the general and back again... often.
3. Try to draw larger implications from your personal stories.
4. Draw from your vast store of formal background knowledge.
5. Always try to tell a good story.
6. Show some passion.
7. Tell your story in an open-ended way.
8. Remember that writing is both a craft and an art.
9. Use citations whenever appropriate.
10. Love and respect eloquent (i.e. *clear*) language.

These tentative guidelines make clear that SPN is not *carte blanche* for unstructured, self-centered yarn-spinning. Even while engaging readers with artful and passionate language, SPN writers must frame their stories around meaningful constructs and questions. They must seek the connections among their experiences, the experiences of others, and the broader knowledge of their discipline. And they must demonstrate the validity of their narratives, although SPN appeals to a broader set of truth criteria, including coherence, livability, adequacy, trustworthiness, honesty, plausibility, situatedness, introspectiveness, and universalizability (Nash, 2004, p. 5)

One aim of the autobiographical focus of SPN is to show the postmodern approach to knowledge construction at work. An effective SPN will show the personal experiences and the deep self-reflection around them that inform the author’s construction meaning. SPN research thus serves less as a proclamation of the truth and more as a model of how readers may construct their own useful truths about relevant phenomena in the context of their experiences. Following principles similar to those underpinning the pedagogical tool of moral conversations (Nash et al., 2008), SPN authors write from the presumption that the propositions they derive from their research are part of a broader social conversation in which all points of view deserve a hearing and will not face immediate rejection. SPN researchers open the door for readers to respond with their own narratives and build their own meaning. SPN researchers make suggestions for generalizability but recognize the subjectivity of their own narratives and the subjectivity of potential responses.

IS APPLICATIONS: WHAT TO DO WITH SPN

While encountering resistance to narrativistic research in his own college (Nash, 2004, p. 16), Nash has supervised several successfully defended doctoral dissertations applying SPN in education and student affairs (2004, pp. 75–129). Similar autobiographical narrative techniques are gaining prominence in education research (Brookfield, 2008, p. 97). Various scholars have used personal narrative to explore issues in health care, social work, and sociology (e.g. Defenbaugh, 2008; Trotter et al., 2006; and Ryan 2006). Quaye (2007) sees an essential role for SPN in all social sciences research to challenge cultural hegemony in academia and make room for voices of diverse cultural backgrounds in research.

What place if any does SPN have in the more technical realm of IS research? For all the technology in this field, we the authors keep coming back to the basic definition of information systems as a discipline: the study of the intersection of information technology, organizations, and people. And where there are people, there are stories.

With that in mind, we suggest five information systems scenarios where researchers might apply SPN.

Reporting Dialogical Action Research

Mårtensson and Lee (2004) develop dialogical action research (DAR), a methodology philosophically similar to SPN. In DAR, the researcher engages the practitioner in conversations both to help the practitioner build practical understanding and solutions and to help the researcher build and refine theory. Recognizing the profound cultural difference between academia and industry, the dialogical action researcher must meet practitioners “where they live” and interact with practitioners in their language to effect the desired action. Through scholarly personal narrative, the researcher can reflect deeply on that experience, identify what aspects of the conversations with the practitioner most successfully built understanding, and share that experience in its fully effective and personal context with readers in academia and industry.

E-Governance and Citizen Participation

E-governance focuses on using information systems to engage citizens in public policy-making and other democratic activities. Where this research involves building systems to promote public conversation and deliberation, researchers must participate in those systems alongside their fellow citizens to fully understand political issues in their context, to recognize any elements of coercion or hierarchy the system might exacerbate or create, and to assess most richly the quality of the deliberative processes supported (Rehg et al., 2005). In such participatory research, a researcher's understanding is keenly tied to the researcher's experiences with the system. Scholarly personal narrative offers the researcher the means to deeply investigate and report that experience.

Quickly Evolving Fields

SPN is an ideal approach in research realms that value innovation, adaptability, and evolution of theory and practice. Because SPN researchers make no exclusive claim to the infallibility of their perspectives—instead viewing the chief purpose and value of research as inviting a conversation and opening that conversation to new and developing perspectives—there is room for SPN research to evolve and adapt within non-static contexts like the social Web and college campuses. That evolution can also occur more openly and rapidly because of SPN's focus on the researcher's personal perspective and meaning-making process. This new approach to what constitutes scholarship is empowering both in its ability to value experience as much as other bases of research and in its immediate applicability to the day-to-day work of putting research into practice.

Lessons from Researchers as Practitioners

To some extent every IS researcher is also a practitioner. We engage colleagues and students in online communities. We use multimedia and content management systems in the classroom. We consult for organizations in our communities and answer our friends' and relatives' questions about computers. We all have stories our experiences with the systems we research, stories rich with practical and ethical insights, along with vivid narrative images, from which other researchers, practitioners, and consumers may build useful understandings of the IS phenomena with which they interact. Scholarly personal narrative allows us to share a significant portion of our knowledge, much of it tacit knowledge, that is excluded from scholarly discourse by other methodologies that push the observer to the background, if not completely off the stage.

Scholarly Discourse and Pedagogy as Knowledge Management

In information systems academia, our publications are an integral part of our knowledge management. We use our articles and books to share our findings, to discuss methodology, and to critique the state of our discipline. With its invitation to questions and conversations, SPN has the potential to shift the peer review process from a hurdle to publication in which anonymous scholars determine whether other anonymous scholars "got it right" to a more open realm of pre- and post-publication scholarly discourse.

We also use our publications to train the students joining our field. Including scholarly personal narrative in the vast corpus of documented knowledge in our field increases the important personal, tacit expertise we can share with our students. It also fulfills a broader obligation we have as scholars to open not only our field but the entire culture of academia to new perspectives, new voices, and new ways of knowing (Nash et al., 2008).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Scholarly personal narrative is not a Swiss Army knife. It does not replace or supplant any other methodology. But it is a valuable tool to include in our methodological kits. The process of rigorous self-study that SPN demands will give us a richer, more grounded understanding of ourselves and the IS theories and models we deal with. The stories SPN allows us to tell will give us a powerful way to communicate our very personal knowledge to academics and practitioners alike and to invite them to converse with us, to share their stories, and to construct their own useful understandings.

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