Re-Conceptualising Research: A Mindful Process for Qualitative Research in Information Systems

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness is a whole state of being that is not usually linked with academic research in information systems. However, if we take Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000; 2003), first qualitative research phase, which is the consideration of the key role of the researcher in socially-situated research, it soon becomes evident that a mindful researcher (Fielden, 2005) is more likely to conduct quality research than one who is not. In this discussion paper, the qualities of mindfulness (Fielden, 2005) are explored; Denzin and Lincoln’s (2003) 5-stage qualitative research process is then mapped onto these multiple characteristics of mindfulness; and also onto a timeline for a typical qualitative research process in information systems. The paper concludes with suggestions on how to include mindful practices in research methods and supervision training in information systems, which is a contribution to the literature in this area.

Keywords: Information Systems, Mindfulness, Postgraduate Education, Qualitative Research, Research Methods

INTRODUCTION

In this discussion paper, the concept of mindfulness is explored with respect to qualitative research in information systems. The main premise of this discussion is that mindfulness is an essential characteristic for a qualitative researcher in information systems. The concepts explored derive from diverse bodies of knowledge that include psychology (Brown & Langer, 1990; Langer, 2000, Kerr 2008), spirituality (Goodenough & Woodruff, 2001; Herold, 2005; Lau, 2007; Zukav, 1989), ethics (Anderson, Reardon, & Sanzogni 2001), sociology (Wheatley, 2005; Snowdon, 2002; Braud & Anderson, 1998; Waddock, 2001), knowledge management (Bellinger, Castro & Mills, 2004; Butler 2001; Day, 2005; McKenna, Rooney, & Liesch, 2006; Jashapara, 2005) and systems thinking (Ackoff, 1999; Checkland, 1984; Churchman, 1968; Flood, 1990; Jackson, 2003; Midgley, 2000). These bodies of knowledge, in general, exist outside of the bounds of scientific knowledge. In this paper, these bodies of knowledge are considered in exploring mindfulness as a means of capturing a deeper meaning of the whole person as the main instrument of qualitative research.

The order of the paper is: the characteristics of mindfulness are described (Fielden, 2005); a typical qualitative research process is defined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; 2003);
mindful qualities are then mapped onto Denzin and Lincoln’s 5-stage research process as well as a typical research project timeline. Implications arising from these mappings for educating qualitative researchers in information systems are also explored. Finally, directions for future reflection and application of mindfulness and limitations of the views presented in this paper are presented.

**MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness evokes the image of flexible and alert awareness (Weick & Sutcliff, 2006). Mindfulness is a counterfoil to mental rigidity. While concentration focuses attention, mindfulness determines on what the attention will be focused (Figure 1). Mindfulness also detects when attention strays (Kerr, 2008). Mindfulness is an act of neutral observation, where awareness of distractions occurs. This is followed by refocusing as distractions occur. Mindfulness usually requires immersion in the process at hand for a state of meta-awareness to emerge. Meta-awareness is being aware of what is happening as participation occurs (Fielden, 2005).

Mindful practices abound in most spiritual traditions (Lau, 2007), and for those people who regard the world as a rational, mechanistic domain, these traditions, and therefore the development of mindfulness largely go unattended. Spiritual practices, such as meditation, hone the mind to become aware of multiple ways of being, or as Reason (2002) suggests ‘knowing the unknown’.

Figure 1 shows the multi-faceted nature of mindfulness. In the top left quadrant, qualities of mindfulness related to cognitive maturity are shown: meta-awareness and presencing (Scharmer, 2007). Characteristics of mindfulness that can be trained by meditative practices (Herald, 2005) are shown in the next two columns: immersion, refocussing, un-distractedness and focus of awareness. Personal qualities of intuition, respect, reverence, integrity, non-judgement, courage and humaneness (Seeley & Reason, 2008; Wheatley, 2006) are shown in the top right quadrant. Elements of mindfulness acquired through spiritual practices (Lau, 2007): discernment, discrimination, spiritual awareness, integration of heart and intellect, and appreciation and understanding are shown in the middle right sector of Figure 1. Holistic properties of mindfulness are shown in the bottom left quadrant of Figure 1: evolutionary process (Scharmer, 2007), likelihood of chaos (Jackson, 2003), and state of mind and practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Qualities of mindfulness that relate to knowledge of the self are shown at the bottom of the next two columns (Fielden, 2005): mindfulness and the self, multiple layers of self, transformation of the self, and understanding multiple points of view. Intellectual characteristics of mindfulness: mental flexibility, socially-situated mindfulness, awareness of novel distinctions and transformation of others are shown in the bottom right quadrant. In Figure 1, mindful qualities are also related to Denzin and Lincoln’s (2003) five research phases.

Part of a researcher’s toolkit is a well-developed intellect that notices novel distinctions (Figure 1). While (Brown & Langer, 1990) suggest that mindfulness and intellect share an emphasis on the importance of cognitive flexibility, intelligence, they suggest, looks for an optimal fit between individuals and their environment (Weick & Sutcliff, 2006). Mindfulness theory, on the other hand emphasises that individuals may define their relation to the environment in several ways. This ability to notice novel distinctions is a key requirement in identifying new research opportunities. Mental flexibility (Kerr, 2008) is also required to view existing situations, data, or analysed results from different points of view either theoretically or practically. Understanding multiple points of view is a necessary requirement for gathering the rich data needed particularly for qualitative research.

In regarding mindfulness as both a state of mind and a practice, one can start to envision mindfulness as an integrated whole. Essential qualities of mindfulness understood by multiple