Hugh Samson
University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Contemplative Inquiry: A Novel Research Methodology for Information Science (Paper)

Abstract:

Contemplative inquiry (CI) is an introspective methodology that values first-person perspectives and diverse ways of knowing. This paper introduces CI as a promising methodology for information science research. The methodology is first contextualized within a discussion of research at the crossroads of information and contemplation and its early expressions are outlined. The methodology is then elaborated utilizing examples from the author's thesis research and possible implications for information science are highlighted. It is proposed that CI offers a framework for investigating the role of the contemplative within information environments and allows for greater incorporation of the qualitative, subjective aspect of human experience within research.

1. Introduction

Information science has broached the subject of contemplation at various points in its history, theory, methodology, information behaviour research, and institutional practices (Latham, Hartel & Gorichanaz 2020). From the Latin *contemplatio* ('to look at,' 'to observe') and related to the Greek *theoria*, contemplation has within a broad comparative framework and pluralistic context some rough correspondence to *contemplative practice* and/or *meditation* (Komjathy 2018). As an umbrella category, *contemplative practice* encompasses various approaches, disciplines, and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, interiority, presence, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose. Contemplative practices include not only religiously-committed and tradition-based approaches, but also ecumenical, secular, and spiritualist methods.

Scholarly research on the subject of contemplation has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, and research that examines the relationship between information and contemplation is also gaining momentum. David Levy (1995, 2006, 2007, 2014, 2016), Professor in the Information School at the University of Washington, is a contemporary pioneer who has drawn explicit attention to contemplation and its relationship to information and technology. Information scientists including Marcia Bates (2002) and Jarkko Kari and Jenna Hartel (2007) have issued theoretical statements that suggest a relationship between information and contemplation. Several studies in information behaviour have engaged with contemplative subject matter, the majority of these investigating information behaviour within specific contemplative traditions (Siracky 2013; Gorichanaz 2016; Guzik 2018; Chabot 2019). These various forays suggest a research frontier at the crossroads of information and contemplation but few if any have addressed the issue of methodology. That is to say, might contemplation serve as a methodology for information science research?

2. Contemplative Inquiry

Contemplative inquiry (CI) is an introspective methodology that values first-person perspectives and diverse ways of knowing. With roots in ancient wisdom traditions, CI has recently been recast as a methodology that stands as an alternative and complement to conventional approaches to research. As elaborated by Amherst College Professor of Physics and Interdisciplinary Studies Arthur Zajonc (2009), the essential stages of the methodology are *respect*, *gentleness*, *intimacy*, *participation*, *vulnerability*, *transformation*, and *insight*. Developed as a cognitive approach to research that is oriented toward applying positive solutions to challenges or problems in active life, the methodology rests 'on the sound moral foundations of humility and reverence' (Zajonc 2009, p. 178). In addition, the researcher cultivates his or her powers of concentrated attention, equanimity in the feeling life, and a strengthened resolve.

Expanding further upon the methodology, Palmer, Zajonc, and Scriber (2010) suggest that CI may be understood as 'the expression of an *epistemology of love* that is the true heart of higher education' (p. 94). It offers researchers an invitation to take deep introspective journeys that permit them to reflect upon the complex entanglement of their personal and professional narratives with their spirituality (Bhattacharya & Payne 2016), journeys that move researchers beyond opposition when they understand what they are resisting and why through understanding their experiences and knowledge making (Bhattacharya 2018). CI may be considered the primary methodology within a spiritual research paradigm (Ergas 2016), leading researchers to practice thoughtful, reflective observation as they 'connect with the seen and the unseen' in order to move toward a more dialogic understanding of the phenomena that they are studying (Davis & Breede 2015, p. 79).

For social scientists within information science, leading qualitative researcher Valerie Janesick (2015) has written a textbook that stands as a comprehensive explication of CI. Janesick defines CI as

> qualitative techniques that place a deep and serious emphasis on thought in every component of a study of the social world. From the first germ of an idea about a study, the design of the study is open to mindfulness. Throughout the actual conducting of the study, contemplative inquiry is solid in its awareness of the implications of impermanence, non-self, and nirvana, and it relies on intuition, creativity, and the imagination. (pp. 34-35)

The methodological techniques of interviewing, observation, reflective journal writing, document and photograph review, and the utilization of various media must all be practiced for healthy timeframes, and the aesthetic dimension of the research is a key element of the inquiry. CI makes room for poetry, which may be utilized in multiple ways and at key stages in the inquiry, and the methodology welcomes additional aesthetic genres as well, such as dance, music, painting, photography and its variations such as photovoice, song, storytelling, and the utilization of multimedia. CI is furthermore shaped by the questions posed in the inquiry, in that '[w]ith a meditative approach to research, not all questions are suited to qualitative research methods' (Janesick 2015, p. 35).

3. Application and Discovery

I have applied CI, alongside ethnography, in my own thesis study of the University of Toronto Faculty of Information Inforum's iRelax Mindfulness Resource Area (Samson 2021). The iRelax Area (see Figure 1 below) is an innovative meditation and yoga resource hub situated within a dynamic and spacious digital learning commons. Comprised of approximately fifty interconnected digital, physical, and textual resources, the iRelax Area possesses a distinctly open and visible spatial profile intended to promote open conversations about positive mental health. My exploratory case study of the iRelax Area examined the initiative's aesthetic, informational, organizational, and spatial properties, as well as individuals' encounters and interactions therewith. The initiative's associated Mindful Moments program, consisting of free, secular guided meditation sessions offered within the learning commons one day per week, was also examined.

Figure 1. The iRelax Mindfulness Resource Area.

In order to develop a detailed understanding of the relationship between the iRelax Area and the Mindful Moments program, the study's research design was broadened to include consideration of CI as a complement to ethnography. Ethnography is a methodology which relies upon immersion in a field setting, extensive and descriptive writing about what is encountered therein, as well as discussions of shared topics of interest with informants in the field (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011; Harrison 2018). In utilizing a synthesis of CI and ethnography as its methodology, the study produced a rich and varied record in the form of fieldnotes, transcripts, photographs, and a researcher reflective journal from which I drew in order to present the study's findings. CI's emphasis on creativity, ethics, holism, intuition, relationality, and storytelling resulted in the genesis of particularly vivid field data brimming with descriptions of the contemplative dimensions of daily life.

Broadening the study's design to include consideration of CI also offered conceptual points of departure that could be utilized as a framework for investigating the role of the contemplative within information environments. Indeed, as I traced the spread of the iRelax Area's various digital, physical, and textual resources throughout the learning commons, I began to conceive of the initiative and its associated Mindful Moments program as *contemplative infrastructure*. This conceptual approach differs from much of the existing research in the area which generally focuses upon the distinctiveness of various contemplative initiatives, programs, spaces, and technologies within information environments rather than upon their complementarity and interdependence (Rose, Godfrey & Rose 2015; Mourer & Karadjova 2017). Echoing Leigh Star (1999) who observes that information infrastructure is both 'relational and ecological - it means different things to different groups and it is part of the balance of actions, tools, and the built environment, inseparable from them' (p. 377), contemplative infrastructure is also 'sunk into and inside of other structures, social arrangements, and technologies,' where people 'do not necessarily distinguish the several coordinated aspects' thereof (p. 381). As illuminated by the study, contemplative infrastructure is characterized by a number of infrastructural properties including embeddedness, interconnection, openness, reach, as well as well as holism, intentionality, transparency, and visibility.
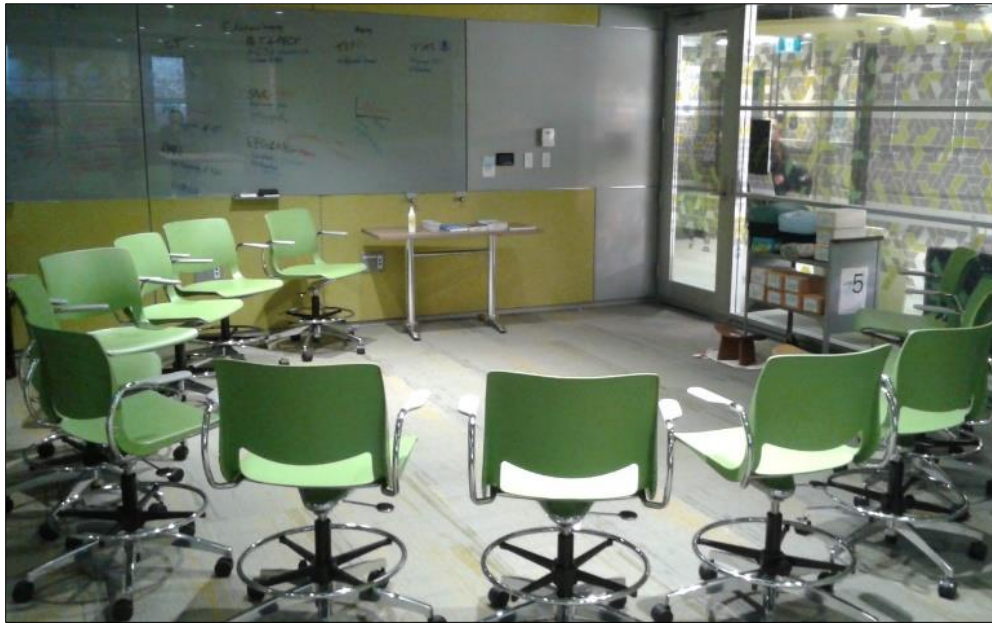

Figure 2. The Ideas Exchange Room in the Inforum prior to the commencement of a Mindful Moments session.

4. Methodological Implications for Information Science

CI offers a promising new methodology for information science research. When taken together with conventional methodologies, an enriched research methodology becomes available that 'embraces and develops an enlarged view, one that has room in it for the exploration of meaning, purpose, and values and how to serve our common human future' (Zajonc, 2008, as cited in Barbezat & Bergman 2014, p. vii). CI establishes an openness to unfamiliar knowledge and ways of knowing, generates compassion, connection, and empathy, and enables clearer understanding

by assisting the researcher to recognize and articulate their pre-existing beliefs and biases. Indeed, Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott and Bai (2014) propose that

> In working toward transforming disengaged forms of academic analysis and disenchanted and instrumental habits of mind and life, the project of cultivating contemplative capacities of presence, discernment, and equanimity . . . becomes a significant offering for our time. At the same time, we might inquire into the distinguishing features or capacities of contemplative inquiry and what commonalities and differences might exist for engagement across academic disciplines. (p. 5)

Several capacities or features of CI that have been noted by scholars include a broader sense of connection with others and one's surroundings and a concomitant expanded sense of self, a deeper sense of engagement and participation, an increased sense of wholeness and integration, and a witnessing mindfulness.

Current methodologies take into consideration human experience dealing with the material world, and with human beings in terms of their interactions and interrelations. Contemplative exploration is usually not the focus of such methodologies, however, and CI is therefore particularly relevant and required for research 'that examines inward experience and that promotes meaning, purpose, interconnection with nature and other beings, inner peace, compassion, and tranquility of mind and heart' (Lin, Oxford & Culham 2016, p. xi). Profound experiences, such as those related to intuitive knowing, deep revelation, and the transcendent are some of the significant domains that may be explored within information science. CI may furthermore serve as a bridge between information science and contemplative research and allow for greater incorporation of the qualitative, subjective aspect of human experience within research.

Potential future avenues to extend CI within information science include investigation of questions such as those posed by Latham, Hartel, and Gorichanaz (2020):

- What is the relationship between information and contemplation? What can be explored on this research frontier?
- Is there any relation between the phenomena of interest to contemplative studies and those of information science? That is, when we consider contemplative practices such as meditation, journaling, and storytelling, are these also information practices? Are there concerns akin to the circulation of documents or the generation and accounting of knowledge to be found in contemplative studies?
- How do contemplative studies and information science relate the spaces and places where their phenomena of interest are found? That is, institutionally, where is the common ground between information and contemplation?
- Could there be an umbrella term or concept that encompasses both the institutions of information science and those of interest to contemplative studies, given their common interests and purposes . . . ? (p. 999, 1010-1012)

Ajit Pyati's (2019) framework for a future research and action-oriented agenda in information science within the concept of *the public library as contemplative space* identifies as phenomena of interest the increasing presence of contemplative initiatives within libraries; librarians as contemplative technology stewards; the library's role in addressing the religious and spiritual information needs of its patrons; and contemplative activism in global struggles for social change. David Levy (2014) suggests that CI may serve as 'a lens to observe and critique current information technologies and practices, and in particular to investigate problems such as information overload, the fragmentation of attention, and the busyness and acceleration of everyday life' (p. 183).

5. Conclusion

My own research at the intersection of information and contemplation suggests that there is a need for further research that not only investigates individual contemplative initiatives, programs, spaces, and technologies within information environments but that also examines the many associations and connections that exist between them. In keeping with Jackson, Edwards, Bowker, and Knobel's (2007) proposal for discussions of information infrastructure to take place on the timeline 'of the long now' as well as within the category of general infrastructure in 'which the emphasis is not on novelty but continuity and consistency with the past,' such a model of contemplative infrastructure would take into consideration and honour the rich and varied contemplative traditions that give rise to it (n.p.). In addition, future studies like my own may furthermore lead to the provision of improved and more diverse forms of contemplative infrastructure within information environments.

The development of CI will provide researchers with the techniques and tools to systematically explore fundamental questions regarding information and contemplation. It is hoped that this paper, and the underlying dialogue that it intends to spark amongst researchers, will help bring the worlds of information science and CI one step closer to each other. To this end, the paper (and its associated presentation at CAIS) will introduce information researchers to CI, outline the methodology's early expressions, elaborate it utilizing examples from the author's thesis research, and highlight possible methodological implications for information science. A current bibliography of relevant works will also be provided for anyone who wishes to learn more about the subject.

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