

Letter from the Editor The Research Problem

Bridget N. O'Connor

Students in my doctoral seminar at NYU this semester have been struggling to develop a problem statement. They understand conceptually the need to establish the existence of a researchable problem, but are challenged to apply what they know to their own research endeavor. And when we discuss the role of related literature in establishing that problem, they likewise understand that role conceptually, but at this early stage of their doctoral work, haven't yet saturated the literature to know what they know—and what they don't know—about their problem area. And if this isn't confusing enough, they are expected to zero in on a very focused issue, not a broad, lick-the-world problem. These are hard discussions because on first blush, a well-developed problem statement appears simple.

But writing a good problem statement is far from effortless. Rather, it is a complex activity related to preparing a logical argument. As a journal editor, I've noted that while individual reviewers focus on different parts of a manuscript, depending on their interest and expertise, one area in which all tend to agree is whether or not the author made a case for the existence of a problem first. Even the most comprehensive literature review or complex, sophisticated method and data analysis is not rated highly if reviewers ascertain that there was no problem established in the first place.

A problem statement in our field, while it may follow any of a number of formats, must integrate concepts and theoretical perspectives of the literature into the problem to be addressed. A formula that can be used in developing a statement comes from the early work of Egon Guba and David Clark (Indiana University, circa 1967), who explained that developing a problem statement is an exercise in logic. They suggested the first step is to describe a given—to state what is a generally accepted proposition; this, they

called the Principal Proposition (PP). The second step is to identify what we know that contradicts or challenges that proposition, and justify the need to look at what we know from new directions or lenses; this, they called the Interacting Proposition (IP). The third step is to set the direction for the inquiry; this, they called the Speculative Proposition (SP).

The use of this formula can help ensure that research goes beyond describing “what is.” Yes, it may be useful to tally how end users learn to use a particular software program. It may also be useful to identify the types of hardware and software used in a specific location. However, whether or not this information qualifies as a manuscript for this journal is debatable, as the research question is not framed around a theoretical lens in the problem statement. Likewise, case studies that report “what happened” in a given situation without establishing the need for developing new perspectives for further investigations seem to be of little importance to the field.

That said, there are always exceptions! However, the *ITL&PJ* editors take the position that a well-articulated problem is of utmost priority in ensuring that the right issues are examined and thus put forward. Doing so will provide the building blocks for future research that will ensure the success of our journal, and by extension, our field.

About This Issue

This issue begins with Associate Editor Robert G. Brookshire responding to the Ray & McCoy and Delaney editorials offered in the *ITL&PJ*'s Spring

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2000 issue in which they provided rationales for four year colleges to include technology certifications as part of their curriculum.

Brookshire takes an alternative view, suggesting that certification programs are really workforce development training, and asks readers to reexamine the mission of their institution to ascertain their appropriateness.

In this issue's opening research article, Jane Burdett reports on the perceptions of meeting process and outcomes among Australian women attending both traditional and GroupSystems supported meetings. Findings from this exploratory study suggested that characteristics of the GroupSystems technology—its anonymity, its promise of including all in a discussion—has the potential to overcome many barriers to women's equal participation in meetings. In the second article, Kelly Wilkinson and K. Virginia Hemby examined the potential of another type of meeting—the virtual conference. They provide the results of surveys sent to members of both the Organizational Systems Research Association (OSRA) and the Association for Business

Communication (ABC), which showed that members were interested in virtual conferences as a means to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for professional development, as well as concerned that such events could result in professional isolationism and a lack of human interaction.

Our *Making a Difference* section begins with Ron Sones providing an argument for reexamining the value chain, suggesting that the integrative forces of technology will allow a new organizational structure in which smaller firms can bind together to capitalize on centralized services. Then, Catherine Chen describes students' thinking processes while using database applications to solve an ill-structured business problem and the differences between two computer interfaces on their thinking processes. The issue concludes with Brenda Sheets' review of Dan Tapscott's *Blueprint for the Digital Economy* (McGraw-Hill, 1998). She recommends the book for all of us who are "fascinated by the massive economic upheavals brought about by the wired revolution." I think she has described all of us!

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

The *Information Technology, Learning, and Performance Journal*, formerly known as the *Office System Research Journal*, publishes articles related to the field of organizational and end-user information systems (OEIS). Submissions may present the results of research in the discipline, deal with research methodologies and data treatment techniques, or describe research or experiences related to instruction in the discipline. For the "Making a Difference" section, manuscripts that discuss our theoretical bases or describe an innovative policy, procedure, method, technique, or practice that has potential benefit for systems professionals and/or educators and technology trainers are encouraged. We also accept reviews of current books—both academic and popular presses—related to OEIS. All submissions are submitted to a blind review process.

Authors should follow the style described for manuscripts and bibliographies in the Fourth Edition (1994) of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*; however, tables should be single-spaced. Authors should not be identified anywhere in the manuscript. Submit four copies of the manuscript. On the original copy, include a cover page with author name, title, organizational affiliation, telephone number, and email address. A 100-150 word abstract of the manuscript should be included with the manuscript.

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