Serendipity and the mind's buffer zone

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In terms of information processing and according to the Mindsponge framework [1,2,3], when we decide to keep a piece of information in our memory when its values are still unknown or not yet carefully evaluated, such information is temporarily stored in the buffer zone. The buffer zone is a theoretical space within the mind where information is kept during the evaluating process or waiting to be evaluated. In the case of serendipity (regarding solving a specific problem), the seemingly “random” information is not discarded immediately after the initial scanning (quick evaluation) due to being accepted as a different value (not related to the specific problem being considered). However, in the new process, because its values in relation to the unsolved problem are not yet established (as opposed to its accepted original value from the completed process), the information stays in the buffer zone awaiting further evaluation. In a case of my mentor, Dr. Vuong, the serendipity event leading to his research on the semiconducting environmental principle [4] was accepted based on the value of nature-loving and curiosity long before it has value in relation to the research.

In life, at any moment, there may be a lot of unanswered questions in one's mind demanding solutions. We need to keep a lot of unfinished evaluating processes simultaneously. Naturally, when many pieces of information are all competing for attention and a place in memory, the brain will prioritize those perceived to be more important. But other seemingly mundane events might not have such privilege to be kept when their values are still mostly unknown, and who knows if they could also be the keys to solving other important problems. They can be pushed back, left somewhere deep in the corner of the mind that becomes harder and harder to recall as time goes by. When new information keeps pouring in, some old ones may be forgotten, especially when we tend to perceive them as waning values before being able to realize them as precious missing pieces for some big problems in the future. We are often surprised when serendipity strikes, and maybe we would be even more surprised if we could ever know how many other potential strikes have been lost through the years.

A disciplined system of practices should be employed to support us in keeping potentially crucial information accurately. Such practices in scientific research contexts can include objectively recording data (external information sources) or quickly writing down interesting thoughts (internal information sources) [5,6]. Objective data recording can prevent unaware and biased information filtering in the person receiving information [7]. It may also lead to skipping over small details that may prove important later. Immediately writing down interesting thoughts is also very helpful, especially when the ideas are still “young” and have not been sufficiently connected to other major theories or belief systems. Scientific preprint servers are convenient and effective platforms for these purposes [8]. Building a disciplined operation is one of the three pillars in the 3D principle of innovative processes [5]. And building such environment for innovation is costly endeavor [9].

Update: More detailed discussions in the full book “A New Theory of Serendipity: Nature, Emergence and Mechanism” [10] (see References).

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