Rethinking Educational Ethnography: Researching Online Communities and Interactions

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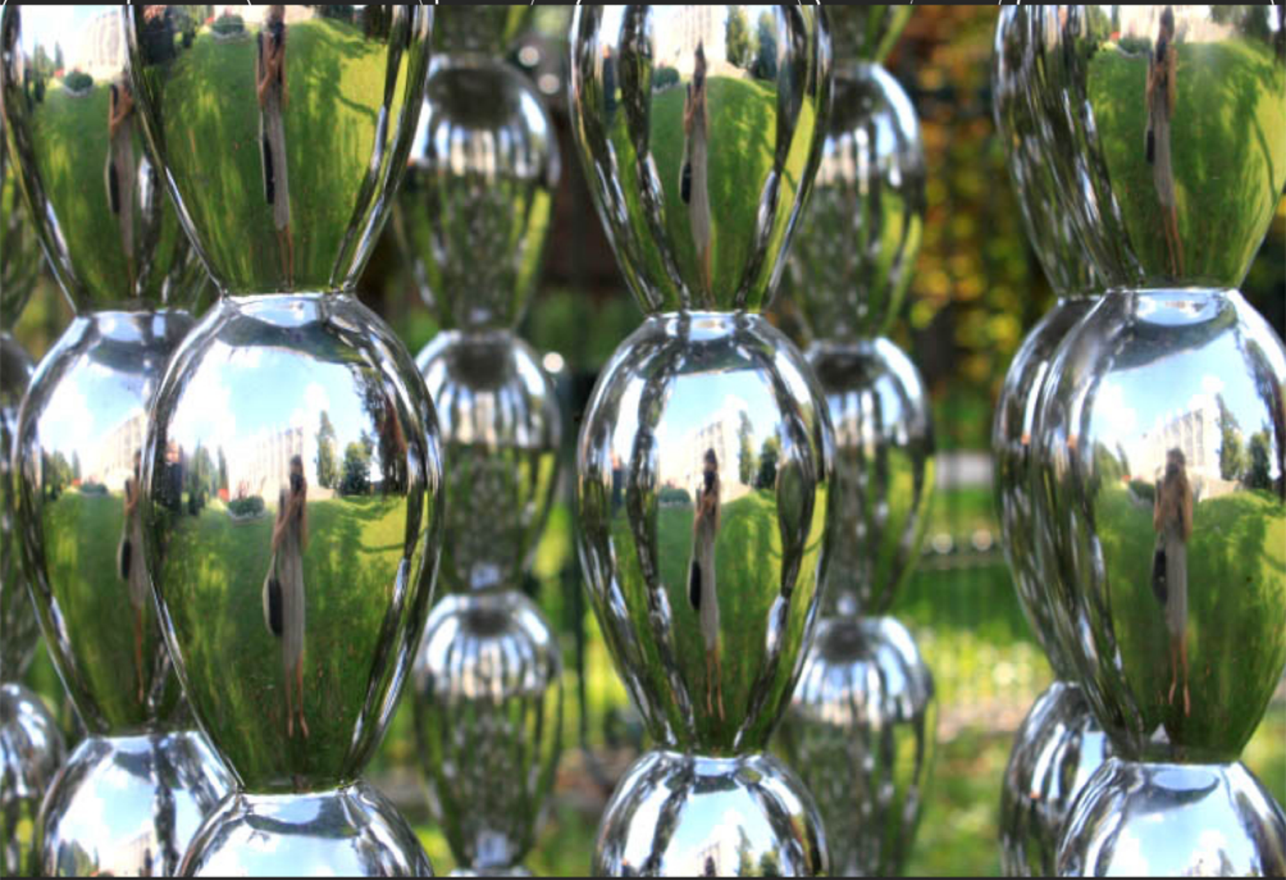

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Sofia Marques da Silva
Paolo Landri (eds)

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Edited by

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CIIE – Centro de Investigação e Intervenção Educativas

RETHINKING EDUCATION ETHNOGRAPHY

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Editors

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INTRODUCTION

Bob Jeffrey, Dennis Beach, Paolo Landri and Sofia Marques da Silva

Ethnography, by its characteristics, has revealed a durable and interesting capacity to mediate the knowledge between different worlds, exploring cultural practices from the inside and in different settings. Ethnography has, above all, contributed to "demarginalize the voice of respondents" (Murthy, 2008, p. 837). However, recent changes have altered the way people communicate and how new technologies are being used for that purpose. For instance, the daily lives of people take place in different contexts, many of which are mediated through or linked to virtual spaces, where new forms of culture are being produced and reproduced. Given this, there is a vital need to research these new cultural settings and meanings, trying to analyse continuities and/or ruptures between those worlds involved.

The classic model of single-site ethnography has been challenged. This is not new of course, there has always been a challenge of some kind to meet in ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus, 1998; Troman & Jeffrey, 2005), but the rise of the network society (Castells, 1996), and the complex and sometimes contested advent of the knowledge society has added further weight and "reality" to issues regarding the very sense of the "loci" of ethnography as well as the many ways of producing ethnographic representations.

Those challenges concern what means to be in the "field", and they raise questions as to whether "old concepts" and actual perspectives in ethnography are an effective means to grasp the transformations of present cultures. We have had to question the accuracy of concepts that we have taken for granted such as, space, time, field, interaction, participant observation. New concepts have already emerged: netnography, online ethnography, cyberethnography, offline ethnography, digital ethnography, and we need to examine their usefulness. Do these changes mean that we are confronting a new type of ethnography, with new research tools needed, new types of empirical data to collect and new types of analysis to interpret situations? To what extent can we continue using the same methods and methodology we have used in the past (Murthy, 2008)?

These questions pertain not the least to educational ethnography. Web-based technologies of teaching and learning are becoming an essential part of the educational experience in schools, post-statutory education and university, as well as in informal modes of learning. New technologies of teaching and learning represent a challenge to "traditional" schooling activity, as characterized for instance by the memorization and reproduction of texts in a multi-roomed, multi-teacher building in a sequenced and standardized curricula (Macbeth, 2000; Miettinen, 1999). In some ways, they deconstruct classical education and learning settings and begin to reconfigure the educational field of practice by substituting, replacing and accompanying offline educational practice in new socio-technical assemblages, which contribute to the renewal of our ways of considering the mode of reproduction and transmission of knowledge. As a result, the classical localities of educational ethnography, such as the classroom, the school, the playground, etc. (Willis, 1981), are moving and appear to detach educational practice from the "here and now" of human interaction, by including new forms of educational relationships in technology-mediated environments (or the virtual learning environment as it is also termed in some works) which make possible educational practice at a distance.

In order to address those challenges, and to deepen reflection on key questions, a group of researchers participating in Network 19 of the European Educational Research Association (EERA) at ECER in Helsinki, August 2010, acknowledged an emerging area of common interests and organized a conference/seminar at the Centre for Research in Education (CIIE) – Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, on May 2-4th, 2011. This event has benefited from the participation of contributions from different researchers from different countries as scholars in this field of knowledge.

The Conference has started to analyse the value and the potential of online ethnography for unpacking complex socio-educational scenarios. The question is: are we able to capture new cultural and educational aspects through the classic model of doing ethnography? More specifically in relation to formal education, can these new methodological approaches contribute to new educational approaches?

Some further questions have been addressed:

- How can ethnographic methods assist the understanding of online environments in relation with offline environments?
- Can we think of the ethnographic method as an opportunity not only to "travel" from the world of the researcher to the world of the participants, but also between different worlds where the participants are living, as a means toward a better understanding of the interplay between those different worlds?
- How should 21st century ethnographers adjust to new challenges, boundaries and limitations that come from the intersections of online, offline and hybrid worlds?
- What type of engagement does the ethnographer create on the world-wide-web?
- What aspects of classical ethnography are we willing to give up?
- How can we handle different new tools for collecting and organizing online data?

In what follows, we have collected the Conference proceedings consisting of a set of full papers presented during the Conference days in Porto. They are all working papers, and relate to the state-of-the-art of the discussions within that network. They refer to theoretical issues as well as to new, ongoing and, to some extent, also finished empirical work in digital environments. We have ordered the chapters according to the Conference sessions. They address: a) How to conduct research in online/virtual settings, b) Conceptual and epistemological challenges for ethnography, c) Online ethnography and education, d) Doing the fieldwork, and e) Ethics in online research. While most of the chapters relate at the same time to all of those dimensions, they have been also classified in these particular "slots" in relation to the dominance of a specific interest.

The complexity and richness of the issues, of the questions, and of the discussions in the chapters confirm the growing relevance of these lines of research and reflection, and witness the development of new research practices in educational ethnography balancing between innovative solutions and recognizable canons (Hine, 2008). They open the floor to future discussions on further occasions as we try to develop research collaboration and promising findings in empirical and methodological results that may equip educational ethnography (and educational ethnographers) with a renewed toolkit to describe the complex transformations of contemporary cultures.

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PART 1

CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ONLINE/VIRTUAL SETTINGS

WHEN THE "(PLAYING) FIELD" HAS NO PHYSICAL LIMITS: ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE ON THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES OUTSIDE SCHOOL

Fernando Hernández, Juana M. Sancho and Rachel Fendler[1,2]

Antecedents: introducing virtual aspects into research

Over the last seven years we have shifted from carrying out research *about* young people to investigating *with* them (Hernández, 2011a; Hernández, 2011b; Sancho, Sánchez, Domingo, Romeu, & Moltó, 2010). What these projects have in common is that they question: (a) stories about success and failure at school developed through biographic stories about the experiences of young people in their relationship with secondary school; (b) mainstream visions about the way young people use digital technologies in and out school and their expectations about the role of these technologies in their learning processes.

In the first study (Hernández, 2011a), the 9 young people we worked with had not successfully finished their secondary school. For a variety of reasons they had not found their place for learning within the school walls (Hernández, 2011a). In the second research,[3] we reconstructed biographic narratives with 20 young people (Hernández, 2011b). Half had not successfully finished secondary school and the other half were in university (indicating that they had complied with the expectations of their families and teachers). In the third one,[4] we focused on the uncertain relationships between policy and practice in the specific realm of ICT in education. The inclusion of students' voices

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in the four ethnographical cases undertaken provoked a serendipitous phenomenon that allowed us to explore – beyond our initial expectations – the *firm* positions students held about the use of digital technologies in and out of schools (Sancho et al., 2010). It also allowed us to see that students do not always value the role of these technologies in teaching and learning processes, both in and out of school (Sancho & Alonso, 2011).

In the first study, we used telephone calls to maintain contact in addition to face-to-face presence for the in-depth interviews. In the second project we used electronic mail to make appointments, exchange texts, and receive comments and suggestions for changes in the young people's biographical information and narratives. We were able to use these virtual tools to complement not only the interviews, but also their visual references and evidence of their trajectory in secondary school that they brought into the study. In the third, beyond interviewing students about the way they use digital tools in and out of school and their views about the role of these technologies in their learning process, we were able to analyse the virtual products developed by them.

Thanks to this virtual relationship, we began to think about the notion of presence (Cinquina, 2010) in regards to social research and specifically in ethnography, which in the words of Appadurai (1996) works with the idea of face-to-face links, spatial contiguity, and multiple social interactions. Appadurai coined the term "virtual neighbourhood" to refer to that place where technological mediation is employed to explain how the traditional proximity between researchers and subjects in an investigation is redefined when using technological mediators. Appadurai stressed that proximity – the neighbourhood – is not necessarily defined by bodily presence but rather by the meanings that we attribute to the links we create. Following this same line of thought, Gergen (1991), in his analysis of the post-modern subject (self), questions the notions of "real" and "meaningful" calling our attention to the fact that these notions are not absolute concepts, they adopt meaning depending on the relational framework in which they operate. This leads him to affirm that a face-to-face encounter is not an indispensable requisite regarding what most people consider a real or significant relationship (Gergen, 1991, p. 84).

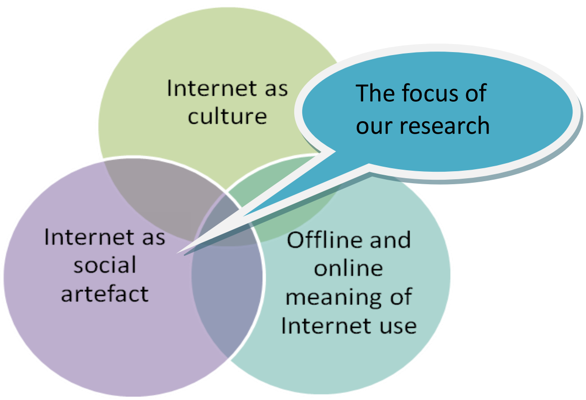
Christine Hine, one of the pioneers of the virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2005) set up the basic issues and questions regarding what could be understood by virtual ethnography. In 2000, she argued that the Internet could be understood in two different ways: as a culture in itself; and as a cultural artefact. The first meaning connects with the special interests of the ethnography for studying what people do with technology. And "once we think of cyberspace as a place where people do things, we can start to study just exactly what it is they do and why, in their terms, they do it" (Hine, 2000, p. 21). The second meaning relates to the idea that Internet can be seen as an entire social construction, constituted both through its history and its social uses. For Hine (2000), "the application of a social shaping approach to the Internet would imply that we apply detailed examinations of the representations of the technology throughout its history focussing on conflicting representations and the social groups that emerge from them" (p. 33).

For this author, some ethnographic approaches to Internet as culture have neglected some fundamental aspects of its interpretation as cultural artefacts. However, she finds it highly relevant to dwell on the production of meaning in context, understanding contexts as the circumstances Internet is used (*offline*), as well as the social spaces that emerge through its use (*online*). For Stone (1991), these two aspects (*offline* and *online*) have their own consensual logic, each of them with their own local version of *reality*. However, according to Hine (2000) we know very little about the ways these two contexts are connected.

It is here where, as we'll argue in the next sections, our new research begins (see Graph 1).

In the next section we discuss several issues related to the development of a research project that aims to explore the role of Internet in young people's learning process in and outside school, taking into account offline and online environments.

GRAPH 1
Research focus on young people's ways of learning inside and outside school



A new project: virtual ethnography on the horizon

Drawing from previous knowledge and research experience we have begun a new project investigating how young people learn and construct experiences with knowledge inside and outside formal school walls. A fundamental part of this project is linked to the realization of both virtual and face-to-face ethnographies with groups of students from five different secondary schools in Barcelona. Our aim in writing this chapter is to share the reflections that have emerged when initiating this project. They have to do with, at least, the following questions:

- Why are we using the perspective of virtual ethnography to investigate with young people?
- What do we hope to find by combining virtual contact with physical presence in the schools and in the "other" spaces where students learn outside the school?

- What is added by inviting students into the process of ethnographic processes of research as investigators?
- How does this position vary regarding the notion of relationship in ethnographic investigation?
- What does "being in the field" mean from this combined approximation?
- What ethical dilemmas and challenges do we face as we prepare to research with students online?
- What ethical dilemmas do we face when virtual evidence differs from information taken directly from the field?
- How does one configure a field diary in this process?
- How might we compare and contrast the field diaries of investigators and youth?
- What dilemmas come from the process of analysis and writing?
- How might we deal with issues regarding authorship?

We have grouped these questions around five main issues, linked to: 1) the adequacy of virtual ethnography to research with young people their learning experiences; 2) the pros and cons of combining virtual contact with physical presence in this kind of research; 3) the meanings of being in the field when virtual and physical environment are explored; 4) the revision of the notion of ethnographical "relationship" when students are invited to be part of the research process as researchers; and 5) the ethical dilemmas coming from adopting these research positionalities.

Why are we using the perspective of virtual ethnography to investigate with young people?

Regarding the use of virtual ethnography in our work with young people, the question now is not whether it has a role in our research, but rather, how best to incorporate it. For youth culture in particular, the turn of the 21st century ushered in an expansion in online connectivity. This is evidenced by a range of prevalent phenomena, such as the term "digital natives", the large amount of time youth spend online, or the wide popularity of handheld devices that allow uninterrupted online access, to name a few signifiers. Within this context, our interest in virtual ethnography stems from the recognition that performing "non-virtual" ethnography no longer is sufficient for studying some of the main issues normally addressed by ethnographic research, issues such as the nature of identity construction, human action and social life, or the experience of everyday life. We find limiting our work to traditional face-to-face ethnography hard to justify due to our perception of an increasingly blurred boundary between the physical and virtual experiences of Catalonian youth, today.[5]

[5] For a brief review of studies that trace the loss of a clear boundary between the online and offline in different social contexts, see the work cited in Garcia et al. (2009, pp. 52-53).

This is not to imply that virtual ethnography is something we find ourselves obliged to do, as if we are merely following our subjects, inevitably, online. Instead, we are acutely curious about the online activities youth are involved in and how those activities relate to their learning practices and experiences. In agreement with Hine (2000), we conceptualize cyberspace not as a structure whose logic is external to society, but rather as a cultural phenomenon, one that embodies and is determined by social relationships. Thus, we see new media use as providing new possibilities in the realm of cultural expression and social action, capable of serving as a site of youth-driven creativity. To this end, our aim in doing virtual ethnography does not derive from an interest in content, per se, but rather in aspects such as how youth assign meaning to or identify with new media usage.

What do we hope to find by combining virtual contact with physical presence in the schools and in the "other" spaces where students learn outside the school?

Our journey into the virtual realm is inspired by our desire to better understand and observe youth learning practices. This desire is fuelled by a main, underlying assumption: we believe that what takes place in the classroom is not fully representative of how students engage in learning. Our experience has shown that students are developing multiple literacies and using new media in a way that is not recognized nor favoured in classroom settings.

In light of this, not only do we feel that in order to capture student learning, virtual ethnography must be part of the research program, we hope to contrast online and offline experiences with the research participants. Thus, virtual ethnography is welcomed within the larger umbrella of our research in order to consider online activity in contrast to more traditional student activity.

The discord between young people's classroom work and online activity has been well-documented in recent years and this work has inspired us to imagine what may be a significant part of young learners' experiences in our own community. We intend to build, in part, on the findings of Patel Stevens (2005). Writing from the United States, Patel Stevens describes a case where she was employed as a literacy specialist to help a young adolescent whose teachers suspected was doing poorly due to low literacy skills. Upon meeting and working with the student, Patel Stevens discovered that contrary to teachers' perceptions, this girl had a very high literacy level. Not only did she write frequently in a journal, in a critical and reflective manner, but she was also the creator and author of a website, and dedicated a large amount of her "free time" to generating content for the site, including participating in and managing the forum she had built for it. While this young person rejected specific literacy practices, namely the completion of exercises listed in her science textbook, she was actually actively engaged in a disciplined process that involved developing and improving her literacy skills in specific contexts.

While Patel Stevens' case may draw a particularly discordant view of the relationship between the multiliterate and multimodal activities youth develop on their own and the work that is recognized and valued in the classroom, we believe that this case is indicative of the division between the different learning spaces youth move within and through on a day-to-day basis.

The study recently published by Ito et al. (2010) provides us with a broader analysis of this tendency. This far-reaching ethnographic investigation, carried out over a three-year time period and involving over 800 youths, contributes to a greater understanding of the meaning and role of new media in youth social lives. For our purposes, it represents a compelling and ambitious example of how to explore and register online learning practices. The research identifies three ways youth spend time on the internet (i.e., the title phrases "hanging out", "messing around", or "geeking out"), which allows them to characterize different levels of engagement with new media use. These categories capture activity ranging from the casual use of social networking sites to the development of high-level skills or the involvement in an expert community. Notably for our work, this study charts the type of learning that takes place online, specifically, the non-hierarchical quality of the learning processes that youth engage in using different platforms or sites.

Our interest in the type of peer-based learning linked to new media use, as illustrated by Ito et al., and Patel Stevens (among others), is a main theme in our current research. The authorized, self-regulated learning new media is associated with stands in contrast to the instructional learning environment provided in schools; this in school/outside school dichotomy is something that needs to be explored. Regarding the results of their study, Ito et al. (2010, p. xii) observed that the biggest changes that ICT-use introduces to learning culture are: new forms of media literacy and new methods of participation. These changes are not superficial, rather they imply significant shifts in two basic pillars of education, affecting both "what" and "how" children learn. By combining virtual contact with physical presence in the schools and in the "other" spaces where students learn, we hope to not only identify informal learning practices and contexts in our community, but we also hope to think with youth about how these practices relate and differ and the meaning given to them in relation to young people's sense-of-self as learning subjects.

What is added by inviting students into the processes of ethnographic research as investigators? How does this position vary regarding the notion of relationship in ethnographic investigation?

Our recent work in educational research has led us to question our earlier practices involved in our research *on* youth and we have begun to explore ways of shifting our inquiries and methodologies in order to research *with* young people. In the context of our current project, we hope to draw on the authority stimulated by the peer-based and self-regulated learning youth often engage in when they use new media; we will invite youth to join the study not only as research subjects but as collaborators and researchers who have a role in the development of the project. Interacting with participating youth in a less collaborative manner – i.e., assigning them a more traditional role as informants – would contradict our assumptions about the authority youth enjoy when learning outside the classroom.

This orientation responds to a constructionist perspective, whereby we work from an epistemological position that sees knowledge construction as subjective and/or transactional (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While this perspective has allowed us to think about doing research collaboratively with others, it does pose problems for a more traditional, "realist" ethnographic model of investigation. In fact, Hine discusses the tension between the constructionist perspective and traditional ethnographic method, labelling it as fundamentally paradoxical (Hine, 2000, p. 55). Her response to this paradox, one which we find particularly useful, is to introduce reflexivity into the ethnographic account, making the act of interpretation and the analysis that produces the results of the research visible. In our case, by inviting internal (youth) perspectives into dialogue with external (our) perspectives, we hope to replace the authorial ethnographic account with a more complex narrative that sustains multiple interpretations of online learning practices.

This focus and reliance on "cultural member input" – in this case, the young people – is particularly crucial in light of one of the main issues that troubles virtual ethnography. An intriguing aspect of doing research online is the wealth of documentation the digital medium makes available to researchers; in cyberspace, everything you can observe online is, essentially, already written down. As Beaulieu has explored, the traditional role of transcribing – of translating social actions into text – is no longer necessary in the virtual realm. In light of this, she suggests that

> Rather than struggling with the readymade textuality of these traces, the ethnographic move is to add a layer, in order to frame these inscriptions and make them amenable to analysis … The anxiety about a possible loss of the epistemic gain of the translating/transcribing ethnographer, through a realisation that textuality is always already present, *may also be compensated by the creation of yet more complex transcriptions* [our emphasis]. (Beaulieu, 2004, pp. 158-159)

Although Beaulieu goes on to frame the added complexity in terms of new methods for computing and analysing digital material, our approach in doing research *with* young people rather than *on* young people accomplishes a similar feat. In other words, while we may be able to read, exhaustively, what youth do online, we aim to know what meaning they give this activity, and how they articulate the differences between their use of new media and their time spent in the classroom. We hope that investigating with youth will allow us to ensure that their input enhances the research. At this stage, we suspect that young people's perception about new media use differs from ours, and we are curious to see how "digital natives" frame and approach a study about online learning practices.

What does "being in the field" mean from this combined approach?

In our discussion about our interest in carrying out virtual ethnography, we reveal the fantasies we have about what this methodology promises, specifically in relation to our line of educational research. However, just as we imagine possibilities, we also harbour doubts and unresolved questions. Mainly, given that our research will involve both material and virtual settings, we must work towards developing an ethnography capable of transitioning between these sites. This poses some methodological issues as we try to address ways to define "the field" that is the site of our ethnographic inquiry.

In a notable short passage in their literature review, Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff and Cui (2009) comment that very few virtual ethnographies deal with the effect of the Internet in offline environments and limit themselves to citing only one study. Despite the perhaps limited number of relevant examples, certain methodological descriptions have helped us frame our research. Kozinets (2009) offers a useful orientation in his discussion of "blended ethnographies/netnographies" (pp. 65-68). Distinguishing between "online communities" and "communities online" (pp. 63-64), he differentiates between inquiry that looks at the structure of online sites and the social acts that take place on them, versus analyses of online phenomena and their effect in offline environments. Following this classification, the latter concept of studying "communities online" is an apt way to describe our own research interests. In addition, returning to Hine's (2000) work, we find her observation that the "object of ethnography can easily be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle" (p. 64) to be a productive manner of thinking about "the field" in a way that allows inquiry to transition between real and virtual spaces.

Finally, Beaulieu's (2004) characterization of inter-subjectivity as a theme that guides the creation of the object of the ethnographic study of technology and virtuality has also been influential. Her argument reminds us that human interaction can be successfully sought out, in particular with the help of blogs, website forums, or direct correspondence, and that this dialogue allows for the study of online sociality. Her argument touches upon the inter-subjective nature of the Internet itself, focusing on how more widespread access to online information destabilizes the authority of the ethnographer and opens up research to the scrutiny and participation of multiple voices. Understanding and researching Internet activity from this framework problematizes "the subjects as well as objects of ethnographic knowledge, or the relations between them" (Beaulieu, 2004, p. 153).

The study we propose evokes this characteristic of online research that Beaulieu describes. First, by inviting youth to collaborate with us, their expertise of the internet comes to have meaningful presence and dialogue in our work. This strategy rejects a certain subject position of the researcher, one that bestows him/her a position of singular authority and expertise. Second, the theme of inter-subjectivity is strongly evoked in our research, which invites questions about the nature of learning both in and outside school. This inquiry depends on the ability of young people to articulate the parallel experiences of learning in different settings.

Our preparation for this project, therefore, has involved thinking about the relationship between technology as a site where people carry out online activity, and technology as a tool for capturing and making possible the development of multiple subject positions.

What ethical dilemmas and challenges face us as we prepare to research with students online?

Within our research group Esbrina at the University of Barcelona, several recent studies by both the group and its members have incorporated computer-mediated communication (CMC) with youth to varying degrees. As we described earlier, new media have become the *status quo* for contacting and maintaining relationships with youth during the duration of a research project. In most cases, colleagues share evidence that speaks to the positive experiences that stem from their endeavours to initiate and sustain virtual relationships with youth.[6] However, we are conscious of the fact that our study is interested in accessing spaces where the very lack of a regulating adult presence is possibly one of the main reasons youth seek out and participate in them.

Therefore, one of our doubts revolves around our role as adult researchers in the spaces youth create and use. While we are ultimately interested in thinking about the implications of offline learning for practices in the classroom, we are sensitive to the issue surrounding the possible colonization of the spaces and work we research, and we will take measures to avoid this throughout the duration of the project. While we are far from establishing fixed ethical guidelines for our work, projects that are in process or which have been carried out in our group have generated experiences that we can draw from.

Anonymity

Acceptance into the community being studied is a main aim of all practising ethnographers, and in particular we can observe from Martínez Iglesias (2010) and Porres (2011) how the ability to maintain a level of informal but frequent contact online considerably alters the nature of the teacher/student personal relationship. In both projects this experience was highly valuable; both personally and in terms of the investigation each person was involved in. As the teacher/researchers entered into a dynamic where they were not the expert[7] (in this case, as online friends and contacts to their students), they were rewarded with increased collaboration and access to their students.

[6] For examples of this work, see: Cinquina (2010), Martinez Iglesias (2010), or Porres (2011).

[7] While relating his fieldwork process, Porres (2011) has described how his use of IM and Facebook was commented on by students, who remarked on his slow conversational skills while chatting, or on his limited number of "friends" on the social network. The slow typing and lack of contacts identify Porres (to his students, at least) as a less fluent user of these media.

Despite the opportunities this provides, this situation is not free of dilemma. These research experiences have revealed, unsurprisingly, that secondary students have a different relationship with new media than adult academics. One challenge this creates is how to address anonymity in research, especially when young people are more comfortable sharing personal information online than, say, academic ethics codes traditionally allow. How to ensure anonymity in a context subject not only to the reach of search engines, but also to the possibility of collaborators "outing" themselves or others is something we will need to address throughout the duration of our project.

In a similar vein, different authors have noted how a strong virtual presence helps researchers gain access and demonstrate credibility to online communities (see Beaulieu, 2004, pp. 149-152). However, for many people who develop non-professional activities online – such as maintaining social network profiles, to name only one possibility – turning online activity into research poses unique problems in terms of how to balance different modes of presence we may assume on the Internet. From within our research group, different experiences involving Facebook have occurred. Cinquina (2011) shares how a participant in a collaborative video project she helped lead, which was part of the fieldwork she undertook for her thesis, later contacted her via this social network. Cinquina comments that this website allowed the participant to get in touch, even though she only had Cinquina's first and last name. While this occurrence is *de rigueur* in the world of Facebook, in terms of ethnographic research it poses questions about how, if ever, virtual ethnographers "leave the field".

Conflicting interests

We also think it is important to problematize the notion of internet communities, keeping in mind that the internet is not a "neutral" space. Often, the ease of communicating with students using certain social networks or software tends to obscure the context in which such sites or software have emerged. Kozinets (2009), who approaches *netnography* from the field of consumer research, reminds us of the many conflicting interests that are present in spaces where online communities thrive, pointing to data collecting practices or corporately sponsored community sites. As we move forward in our research project, we feel that an awareness of the commercial dimension present in our research must be maintained and explored further.

Conclusive remarks

This reflection on the questions that have been presented forms part of our research processes that are now underway. There is not a before or an after; everything is taking place now. Just like when we pass through the virtual space of a social network where we carry out part of our investigation, we leave traces in the form of images, texts or graphics that expose our present. This is the same present in which the young people place themselves in our research, when they are invited, and authorize themselves, to take a central role in the process, thus allowing them to explore what learning in and out of school means to them. Adopting this perspective responds to our need for the investigation to form (educate) everyone who participates in it. At the same time, this position questions the boundaries of some of the more entrenched concepts associated with ethnographic research, such as: "field", "relation", "presence", "collaboration", "informant", "documentation", "participant observation", and "narrative account", among others.

What we find underneath this questioning relates, in part, to what so-called virtual ethnography proposes regarding the configuration of reality. When considering how the reality researchers face transitions between online and offline contexts, the ethnographic field expands, losing its bind to time and space. This situation requires that we revise what meaning can be found in comparing *real* contexts and *virtual* contexts. In addition, it implies, as Hine (2000, 2005), Beaulieu (2004), and Kozintes (2009), among others, have demonstrated, not only a change in the time/space of real/virtual sites but also a change in the notion of authorship. For example, it questions the position of the researcher's role as an expert, casting doubt on the validity of the ethnographic account that speaks with an omniscient view of reality. This questioning suggests a new function of ethnographic inquiry, particularly for education, given that research is no longer about seeing what we want to see but, rather, about seeing what we are allowed to see.

As Hine (2000) has remarked: "The challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the 'virtual' and the 'real'" (p. 64). Making boundaries and connections is a way of looking at reality differently; it is a practice that situates ourselves in reality and provides a way of narrating our experience to others. If every study aimed at (de)constructing limits and revealing connections, such that the invisible becomes visible, to the extent that the virtual becomes part of "real" time and space, not only would the ethnographer's field expand, but also the relationship of inter-subjectivity (Beaulieu, 2004) would transform, problematizing the role of the subject in a virtual ethnography. This transformation can be observed in Porres' (2011) work, where secondary students share together, online, their experiences with visual culture, in an effort to "understand how we, as subjects implicated in a pedagogical relationship, negotiated our identities in order to embody subjectivities that the school offered us" (p. 69). The distance between them (the research subjects) and us (the researchers) becomes blurred, as both are participating in the same inquiry. Both share the same field. A field is built, not defined, and both participate in building it.

Thus, a virtual ethnography perspective, involving all the challenges we have just described, accompanies us throughout our research with young people into learning inside and outside the school. Studies like those by Dillon and Moje (1998), Alvermann (2001, 2002), Osborn et al. (2003), Gee (2004), Mahiri (2004), and Vadeboncoeur and Patel Stevens (2005) that investigate what challenges youth face in different situations have contributed to an understanding of certain aspects related to immigration, home life, online connectivity, participation in virtual communities, and so on. This body of work has generated knowledge about how young people experience learning in different situations, but it lacks a more holistic perspective. We must now undertake research that connects themes and contexts, which will take into account the flow of young people's lives – in and out of school – and their ways of learning. We do not feel that we need a new "box" within which we can store everything related to youth's relationship to learning, but we do need a new way of thinking that allows us to pay attention to how young people construct a relationship to learning (to knowledge), understanding this process not as a final result (we are aware that there is no fixed or stable territory) but rather as a complex narrative. Through this approximation we believe that the contributions of virtual ethnography are useful, if they are embraced as possibilities, not as facts. The questions and challenges that this perspective raises is what we have tried to discuss in this chapter.

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NON-HETERONORMATIVE GENDERS IN WEB 2.0

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Introduction

Web 2.0 has expanded the possibilities for interaction and communication between people, providing also new ways of cultural and social dissemination, influencing the characteristics that define us individually and leaving even more complex forms in the manner humans relate among themselves in the contemporaneity. The Internet offers heterogenic and fluid spaces which allow the subject to explore other aspects of identity and to build increasingly open and plural identities, which can, if desired, ironize or transgress the heteronormative system's constructed schemes of repression.

The many possibilities for the development of virtual identities offered by Web 2.0 tools allowed a break with the need to link the identity to a physical referent, and in this perspective virtual communities are genuine factories of identities that offer a range of possibilities for people who do not feel represented (or only partially represented) by conventional means of communication.

These benefits include the ability to circulate with freedom and withdraw from the heteronormative standards of the system and also to discover in the Network like-minded people and spaces with similar interests. Cyberspace is also an environment where people can experience different and diverse ways to recognize, construct and introduce themselves. This fact contributes to the construction of more plural and fluid identities, promoting a greater visibility and proliferation of identities dissociated and dissonant from the definitions attributed to gender and sexuality of the physical environment.

This study uses netnography and bricolage, from a constructionist approach, in order to examine how genders develop and represent themselves in Web 2.0, which provide favourable environments for the exploration of new processes of subjectivity in the development of online identity, from a custom and practice perspective, which constructs the subjects according to non-normative genders.

The context for this study is a social network built specifically for the development of the project and takes the name of "Desobedientes". The network of *Desobedientes* explores the possibilities of Web 2.0, its platforms and tools, and

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proposes hybridization of methods to construct meaning through voyeur observation, as well as participant observation.

Data analysis is based upon gender performativity (Butler, 2007), focusing mainly on analysing the games of identities and how disobedient genders and heteronormativity express themselves through technological mediation and virtual exchange of cultural repertoires that operate at texts, image and sound levels.

Reflections upon profiles of the network of disobedient, points out how gender, sexuality and digital body are built, bringing into play representations, ways of acting and thinking, world views and how to relate to it, and we also analyse the concepts and prejudices of the various social aspects in the construction of subjectivities.

Gender identity and sexuality through the virtual bricolage

Brico-technological identity is an eternal becoming, "the 'bricoleur' may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it" (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 21). Digital bodies speak with and through hypertext. Their narratives are constructed and available to users, selected according to the practices of everyday subjectivities by the experiments of the subject on the Internet:

> The bricoleur resembles the painter who stands back between brushstrokes, looks at the canvas, and only after this contemplation, decides what to do next. Bricoleurs use a mastery of associations and interactions. For planners, mistakes are missteps; bricoleurs use a navigation of midcourse corrections. For planners, a program is an instrument for premeditated control; bricoleurs have goals but set out to realize them in the spirit of a collaborative venture with the machine. For planners, getting a program to work is like "saying one's piece"; for bricoleurs, it is more like a conversation than a monologue. (Turkle & Papert, 1990, p. 136)

The brico-tecnological identity assumes the role of the virtual explorer, who seeks to re-signify and reconstruct, until it is satisfied with the product, which may temporarily represent it online. Temporarily because the virtual identity, likewise the *bricoleur* identity, is always under construction, seeking an appropriate mark, a snapshot, a fragment of itself.

A virtual identity is constructed through reflection, reframing and creativity, and can be managed and operated through different positions. This capacity for self-management deviates from linear speeches and the objectivity of the physical body, as García Manso (2006) explains:

> In this sense, results of great interest the discussions around the new devices that suppose new forms of subjectivity and social relationship between the subjects, these new devices, called high tech, that provide the reconstruction of the bodies from their technological extension, which open to passage to new sexualities and gender opportunities, far from the natural, dual or binary. (p. 51)[2]

[2] My translation of: "En este sentido resulta de gran interés las discusiones en torno a los nuevos artefactos que suponen nuevas formas de subjetividad y de relación social entre los sujetos, estos nuevos artefactos, denominados high tech, que proporcionan la reconstrucción de los cuerpos a partir de su prolongación tecnológica, que abren paso a nuevas sexualidades y posibilidades de género lejanas a lo natural dual o binario".

The ability to re-create itself becomes an example of cannibalism, in the context of this research, cannibalism of the fragment, with similarity and affinity with the "Manifesto Antropofágico" (Anthropophagic Manifesto),[3] by Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954), Brazilian poet and writer and one of the representatives of the modernist movement in Brazil: "Only cannibalism unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. Tupi or not Tupi, that's the question".

The cannibalism of the fragment, or brico-technology, practice the contextualization of the image through the re-signification and available recycling materials, creating another element that shapes the post-biological identity, postgender, the digi-body, fluid and not linear, what "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

The online identity is a product of hybridization of visuals elements, text, sound, and body representation that the subject uses to compose his presence on the Internet. These elements can be used simultaneously or disconnected; however, they involve processes that go beyond simple appropriation. It is necessary to re-signify in order to make possible identity construction, since the intention is to freeze a fragment, exploring aspects of the identity, so this representation could tell a little about yourself, seduce and attract the curiosity of the "other".

In this sense, Web 2.0 is a true factory of identities, where millions of users circulate and visualize their personalities and views of the world, as well as their corporeality, visualizations and intimacies.

In hypermediatic environments people explore multiple opportunities to experiment, explore and experience different masculinities and femininities, and develop identities with more open and flexible configurations than those granted to the physical world. The construction and deconstruction of identities online depend on the choices the subject makes at the moment s/he is positioned in the Net. Building a homogeneous or dissonant identity depends on the will and imagination of the individuals who move in the Web 2.0.

Gender and sexuality identities have their existence in the Internet through pictorial symbols, text and sound. A new visual body expandable and reprogrammable that deviates from biological and naturalized representations escapes the linear discourse. A virtual identity is recreated and transformed by the multiple fragments used to compose and translate their digital identity.

Methodological aspects (or anthropophagy of fragment)

My political and epistemological position derives from social constructionism. I speak (and seek my own voice) about Queer Theory, feminisms and other post-structuralist authors who dialogue with Visual Culture and Gender Studies.

The method uses a *netnography* and bricolage approach to examine the disobedient sexual identities in social networks. The netnography sees the internet as a sociocultural product which represents and diffuses social contexts, with real

[3] Manifesto Antropofágico: http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifesto_antropofágico.

characters that negotiate and exchange cultural repertoires. In turn, the bricolage promotes interactivity connected to context, requires flexibility in methods and suspicion of ready-to-use formulas.

The main point of the project is to discuss how gender and sexuality are inscribed in the identities disobedient to heteronormativity through technological resources. In this sense, attention is fixed on the strategies that are used at the moment of construction and the experience of the identity on the Internet. However, we accept that the reconstruction and deconstruction of stereotypes are also reinforced or denied in virtual spaces.

The dynamics, fragmentation and instability of virtual environments make predetermined methodological strategies impracticable and thus the solution agreed was to seek out the tactics of action and interaction that are appropriate to the context that is being analysed. This assumes that the "methodological negotiator" "actively constructs the research methods from the tools at hand rather than passively receiving the 'correct', universally applicable methodologies." (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 2). As explained by Canevacci (2004):

> As soon as the research reaches the nerwork, the linguistic results should be somehow adapted; the method will adapt to its object. Meanwhile, the researchwill not only be in the web, but also in the new multilogical, iconological and figurative codes expressed in the web. The consequences are transformative: the ethnographic methodcannot be itself or it cannot be slightly "reformed" in its applications in the web: it should have a radical change or otherwise it will become a fetish.[4] (p. 139)

The intention is to seek a more plural and hybrid perspective to construct meanings, due to the speed with which virtual identities circulate, transform, disappear, evolve and become transfigured. This position is close to bricolage that plans research as an interactive process fundamentally associated with the context of the people involved in the process, as proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2000):

> The product of the interpretive bricoleur's labor is a complex, quiltlike bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage – a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations. This interpretive structure is like a quilt, a performance text, a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole. (p. 6)

To develop this project, a Web 2.0 network management online strategy has been created, which carries the name of "Desobedientes". This network consists of a main website (www.desobedientes.net), a profile on Facebook, MySpace and Tweeter, and a YouTube channel. All identities listed in the *Desobedientes* identify themselves as having sexually disobedient identities.

The analytical structured focuses on the choice of users and the tools that shape their identity online and the identification of characteristics that relate to gender and sexuality, such as the way subjects describe themselves, their bodies and the digital

[4] My translation of: "Una vez la investigación llega a la red, los resultados lingüísticos deben ser adecuados de alguna manera: el método se adecuará a su objeto. La investigación mientras tanto no estará sólo en la web sino incluso en los nuevos códigos multilógicos, iconológicos y figurativos expresados dentro de la web. Las consecuencias son transformadoras: el método etnográfico no puede ser el mismo o no puede ser "reformado" ligeramente en sus aplicaciones en la web: debe tener un cambio radical o de lo contrario se convertiría en un fetiche."

manners of interacting and communicating, characteristics that define their presence and their experiments in social networks. The challenge is to find meaning to these fragments and feed from it, to establish connections between facts and stories without beginning, middle or end, index or chapters, which cross and intersect, shaping new matrixes in an area that tends to the multiple and the diverse.

As stated earlier, the data, content and exchanges by these users are examined from the perspective of gender performativity and the methods of analysis are voyeur observation and direct participation, with the purpose of studying the different positions that reproduce the hegemonic patterns, or appear in settings that are contrary to the normative genders and sexualities of the physical world.

The voyeur terminology is commonly used to describe the observation of sexual or erotic scenes, a significance that is not used in this investigation. The voyeur posture that is pursued questions the look, the manipulation and the creation of possible misunderstandings. That which is beneath what appears at first sight is often the most interesting. This is a level of cognition and interpretation that is always reflective and logical and refers" not to a sexual kink but Webster's second definitions of the word: the voyeur is the 'prying observer'" (Boorstin, 1990, p. 12).

The digital voyeur has a watchful eye, which acquires a "relative autonomy, being nowhere specific, but potentially anywhere" (Cardoso, 2009, p. 176). However, in this virtual space composed of thousands of windows, unlike the classic voyeur, the digital voyeur needs not to hide. The computer screen is the passport to millions of locks, doors and windows.

Through the perspective of a voyeur observation it is possible to "problematize" the text and visual features that users elect to inhabit and pass through in cyberspace. The analysis focuses on contents and features that express, even subjectively, elements that are interrelated with issues of gender and sexuality, for example: the nickname, the visual representation of identity, the presentation of oneself, the cultural, visual and sound repertoire, how one operates, interacts and, finally, how one communicates.

Direct participation in the *Desobedientes* network takes place through multiple tools, such as: digital interviews, virtual events (a tool to gather in real-time a group of people to discuss around a specific topic), conversations and interactions in real time (chat, msn, skype) and in-depth interviews (like video chat, text chat or messaging services). It should also be said that these tools do not have a specific order or stages but are used sporadically or even in combined or nuanced forms.

Final notes

The observations and interactive dynamics that have been produced so far are basically characterized by its dynamism and variety. The positions of the *Desobedientes* network users concerning the issues of gender and sexuality denote different masculinities and femininities, a fact that supports the concept of virtual communities as plural spaces, heterogeneous, multiple, and environments of cultural exchange and fluctuation.

Some strains have already been witnessed in the development of research, such as little questioning of the "rules of the game", and reveal power instances; and the digital and invisible panoptic on which imposes conservative and repressive environments. Transgressions exist and are committed but, if discovered, may be punished and the identities may be extinct.

In brief, the analysis so far, and from a global perspective, indicates that the sexually disobedient identities can be positioned through behaviour, or atoms of behaviour, which reinforce a tendency for transgressing the rules of the presented face. Virtual environments are used as spaces for experimentations and exchanges, where gender, sexuality and technology categories are not unitary and represent opportunities to explore other aspects of oneself, opening a range of alternative possibilities to experience gender and sexuality in the internet.

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SINGLE PARENT ONLINE FORUMS AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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In this chapter we draw on findings from two research projects (one completed and one ongoing) focused on "single motherhood/parenthood by choice" in three Spanish regions (Madrid, Catalonia and Valencia). So far, we have interviewed numerous single mothers and some fathers (over 100 in the three regions over a three year period) who have started family projects through adoption, fostering, assisted reproductive technologies or planned sexual intercourse; professionals involved in these processes (34 interviews in the three regions); and children from these families (13 children). Over the last three years we have also conducted continued participant observation in formative spaces related to the adoption process, events organized by single parent associations and adoption agencies and single parent virtual networks.

A first analysis of our findings shows that there are significant differences between mothers who engage in family projects through assisted reproductive technologies and mothers who begin their family project through international adoption. The first group of mothers seems to have created a stronger group-identity and construe their parental projects in more agentic terms – appear more empowered in the process – than mothers who are involved in the international adoption route (Jociles & Rivas, 2009). These contrasts are visible across different forms of data such as semi-structured interviews, observations in social and associative gatherings, media and organizational documents in which single mothers participate. It is also visible in the activity and of the main virtual forums or online support groups (Stommel & Koole, 2010) these mothers participate in: "Single mothers by choice" (*Madres solteras por elección* [MSPE]) in Madrid, "Motherhood, an individual decision" (*Mares, una decisió en solitari*) in Catalonia and "Adopting as a single parent" (*Adoptarsiendosoltero*) in Madrid.

These two paths in the social construction of motherhood are the result of a complex web of institutional, political and biographical elements that configure single mother's experiences – which have been examined elsewhere (Jociles & Rivas, 2009, 2010). An illustration of these differences is available in single mothers' virtual activity, as the following extracts show.

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EXTRACT 1
***MSPE Forum*, 9 June 2007 (in Jociles & Rivas, 2009, pp. 145-146)**

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
Dar a conocer un nuevo tipo de familia en la sociedad, y sensibilizar a ésta para que sea aceptada como una opción responsable de la mujer.	Inform society about a new kind of family and work to see that it becomes accepted as a responsible option for women.
Ser un grupo de apoyo con un denominador común que sirva de intercambio de experiencias e información para aquellas mujeres que quieran llegar a la maternidad en solitario.	Become a support group with common objectives to share experiences and information among those women who reach motherhood on their own.
Conseguir que se atiendan, por parte de organismos públicos y/o privados, las necesidades específicas de nuestro tipo de familia: sociales, educativas, sanitarias...	Ensure that the specific needs of our type of families are met by public and/or private agencies: social, educational, health related...

EXTRACT 2
"Adopting as a single parent forum", message 30892, November 2008
(in Jociles & Rivas, 2009, pp. 147-148)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
Yo tampoco estoy de acuerdo en pedirle aclaraciones a China; no creo que se consiga nada y, además, como hemos dicho mil veces, son sus niños y ponen sus normas. Creo que podemos exigir aquí a nuestra Administración que se unifique el tema de adopción entre las distintas Comunidades Autónomas, pero exigirles a ellos... nada. ¿Os imagináis si cuando pusieron el cupo o cuando nos han excluido en China, hubiéramos decidido escribir para exigir que eso cambiara?, ¿le hubiera parecido lógico a alguien?	I also don't think we should request clarification from China; I don't think we will achieve much and, even more, as we have said a thousand times, they are their children and they set the rules. I think we can demand that our administration unifies issues in relation to adoption among the various autonomous communities [Spanish regions], but we cannot make demands... no way. Can you imagine that when they set the quota or when we were excluded in China, we decided to write to demand that this change? Would anyone have found this logical?

Extract 1 shows the presentation that a newly formed association of single mothers by choice posted on its web forum. This association is open to all mothers who start family projects on their own – regardless of the "procedure" that they adopt – but, in practice, a great majority of its members have done so through assisted reproductive technologies and, therefore, the association tends to represent and defend the concerns of this particular group of mothers. As the extract shows, the explicit aims of the association are political, social and personal and underscore women's agency in defining their family projects in different social fields. By contrast, extract 2 shows single mother's disempowerment in relation to the different institutions and administrative tiers that configure international adoptions. Further, although it is only tacitly visible in this conversation, involvement in an adoption process often means that single mothers align themselves with the broader concerns and mobilization of adoptive parents "in general" (be it heterosexual couples, homosexual couples or single men/women) or of those families who share the same country in the adoption process.

In this chapter we continue this analysis and explore in more detail the role that virtual relations and activity play in the configuration of these differences and in the construction of single mothers' identities and family projects. To do this, we examine two interrelated themes that emerge in our findings: (a) how participants construe and talk about virtual forums – during semi-structured interviews, informal conversations or through online self-reflexive activity; (b) how participation and interaction unfold in each of the virtual forums we have examined. We understand these online forums (as well as other relational spaces created by/for single mothers/parents) as educational spaces, as communities of practice (Stommel & Koole, 2010) where mothers develop their subjectivities primarily through peer interactions with other mothers/parents who are at different stages of their parental and family projects (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lemke, 2000). In the conclusion, we will return to this broader question in light of the data we examine.

Forums and virtual activity in single mothers' parenthood projects

Different strands of data in our project suggest that single mothers under study construe parenthood as a process, as a trajectory where different "hurdles" have to be confronted in a stage-like course. To a large degree, these stages are particular to each of the paths that are followed into motherhood, even though there are some convergent issues in each journey. Without claiming that the proposed outline is comprehensive and completely detailed, the following list of landmarks seems to be part of trajectories for women who choose adoption: (1) making the decision to become a single parent, (2) sorting the administrative processes involved in becoming an adoptive parent in Spain, (3) bureaucratic difficulties related to adoption in the country of origin, (4) trips leading to a return with the adopted child, (5) "post-adoption" issues, (6) issues related to child-rearing. For women who choose artificial reproductive technologies, the landmarks are: (1) making the decision to become a single parent, (2) choosing among different technological procedures, clinics and professionals involved in the process, (3) confronting the multiple biomedical difficulties involved in artificial reproduction, (4) pregnancy, (5) birth and early development/motherhood, (6) issues related to child-rearing, and, more recently, (7) everything related to having/considering having a second child.

Even a short glance at these lists suggests that motherhood is a complex and often stressful process, which takes place within a sociocultural and institutional scenario where parental choice is not socially supported and may even be devalued. Single mothers by choice mobilize numerous resources to deal with all these difficulties and uncertainties (family, friends, organizations, peer mothers, etc.). Virtual spaces are one of the assets that can be used, yet these virtual spaces are construed in different ways and these differences seem to be related to the different routes into motherhood we have studied. Participants in our study set up an opposition between "information" and "support/something more" as the possible purposes that virtual spaces could have and position themselves in relation to their own and other participant's virtual activity. For several mothers involved in adoption processes, obtaining and exchanging information is underscored as the primary use of virtual forums.

EXTRACT 3
Interview with Francisca, an adoptive mother
(40-45 years of age, university degree, manager in a private financial company, May 2008)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
[-¿Qué papel dirías tú, entonces, que tienen los foros?] Yo diría que es fundamentalmente de información. (-¿Sí?) También se utiliza mucho para relacionarte. De alguna forma sí, porque hay cosas que, si tú has vivido el proceso o lo estás viviendo, las conoces y... no sé, nadie entendería de qué forma te alegras porque te han dicho que eres "idónea". Si lo dices fuera de esto, pues, te dicen: "Pues, ¿y qué? ¡Pues, ya!". Sin embargo, tú sabes la alegría que es que te digan: "Oye, ¡que ya tienes la idoneidad!" o "Tu expediente está registrado", o pequeños logros como éstos. Entonces yo creo que sirve para comunicar esos sentimientos, para saber que todos pasamos más o menos por lo mismo y nos apoyamos. Pero, fundamentalmente, yo para lo que más lo uso es para [conseguir] información en algún momento determinado. Pues, me acuerdo que cuando yo vine con S. (su hija), pues, cuándo había que ir a hacer lo de la baja maternal, dónde había que ir a hacer lo del registro..., de todo eso yo me he informado a través de compañeras y compañeros que lo han hecho antes, en el foro.	[- What role would you, then say, that forums have?] I would say that it is fundamentally information. (- Yes?) It is also used much to relate with other people. Somehow, yes, because there are things that, if you have lived the process you are experiencing, you know them and... I don't know, no one understands how happy it makes you to be "certified as adequate". If you share it outside they say: "so what? OK!". However, you know about the joy involved in being told: "Hey, you have passed the 'certification'!" or "your case file has been registered", or small achievements like these. Then I think that it helps communicate those feelings, to know that we all go through more or less the same and that we support each other. But, fundamentally, I use it mostly to get information at particular given times. I remember that when I came with S. [her daughter], I had to request maternity leave and find out where to go to register [the child]... I got all that information through "peers" who had done this before, in the forum.

By contrast, some mothers who have followed the artificial technology route question this reductionist use of virtual forums and explicitly state that they expect them to play other roles.

EXTRACT 4
Interview with Kora, in the process of assisted reproduction
(35-40 years of age, university degree, consultant, May 2007)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
En el fondo, la conclusión es: mejor a este tipo de gente, pues, no les contestas, porque el problema es que… vamos a ver: "¿Tú, qué pasa? ¿Para qué utilizas el foro?", porque luego fue una de las cosas de las que dijo: "¡Si yo sólo quiero información!". Es que eso no es. El foro no es simplemente para pedir información y luego largarte. El foro es para estar ahí, para estar apoyando, para, en fin... que es un poco un seguro en todos los sentidos.	In the end, the conclusion is: to those only asking for information, it's simply better not to answer them, because this is the problem... so come on: "what's the matter? what do you use the forum for?" because this is one of the things that was said: "but I only want information!" and this is not the point, the forum is not simply to ask for information and then leave. The forum is to be there, to give support… it's a little a reassurance in all respects.

As we show below, this division in expectations and use of virtual forums across the two main routes to single motherhood is not clear-cut and we do find some adoptive mothers who express other expectations in relation to the role of virtual forums – although the fact that this concern is voiced during online interaction is indicative in itself of the dominant trends in that particular virtual space that is being questioned. However, one reason why these different uses seem to dominate in each of the forums – for "single mothers by choice" or for "adoptive single parents" – may be because within the virtual (and non-virtual world) each group of single mothers seem to have other "communities" formed by other parental configurations/criteria as natural interlocutors or relevant reference groups – regardless of whether this affinity is construed as such by the single mothers themselves or ascribed by others. Within this matrix, single mothers have to position each other and the particular dynamics of each route lead to different relations with these communities, which in turn are made visible in virtual activity.

For single mothers who (mostly) opt for assisted reproduction procedures, one of the key issues during the past few years has been to differentiate themselves from other women who may be labelled as "single mothers" or may even share the same reproductive procedures. For some time now the most visible differentiation (which takes place mainly outside the virtual world: within associations and public representation, in relation to the media, in relation to public policies, etc.) has been between "single mothers by choice" and other single mothers (divorced, separated, widowed, etc.) who are perceived as having very different life-histories and policy needs. More recently, sexual orientation and intimate relationships have become an issue and this has raised the question regarding whether if lesbian women (who may have a partner) involved in assisted reproduction procedures should be considered "single mothers by choice". These debates are made visible in virtual activity and, ultimately, inclusion in the category and participation in this online community involves commitment with a particular collective "we" and the capacity to share experiences beyond the mere exchange of information.

EXTRACT 5
Interview with Kora (same as Extract 4)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
Se creó ahí una polémica por una chica, que era lesbiana, que tenía pareja y que quería participar en el foro, y entonces Samantha le dijo: "Mira, no puedes participar en el foro porque es para madres solteras". Ella se sintió discriminada. […] Por eso, Rocío sacó ese tema y puso esa pregunta: "¿Qué pensáis vosotras del foro?". La mayoría, yo creo, coincidimos en qué es "madre soltera por elección", es decir, no es lo mismo una mujer a la que la ha abandonado su hombre, y aun así es madre soltera..., evidentemente va a haber momentos en que va a experimentar lo mismo que nosotras, pero habrá otros momentos en que ella va a estar más frustrada por decir: "Yo esto no lo pedí".	There was a controversial situation over a girl, a lesbian, and had a partner who wanted to participate in the forum, and then Samantha said: "Look, you can't participate in the forum because it's for single mothers". She felt discriminated. […] That's why Rocío raised the issue and posed the question: "What do you [plural] think of the forum?" Most of us, I think, agreed that she was a "single mother by choice", that is, it's not the same as a woman who has been abandoned by her man, and yet she is a single mother... obviously there will be moments when she will experience the same things as us, but there will be other times when she is going to be more frustrated and will say: "I didn't ask for it".

By contrast, mothers who follow the adoption route along the process may find themselves sharing experiences and needs with different women and family configurations. At times they align themselves with single mothers, other times with adoptive parents (whether single men/women or hetero/homo/sexual couples) who deal with the same bureaucratic procedures and yet, at other times, with families who have children from the same country of origin. As a result, their virtual activity may be distributed along different sites and forums "specialized" on each of these family configurations. This strategy has as two practical consequences. On the one hand, it facilitates the development of a less emotionally intense relationship with particular virtual communities. On the other hand, it leads to an instrumental relationship with virtual forums in which the mere "exchange of information" and migrations over time to different virtual spaces are seen as legitimate forms of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

EXTRACT 6
Interview with Selena, in the process of adopting a child
(40-45 years of age, uncompleted university studies, administrative assistant, March 2008)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
[E: ¿Y quién te informó de esta ayuda del Ayuntamiento?] En el foro. [E: ¿En qué foro?] En el foro de Rusia. Sí, es que en el de monoparentales no estoy casi, porque estuve al principio, y ahora... Es que, claro, hay más información ahí. En (el foro de) monoparentales entro de vez en cuando porque no me quité, pero fue más al principio, porque ahora me interesan más esas historias también: que si es mejor por libre, que si no sé qué...	[E: Who informed you about this municipal help?] In the forum. [E: in what forum?] The Russian. Yes, I am almost never in the single parent one, because I was at the beginning, and now... well, of course, there's more information there. I entered the single parent [forum] from time to time because I did not unsubscribe, but that was more at the beginning, because now I am interested more in other "stories" also: whether it is better to go independently…

Interaction and collective activity in the virtual world

The above extracts mostly show how participants describe their relationship with virtual spaces and their own retrospective accounts of how virtual activity unfolds – which sometimes appear in the context of some other issue (e.g. Extracts 5 and 6). The methodology of the study also included direct observation and participation in virtual forums (which also have an archive of all interactions/conversations that have taken place in the past), thus we can examine how these spaces are used by single mothers and the direction that conversations may take in the different virtual communities in which they participate. Some of the differences that participants report are corroborated through direct observation. We also find other processes which are not retrospectively verbalized and illustrate participants' identities and engagement with the virtual world.

EXTRACT 7
Post thread in the MSPE forum (original message: 2 March 2006)[4]

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
(1) hola, estaba buscando la definición de madre soltera en la red... en wikipedia aparecía: "Se llama madre soltera a la mujer que se ve obligada a cargar con la crianza de los hijos y el manejo del hogar sin la compañía o apoyo del cónyuge o esposo." no me he sentido nada identificada y creo que no nos hace justicia a ninguna de nosotras, así que la he cambiado!! y a partir de hoy, en el diccionario mas universal del siglo XXI: "Se llama madre soltera a la mujer que decide llevar a cabo la crianza de los hijos y el manejo del hogar sin la compañía o apoyo de una pareja." puede ser un pequeño paso para la mujer, pero un gran salto para la humanidad... ciao	**(1)** Hi, I was looking for a definition of single mother on the web... this is what appeared in wikipedia: "A single mother is a woman who is forced to bear the upbringing of children and the management of the home without the company or support of spouse or husband." I don't identify at all with this and I think that it does not do justice to any of us, so I've changed it!! and starting today, in the most universal dictionary of the 21st century: "A single mother is the woman who decides to carry out the upbringing of children and the management of the home without the company or support of a partner." This may be a small step for women, but a great leap for mankind... ciao
(2) Me alegra mucho que hayas introducido ese cambio, son pequeños pasitos pero que significan un montón. Creo que en nombre de todas GRACIAS!	**(2)** *reply* ***MAD01 wrote on March 3*** I am very happy that you've made that change, these are small steps but they mean a lot. On behalf of all US THANKS!
(3) Aplaudo la inserción de tu nueva definición!!! Besos!!	**(3)** *reply* ***MAD02 wrote on March 3*** My applause for the inclusion of your new definition!!! Kisses!!!
(4) Yo casi añadiría: se llama madre soltera a la mujer que decide llevar a cabo la crianza de los hijos y el manejo del hogar sin la compañía o apoyo de una pareja, instituciones sanitarias, apoyo gubernamental entre otras, viéndose obligada a pasar por una serie de acontecimientos que van frenando o retrasando esta decisión. Uy si me pongo a largar ya entro en temas de discriminación como el caso de los médicos sarcásticos que nos miran como si fueramos viejas tontas y un sin fin de cosas más. Pero como estoy de buen rollo...	**(4)** *reply* ***MAD03 wrote on March 3*** I would add: a single mother is the woman who decides to carry out the upbringing of children and the management of the home without the company or support of a partner, health care institutions and government support among other things, being forced to go through a series of events that hold back or delay this decision. Ups, if I get on a roll, I get into issues of discrimination, such as sarcastic doctors who look at us as if we were old fools and a myriad of other things. But since I am in a good mood...
(5) A mi no me gustaria olvidar las que no son por eleccion... Que tambien las hay. Dificilisima, perdida	**(5)** *reply* ***MAD04 wrote on March 3*** I would not like to forget those who are but didn't choose to... There are also those. Very difficult, lost
(6) PERFECTA, LA DEFINICIÓN… Seguro q la anterior la había realizado un hombre...	**(6)** *reply* ***MAD05 wrote on March 3*** PERFECT DEFINITION... I am sure the first one was written by a man...

[4] The single mothers in our study make up a relatively small and interrelated community. They have also recently been the focus of much media attention. To protect their identities and favor as much as possible their anonymity, in the interview extracts we use pseudonyms and provide biographical information in general terms (e.g. age is reported within a five-year bracket). In the case of virtual interactions we have eliminated "avatars" and "nicks" since many participants in these forums know each other personally and would easily identify each other through this information. In this last case "nicks" have been replaced by numerical codes that allow tracing participants in the interaction. We have also eliminated personal signature lines from the posts.

(7)	**(7)** *reply* ***MAD06 wrote on March 3***
hola chicas....muy buena la definición...nuestra Real Academia de la Lengua necesita un meneo en género...sólo teneis que mirar algunas jugosas definiciones del diccionario de la RAE, por ejemplo: hombre, mujer, huérfano, jueza, doctora, etc. (más propias del siglo XVIII que del XXI)...no me extraña la definición que hay, pero afortunadamente la realidad social es otra y el lenguaje acabará cambiando adaptándose a esa realidad, a pesar de los carpetovetónicos de la RAE. Me apunto a la definición nueva y a la ampliación de MAD03....y no me olvido tampoco de las que tienen que serlo a la fuerza, pero ni aun así me identifico con el término "madre soltera"...¡¡qué antigualla!!!!!... y no te quepa ninguna duda de que la definición la ha redactado un hombre.....uyyyyyy que me embalo!!! besitos y suerte	hello girls.... very good definition... our Royal Academy of Language [RAE] needs to be shaken a bit in relation to gender... you just have to look up some juicy definitions in the RAE dictionary, for example: man, woman, orphan, [female] judge, [female] doctor, etc. (more characteristic of the 18th century than the 21st)... no wonder we had that definition there, but fortunately there is another social reality and language will eventually change and adapt to this reality, despite the terribly traditional RAE. I am all for MAD03's new definition.... and I don't forget either those who didn't choose to be so, but even so I don't identify with the term "(spinster) mother"... that's so old!!!!!... and no doubt that the definition was drafted by a man... uuuups I am warming up!!! kisses and good luck

[16 MORE POSTS CONTINUE THIS THREAD]

Extract 7 reproduces a conversation in the "single mothers by choice" forum that can be considered a form of collective action in the virtual world (Kamberelis, 2004). The intervention gravitates around how they are defined by others and how they define themselves – highlighting, along the way, how issues of identity are a central aspect of this community. In this context, virtual interactions provides a space for co-construction of a particular definition of single motherhood in which many of the structuring themes in the broader debate are inserted: (a) the role played by "choice" (posts 1, 5, and 7), (b) the various forms of male sexism (posts 6 and 7), and (c) institutional and political disadvantage in relation to other family configurations (post 4). More importantly, within this forum there is a strong convergence regarding how these central issues are structured. Among other things, this convergence is reflected by the fact that the original comment prompted twenty responses (by 14 different participants) – some of which were quite elaborate (e.g. posts 4 or 7).

By comparison, Extract 8 captures some of the dilemmas and concerns faced by adoptive single parents who find themselves in the intersection of multiple interests which are not easily addressed in a single virtual platform. Members' accounts show how their strategy is to simultaneously participate in several spaces, which may be later judged and ranked (posts 2, 3, and 4). This thread also captures participants' discomfort with the fact that exchanges in this forum lack involvement by members of the online group (posts 1-3 between MOM01 and MOM02) or that members use the platform for purely instrumental purposes (i.e. "information") (post 1). In this context, participants seem to display two alternative strategies: (a) as followed by MOM02, align more strongly with the single mother by choice community – since she finds more affinities in her involvement with this community even though adoption is the dis-preferred route in the group (post 2); (b) as the thread in general shows, propose the creation of a new online group in which, by restricting the scope of the community, involvement may be increased (from the conversation it transpires that this new space could gravitate around discussing "post-adoption issues by single parents who have adopted older children".[5]

EXTRACT 8
Post thread in the adoptive single parent forum (original message: 21 January 2011)

(Spanish original)	(English translation)
(1) RE: ¿temas de posadopción otra vez? Foro específico postadopción (MOM01) Yo me siento identificada con muchos temas que se tratan en foros de adopción (como el de mayores, o adoptiva, por ejemplo), pero también con temas que se tratan o deberían tratar en foros de monoparentales (como el de madres solteras por elección). Me da un poco de pena que este foro, que aunaría mis dos intereses en cuánto a maternidad (bueno, tengo algunos otros, pero ya se entiende), no responda a las expectativas que tenía cuando entré en él. Yo creo que los hilos interesantes se agotan porque de los cientos de personas que integran este foro, somos un pequeño puñado las que opinamos... y claro, la cosa no da para más... Me sorprende incluso que las personas que entran y están en proceso pregunten sólo (a menudo, no siempre) sobre trámites y países, y tan poco sobre temas de post-adopción...	**(1) RE: Post-adoption issues again? Post-adoption specific forum (MOM01)** I identify with many of the topics that come up in adoption forums (such as the older children one, or adoptive, for example), but also with topics that are covered or should be addressed in single parent forums (such as the single mothers by choice one). I am a bit saddened that this forum, which deals with my two interests concerning maternity (well, I have others, but you know what I mean), does not meet the expectations I had when I joined it. I think that interesting threads are exhausted because, from the hundreds of members of this forum, only a small handful of us give our opinions... and of course, this can only be taken so far... I am even surprised by people who enter and are in the process and only ask (often, not always) about paperwork and countries, and so little on post-adoption...
(2) MOM02 escribió: Hola, [MOM01] Es verdad que apenas se han tratado estos temas. Bueno, alguna que otra vez sí, pero enseguida se agotan los hilos interesantes. Ahora bien, yo llevo tanto tiempo en el foro de mayores como en éste, y tampoco me siento muy identificada con las cuestiones que allí se tratan: la mayoría de los problemas que allí se abordan, no son los que a mí me preocupan, y otros que sí me preocupan, allí no se abordan. Lo cual es normal: sigo pensando que como monoparental tengo una situación diferente y circunstancias distintas que inciden en lo que me pasa y preocupa. Esta es una de las razones por las que, desde un principio, me impliqué en los foros de madres solteras por elección, a pesar de que la mayoría de las participantes han ido por reproducción asistida, y no por adopción internacional. A pesar de ello, la mayoría de las cosas que tratan sobre los niños, sobre el día a día (por supuesto, no lo relacionado con "los tratamientos clínicos"), etc. son cosas que comparto con ellas. Ahora bien, como sabes, en esos "foros", los temas relacionados específicamente con adopción monoparental, o con los hijos adoptivos de monoparentales, más bien, son mínimos, porque somos "dos" (creo que literalmente).	**(2) MOM02 wrote:** Hi, [MOM01] It's true that these issues have hardly been discussed. Well, one time or another they have, but interesting threads are quickly exhausted. Yet, I have been quite a long time in the forum of older children as well as in this one, and I don't identify much with the issues addressed there: most of the problems dealt with there are not those I am concerned about, and others that do concern me are not addressed there. This is normal: I still think that as a single parent I have a different situation and circumstances that affect what happens to me and my worries. This is one of the reasons why, from the beginning, I got involved more in the single mothers by choice forums, even though the majority of the participants there have gone through assisted reproduction, and not through international adoption. Despite this, most of the stuff dealing with children, about day to day things (of course, not related to "clinical treatments"), etc. are things that I share with them. However, as you know, in these "forums", issues specifically related with single parent adoption or adopted children of single parents, are rather scarce, because there are only "two" (literally I think) of us in this situation

[5] Interestingly, the general "adoptive single parent" online group grew out of a similar sense of lack of identification of the important issues of this group of parents within general forums focused on international adoptions or adoptive families.

(3) MOM01 escribió: Estoy de acuerdo con [MOM03], el mejor foro de postadopción es el de mayores de Yahoo (aunque sea de mayores, también hay padre con niños pequeños, o adoptados de pequeños y que han crecido). Con mucha diferencia. Yo entré en este foro hace tiempo, y aquí sigo, y siempre me ha sorprendido la ausencia de temas de enjundia relacionados con la postadopción y con la monoparentalidad.	**(3) MOM01 wrote:** I agree with [MOM03], the best forum for post-adoption is the older children one in Yahoo (even though it is of older children, there are also parent(s) with small children, or children who were adopted when they were small and who have grown up). By far. I joined this forum some time ago, and I'm still here and I have always been surprised by the absence of substantial issues related to post-adoption and single parenthood.
(4) MOM03 escribió: Para mí, el mejor es el de yahoo. Me llegué a apuntar a unos cuantos, pero el único que yo he visto en donde se pone la carne en el asador siempre es en ese.	**(4) MOM03 wrote:** For me, the best is the yahoo one. At one point I joined several but the only one I've seen where thinks get cooking is always that one.
(5) MOM04 escribió: Hola [MOM02 y NOM05], estoy de acuerdo en lo que decís, nuestras familias son diferentes y, aunque apenas visito páginas de postadopción, creo que tendríamos que compartir nuestras experiencias ya sea aquí o en otro foro... así que me apunto a cualquier iniciativa. Seguiremos en contacto. Saludos	**(5) MOM04 wrote:** Hi [MOM02 and NOM05], I agree with what you say, our families are different and, although I hardly visited post-adoption pages, I believe that we should share our experiences either here or in another forum... so count me in for anything that is proposed. We will keep in touch. Cheers

[2 MORE POSTS CONTINUE THIS THREAD]

Conclusions

In the introduction we suggested understanding single parent virtual forums (alongside other contact spaces among these mothers) as educational spaces. We made this claim drawing on a notion of learning/education based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning model. From this perspective learning takes place in communities of practice and can be seen as a transformation in forms of participation and identification with the community (Gee, 2004; Rogoff, 2003). Within this framework, the findings we have presented can help characterize in some more detail how learning unfolds in these spaces and how the communities we have studied are structured.

First, the most salient feature is that these communities are spaces for "peer learning". Interactions in these forums are exclusively among single mothers at different stages of their maternity and family projects. In other words, expertise/mastery – and the potential forms of scaffolding, asymmetry, etc. that arise from it – is exclusively based on being at different stages of the trajectory that we have claimed defines maternity in this context. Within the single mother group we have studied, underscoring peer relations as an educational process is not an irrelevant issue. In Spain, the two main routes to maternity we have examined (adoption and assisted reproduction) are highly institutionalized processes regulated by numerous professionals (psychologists, social workers, doctors, biologists, judges, etc.) and "expert discourses" that define, constrain and evaluate the family projects of these women in very specific terms. In addition, these single parenthood/single motherhood projects are immersed in a complex web of social representations, stereotypes and ideological constructions that circulate in Spanish society. The single mothers we have studied are often exposed and interact, voluntarily and involuntarily, with these expert discourses and social representations (e.g. in organized events with professionals, in their own process during adoption/assisted reproduction, through media appearances and debates, through the associations/organizations they are part of, etc.), so we are not claiming that peer relations are the only (or even the more powerful) source of educational influence. Rather, what we want to stress is that virtual forums and online support groups are the space where peer interactions are privileged and where the discourses and representations put forward by experts, the media, society, etc. can be contested, re-elaborated and discussed.

Second, within these interactions, foundational questions of "definition" and "self-identity" seem to play an important role. This self-reflexive concern is most visible in the case of mothers who, through their virtual, personal and organizational affiliation, have put at the centre of their concerns single motherhood – as we have shown, this is almost always the case in assisted reproduction, but may be one among several competing affinities in the case of international adoptions. Through this identity work single mothers are proposing, re-configuring and questioning common assumptions in relation to kinship and contribute to produce an increasingly complex and heterogeneous portrait of what a family is and, more specifically, of single-motherhood (Rivas, 2009). As Extract 7 clearly shows, they are also committed to make visible and present these debates in the virtual world and its emblematic public spaces.

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USING ONLINE COMMUNITIES, WIKIS AND BLOGS TO CAPTURE THE "BOUNDARY CROSSING" OF NOVICE TEACHERS: AN ACTION RESEARCH ENQUIRY ON THE MARGINS OF DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Warren Kidd[1]

Introduction

The small group of trainee teachers taking part in this research and the online community it has generated have the opportunity, through the "online field", to articulate and reflect upon their emerging identities and pedagogic concerns in their newly qualified teacher (NQT) year. Reflections and concerns of the blogging sample are used to frame and inform practice on the teacher education programme in which the sample was originally learners and peers. The trainee teachers in question explore their boundary-crossing practices as "outsiders" and "legitimate practitioners" in the diverse educational institutions of their first employment, all situated in the post-compulsory/further education (FE) or lifelong learning sector in London and the south-east of the UK (see Kidd, 2011).

Ongoing concerns emerging from the blogging by the NQT sample are: feeling "alone" in the NQT/novice year; missing regular support from the training programme; a sense of concern at a pedagogic "mismatch" between training and mundane "everyday practice"; and the excitement and overwhelming responsibility of "knowing one's own learners". To chart the concerns, pleasures, successes and anxieties of the sample, Web 2.0 tools – blogs and wikis – have been adopted as a means to capture data and to develop a methodology based upon an asynchronous e-focus group. This chapter is an analysis both of the data generated by the blogging and the use of blogging as a methodological tool, exploring methodological and cultural practice online which has produced data phenomenologically rich and ethnographically relevant, albeit on the margins of (digital) ethnography and the "real field".

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Background

The genesis of this research is my own hermeneutical situation – my previous experience in action research in past professional posts and my current role as a teacher educator. As with my sample, my own professional identity as a teacher educator is as "emergent" as their own identities as FE teachers. Phenomenologically speaking, I am interested in the identity and settling-in changes that FE teachers make (and are required to make) in their first year of employment and their reasons for thinking about the sorts of issues that preoccupy them: what are the levels of awareness practitioners have of their own practice and how do they construct their own repertoire of ideas, techniques and approaches? What are the levels of awareness of NQT practitioners of their ongoing and changing identity and professional role constructions? In turn, I am interested in how new entrants into full-time qualified teaching roles after training in the FE sector construct their teacher identity and how this identity relates to their classroom choices and practices (Day, 1985).

As a new teacher educator, how do I "go about the business of teacher education"? How do I construct a pedagogy and how can I measure the impact of this – and the legacy of this impact – on those I teach to teach? The notion of "modelling" and of making explicit the mechanics of practice are often seen to be at the heart of notions of teacher education (see Loughran, 2006, 2007), although they are as problematic, ambiguous and contested as the very educational sectors and policy settlements they "train" and "educate" for. Nonetheless, the expression of this meta-process – reflecting, making explicit otherwise tacit knowledge, modelling and making visible hidden structures and craft practices and techniques – finds illustration in a number of writings in the field (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006; Loughran, 1996; Malderez & Wedell, 2007). As Loughran (2007) notes: "Enacting a pedagogy of teacher education is enmeshed in the ways in which teacher educators knowingly and purposefully create opportunities for students of teaching to see into teaching" (p. 1).

The Web 2.0 tools and techniques which are the subject of this chapter are my response to this particular professional location: how can I support the education of my trainees, and how can I chart and measure the impact of my teaching? How can I chart the development of teacher identities (and the *situated* and *a-situated* boundary-crossing practices) amongst those whom I have taught and trained to teach?

On the margins of digital ethnography?

A blog was created to chart the reflections and stories of emerging teachers in their first term of employment. This online community, hidden to the outside world, represents a "between space" – not the university training programme where the participants (and researcher) first met; not their employment; but somewhere "in between". This between space gives participants in the online community the opportunity to articulate their reflections and stories of their transitory social practices in a "real field", using a "virtual field" as rich and as ethnographically and phenomenologically relevant as their own. In this field, the researcher is located "in the background" – both present and absent, commenting and asking questions but allowing participants to interact and post as they see fit. Participants are able to record their emerging practices alongside their emerging professional socialization. Participants are not acting as disembodied subjects; their stories are located in the shared blogosphere community, demarginalizing their voice (Murthy, 2008); enabling and enacting the recoding of self-narratives.

The adoption of Web 2.0 tools as a means to construct and locate fieldwork has enabled both researcher and participants to join together in acting in a "web of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). The online community created is an artificial site, constructed for the purposes of this research, rather than a "natural" online social group. Yet this space is as "real" as any social grouping and online practice can be. The "audience" are themselves not disembodied, but are also members of the online community – viewers, readers, and bloggers; both audience and story-tellers in their own right. The stories shared enabled the researcher to measure the impact of his teaching on the teacher education programme where the "novice teachers" originally met, and within an action research paradigm to add to research-informed practice in teacher education pedagogy.

The question we can draw from this work which resonates the most, perhaps, with the conference for which this chapter is intended is that concerning the nature of online educational fields as "authentic" avenues for social scientific exploration in general and for (digital) ethnography in particular: does the construction of "artificial" virtual spaces represent an ethnographical field? are "natural" online spaces ethnographically relevant in a way that unnatural and "forced" spaces are not? To quote Geertz (1973),

> From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description". (p. 5)

Consequently, although my online space and place (the blog) allows participants to reflect and story-tell, it does so as a construction which exists merely (solely/artificially) for the purposes of research data gathering – notwithstanding the action research sensibility and the ethical dimensions of participation based upon "something-for-something". In this sense, my work is marginal to digital ethnography, and yet it does produce "thick description" using tools which are themselves phenomenologically and ethnographically rich. As Geertz (1973) notes, the "received procedures" may be different, but the "intellectual effort" owes much to an ethnographical sensibility; on the margins perhaps, but certainly demonstrating shared concerns.

Lay ethnography and identity work

As participants enter the online field, the space to share and interact, they construct stories and give meaning to their thoughts and identity practices. These stories and their professional learning and identity constructions are strongly situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in a sociocultural sense, and yet participants "do" identity work and make transferable this work in their online discussions. In this sense, might we position these online participants as lay ethnographers themselves? This notion allows my research, and within it my conception of my participants, to reframe and reposition their role in both the research and in their own "meaning" which they give to their boundary-crossing practices. Do we need to reconceptualize trainee and novice teachers as lay ethnographers? As they go about the process of giving meaning to their world around them, building their professional *ethno-methods* of reflective learning, are boundary-crossing teachers capturing ethnographically and phenomenologically rich "thick" data? Is this an ethno-ethnography?

It is certainly the case that the participants in this research are working across a double hermeneutic. They are crossing the boundary from "trainee" to "novice" teacher while also crossing the boundary between "outsider" and "legitimate participant" in their new situated settings of first-time employment, separate and distinctive from the institutions where they first "learnt"/trained. To refer to Geertz (1973) once again,

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (p. 10)

My participants – through the blog and the associated writing practices – are very much engaging with "constructing readings" of both their practice and their identity. In doing so, they draw observations from their own fields of practice as "outsiders", slowly making sense of new settings, allowing themselves to be accommodated in new groups. My readings of their readings – rich from the data they provide in our online field – make my location as a researcher in an unnaturalistic virtual community as peripheral as their own location; outside, not yet participating in the legitimate and socio-culturally established groups they seek to cross into.

Murthy (2008) gives the following answer to the question "is digital ethnography a 'real' ethnography?": "As ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories" (p. 838). Through online communities, albeit at the margins of digital ethnography and on the periphery of the "real sites" of their meaning-making, blogs have provided useful tools through which in this research I can encourage voices and stories to be shared, stories which would not otherwise be given a voice if not for the Web 2.0 tools utilized for educational research purposes.

The role of Web 2.0 tools

The engagement with a digital community "locates" the methodological practice of online "blogging", for the purposes of this enquiry, in a comparable location to the use of more traditional diary-based methods of reflection and data generation. Avis, Bathmaker and Parsons (2001) used time-log diaries with FE practitioners to record workflow. Jordan (1989) writes of the role to be played by the articulation of "stories" to help "apprenticeship" work-based learning. The adoption of blogging in this research has allowed the capture of some stories of PCET sector NQTs – stories firmly rooted in workplace learning. This method has provided an effective means to uncover themes and to see how such stories develop and change over time.

Participation in the enquiry was on the basis of "something for something". It offered "value" back to the participants in the research, situating them (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as their own "virtual community". The participants benefited from added support from each other and from me through a blogging experience which lasted six months. The challenge has been to create the right climate and relationships between the members of the (small) virtual community to encourage them to communicate with each other and to try and understand each other's reflections; to understand the "situatedness" they each draw upon. Therefore, our practice is "research-informed" whereby engagement with the digital community allows for the timely capture of concerns raised by the sample as they navigate their way through their professional identities and reflect upon the impact of the PGCE in, as one respondent put it, their *preparedness*.

The posts and blogs are held to be snapshots of wider ongoing identity and pedagogic constructions. Various lessons learned (patterns, trends and concerns) – the articulation of "stories" – have been captured from this enquiry as we chart the ex-trainees' voyage through the first half of their first teaching year. These stories can help to inform the practice of new trainees and entrants to the professional FE sector at a time when the research literature speaks of concern for the potential of multiple, solid and confused identities at such a "significant conjunctural moment in FE" (Avis & Bathmaker, 2009). Stories help to locate our practice within a more tightly defined and yet broader nexus of practice: they help us to imagine and as a result fit in; they help in locating us within the habitus of our professional practice. It is important for the methodology of this enquiry that participants are afforded the opportunity to reflect upon their classroom practice and in doing so make transparent the choices and decisions which underpin the growth of their "professional craft knowledge" (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006), and wider concerns and preoccupations. Avis and Fisher (2006) have suggested that online learning can construct meaningful dialogue. Morrison and Galloway (1996) have highlighted the usefulness of diary accounts in making public the usually private world of classrooms. The experience of this enquiry, to date, indicates that online and digital tools facilitate ease of data generation and gathering.

Research methods

The chosen instrument for data gathering is a private blog – a "walled garden" – hosted by the Google-owned Blogger site, and "closed" to public scrutiny. In the initial stages of this work, wikis rather than blogs were used as means to explore – pre-pilot – the issues and challenges involved in constructing digital/online spaces for reflection and interaction. As Hookway (2008) notes: "While social scientists have been occupied with the question of how and to what extent cyberspace shapes social life, they have also become interested in the question of how cyberspace can expand the social researcher's toolkit" (pp. 91-92). Following this observation, i.e. that "cyberspace" tools and phenomena can provide opportunities for research practices, it is the experience of this research that the use of both wikis and blogs constructed and framed fundamentally different responses by participants, although it is acknowledged that these participants were themselves different research cohorts. Whereas the use of the wiki (provided, at the time, by the *Wetpaint wiki* site) allowed participants to interact much more extensively than the joint-authored blog, on the other hand, the more "traditional" blog has provided richer and "thicker" detailed reflections – a closer and more intimate sense of the narratives and stories of the participants – with little or less interaction between them. In the words of Kollock and Smith (1999): "Each online communication system structures interaction in a particular way, in some cases with dramatic effect on the types of social organizations that emerge from people using them" (pp. 4-5).

Only members of the sample have access to this Blogger site along with me as e-moderator/researcher. Participants are able to post comments, create "discussion threads" and to post replies to each other.

- Participants post comments, reflections and questions to each other semi-regularly onto the secure web space where in turn they can see all the posts and comments and replies of the others – generating support amongst the participants and offering membership of a virtual "community of practice". This offers something of considerable value back to the participants of the research, situating them as their own "virtual community".
- I have explored how the data gathered, with appropriate anonymity (and awareness and approval of the participants), can be made available in teaching sessions to the new cohort on the PGCE – a source of data representing a growing, living, ongoing construction for others (an archive of the voices of others). The new cohort, as an audience outside the research, might still be able to access the journey that the data seek to reflect and make transparent; the professional concerns and "lessons learned" from the impact of the PGCE.
- The themes drawn from the data have enabled me as a teacher education practitioner to evaluate the impact of the UEL provision for my own classroom and professional practice.

- The use of blogs (and before this, of wikis) as data gathering tools in this research raises a number of issues.
- The use of blogs and wikis in this context seems to construct a methodology of an "E-focus group" – but one that is asynchronous, where participants can respond and "chat" but not in real time.
- The use of the blog (and much more the wiki in the pre-pilot), with its emphasis on "text language" and reflection, can produce data that are both "off the cuff" and also "considered", and these very data are expressed by participants in the language of Web 2.0 and can be (re)presented as typed by the participants themselves.
- The blog, over time, allows themes and discussions to emerge and this builds up conversational elements between participants.
- As a researcher, I have access to the time of posting by the participants – adding another rich layer of information to the data.
- The use of a blog in this way has been easy to edit, easy to moderate and offers an "anywhere" access. New posts can be flagged to the e-moderator/ researcher in an email alert, maximizing efficiency.
- Data are backed up.
- Data are ready-made in digital form – allowing for a simple "cut and paste" of text into other programs for coding and data analysis purposes.

(Preliminary) Research findings

A key theme – and one raised by the participants themselves as a "thread" for continued discussion through the six-month period – has been the notion of the *pedagogic mismatch* between their PGCE training pedagogy, based on experimentation and active-learning, and that in operation in their employing institutions. There are a number of elements in this "mismatch": frustration at "older staff" and their practice; the articulation of the feeling of tension between models of "good practice" on PGCE and what employing institutions were celebrating as "normal" or "good practice"; surprise and anxiety at the prevalence of "didactic" teaching; surprise and frustration at learners who valued didactic methods; and the "emotional drain" of feeling "unconnected" with colleagues.

> Challenge and stretch yes, go for it at any costs??? Not really. I think that these observations are sterile and not aimed at getting learners to learn but at getting the college to record your "progress" and giving them the info they need for OFSTED and interna; reporting.[2]

> …you need to play the game. While you can do what you know is best in your classes, when you are being observed you need to know the rules of the game and plan strategically. Not change your style and your belief completely but see the bigger picture. If you don't achieve the best grades, you don't get to progress and influence even more how the teaching is done.

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[2] All quotations from the data are (re)presented here exactly as typed and posted by the respondents on the blog.

> The worrying thing is is that my colleague commented on the fact that she did the didactic with activities because otherwise "they don't think they are learning anything". My stomach turned over and I felt myself getting quite annoyed actually!! Not toward my colleague, but towards the whole system! After doing my PGCE training and it changing my life completely and my ideas about what teaching should be, to hear that comment, after working so hard really made me feel angry, annoyed, anxious and a bit sad actually!
>
> I am also sooooo confused about what the college is looking for with regard to teaching practice. My colleague, whom I adore and totally respect and who I think is awesome, got observed today and got a grade two for mainly didactic teaching with activities in between.........I feel totally lost! On the other hand, I love the work and the stuff I am doing with my students and feel it is right, but will I need to have a didactic approach with a few bits of activities when I am observed next year????!!! Any suggestions, guys?

The participants in the research were both excited about the prospect of, as one put it, *carving out* new professional identities and frustrated at the same time with what they saw as poor and average practice, at the *mismatch* between what they believed about learning, teaching and pedagogy, and what they felt was *thrust upon* them by the quality mechanisms of their employing institutions. The participants were surprised and overwhelmed by the levels of "performativity" in their employing institutions – and felt they had been sheltered from this during pre-service training. There was also widespread recognition that their professional teaching role was *there for the making*. They operated with a strong notion that their own professional identity was contested and at odds with what they felt was happening to their institutions and that they worked in a space where they had to *play the game* while still making sure they taught how they wanted to. They saw themselves as active agents in their own professional practices, but felt that this involvement would be a challenge and would also occur at times in *secret*, away from the wider *institutional game*.

Conclusions

The experience of this enquiry, to date, indicates that online and digital tools allow for ease of data generation and gathering. They have allowed rich qualitative data to be produced which at times speak with a very personal voice; making invisible classrooms slightly less private than before. The regular and at times "throw-away" nature of the threads, and the openness of many of the blogged posts, suggests that the act of working digitally and communally enables participants to manipulate and mould thoughts and reflections in reflective and reflexive ways. As Kent (1993) reminds us, "An ethnography cannot give us a glimpse of reality that resides beyond the story told within the ethnography; the story is all" (p. 67). The use of online unnaturalistic communities and virtual places has allowed participants to tell ethnographic stories themselves, at first hand, and so these digital practices offer an insight into their own craft practice and in turn their ongoing identity transformations as they boundary-cross from illegitimate to legitimate participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In framing this discussion of teaching, teaching knowledge base and teacher education I argue that it makes sense to see the complex and context-dependent practice of teaching as an identity forming/supporting/transforming process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Turner-Bisset, 1999). This is as true for the FE sector as elsewhere – and as true for teacher educators training VET professionals to work in the FE sector as elsewhere. Feldman (1997) articulates this clearly in describing "teaching as a way of being" (p. 757). In this "teaching as a way of being perspective", it is not so much that one "does" teaching, but is *being* a teacher. Part of this conceptualization suggests that teaching is a social practice made up of innumerable social encounters; that teaching "...is highly contextualized and is situated socially, spatially, and temporally in teachers' practice" (p. 757).

If nothing else, the social enterprise that is teaching means that teachers come into contact, daily, routinely, with other knowledgeable social agents – students/learners – and their agency often requires newcomers to the profession to rethink their learning and practice – a vital part of the localized context and how this shapes the learning experience of FE trainees (Yandell & Turvey, 2007). Within this "way of being" – this "acting out" and "feeling within" the teacher role and identity – Grimmett and MacKinnon (1992) talk of the "crafty teacher": the dexterous manipulation of a variety of knowledge and its application to localized contexts. I suggest that this is the true goal of all teacher education and its pedagogy – to develop *craft-y trainees* who go on to become *craft-y teachers*. In a sector shaped by global policy rhetoric and increased managerialism, FE trainee teachers, perhaps manipulating both a VET background and a "college" pedagogy, may need to be the "craftiest" of all, to negotiate both "being a vocational professional" and "being a teacher", and all this while boundary-crossing into (and from) sociocultural settings found to be quite different from learnt experience on the PGCE.

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PART 2

CONCEPTUAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR ETHNOGRAPHY

ETHNOGRAPHY, EDUCATION AND ONLINE RESEARCH (OLR)[1,2]

Bob Jeffrey[3]

Ethnographic legitimacy

The Malinowskian revolution in ethnography comprised of uniting the fieldworker and the theorist in a single body, such as that the one who went, saw and reported was also the one who analysed (Kuper, 1983). Travel in this analysis became a signifier of the relationship between the writer and readers of the ethnographic text and the subjects of the research. Along with travel comes the notion of translation (S. Turner, 1980). It was not sufficient to travel; one must come back with an account.

However, the ethnography of the internet does not involve travel. It is an experiential rather than a physical displacement. The field can be conceived of as a "space" – better an attitude – which, far from being neutral or inert, is itself the product of disciplinary technologies (R. Turner, 1989). In a conventional ethnography involving travel, the ethnographer is in a symmetrical position to that of informants – looking around, asking questions and trying out interpretations, the ethnographer exploits the situation of being a stranger.

But there is a paradox here: while pursuing face-to-face meetings with online informants enhances authenticity via triangulation it might also threaten experiential authenticity that comes from aiming to understand the way the world is for informants. Rather than accepting face-to-face communication as inherently better in ethnography, a more sceptical and symmetrical approach suggests that it should be used with caution and with a sensitivity to the ways informants use the context and situation under investigation. Besides, authenticity is another manifestation of the "phenomenon always escapes" rule (Silverman, 1993) – doomed to be ultimately irresolvable. How informants judge authenticity is more relevant.

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[1] This chapter is an attempt to establish the methodological basis for carrying out ethnographies of online education communities, in particular in the Continuing Professional Development VITAL project coordinated by the Faculty of Education and Language Studies at The Open University – www.vital.ac.uk.
[2] The arguments and references in this chapter are almost all to be found in two books – one authored and one edited – by Professor Christine Hine of Surrey University, UK (Hine, 2000, 2005).
[3] Graduate School of Education, Exeter University, UK. Email: bj@eande.org.uk.

There is more to be gained from applying traditional qualitative or ethnographic methodologies – which can contain quantitative analysis – to online social groups (OLSG) than spending time trying to discern whether the online nature of their activity is amenable to ethnographic principles. Ethnography is a diverse methodology, and has its own internal problems with coherence, reliability and validity anyway.

One of the arguments for this approach is to see online social groups as not much different to other forms of social interactions and sociability and that it is not appropriate to separate "virtual" spaces/places from other such forms. We use the term "social groups" instead of "virtual communities" for the latter implies non real entities whereas active groups see them as real. Nevertheless, the boundaries of the ethnographic field in computer-mediated communities are more tenuous and need interpreting and understanding (Rutter & Smith, 1999).

It appears that ethnography, in its broadest terms, and qualitative research are now the preferred forms for research of online social groups. The first phase in the early 1990s focused more on psychological approaches and the second contemporary phase focused more on naturalistic approaches of observation with or without participation and ethnographic methodologies.

There is also a matter of legitimacy and status involved for online social groups as an area of relevant social documentation and the claiming of them as an ethnographic field brings that legitimation. It establishes the sites/places/spaces as cultures worthy of investigation and analysis. They define each other, a mutual existence. Ethnography is an ideal methodology to explore the complex links between claims for Network Technology (NT) in the home, workplace, mass media and academic journals. It can look at the way the technology is experienced in use. Instead of asking what effects computer-mediated communication (CMC) produces, an opposite question deserves attention: how does the context shape the use and effects of CMC? (Mantovani, 1994).

Ethnography can be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it.

Some research questions might be:

- How do users of the internet understand its capacities? What significance does it have for them? How do they understand its capabilities as a medium of communication and whom do they perceive to be the audience?
- How does the internet affect the organization of social relationships in time and space? Is this different to the way in which "real life" is organized and if so how do users reconcile the two.
- What are the implications of the internet for authenticity and authority? How are identities performed and experienced and how is authenticity judged?
- Is the "virtual" experienced as radically different and separate from the "real"? Is there a boundary between online and offline?

Theoretical perspectives

The Internet as a culture and a cultural artefact

There have been two distinct ways of viewing the internet, each with its own analytical advantage: it's a place, cyberspace, where culture is formed and reformed; the second is as a cultural artefact (Woolgar, 1996), a product of culture, a technology that was produced by people with contextually situated goals and priorities.

Once CMC was conceptualized as culture, it became the business of anthropology, cultural studies, political science, communication and media studies, psychology and sociology. Cyberspace is now crowded with researchers swarming over the virtual landscape, peering around at virtual natives and writing busily in their virtual field notes (Stone, 1996).

The "reduced cues" model for understanding CMC is probably the best known and most influential of the cultural technology based approaches, i.e., comparing CMC meetings with face-to-face ones, for example, showing how the former enables disinhibition. Researchers focus more on the context in which the technology is used and its influence on social identity and de-individualization.

However, instead of asking what effects CMC produces, an opposite question also deserves attention: how does the context shape the use and effects of CMC (Mantovani, 1994). The internet as a cultural artefact can be seen as thoroughly socially shaped, both in the history of its development and the moments of its use. Social shaping implies that what the technology comes to be is the upshot of social processes of negotiation between different interest groups who view differently the advantages and disadvantages of the technology. For ethnography, the technical and social foci of the internet become constructs which are performed in different settings, rather than *a priori* explanatory distinctions (Rachel & Woolgar, 1995).

Social theory

Social theory focuses not on the deterministic social effects of NT, but as an enriched way of thinking about the complexities of the relationship between NT and societies (Webster, 1995) to analyse technology, and the sociology of science and technology suggests we view technology not by virtue of some intrinsic quality of the technology itself, but as a result of contingent sets of social processes; technology as text to be used in any way people determine (Grint & Woolgar, 1997).

Technology as text

Technology as text (Grint & Woolgar, 1997) is one way of analysing the CMC. The design process involved developers embedding their notions of what users are like into the machine, consumption involves processes of negotiation and interpretation. The technology as text metaphor suggests a focus on processes of development and consumption, viewing the relationship between producers and consumers as mediated, but not determined by the technology text. Rather than possessing inherent qualities, the technology text "makes available" readings which users/readers interpret in context. It focuses attention on the contingency of practices through which the internet is made meaningful in both production and use. Internet Service Providers (ISP) application developers, web page developers and newsgroup contributors could be seen as producers of the internet.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest texts deserve a more detailed appraisal, than the traditional prioritisation of oral interactions and engagements, and that judgement about the authenticity of written accounts should be suspended. Rather than being seen as more or less accurate portrayals of reality, texts should be seen as ethnographic material that tells us something about the understanding people have of the reality they inhabit. Texts are an important part of the life in many of the settings which ethnographers address and to ignore them is to produce a highly partial account. Rule books, manuals, biographies, scientific papers, official statistics and codes of practice can all be seen as ethnographic material in the ways in which they present and shape reality and are embedded in practice. Ethnographers should neither dismiss texts as distorted accounts not accept them as straightforward truths, but should draw on their own "socialised competence" in reading and writing to interpret them as culturally situated cultural artefacts (p. 174).

A textual focus places emphasis on the ways in which contributions are justified and rendered authoritative and on the identities which authors construct to perform their postings – a discourse analytic approach, but it remains ambivalent about the nature of the discourse under analysis. The distinction between text and interaction blurs since the material discourse analysis encompasses textualized records of interaction as well as solely written texts. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the reality which texts construct – a cultural approach.

Textography is a combination of an analysis of texts with an understanding of their relationship to other texts and the working lives of authors, although this is a partial work and the model is unable to do justice to "complex situationalities of personal, curatorial, institutional, and disciplinary influences" (Swales, 1998, p. 142). The technology as text metaphor is less straightforwardly applied to the internet than it is to bounded and located technological artefacts, but can be used as a thoroughgoing constructivist approach. Technology in everyday life can only ever be grasped conjuncturally as part of ongoing interactions in the home, e.g., one cannot study the TV alone (Bausinger, 1984) as a text independent of context.

Texts possess the potential for availability outside their site of production and hence make possible the separation of production and consumption, but the readers of a text cannot readily ask the authors what they meant. The focus on consuming texts is therefore placed far more on the interpretative work done by readers and less on a shared understanding between authors and readers – the experience of using the internet. Rather than replacing an ethnographic approach, a discourse analytic approach to internet texts could carefully coexist with ethnographic approaches to internet interaction. This combination could help maintain analytic ambivalence about the phenomena being studied. Both interactionist and text analysis approaches share a problem of observability: potential interactants who choose to remain silent and potential authors who fail to write are lost to the analysis. The internet is textual twice over: as a discursively performed culture and as a culture artifact – the technology text. In neither sense are its uses and interpretations determined by the text.

The internet is therefore both a cultural context and a cultural artefact. It is a cultural context through the way we apply ethnography and it is also a range of technologies used by people to construct, negotiate and exchange meaning and understanding. It is an interpretively flexible object – a culturally located experience and ethnography concerns how groups are formed and are sustained.

However, the distinction between the internet as culture and cultural artefact is a heuristic device for thinking about the interdeterminancy of the internet. It is not to be taken as a distinction that is real in the experience of the users of the technology or as a straightforward reflection of online/offline boundary. The distinction between culture and cultural artefact replays the real/virtual distinction and if accepted unproblematically it may obscure the processes through which this boundary is itself constructed. Treating the internet as a cultural artefact interrogates the assumptions which viewing the internet as a site for culture entails and highlights the status of the internet as itself as a cultural achievement based on particular understandings of the technology.

The ethnographic boundaries of online social groups need identifying, as does the identification of who is local, who belongs, how identities are displayed, and how are the lines between this and that group to be meaningfully drawn (Rutter & Smith, 1999, 2005). Online data leave traces – logs files, message archives and hyperlinks (Beaulieu, 2004, 2005).

Email as textual data (Mackay, 2005) could firstly be seen as an encoding process and then a decoding one (Hall, 1980), and added researcher interest will constitute the way participants respond to emails not just the content – the readability of texts (Barthes, 1973) as opposed to the deconstructionists view that power and politics are found only in language (Hall, 1980). Both encoded texts foreground some interpretations and marginalize others in an attempt to establish meaning, so symbolic work is being carried out (Mackay, 2005) in textual reproduction and this opens it to interpretation.

Studies to date have largely focused on the internet's status as a culture and neglected it as a cultural artefact, so combining the two (online/offline) raises methodological problems, e.g., an approach applied in specific bounded settings compare with CMC that disrupts the notion of boundaries. Ethnographers have often settled for studying either online or offline, but to do both requires a rethinking of the relationship between ethnography and space.

Methodological issues

The use of any particular methodology will affect the nature of the area to be investigated as epistemologies affect research outcomes. So, the use of ethnographic principles and methodology will, to some considerable extent, influence the concept of any place or space and construction of its features and attributes. Kitchin (1998) summarizes proposed effects of cyberspace into three categories: changes to the role of time and space; changes to communication and the role of mass communication; and a questioning of dualisms such as the real and the virtual, truth and fiction, the authentic and the fabricated, technology and nature; and representation and reality.

However, it is also important to incorporate a sceptical ethnographic approach to the inherent qualities which are proposed for NT, in particular the qualities which are supposed to make the internet a force of social transformation.

Community

The use of ethnography to research online social groups (OLSG) is affecting our continuing conceptualizations of ethnography itself, which implies a reciprocal relationship between the sites for investigation and research, and the methodological approach. Studies of CMC have been proposed as promoting a new definition of community, which relies more upon shared social practices than on physical boundaries (Watson, 1997) but others say they cannot be considered as such if participants can simply log out, the level of intimacy is insufficient, i.e., pseudo-community (Beniger, 1987) in contrast to an idealized "traditional community" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

Traditional anthropology suggests that community is determined by overall social structures whereas an opposite evolutionary approach sees community as self-contained, a community as primary stage of social gathering ordered by rational and contractual relations. A third alternative approach, useful for online social groups, is that of the symbolic anthropologists between the two extremes, an outcome of social relationships that perform the idea and give a specific and contextualized meaning to it (Guimarães Jr., 2005). They assert identity of it (Cohen, 1985). A community is predominantly a matter of boundary construction through identity and shared systems of meaning. "The reality of a community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it both a resource and a repository of meaning and a referent of their identity" (Cohen, 1985, p. 118). The outcome of taking a symbolic approach is that the quest for an exact definition of it loses its meaning. But also to say that something is a community or is not is to perform political work (Watson, 1997). The main question is not "Are they a community?" but "how are they a community?" (Guimarães Jr., 2005). For online social groups, community is a metaphor whose meaning applies differently to each context, an emic approach in which social networks create a local culture, one of shared conceptions and representations about the social life developed by the group of people as well as clues about the "proper behaviour that frames the way the interactions develop, a shared culture, belonging to the same web of meanings" (Geertz, 1973).

Stone (1996) describes the online and offline as both being a consensual loci with their own locally defined version of reality. We know very little about the ways in which these two contexts are connected. On one level this is a practical problem: the settings where we might observe internet culture are different from the ones in which we would observe the internet in use. One setting is the virtual and the other is a physical space, the home, workplace or other physical place. The practical problem of designing an ethnographic study of the internet is also a statement about methodological foundations. The problem is a result of a narrow conception of ethnography focused on prolonged engagement in a bounded social space, whether that be a village, a club, a computer company or a newsgroup.

There is no "place" in the virtual world beyond the metaphor, so the definition of a research setting is not a starting point but a primary research question requiring careful and continuous ethnographic examination, but we can ask participants to provide contextual descriptions of their own offline/online contexts (Mackay, 2005).

Relations

Online activities in online social groups questions the understanding of a research site and the kinds of possible interactions therein and involves the building of relationships, autonomous self-disclosure and it can be used as a research tool. Hyperpersonal communication (Walther, 1996) produces a visual autonomy and therefore more homogeneity in that generally people may not be able to see or hear others (Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990) and are therefore unable to use common stereotypes of race and class. Nevertheless, writing is the medium of the site and this may lead to more disclosure than possibly face-to-face encounters, which are heavily affected by symbolic interactionism. Anonymity can more easily be obtained and may lead to more openness, e.g., health queries (Joinson, 2005), sex worker sites where secrecy is needed exemplifying the fact that cyberspace is not "another space" detached from real life, but rich and complex connections within contexts in which it is used (Sanders, 2005). Hyperpersonal interaction (Walther, 1996) has four factors – sharing, optimizing self-presentation, asynchronous communication and a feedback loop. Online social groups provide spaces for more interactive activity such as "liming" hanging around, chatting, finding out what is happening, exchanging banter – traditionally a "street corner" – a feature of Trinidadian life that can now take place on the internet (Miller & Slater, 2000). Internet chat enhances indigenous culture rather than homogenizing it.

Time

For Giddens (1990), the clock and the calendar contribute towards the formation of "empty" dimensions of time and space. Time becomes a universal concept allowing for coordination across distance. Space is separated from the physical locations known as place. The separation of time and place and their transformation as factors in social ordering is referred to as time-space distanciation. This process is enabled by disembedding mechanisms: systems of exchange and knowledge which are independent of particular locations in time and space. In this way of thinking the new information and communication technologies are an extension of an existing concern with greater control through greater knowledge coordination across time and space.

Research over time is a major feature of ethnography and online research logs record every instance in time and open themselves to quantitative analysis as well as a qualitative analysis of how meanings and relationships change over time. However, time is also compacted (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004) in online social groups in that often activity, interchange and explorations happen quickly and speedily in bursts (Guimarães Jr., 2005). These may die away or continue in a more considered manner over a longer period and there may be more significant change affecting the whole site over time depending on the arrival and departure of participants. This will be more prolific in traditional ethnographic sites where physical structures and highly structured organizations tend to exist for lengthy periods of time.

Researcher presence

The social construction of knowledge is a problem for ethnography for the latter could be seen as a social construction and not a representation of reality. This paradox becomes more apparent for ethnographers of knowledge production, who might claim to be producing objective descriptions of the ways in which what scientists think of objective fact turns out to be the upshot of social processes. If knowledge is seen to be a social construct, then ethnography has very weak claims to be held exempt and the case for validating ethnographies on the basis of truthful representation of underlying reality becomes suspect.

Three distinct strategies for dealing with this paradox have become notable.

A] To rehabilitate members understandings of culture alongside the ethnographers account so neither is privileged and it blurs the boundaries between ethnographic and member understandings.

B] The ethnographer reflecting on the particular perspective, history and standpoint which led the ethnographer to give this particular account and standpoint, but some see this kind of self-reflexivity as a cul-de-sac (Moores, 1993).

C] To incorporate a destabilization of ethnography authority within the text itself. Epistemological correctness entails making clear the constructed nature of accounts which aim to make clear their constructed and contingent nature. Different ways of writing ethnography based on a recognition that writing is a constructive act rather than a straightforward way of reflecting reality (Denzin, 1997).

Hine (2000) argues that we don't have to choose but she follows Hammersley's (1990) perspective that we make judgements about relevance – the purposes the description serve. However, she doesn't explicitly add the other two criteria to legitimize an ethnography, that of plausibility and credibility, nor does she invokes Hammersley's description of these three criteria representing a subtle reality (Hammersley, 1992), but she appears to be going along this path.

Her major step is to incorporate a form of reflexivity that is based on the researcher having some similar knowledge of CMC and to use that alongside the perspectives of the research members. She sees this as addressing the problem of ethnographic invisibility of interpretive and embodied work (Cooper, Hine, Rachel, & Woolgar, 1995). The ethnographer can use an active engagement with the internet as a reflexive tool to a deeper understanding of the medium. Reflexivity can therefore be a strategic response to the silence of web surfers and newsgroup lurkers. It can also be a way of acquiring and examining "socialized competencies" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). An ethnographer can, by using the net, develop an understanding of what it means to be a user. The processes through which field sites are found and materials collected become ethnographic materials in themselves. Being present forces the ethnographer to be a participant in events and interactions. By opening up oneself to the unpredictability of the field allows at least part of the agenda to be set by the setting.

A limited medium like CMC seems to pose problems for the ethnography's claim to test knowledge through experience and interaction. The position changes if we recognize that the ethnographer could instead be construed as needing to have similar experiences to those of the informants so using a reflexive understanding of what it is to be part of the internet. This provides a symmetry to the ethnography as the ethnographer learns through using the same media as informants.

This seems to be quite sensible for, although we attempt to make the familiar strange in traditional ethnographies, we need to have some similar understandings, e.g., relations, power, performances, self-interest and altruism, which we take into any ethnographic site and also probably some knowledge of the technical aspects of a site for study such as having been a teacher or student.

Ethnographers have to find ways of immersing themselves in life as it is lived online and as it connects through into offline social spheres. It is more than the ability to send and analyse email.

- Effective online relations can be formed and an online presence is essential for enhancing an understanding of CMC and its broader cultural domains that exist in and through it.
- The benefits of online research do not arise automatically from the technology, but require considerable sensitivity and reflection on the part of the researcher. A learning process, focusing on the development of new sociability skills is to be expected.
- The online/offline distinction should not necessarily be adhered to as a research strategy. While some research strategies can be answered through research

relationships conducted solely online, others will be best served by moving research relationships either from online to offline or vice versa.

- Researchers have to pay considerable attention to their self-presentation. Establishing one's presence as a bone fide researcher and trustworthy recipient of confidences is not automatic, and varies depending on the cultural context under investigation. The doubts of informants, the risks to which they feel the research may expose them, and their expectations of online relationships may vary widely according to settings.

Ethics

In terms of data use and ethics we should make a distinction between information that is publicly accessible and that which is publicly disseminated. To use publicly accessible data need not require participative identification but disseminating that data is another matter and we have to adhere to ethical principles of doing no harm. However, online social groups often use pseudonyms to protect themselves from identification and to give themselves visual autonomy (Joinson, 2005), so it may be easier to use already anonymized data obviating the need for participation consent being agreed (Sanders, 2005).

Online ethnography describes places that are not material spaces, but places where disembodied persons act and perform (Rutter & Smith, 2005). We have deskwork rather than fieldwork (Fox & Roberts, 1999) and so internet ethnographers use more "observation only" practices than participant observation, more unobtrusive measures (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966), closer to leaving the site undisturbed (Woods, 1996). Nevertheless, our ethical stance encourages us to announce our presence so there is a "presence and absence" situation.

An ethnography of, in and through, the internet can be conceived of as an adaptive and wholeheartedly partial approach which draws on connection rather than location in defining its object.

Connectivity rather than holism

Ethnography holds particular appeal for studying what people actually do with the technology. Once we think of cyberspace as a place where people do things, we can start to study just exactly what it is they do and why, in their terms, they do it. But ethnographic methodology needs altering. Real time engagement with discussions as they develop can be combined with other kinds of interactions: small exchanges with participants, electronic or face-to-face interviews and the posing of general questions to the group for two-way interactions, a holistic approach.

However, Hine (2000) is drawn away from holism towards connectivity, a field of relations rather than a site (Marcus, 1995; Olwig & Hastrop, 1997) as an organizing principle, so she is agnostic about the most suitable site – online/offline. Ethnographers start from a particular place but follow connections which were made meaningful from that setting. Ethnographic sensitivity focuses on the ways places are made meaningful and visible. So we examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space (Marcus, 1995), e.g., following people, things, metaphors, narratives, biographies and conflicts. Any anxiety about diluting fieldwork is replaced by increasing sensitivity.

A space of flows which in contrast to the space of place is organized round connection rather than location – flows of people, information and money circulate between nodes which form a network of associations increasingly independent of specific local context (Castells, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). Online ethnographies de-spatialize notions of community and focus on cultural process rather than physical space. Connective ethnography turns the attention from being here to getting there (Clifford, 1992). Abandoning the online/offline boundary as a principled barrier to the analysis allows it to be traversed (or created and sustained) through the ways in which connections are assembled. Rather than cataloguing the characteristics of internet communication, the virtual ethnographer asks not what is the internet, but when, where, and how is the internet (Moerman, 1974).

Connection could also be the juxtaposition of elements in a narrative, the array of pages thrown up by a search engine, or a set of hyperlinks on a webpage as an instance of communication between two people. The goal of ethnography becomes to explore what those links are, how they are performed and what transformations occur en route in a snowballing approach (Bijker, 1995) that is sensitive to heterogeneity. Each performance of a connection becomes an invitation to the ethnographer to move on. An active engagement through exploration and interaction rather than a disengaged textual analysis.

The principles of virtual ethnography

1. Sustained interaction to reduce puzzlement and used as a device to render the use of the internet problematic – the way it is used, interpreted and reinterpreted.
2. Interactive media is both culture and cultural artifact.
3. Ethnography of mediated interaction as mobile rather than multi-sited.
4. If culture and community are self-evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography. The objective of ethnographic enquiry can usefully be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle.
5. Stopping ethnography is a pragmatic decision because there are no natural boundaries and therefore the decision is limited by the embodied ethnographer's constraints in time, space and ingenuity.
6. Along with spacial dislocation comes temporal dislocation. Engagements with mediated contexts are interspersed with interactions in other spheres and with other media. Virtual ethnography is interstitial in that it fits into other activities of both ethnographer and subjects. Immersion in the setting is only intermittently achieved.

7. Holistic description is unachievable, and therefore accounts are based on ideas of strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities.
8. The shaping of interactions with informants by the technology is part of the ethnography as are the ethnographer's interactions with the technology.
9. The ethnography is both absent and present. The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies *is* the ethnography. This is ethnography in, of and through technology.
10. Virtual Ethnography (VE) is not only virtual in the sense of being disembodied. Virtuality also carries a connotation of "not quite" adequate for practical purposes even if it is not strictly the real thing. VE is adequate for the practical purpose of exploring the relations of mediated interaction, even if not quite the real thing in methodologically purist terms. It is an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.

The final principle is the fundamental one which underlies the rest and makes them possible. Adapting and interrogating ethnography keeps it alive, contextual and relevant.

The crisis of representation, legitimation and praxis (Denzin, 1997), rather than suggesting the abandonment of ethnography altogether, can be seen as opening possibilities for creative and strategic applications of the methodology – The ethnography of ethnography (Van Maanen, 1995).

Educational research possibilities

The following internet research projects have been or are being carried out by researchers at The Open University and show the range of possibilities for virtual ethnographies: new pedagogies, social presence in online distance education, learning cultures in online education, learner creativity and control, women's use of online networking for professional development, student use of technologies for learning and the use of blogging to improve study skills. Copies of all papers/chapters can be found on The Open Resource at The Open University – http://oro.open.ac.uk.

Virtual worlds: Controversies at the frontier of education (Sheehy, Ferguson, & Clough, 2010)

This book faces the challenges that arise when virtual worlds are used for learning and teaching. The ideas and practices emerging from this field are relevant to all educators, and it offers insights into the development of a pedagogy that is authentic, inclusive and enjoyable. Each chapter addresses a particular issue and is illustrated with examples drawn from both research and practice. These examples cover a wide range of learning scenarios, both formal and informal, involving teenagers, school pupils, undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as a variety of lifelong learners. The issues include the importance of virtual worlds, the influence of online games and physical-world economics and politics, the relationship between avatars and learner identity, the challenges of ensuring child safety and protection, interaction between real-world and in-world environments and activities, accessibility and the development of new pedagogues. The authors are all teachers and learners in virtual worlds; many have been responsible for designing, programming and maintaining virtual environments. (Book description)

Social presence in online learning communities (Kear, 2010)

The more recent literature on social presence suggests that it is influenced by the behaviour and interactions of participants, as well as by the characteristics of the communication medium. Learners in an online community can therefore increase social presence by communicating in ways which are perceived as 'warm' or 'sociable', and can compensate for the lack of richness of the medium. Moreover, features of communication systems can be used to encourage these types of interactions, and to ease communication. For example: use of member profiles can help participants feel that they know each other better; and use of synchronous communication can avoid frustrating delays between messages and responses. (Abstract, para. 2)

Learning cultures in online education (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009)

In compiling 'Learning Cultures in Online Education', therefore, we are not looking primarily to fill a gap in existing empirical research, but instead to draw together perspectives that problematize the workings of culture in online education from a range of theoretical and disciplinary positions. This, we hope, will help define a gap that we ourselves, and others, may be motivated to try to fill empirically in our future research. We are also, in the interests of cross-disciplinarity in educational research, setting out to draw attention to drivers of educational change other than the purely instructional or pedagogical. (p. 2)

When educational worlds collide (Twining, 2010)

The Schome Park Programme set out in 2007 to use a virtual world, complemented by a wiki and forum, to explore radically different models of education systems, which can genuinely empower learners to take control of and responsibility for their own learning. This chapter explores the culture and approaches that were adopted within the Schome Park Programme and contrasts them with those found in schools. It provides specific examples to illustrate clashes of culture between self-directed learning in Schome Park and the culture of schools in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). (p. 125)

Patterns of online networking for women's career development (Donelan, Herman, Kear, & Kirkup, 2009)

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how women working in science, engineering and technology use online networking, for career and professional development purposes. A combined qualitative and quantitative approach is taken, using interviews for the first phase of the research and online surveys for the second. The findings are discussed and presented with reference to theories on career development and in the context of recent work on women's networks and online social networking. (p. 92)

Research methodological issues with researching the learner voice (Conole, 2009)

This chapter provides a summary of current research exploring students' use of technologies. It focuses in particular on a case study carried out in the UK, which explored the use of technologies by students in four different disciplines. The case study included an online survey, audio logs and interviews. The findings suggest that students are now immersed in a technology-enhanced learning environment and use technologies extensively to support their learning activities. It points to changing digital literacy skills and has profound implications for educational institutions in terms of how courses are designed and delivered and in how students are supported in their learning. (p. 669)

University students' self-motivated blogging and development of study skills and research skills (Minocha & Kerawalla, 2010)

The chapter presents and analyzes an empirically grounded investigation into the self-motivated course-related blogging activities of undergraduates and Masters-level students, and research-related blogging of doctoral students. It focuses on how blogging may help students to develop their study skills and research skills. Analysis of students' blogs and semi-structured interviews with the participants has shown that writing in the public domain can encourage networking, commitment to goals, articulation of research ideas, development of confidence in writing, and facilitation of critical and reflective thinking skills. The blog can be a useful repository of ideas and resources, and can be a public platform for the synthesis of ideas. Blogging can facilitate the creation and membership of an online community where academic events are flagged, resources are shared, research is advertised, and ideas and comments are exchanged. The authors conclude with a discussion of the ways in which blogging can support the development of key study and research skills, such as time management, academic writing and effective communication. It is hoped that the findings will help in guiding students, educators and institutions considering the use of blogging in university education. (p. 149)

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CONCEPTUAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN HYPERMEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY: A BOON FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The following chapter outlines digital and hypermedia methods in the research, describing how software such as *Atlas*, *SurveyMonkey*, *Final Cut Pro*,[3] as well as a project blog, enabled some virtual communication, research documenting, and analysis among and within research sites. We suggest that our experience with these methods exposed the limitations of the technology, but that coming up against these limitations posed useful questions about the nature of specific research methods and about the overall priorities of the study. As an example, the chapter focuses on how digital methods have usefully complicated available conceptions of "liveness", an important dimension both of live performance and of ethnographic fieldwork. We hoped that the technology would allow us to make the live experience of performance and of our fieldwork available to further analysis by other teachers, other researchers, and in other sites. When we began to incorporate technology into our research, it was with the thought that it might help us preserve, or at least restore to our memory, our live experiences in the field. As the research progressed, it actually had the greater effect of attuning us more closely to the nature of knowledge production and sharing embedded in our research methodology. The chapter will offer some poignant empirical examples to demonstrate that in our research, analysis has been situated in, and quite motivated by, the technical hurdles we have faced. With guarded optimism about the promises offered to ethnography by new

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[3] The larger paper, published in *Ethnography and Education* in 2011, from which this chapter is drawn offers an extensive analysis of the challenges and uses of *Adobe Connect* and a project *wiki* for communication and collaborative analysis across the geographic, cultural and linguistic divides of our global multi-sited ethnography. In the interest of brevity, that discussion has been omitted from this chapter.

technologies, and the ways in which ethnography does change as a result of these digital desires and capabilities, the chapter concludes that our virtual, multi-sited experience valuably relocated research analysis from post-facto interpretation to a dynamic and ongoing negotiation with method in the field.

Atlas and *SurveyMonkey*: software and processes of data collection and analysis

Two technologies we have used to document and organize our data have similarly led us to think differently about the selectivity of method, our relationship to the field, and specifically to the value we have placed on liveness. The first of these is *Atlas*, a qualitative analysis software that allows us to code our data (transcriptions, discussions, video, photos, etc.), create novel links between research data and existing scholarship, and to systematically organize and make sense out of diverse materials. It is also helping us to create important thematic links between our qualitative data sets and our quantitative questionnaire across sites. *SurveyMonkey* allows us to easily export data to SPSS for quantitative analysis. Miller and Slater (2000) have proposed that online questionnaires can sometimes produce greater "intimacy" in data. What is clear is that we have collected great amounts of data from Likert-type numerical scales, Worchel self-identity questions, and open-ended questions across great geographical boundaries, and we have done so at very minimal cost financially and in terms of human resources. Translating the questionnaires into Hindi and Mandarin, however, proved to be quite difficult as local dialect presented some additional challenges.

The purpose of these surveys was to quantitatively explore factors associated with student engagement in challenging educational contexts around the world. A mixed-methods approach was used to embed the surveys within the existing qualitative agenda of the study in order to extend, inform, and deepen our understanding of what motivates student learning. Literature on student engagement in schools located within urban neighbourhoods and contexts that are economically disadvantaged was used to design two separate, yet mutually supportive surveys.

Survey 1 is completed once online by youth participants and includes incorporated scales related to motivation and student engagement (predictor variables) to correlate with various aspects of school and social life: academic participation, school involvement, activities outside of school (e.g. caring for self and others, academics, civic involvement, socializing, religious activities, and entertainment), and school subject preferences (outcome variables). In this survey, students were presented with a list of items for each factor and asked to select a response that best reflects how they feel (strongly disagree to strongly agree), how often they do something (never, sometimes, frequently, always), how many hours they engage in certain activities (less than one hour, one to one-and-a-half hours, two to two-and-a-half hours… five or more hours). This questionnaire also included various demographic questions.

Survey 2, the *reflective survey,* as we have been calling it, is completed "live" in class and was designed to assess how students felt immediately following a drama class that the teacher assessed as particularly engaging for the students. Likert scales (rating how you feel on a scale of one to five) allowed students to rate how they felt about a series of statements (items) presented to them (strongly disagree to strongly agree). This survey differs from the online version as it can be presented multiple times to students throughout a semester so that individual student responses could be tracked over time. It further encourages students to reflect on their experience within that specific drama class instead of responding to generalized items in the online version. This gave us a specificity we desired and helped us to tie responses to particular pedagogies being used in the classroom. But what it also represents is our attempt, even though our quantitative tools, to preserve some measure of the “liveness” of an engaging experience. Imagining that students would be invited to reflect upon an engaging experience, to unpack *in the moment* some of their ideas about its qualities, we again found ourselves privileging this sense of liveness, imagining it as less mediated and more accessible to us, in the moment. We are not yet at the point where we can read the reflective survey data against the visual images we have of the actual classroom work, but it may tell us something further about the limits of interpretive acts. How would we have understood the visual in the absence of the students' own analyses of these engaging moments? What relationships do we find between the visual and the student reflections? From this particular methodological turn, we also stand to learn a great deal about the (in)congruities between a teacher's understanding of engagement and a diverse group of students' understandings. And how do each of these come up against the researchers' perspectives?

We have also attempted to extend the liveness of the field into our qualitative analysis software, *Atlas*. Like its major competitor *NVivo*, *Atlas* is database software that serves as a repository of research documents and a means to organize and develop our thinking by developing a system of “codes” and “memos”. It is principally a textual medium, though you may also import images and code them for specific research themes. It is immensely powerful and helpful software in our project, particularly, again, given the large volume of material we need to organize from multiple sites over many years. But methodologically speaking, the live, performative, complex nature of the fieldwork in drama classrooms seems so radically removed from the static, textual discourse that represents it in our *Atlas* database. While this is an inevitable situation, and the movement between modes of discourse is structural to the research design, we have tried to use technology to extend the liveness of the field specifically by creating a means to code the video of the classroom activities, which, given the complex and often parallel activities of drama, are impossible (or immensely time-consuming) to render into a transcription.[4] We have created indices of the classroom recordings – series of quotations and notes – that are indexed to the video files and that are also linked to fieldnotes taken by the researchers who were in the room that day. In this way, one can move from *Atlas* to *Final Cut Pro* (the editing

[4] *Atlas* allows you to code video from within the program, but our video files – shot in high resolution and commonly hours in length – are far too many and large to manage from within the program.

software where our video is captured and organized) and locate specific moments in the video recording that correspond to a given research theme. To illustrate this more clearly, we offer the following excerpt from an index file for a video recorded at one of our sites, the Middleview School. The class described was typical for its mixture of drama work, discussion about the research, and multiple interruptions:

Title: AVFN-2008-11-20-Permission Forms, and Door Transformations
Archive Completed By: Sarah

Synopsis with Main Events:

- Begins with camera recording images of young girls and young women, constructed by grade 10 class. What school, friends, family, media, and religion say about different genders.
- Collecting Permission Forms.
- Students in circle when Cat comes in. Confusion arises from students due to his absence. Cat explains his move, why his mom wants them to move ("My mom thinks Toronto destroyed me and my brother"), he doesn't want to leave. But Cat is excited about his new home – and notes that it has a fireplace. As a class, they discuss his options: changing schools, not losing credits, etc. Researcher (Kathleen) offers suggestions of other schools.
- Researchers and Miss S talk about next steps regarding the Doors Project, and research. Discuss film project, and possible editing workshops. During this time, students are lying down, some with head in hands.
- Fabian enters: Group sings Happy Birthday.
- Discussion about his birthday plans in Montreal, he's warned not to drink and drive.
- Conversation about research continues, but class is side-tracked by image of Oprah with 6 toes on someone's cell phone. They rush over, crowd around the phone. Camera zooms in.
- Exercise for the day: Door Transformations, using one of the pieces that they wrote.
- Students divide into groups, with 20 min to rehearse [...].

Using such cursory descriptions of moments in the field, we can review the video and explore a moment in more detail. For instance, Cat emerged as an important participant in our ethnography and the index of this early video footage in our site allows us to return, at a later point of analysis, to a seemingly random conversation about his mother's decision to take him out of the community and the school. It is possible also to import a short, manageable clip directly into *Atlas* and code a specific moment in the field, linking directly between the program's "codes" and the video, a feature that has usefully allowed us to create further coherence among multiple and multi-modal data sets.

Edublogs: being responsive to the field

When we study social and artistic performances in the classroom, we are also studying pedagogy, and thinking about pedagogy evokes a different and quite important sense of liveness: as a teacher's repertoire of strategies that are negotiated in the field and which often do, and often must, respond to an evolving situation in the room. Our study continues to benefit from fitting live, responsive research methods to similarly responsive pedagogical moves. This means that our methods are sometimes chosen or created in collaboration with a teacher who wishes to use the research experience as a platform within which to explore curriculum and experiment with pedagogical methods.[5] What this meant for us was that our technological methods in our research contexts actually emerged out of a specific pedagogical need, as opposed to being imposed as an external intervention justified purely by a vague assumption about the value of technology to youth or to learning. In their analysis of teaching ethnographic research to students, Grant and Buford May (1999) reflect on the hazards of romanticizing the technology to the detriment of substance. They call this a "fundamental distortion of the ethnographic approach" (p. 556). Instead, what they teach their students is to start with the setting and then think about appropriate (digital) methods. What they are really getting at with their students is the sense that methods are often chosen, transformed or invented as a response to the realities of the social worlds researched and, importantly, to the dynamics of the fieldwork's relationships involved.

Such was certainly the case in our second year move to blogging. And from our research perspective, the participant-led aspects of blogging might be considered a potential inversion of the traditional researcher/subject roles, or, as Murthy (2008) argues, the blogging space may also be read as a potential "public sphere", giving participants an emotional and discursive share in the research project. One ethnographer, Jill Walker, who adopted blogging early on (since 2000) offers that one reason why ethnographers have been slow to adopt the blogosphere in research is precisely because of its "public-ness" (Walker, 2006). We turned to *Edublogs*, a subsidiary of the popular *Wordpress* blogging platform that has tailored its format to suit educational purposes. We have found *Edublogs* not only pedagogically useful, but well suited to our research interests and goals, sometimes creating a very rich interactive potential between the blogs and our research activities.

The blog ultimately became an important space for collaborative and emergent pedagogy. We were inspired to use blogs in the drama classroom by two Australian researchers who used group blogs to facilitate in-class play-building (see Philip & Nicholls, 2009). We chose *Edublogs* as a platform for its usability, functionality and the aesthetic appeal of its many themes. The capacity at *Edublogs* for storing, sharing and discussing digital audio and video was particularly useful to a verbatim theatre unit our collaborating teacher had prepared, very nicely intersecting with her pedagogical goals. In verbatim theatre, all the words spoken by characters are taken verbatim from interviews. In this class, we had students' digitally recorded interviews that they conducted with fellow students in their school that were subsequently edited and transformed into monologues to be performed in class. We used the blog for a few different purposes throughout this creative process: for groups of students to compose pitches for what they felt should be the subject of the interviews ("cliques" in the school was the winning pitch), for a discussion forum about the workshops and creative work, and finally as a place to present the completed project (a post for each student including their texts, the audio recording of their interview, and a video recording of their

[5] See Kansas State University's "Digital Ethnography" blog, which examines the pedagogical uses of blogs in ethnographic research.

final performance). The blog became a place where the live, embodied experience of the interview would be digitally rendered into audio and text, and then back again to the live, embodied experience of an in-class monologue performance. Also, with its use, we started to feel, as researchers, as though we were teetering towards our ultimate goal of creating a "youth knowledge base" on the question of engagement/disengagement with school because the method of blogging seemed to create, as Bohman (2004) has observed, "a space of mutual accountability", which blurs the roles of "speaker" and "hearer" creating a process which demands that one be responsive to others (p. 136).

Training students how to use the blog and keeping them focused on it was difficult at times. Some had trouble navigating the site, and others would frequently switch over to Facebook or YouTube. Mallan, Singh, and Giardina (2010) note that youths who are thought to be "tech savvy" do not always take up technologies as smoothly as researchers expect them to (p. 266), and this has been particularly true in our experience in disadvantaged contexts of schooling where access to technology cannot be taken for granted. Still, the blog provided students with a record of the experience that they could share, while it also provided the researchers with a dynamic record of a creative process that could later be analysed and shared with the collaborating international researchers. Difficulties notwithstanding, our blog was a successful experiment in aligning the methodological aims of the research and the pedagogies of the drama classroom.

Digital video: a world of moving images

Many of the technologies discussed in this chapter rely on a more basic technology with implications of its own: digital video. Much of the youths' research participation has involved digital video. While this clearly records our activities together in the classrooms, it is also a form of collaborative knowledge construction that creates a new digital discourse. We have reams of image and audio files, capturing processes and performances, formal and informal, upon which the youth themselves, as well as multiple researchers in vastly different educational and social contexts, can reflect. In her very interesting article on youth writing with digital video, White (2009, p. 397) develops a theoretical frame broadly defining five categories of digital video use: narrative orientated digital video, episode orientated digital video, interview focused digital video, digital video directed by young people and journal digital video. To date, in our study, we have used digital video narratively, episodically, in interviews and for performances, but we have not yet made much use of the youth-directed video data collection, apart from having interested students periodically filming in the classroom. Very resonant with our experiences of using digital video in our classrooms with youth, White summarizes her notion of Ethnography 2.0 very nicely at the conclusion of her article, as a critical, collaborative and enabling methodology that uses digital video and digital technology as an approach to experiencing and understanding a specific educational and cultural process.

Ethnography 2.0 necessitates a recognition of the epistemological, cultural and political spaces that inform the language of research (White, 2009, p. 409).

Although many in the world of visual sociology have used video in very interesting ways, well beyond its simple recording functions (for example, see Pink, 2001, 2007), we have been trying to conceive ways to share digital video across great geographic, cultural and linguistic divides in order to engage in what we are conceptualizing as collaborative analysis. Not only do these video files require tremendous and costly storage capacity, but again, in our efforts to push the idea of collaboration beyond its rhetoric, we have sought out new software in order to re-create the "liveness" of face-to-face meetings of researchers, where cultural assumptions and misconceptions can be immediately addressed. We expended some energy pursuing a new software from Berkeley University, called *Diver*. It promised a way to "tag" and annotate smaller pieces of digital data from within large bodies of digital footage from classroom observations. In a culturally-specific and complex classroom, it would, as we imagined it, allow researchers to "dive" into micro-pieces of data in order to glean the interpretations of other researchers, to direct each other's eyes towards specific events, behaviours or individuals within a complex frame of activity. The software is not, as yet, in the public domain and while it would no doubt be useful, we have also to contend with multiple languages in the context of our research. This would require an enhancement to the software that would allow for translation of the audio *to* and *from* English, Mandarin and Hindi in our case. Even without this, though, much can already be gleaned from the digital-semiotics on display, the physical and the embodied that we see on the video. We are, however, some ways away from the kind of translations that would allow us into each other's languages and linguistic meaning structures.

Moving so completely toward a digital image analysis process also has its obvious hazards. We recently purchased a camera that allows us to use a P2 card, saving literally hours of rendering time from digital tapes to *Final Cut Pro* editing software because, like a data stick, one's video images can be transferred from camera to computer in no time. However, a very large portion of our second year of digital video data has recently been lost to a hard drive crash. Our backup for these data are thankfully on the tapes, which will require an enormous time commitment in order to render all these tapes for a second time. With a P2 card, while fast and convenient, we would not have had such a backup so readily available. Given this near calamity, we purchased a new system called *Drobo* that will offer us multiple backup possibilities. This may seem a minor detail, but it does remind us that moving into digital technology requires very careful planning in order to keep safe and well-documented the much greater quantities of data collected in a multimodal ethnography.

Finally, on a conceptual level, Pierides (2010) claims that multi-sited ethnography makes a contribution to educational research because it reconfigures the boundaries of the ethnographic site and takes account of a world that is on the move (p. 187). What digital video affords to multi-sitedness, then, is a "capture" of that movement and situatedness, making it available for collaboration and future analysis. But a video recording is not simply an "accurate" or "true" record of what has happened, rather, a video recording of activities in the field makes explicit what points of view (literally in terms of camera position and figuratively in terms of researcher perspective at the time) were foregrounded in the field and can hold these up for later reflection and analysis, providing a kind of new subjective and analytical engagement with the original activities of the field. As in the earlier move to multiple fields (Marcus, 1995, 1998) multiple perspectives (live and digital) add an interesting complexity to the experience and analysis of ethnographic data.

Discussion: "liveness" in performance ethnography

The subtitle of the USP project, "the interplay, through live and digital drama, of local-global knowledge about student engagement", announces our wish to use technologies to productively navigate the tensions between, among other things, the live and the digital. As was suggested at several points in the preceding description, our use of technology in the research project has complicated available conceptions of liveness.

In Performance Studies, there are perhaps two threads in the ongoing discussion of liveness. The most prominent thread centres around the status of live performance in relation to other media, particularly to television and film. The debate heated up following the publication of Philip Auslander's (1999) book, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, in which Auslander argues that live performance is increasingly "mediatized," that is, circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and "in other forms based in technologies of reproduction", and that such mediatized forms also contain the live (p. 5). Peggy Phelan's (2003) response to Auslander re-defined liveness as "the potential for the event to be transformed by those participating in it" (p. 295). The second thread in this conversation – more pertinent here – considers liveness in relation to the documentation and analysis of performance. At stake in this thread is how the artefacts of performance – from photographs, to video, to programs, to memories, to reviews, to personal memories – make live performance available after the fact to other artists, to researchers, or simply to posterity. A notable voice in this conversation has been Matthew Reason (2006), whose book *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance* concerns the theoretical and methodological implications of how "representations" such as writing, photography and video "make performance knowable" (p. 3). Where Peggy Phelan (2003) had argued that performance is defined by its disappearance, Reason argues that performance is also, equally, defined by documentation (Reason, 2006, p. 26). Responding to those who malign performance documents on the grounds that they fail to capture the "live" experience, Reason says that the document only fails if we expect it to "save", "recover", or "re-member" in that literal sense of putting the limbs back on; reassembling the pieces together to create the whole. Like memory itself, however, the documents of live performance – the "detritus" in Reason's terms – are always and only partial. Reason cites Eugenio

Barba's claim that live performance continues to have a kind of "life" in the evolving memories of those who witnessed it. This leads Barba to privilege memory over more calcified forms of documentation. Reason counters that the archive is as mutable as memory; the archive, too, imaginatively re-members (Reason, 2006, p. 86).

But even Reason, like Auslander and Phelan, is thinking about performance mainly as public theatre events before audiences, and how these are documented, adapted to television, film or (now) the Internet. What they rarely discuss is the ethnographic documentation of the performance process specifically for research purposes. So much of the work being done in the discourse about liveness – reducing the distrust of documentation, undoing positivist attitudes, etc. – is in justification of something that is necessary for performance ethnography. The performances to which we have been witness needed to be documented – recorded in writing, in video – in order to be shared with a wider audience. But the fact that documentation is necessary doesn't make it less fraught. In the first place, we have learned from this discussion something about the mutability of both memory and document, and have come to not regard one or the other as more "realiable" or "full". Where some clearly feel that memory of the direct, live experience trumps any other source of information, the opposite may as well be the case. As Varney and Fensham (2000) argue, it may in fact be the case that video may be a "check on the memory of performance" (p. 92).

Conclusions and implications

Here, we would like to extend the implications of what a move to the digital means for larger considerations in ethnography, particularly as the state of the latter is understood by George Marcus, a leading voice in tracking the evolution of ethnography within and beyond anthropology in forms that have proliferated throughout the humanities and social sciences.[6]

In recent years, Marcus has been critiquing a tendency in ethnographic research toward what he has recently called the "ethnographic baroque", a tendency toward "messy", unsystematic experiences in the field that rely, in their written products, on the "tale of fieldwork" rather than older conventions such as quotes, anecdotes, and case-examples (Marcus, 2007). Marcus argues that this trend (which he was instrumental in starting) has become a problem in anthropology because it has resulted in a relocation of the "experimental" work of ethnography from the field to the writerly text. "These features", Marcus writes, referring to the "baroque" characteristics", are often brilliantly configured for exemplary performance, but as the elements of a contemporary script for ethnography, they also limit its roving curiosities, and its ability to find itself in the fieldwork" (p. 1130). In other words, ethnographers have moved away from thinking via human interaction in the field to the detriment of their studies.

[6] This period of ethnographic critique was particularly spurred by a collection of essays edited by Clifford and Marcus (1986), entitled *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.

Writes Marcus, "ethnography would be performed as strategies, mediations, which would [...] find its depth [...] in the space/time of fieldwork" (2007, p. 1131).

Of course Marcus is appraising ethnography as it is being used in anthropology, and does not take into account the many ways the methodology has changed as it has been taken up in other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, a circumstance about which Marcus appears to be aware of and ambivalent (Marcus, 2008, p. 4). As Max Forte (2008) has written on his blog *Zero Anthropology* in response to Marcus's ongoing critiques, Marcus "neglects new forms of doing, writing and producing ethnography, especially with reference to cyberspace ethnography, new forms of visual ethnography on the web, anthropological blogging, and so forth", to which we could add participatory action research, critical ethnography, and so on. Perhaps, in fact, Marcus's problem with "baroque" texts may not be a particular problem in ethnography in education. But for us, Marcus's critique raises an interesting question: at what point in the process of ethnographic research does analysis take place? Marcus is arguing that too often ethnographers are collecting data from the field, but doing all of their work post-facto in producing "messy" texts that mix, juxtapose, and interrogate. How well does this characterize ethnographies in education? In *Ethnography for Education*, authors Pole and Morrison (2003) offer an open-minded view of how and where analysis enters ethnographic studies in the field. They begin the chapter in their book about analysis by pointing out that some of the most important analyses of a study may take place as part of its initial research design (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 75), and also point to the widespread invocation of "grounded theory" as a methodological precept, a set of principles that dictates, among other things, a constant movement between empirical data and theory-building (p. 79). From there, however, Pole and Morrison declare that "all analysis involves the efficient management of data" (p. 94), eventually ending with a section on "writing as analysis," completing a picture of ethnography in education that bears out Marcus's argument that the locus of the ethnographer's analytical effort has come to be in the writerly text.

We would argue that the technologies we have implemented in the USP project address Marcus's critique by placing important intellectual work of the research back into the field. In the examples we provided in this chapter, we illustrated how technology allowed us to extend some elements of the live experience "in the field" through to later analysis within our team and with our collaborators. Importantly, though, it also extended analysis in the opposite direction into the fieldwork. Certainly, the many challenges we have related in this chapter add up to a qualified endorsement, and at many times we have felt that the promise of new technologies has not been matched by their realization in practice. Yet trying to make our various technologies function well for us in the field required an ongoing intellectual engagement with the data they were (or were not) soliciting, and of necessity we had to appraise and tweak our efforts on a daily basis in the schools. By blogging with the students, for instance, we were not just producing a volume of data for subsequent analysis, but were actually thinking through the issues at stake in the research through the technological experiment. For us, the thinking we have done by trying to implement our various technological tools has placed the researchers in positions of incredible exchange both in the field with students and among collaborating researchers.

Our experiences with virtual and real multi-sitedness, our efforts to understand and contextualize local practices and conditions within global processes and a changing world system, has certainly "deparochialised" (Lingard, 2006) our research in important ways. But we have also found that the communication across worlds through technologies, both our successes and our challenges with this, has opened up much larger questions about the purposes and possibilities of ethnography in educational contexts. It has fundamentally changed our ethnographic imaginary, as Pierides (2010) calls it, precisely because these experiments, by design or by accident, have intensified our engagement with “the field” and asked us that we constantly examine our choices, take nothing for granted, and be responsive to a wide range of research collaborators across multiple sites so that our ethnography will ultimately benefit from our live and our digital social and academic networks.

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ON BEING THERE WITH FEDERICA: A MULTI-SITE ETHNOGRAPHY OF A WEB-LEARNING PLATFORM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Rosanna De Rosa[1] and Paolo Landri[2]

Introduction

The diffusion of web-based teaching and learning technologies is producing a notable change in the materialities of the fields of education (Lawn & Grosvenor, 2005; Sørensen, 2009). Web-based teaching and learning technologies are becoming an essential part of the educational experience in schools, post-statutory education and university as well as in informal modes of learning. New technologies for teaching and learning represent a challenge to "traditional" schooling activity characterized by memorization and reproduction of texts in a multi-roomed, multi-teacher building, and sequenced and standardized curricula (Macbeth, 2000; Miettinen, 1999). In some ways, they de-construct classical education and learning settings, and start a restructuring of the educational field of practice by substituting, replacing and accompanying offline educational practice in new socio-technical assemblages, which contribute to the renewal of our ways of considering the mode of reproduction and transmission of knowledge in contemporary societies (Landri, 2009). As a result, the classical localities of educational ethnography (the classroom, the schools, etc.) (Willis, 1981) are moving and appear to detach educational practice from the "here and now" of human interaction, by including new forms of educational relationship that imply technology-mediated environments. Places of education are becoming distributed and technologically dense in such a way as to challenge the humanistic premises of the educational project of modernity (Biesta, 2006; Edwards & Usher, 2000).

This chapter is intended to address those challenges by problematizing the questions of "on being there", and of the privileges attributed to face-to-face interaction that represent two fundamental tenets of the classical ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000). We will argue instead in favour of a multi-sited approach to ethnography (Hine, 2007; Marcus, 1995, 1998), informed with a theoretical interest in

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socio-material studies of education (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010) and science and technology studies (STS) (Hackett, Amsterdamska, Lynch, & Wajcman, 2007) that helps to re-conceptualize ethnography inquiry as an "experiential way of knowing" that may have a multiplicity of human and nonhuman forms of mediation.

We will reflect accordingly on presence on a web-learning platform. In that respect, this chapter will draw on a collaborative project with/on Federica (www.federica.unina.it), an open access web-learning platform of the University of Naples "Federico II" which aims to offer an integrated environment where students, teachers and users may have access to a multiplicity of academically-validated knowledge resources in a multi-modal way via socio-technical tools (computers, WiFi platforms, smartphones and *iPads*).

FIGURE 1
Federica's HomePage

In particular, this chapter will present complementary views on what "being there" means both for an ethnographer and for a researcher contributing to Federica's (re)design and (self-)reflection.

"Being there" in/with Federica[3]

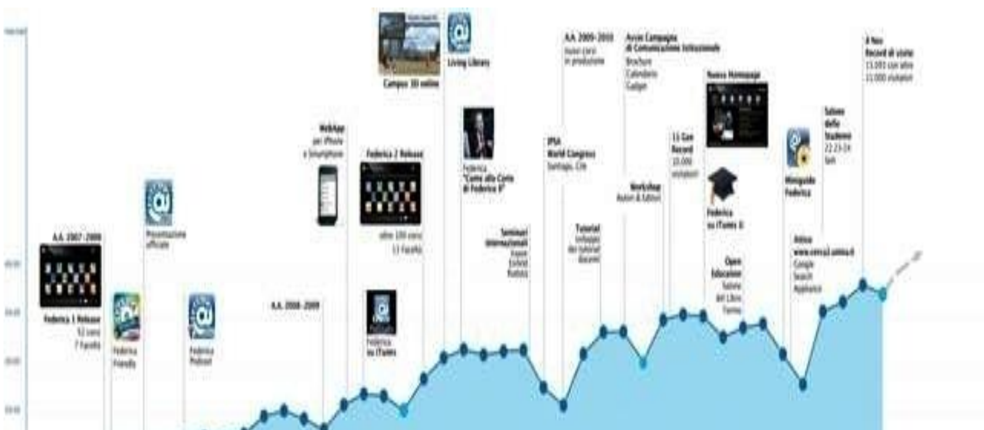
"Federica" is a web-learning platform which is considered a key educational innovation for the largest university of Southern Italy (Università di Napoli "Federico II"). "Federica" is a digital platform carried out under an open access license that includes the translation of a notable number of courses, for undergraduate as well as post-laureate education,

[3] *Federica* is the web-learning platform designed by the University of Naples Federico II. Financed by a structural grant (FESR 2007-2013), it is actually managed by the local CSI (Centro Servizi Informativi).

intended not to substitute, but to accompany the traditional courses of the many faculties of this university (www.federica.unina.it).

"Federica" is in many ways a challenge to the educational practices in our university, which has 13 faculties, 81 departments, 154 courses (not to mention doctoral schools, masters degrees and the like), and almost 100,000 students, since it is an attempt, at a higher level, to coordinate the many efforts of introducing locally, and sometimes in a heterogeneous way, web-based technologies for teaching and learning (see Figure 1, "Federica's Home Page"). In that respect, "Federica" is now a successful on-site educational standard with 5,000 lectures, which paves the way for future developments. It receives financial support from state, regional and European joint financing awards, and is attracting a lot of attention both in Italy and abroad, as well as acknowledgement for its originality and innovation. In some ways, "Federica" is now an educational space which adds to and expands – inside the *space of flows* – the classical space of the University made up of classrooms, physical buildings, teachers' rooms, etc. and seems to imply a restructuring of those complex assemblages of people, technology and objects constituting educational practices inside the University. "Federica" is not a usual educational digital space, however. It is not a true e-learning environment with the usual machinery of forum, wiki, blog, etc.). It is undoubtedly an educational space, which has been intentionally aimed at undertaking educational purposes by embracing a multi-modal perspective of textuality.

FIGURE 2
Developments Timeline



Studying with "Federica" implies being there in/or with "Federica" to set in motion the experiential way of knowing that appears to be the foundation of knowledge endeavour of (virtual) ethnography (Hine, 2000), but, more importantly, a mobile ethnography seems necessary to capture the multi-sitedness of Federica.

Rethinking Federica: a researcher's experience in co-designing a new e-learning platform for "digital native" students[4]

Since its inception, the Federica platform project developed along three main lines: research, experimentation and institutional communication. The project was promoted by the Social Sciences Department of the Federico II University in Naples, one of the major academic institutions in Italy. The platform took advantage of its previous methodology analysis on e-learning experiences in Italy and across the world, along with its acquired expertise in digital cultures and communication. The project also took into account the lack of specific ICT references and the stalled discussion on the effectiveness of available platforms for fostering an actual learning experience. Accordingly, the research and managing teams tried to overcome the current debate by redesigning the University's web-learning process within a humanistic context. Indeed, even the project name (besides the clear corporate identity with its reference to Federico II University) reveals an approach that goes beyond a specific platform or structure and is not associated with a linear e-learning dimension. In other words, it soon became clear that Federica needed to actualize a research project, a vision, a communication strategy and an online platform all at the same time. It needed to be an applied research project, able to analyse and review ongoing transformations and translate these changes into actions of innovation, updates and support. Our role as researchers and teachers was to highlight changes in user approach and media consumption, as well as broader transformations affecting the reading, writing and research strategies of the so-called "digital natives". We experienced great frustration and difficulty pursuing our teaching and research activities with students who no longer employed the typical processes of knowledge organization and production. Electronic versions of common libraries, catalogues and databanks were experiencing a new form of inaccessibility, much more dangerous than previous ones.

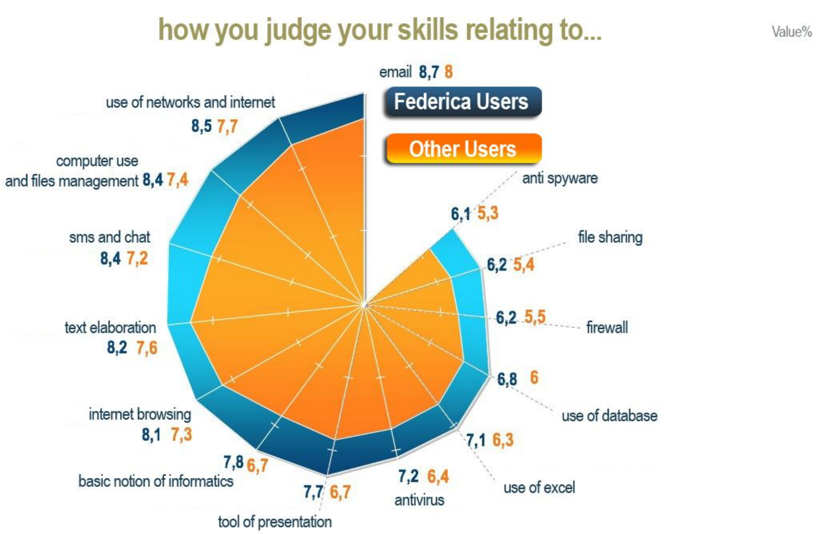
FIGURE 3
The living library. A strategy to bridge the printing literacy to the digital

[4] This section refers to Rosanna De Rosa's experience.

Defined as the *Amazoogle Factor* in a document by the Columbia University Library, this new form of inaccessibility is rooted in the students' habit of continuously restricting their learning references, eventually reducing it to very few online sources. On the other hand, a broad and fast conversion to the digital formats gave way to an explosion of conversion of content offerings, thus forcing the academic world to revise its own role in the transmission of knowledge. The University itself was at a crossroads: it could no longer be the same institution that had operated for centuries, but it was not yet ready to become the new creature for a different future. In this framework, the role of Federica was to bridge the gap between traditional *printing literacy* and the emerging *digital culture*.

Our management team faced an immediate challenge: how to accept and support the students in this new environment, but still see them in humanistic terms. They were strongly attracted to new presentation tools and communication technologies, and were highly skilled in the new media languages and formats – managing the Web as a universal platform whose applications could solve any issue. They were constantly sharing resources and information, referring to the Internet to manage all of their organizational functions (from gathering a bibliography to a paper outline to shared document drafting) and using online groups to satisfy the need for identification and belonging that the University was no longer able to provide. Therefore, *being there* meant quickly working out what cognitive "mutations" the new networked mind had undergone. What *brainframes* were being created in the digital natives' mind? And how to access and share them? The consciousness of an intimate relationship between technology and mind was influencing every decision regarding the main features of our platform in progress.

FIGURE 4
Students' Skills



The students were also inclined to reject any notion-based approach, moving instead towards patterns based on life-style learning and gathering a large variety of experiences. This emergence of distributed and oral knowledge, along with a strong presence of visual content, soon paved the way for the broad success of YouTube, social networks and web applications. The traditional academic culture seemed to fade away. In overcoming the frustration of losing its status as a major agent of academic knowledge, our research team understood the need to become a simplified (but still authoritative) guide in order to avoid the risk of leaving this new networked mind in the hands of too many online content providers.

FIGURE 5
Using old movies to teach

We had to accept the popularization of ideas and to move the knowledge access point forward as a crucial element of the democratization process promoted by the Internet. In other words, we were asked to let go of our traditional teaching approach and to embrace instead such appealing life-style learning experiences as the TED Project (Technology Entertainment Design), devoted to "Ideas Worth Spreading" through public talks with a very strong presence and following them over the Internet.

The students were also much more at ease in the new media ecosystem. They could easily de-construct and re-construct online content and subjects, while at the same time freely experimenting with different kinds of digital environments. They used a variety of devices to access the Internet and fostered new social relationships at the same time, thus transforming the user interface of these online environments into shared places devoted to their ongoing interactions. As a consequence, *being there* meant understanding the growing value of such user interfaces as horizontal patterns, rather than as graphical representations of vertical and hierarchical structures. We had to simplify the navigation paths reducing the hierarchy of information levels, thus gathering all content in a transparent, surface open space. The content provided had to be divided into portable objects, not just located on a web platform but also able to travel on mobile devices and in different contexts. Briefly, we had to support innovation at both organizational and cultural levels.

In particular, the organizational variability represented a real challenge for an open access web-learning initiative that came from an old and renowned University. The research carried out by the same Social Sciences Department in 2005-2008 underlined the crucial role of the organizational features for similar projects worldwide. The study revealed a two-fold strategy: a weak *top-down* model, with the faculty providing directions and control while leaving the various actors involved in charge of the most appropriate technical and organizational solutions; and a strong *bottom-up* model, with a spontaneous push to develop and implement the best possible in-house solutions. Of course this overall approach implied the active participation of each party involved along with a process of ongoing reflection and adjustment. The limits of both models should also be mentioned. In the first case (a weak *top-down* model), there is the attempt to still impose a homogeneous and recognizable institutional framework over the various initiatives. The second case (a strong *bottom-up* model) could activate some reinforcing mechanisms toward a specific technology or platform, or the implementation of one unique organizational model over possible others, thus precluding the chance to experiment alternative solutions.

In addition, an analysis of other Federico II University projects funded by the same grant revealed a high degree of organizational dispersion and a low level of institutional involvement – a mixture that eventually made these projects disappear altogether from the regional academic landscape.

Thus, *being there* meant also recognizing the limitations of both models and trying to reconcile them in order to define a unified strategy, based on the cohesive and integrated involvement of academic actors and faculty members. The open and sharing vision of the project played a crucial role particularly in convincing the faculty members to produce content in an open access format, potentially available to users worldwide. Thanks to this simplified model of content development integrated into a traditional teaching experience, the faculty members realized the importance of their new role in sustaining the project by producing specific content that would also be used to promote an international visibility.

The project launch received both appreciation and concerns. The most significant concern was the sudden emptying of the classrooms. Students saw the Federica platform as a more efficient tool for managing their courses, while professors interpreted this void as a loss of their “reference target”. Many students decided to vacate those classes where they seemed “self-sufficient”, thus exposing the overall project as a form of de-legitimization of the university and faculty role. However, less crowded classrooms also provided a higher quality of teaching and more effective interaction.

In any case, *being there* meant promptly addressing and developing a new aspect of Federica which had been raised by the students who were deserting the actual classrooms. We got ready to answer questions via email and implement new interactive features – only to discover another story. Students attending only virtual courses failed to use some online interactive services, while the others following the blended class, on the other hand, decided also to subscribe to an additional option (such as *Myclass*), thus integrating online teaching with the physical classroom in terms of ongoing sharing of information, suggestions and self-produced content. In other words, they were asking the faculty members to become *trainers* in order to share both studying and teaching practices.

The Net dynamics were introducing a horizontal feature in the relationship between teacher and student, thus helping the former to overcome their concern about the de-legitimization of his/her role and the latter to avoid their fear of stricter evaluation in the classroom. Based on my personal experience, eventually this relationship and general interest grew stronger – overcoming the difficulty of promoting de-construction and re-construction practices, along with the creation of new theories, the acquisition of new skills and the appreciation for critical thinking.

Today I am witnessing in my students transformations that were unthinkable just a few years ago. At the beginning of each new course they create a new Facebook group as a self-help tool to share information and experiences, in a non-competitive fashion. They move at ease among formal and informal online environments, considered as a natural extension of the physical classroom, which in turn is conceived as an organizational unit that links and actualizes the requirements of broader social learning.

As a teacher, *being there* means being able to move inside and outside the Internet, following the navigation patterns set by my students and adapting to the most convenient and effective procedures they decide to embrace. No platform can last forever, but each project contributes to the enrichment and support of the overall classroom experience.

Being there as ethnographer[5]

Let's meet at Federica!

"Federica" is a female name, and appears to counterbalance "Federico II", the name of one of the most powerful Holy Roman Emperors (Frederick II) who supported the foundation of the University in the Middle Ages[6] and now gives the University its distinctive name. The use of a female name for a project seems to suggest a personification, and draws attention to the human features of the web platform, so that it raises the question of the embodiment of Federica. While this equivalence may appear misleading to some extent, since it conveys again the possibility of meeting Federica (albeit virtually) face-to-face, Federica is indeed a physical place, at the least for the people working there or who have a close relationship with the project. This may be recognized by the recurrent use of the term "Federica" to refer to a place by people acquainted with the project. As an ethnographer, I noticed that I could meet people at "Federica" or, rather, meet those people responsible for making and reproducing "Federica". "Federica" has a physical space at the University of Naples, meaning that "Federica" has an address, and a set of rooms in a very nice building with a panoramic view of Naples that hosts conferences too. In that building, at least 4 rooms are "Federica" sites where people (researchers, consultants, director of research, etc.) work to look after the infrastructure, those bundles of webpages making up the contents of Federica, and of the many sub-related projects representing the complex architecture of Federica (the Living Library, Virtual Classrooms, etc.). The rooms host almost 12 people on average, and they are responsible for the life of "Federica" on the Internet.

FIGURE 6
One of Federica's rooms

[5] The following sections were written by Paolo Landri relating to the ethnographer's experience.
[6] The University of Napoli "Federico II" is one of the oldest state university in Italy.

These people work as a team and, in some respects, represent a community of practice, in the sense that they share a common involvement, a repertoire, as well as a set of practices articulated around the digitalization of university courses of diverse academic disciplines. The project team has defined the standard framework for the course (framework, layout, the kind of digital standard, etc.), the definition of the policies for the digitalization of the content and the policies for accompanying and assisting academic teachers in their working of contents translation for the Federica platform. This team, the project and Federica itself are the spin-off of a research activity on institutional communication in higher education and on e-learning platforms in universities. The team may be considered, in organizational terms, as an extension of an *academic chair* (here, the chair of Political Science in the Faculty of Sociology) – typically articulated by following the traditional mode of a hierarchy of power and prestige of the professorship, and the dynamics of co-optation fuelling a positive engagement inside a growing and virtuous circuit of knowledge and competencies. The team consists of a combination of professional knowledge coming mostly from sociology, political science, communication, informatics, graphic design, marketing, and economics. In effect, Federica is supported behind the scenes by a community of practice hierarchically ordered around a chair, and a professor that plays a strategic, scientific and managerial role. The chair includes a staff composed of several researchers and consultants not necessarily formally associated with the chair – however involved in the project – contributing to the realization of the project which aims to assist the holder of the chair in strategic planning and in policy decision. Here, in particular, a researcher takes care of, and coordinates scientifically, the project and assists with the strategic and scientific planning of the project. The rest of the team plays implementation roles, and is governed by researchers/professionals that manage them and check the progress of the work. Those playing the implementation roles work on the ground floor and on the second floor of the building described before. These people previously worked as researchers (most of them were recruited precisely through normal academic channels, selection procedures and involvement in the project); however, their competences and knowledge are being refined through their participation in the project to such an extent that some of them may be considered as "professional", or they perceive their work in a professional way. For some of them, "Federica" has been a place for professional education and learning, and they are experiencing a change of identity as they enhance their knowledge repertoire. A shared ethos and in some cases a passion for "Federica" which reflects a commitment to a social responsibility for knowledge sharing through the Internet, subscribing to the philosophy of open source. Finally, a common set of tools contributes to the repertoire of "Federica" professionals. This regards the computers they use (they are all Mac-users, and it seems to be "compulsory" to use Macs), the extensive utilization of Internet software applications, and the positioning of their workstations. They all work extensively at computer desks, and are surrounded by computers on all sides. Their positions in their rooms (on the ground floor as well as the second floor, where they share a larger space) are exactly in front of the computer screens, and they are used to talking to each other without leaving their positions. As a workplace, this "Federica" site is densely populated by technologies (computers, *iPhones*, telephones, etc.); and, as a result,, communication occurs, by using a multiplicity of applications they open on the screen, like for example the *Skype* chat. In the same room, workers at opposite desks are divided by their screens, and they may be either seen by or hidden from others by standing up, or sitting down. Their working hours are different, and depend on the role they play in the project. Accordingly, their presence at that site may be quite different; the core team, for example, works most of their time at that site. This core team has adopted a division of work reflecting an emerging differentiation among families of faculties, and a related affiliation of professionals for groups of academic disciplines and their respective courses, and some of these people end up becoming key players in the operation of translation onto the web. This differentiation also helps to understand the diverse knowledge and learning styles within different academic disciplines with respect to multimodal resources, and enables us to adapt and refine "Federica" standards to the different "pedagogical devices".

Here, the investigation reveals a "densely technological environment" presenting characteristics which are not so different from those on a usual "knowledge workers' site" (where the coordination of work is an orchestrated and skilled ongoing arrangement of human and nonhuman elements), but also includes heterogeneous engineering of sociotechnical chains. Once I gained access to this site – and this was relatively easy because I was in close contact with the academic chair for a long time – my ethnography followed a traditional trajectory. I found a place – a bounded site limited by walls – where I could collect information about the actual work of "Federica" behind the scenes, where, through face-to-face relationships, ethnographic notes and interviews, I reconstructed and described the ongoing making-of and reproduction of "Federica" as a web platform for teaching and learning. A sensitivity to socio-materiality revealed the critical connections between human and nonhuman elements on-the-scene. Here, my presence as ethnographer was face-to-face, with a sense of boundedness of the entities involved in the trajectory of enquiry. It would be misleading to consider that site as the "ultimate" reality of Federica, as if "Federica" was just an illusion, a necessary adaptation to the spirit of the time, while the "real" university is firmly rooted in the classical academic spaces. Instead of jumping to that quick conclusion, we should note that here we have described "Federica" as a region, a bounded space where definite entities (people, technologies, knowledge, etc.) come and meet. Here, ethnographers adopt a sedentary mode, inhabit a bounded space and contribute with their description to the performance of a regional space. This site is revealed in static mode.

Connecting to Federica's web platform

A diverse description may have also grasped the fluidity of "Federica". In that case, however, it is required a mobile ethnography whose character appears to be not long-lasting but intermittent, to some extent intermeshed, or embedded in other activities. I shift here to a different mode of involvement and follow the instantiation of "Federica" and of the community of practice inhabiting the space we have already described. This implies going along with (Kusenbach, 2003, as cited in Ferguson, 2011) the community or with the complex actor-networks we are investigating and registering the events and conversations that happen in that "intermittent time". A natural site where we can follow Federica is clearly on the Internet. A quick look at the Internet website may reveal the combination of a unique standard and the variation of the contents each course decides to upload. Users, and the ethnographer, acting here as user as well as researcher, may investigate and encounter knowledge contents outside the traditional borders of the educational space. Open access philosophy, here, provides opportunities for mobilizing knowledge and for making downloadable contents (texts, videos, registrations, etc.) for higher education. One may consider how higher education is – at least in principle – thus made available "on the move" once a WiFi or internet connection is established or a mobile setting is in the hand of academic teachers or students ("Federica", for example, is the only Italian university on *iTunes U* via enhanced podcasting). Complex processes of translation accompanied the realization of those courses, and were carried out by the efforts of the community-of-practice of "Federica". While a standard policy is defined, the group of professionals devoted time and energy to assisting, coordinating, and editing the work of the many academics who, first on a voluntary basis and then with a contract to cover expenses, aimed to produce courses to fit with the standard. "Federica", alongside the sector called "courseware", also offers a section called "living library" which contains a careful guide and a portal to the most authoritative resources in terms of libraries, articles, databases, etc. useful to accompany students, but also potential users on the Internet during their period of education, and learning. Up to now, "Federica" has 4 main branches: courseware, living library, podstudio and Campus 3D (a 3D reconstruction of the University and of the faculties closely associated with all the resources created inside the Federica website). How do we describe that space? And how do we characterize the "Federica" site? "Federica" represents a transformation of the materiality of academic knowledge, and more in general of knowledge-conveyors at the universities. The usual materiality was created to be used in the classical academic regional space, a site which is bounded and delimited both in time and space. "Federica", instead, is a liquid entity, ready to be mobilized with the appropriate *device* in many (educational) spaces. Here, the ethnographer is required to follow those enactments and these materializations to see how "Federica" as a liquid entity is mobilized by its users (academics, students, etc.). In that respect, Federica is not a "virtual entity"; it is something that may or may not be involved in opportunities of education and learning.

Following "Federica" through social networks

My sense of "being there" and engaging with the liquid enactment described above changed as well. In practice, it meant being connected to the Federica website through Internet and with some of the people working at "Federica" through some of the most popular social networks, like Facebook (FB) or Twitter, to understand the way Federica draws attention to herself, her courses or other relevant activities. In my mobile ethnography, although I was still for a long time while I analysed various courses in order to understand the diverse use of multi-modal opportunities the platform provides, I also followed the shift in Federica to align with the logic of the Web 2.0. At the beginning, it was decided – there was a preference for not encouraging teachers and students to use too many interactive tools with the aim of saving the integrity of the Federica communication project for the University of Naples – to move slowly towards the opportunities offered by Web 2.0, and to place greater emphasis on the contents, and their accessibility. I was able to get information and be involved in discussions about "Federica" from my own office. In one of those discussions, for example, I started a conversation, because one of the people working at "Federica" uses *Foursquare* web applications, which means friends can know where you are. Since I am one of his friends on FB, I was entitled to know that he was working in "Federica", the place I described before.

Pasquale just checked in @ *Federica, Centro Congressi Federico II* (*pasquale on foursquare*)

Paolo Landri: you are a little bit late!

Pasquale Popolizio: late for the check-in, not for my presence ;-)

Paolo Landri: the ghost of Panopticon !

Pasquale Popolizio: who lives, like me, on the Internet, has to be always clear and sincere

Paolo Landri: visibility and invisibility… presence and absence from the Internet ...Federica is not my object of research, rather a subject of research that accompanies me

Ros De Rosa: Gosh:...it is time to give a body to Federica.

Paolo Landri: as a matter of fact it has already, and it is a post-human body

Ros De Rosa: Post-human? Thank goodness, I am not worried anymore. In those time, with those berlusconian people all around...

Paolo Landri: lol… those are in-humans, or humans too much humans

Pasquale Popolizio: Federica has indeed a body ;-) It is made of those with passion and competences contributing to its development and success ;-)

A web track application, here, allows an ethnographer to engage in a conversation by calling on Pasquale, a professional at "Federica". This connection established a presence mediated by the Internet, and allowed boundless discussion and reflection on the part of the ethnographer on the hotly debated issue of control on the Web which in turn shifted to a consideration of the body-ontology of “Federica”. While the two researchers (me and Rosanna) argued about the hybrid nature of that entity, Pasquale's last sentence finally stated the ultimate human character of “Federica”. At the same time, the conversation also reveals how impossible this discussion would be without being mobilized in a human and nonhuman network, that is, in a form of mediation “making do” the conversation and the reflection. The discussion also highlights the profound involvement of “Federica” and of those working with it/her on the Internet and its forms of mediation. Further research is needed in order to understand the local enactments of “Federica”, and in particular: a) how “Federica” is combined with teaching and b) how the materialities of “Federica” are mobilized by those studying. In both cases, the liquid character of “Federica” suggests a rethinking of ethnography by mobilizing the methods and including new instruments for grasping how teachers and students combine new and old materialities in higher education.

Conclusions: experiential ways of knowing “Federica”

The chapter has presented diverse experiential ways of knowing “Federica”. We have thus described the diverse experiences of “being there” in/with Federica, and in particular, those of a researcher/designer of Federica, and those of an ethnographer faced with the problem of representing a mobile entity like Federica with its multiplicity of enactments. The different descriptions reveal some voices behind the scenes. Here, the passionate involvement of the professionals is both an advantage and a limitation. It is an advantage since Federica is experienced as an affiliative object to maintain and develop. It is a disadvantage in so far as it restricts the view to the object itself. As a matter of fact, one of the main difficulties experienced in governing the project has been a deep gap between professionals and researchers’ points of view. The former were unable to look at the project with abstraction, comparison and strategic vision, and the latter were unable to estimate and accept the technological and prospective limitations from professionals in the attempt to adapt the technological setting to a mindful model of e-learning. Notwithstanding their humanistic legacy, once playing the role of “caretakers” of the web platform and of its development, community-of-practice have made it more and more difficult to change the platform, as they see any small modification to the organizational setting as a distortion. Researchers/designers had to negotiate between the innovative and experimental spirit that keeps a web-learning project alive, and the conservative and defensive spirit that wants to consolidate its territory. If the perspective changes, then so does the outlook and with it the world vision. Researchers take care of teaching, and pursuing his/her target along the diverse virtual territories students inhabit. Professionals consider “Federica” as a matter of fact, as it is, not as what it could stand for. The ethnographer, in that case, tries to trace the immobility and the mobility of “Federica”, by performing a multi-site ethnography. Here, the ethnographer presence (“being there”) is achieved through multiplicities of arrangements (face-to-face, reading, listening, surfing web-platform, chatting with social networks, etc.). "Being there" means participating in spatiotemporal arrangements that include complex human and nonhuman interactions. This helps us to reflect on how ethnographic inquiry as an experiential way of knowing is not reducible to "simple" face-to-face presence (as if the same face-to-face presence was a sort of im-mediate interaction), but should include the manifold instantiations of the presence at the distance made possible by the Internet. A more comprehensive reconceptualization of educational ethnography is accordingly needed in order to grasp with mobile methods the mobile character of the new educational spatiotemporal arrangements.

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VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY FOR VIRTUAL WORLDS: THE CASE OF SECOND LIFE

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Introduction

The origins of ethnography lie in anthropology and historically it has been the methodology of anthropology, with the pioneering study of Malinowski (Young, 1979) at the beginning of the twentieth century (Hammersley, 2006). Since then, ethnographic studies have spread through social science and applied social science, being mainly of a qualitative nature. Further, with the growing number of internet-based studies, new research areas and approaches have emerged in social studies. This is because human communication and interaction have been reshaped by the vast impact of the Internet over the last decades. Therefore, it can be inferred that the social implications of the Internet have changed the nature of ethnographic studies. Fetterman (1998, p. 72) goes so far as to claim that "the Internet is one of the most powerful resources available to ethnographers". Building upon this assumption, virtual ethnography has increasingly been embraced by many researchers (see Domínguez et al., 2007; Hine, 2000; Leander & Mckim, 2003; Marcus, 1998; Markham, 2005; Wittel, 2000) with the advent of studies of ethnography through the Internet. This new form has emerged principally with the great amount of electronic communication environments as a way of interaction, yet having roots into assumptions in which ethnography is based. This basically refers to how online research methodology adapts ethnography into the study of cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated social interaction. As a result, numerous qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviewing, focus groups and surveys, have been reconstituted to function in online social settings (see Bardzell & Odom, 2008; Browne, 2003; Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Markham, 2005; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Teli, Pisanu, & Hakken, 2007).

Definition

Hammersley (2006, p. 1) stresses the core meaning of ethnography "to be a form of social research that emphasizes the importance of studying at first-hand what people do and say in particular context". In the same vein, Hine (2000, p. 4)

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highlights that ethnography can be a supreme methodological approach of internet studies since ethnography of the Internet can expose in detail the ways in which it is experienced based on day-to-day practice. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) describe the role of the researcher, the ethnographer, in light of these assumptions as:

> The ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned. (p. 2)

This is the point that articulates that the ethnographer resides in a kind of in-between world both as an observer and a participant to authentically understand the ways in which people interpret the environment with which they engage and organize their lives. Thus, the role of the ethnographer can be said to observe and analyse practices that take place in the environment in order to present them in a new light.

Virtual worlds

Multi-user virtual environments often are called "virtual worlds" or sometimes *metaverse*, *a* popular synonym for virtual world, in reference to the characteristic of the real world within virtual worlds (Metaverse RoadMap Glossary, 2007). These are the terms that are currently used to describe a three dimensional (3D) graphical space where users can interact with each other simultaneously via the Internet. In other words, virtual worlds are online places in which users can interact with others as "being there" for socializing (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Many scholars have various views on the definition of "virtual world" and the term is used in different ways by academics, but the key characteristic features of a virtual world are given by Bell (2008, p. 2) as "A synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers". This implies that virtual worlds are based on real time communication, persistence with or without a user's presence, interactions of users, digital representations of users and through networked computers. This is the common consensus on the definition of virtual worlds. Multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) allow users to experience the world by walking, flying or teleporting through their avatars defined as characters that represent their users when interacting with each other online. Second Life, Active Worlds, OpenSim, and Club Penguin can be identified as currently thriving applications of virtual worlds. Yet, Second Life (SL) is determined as the most advanced application – perhaps the most significant one; the rationale of introducing SL in this way will be explained in the following paragraph – of MUVEs in Salt, Atkins and Blackall paper (2008, p. 5). SL was chosen for this discussion due to its accessibility and the pre-existing virtual locations created by other SL users. For this reason, it is important to highlight what is so unique about SL.

Second Life

SL was publicly released in 2003 by Linden Labs, which was founded by CEO Philip Rosedale, former chief technology officer at RealNetworks. SL was inspired by Snow Crash – a novel by Neal Stephenson – and is inhabited by millions of users – called residents – all over the world. SL is described in its website as “a place to connect, a place to shop, a place to work, a place to love, a place to explore, a place to be, Be different, Be yourself” (Second Life, n.d.). People are using SL to communicate, to establish businesses, to sell goods or services and buy virtual property, to organize events, for live performance, for movie making, even for charity. The main reasons for using SL are: exploring the environment, sharing experiences with others, meeting people and making friends around the world and engaging in commercial activities (Graves, 2008). The prominent characteristic features of SL are: it is a user-generated environment, residents can develop shared content collaboratively upon common interest, and it has economic transaction possibilities built in for marketing, based on Linden Dollars, that leads to real world income. The above information implies that the primary aim of SL is to afford an environment in which the users can interact with each other. However, SL also hosts many educational events including in-world classes, academic conferences, seminars, demonstrations, exhibitions and a great number of educational institutions such as universities, colleges, libraries from around the world, have islands as virtual learning and teaching platforms.

Patrick (2008) states, based on Gustafson’s study, that at least 300 universities across the world run courses or conduct research into SL, and the United States has the largest percentage of SL users. More interestingly, Linden Lab has announced at the NMC Conference, which took place in 2010 in Anaheim, that about 800 educational institutions are actively using SL, including 60 of the top 100 universities, like Harvard, Oxford and Imperial College, and also well-known companies such as IBM and institutions like the US Air Force. At the same time, Kirriemuir (2008) highlights that “as a rough estimate some three-quarters of UK universities are actively developing or using SL, at the institutional, departmental and/or individual academic level”. Yet, in 2009, the study of the virtual world watch in the UK (Kirriemuir, 2009) found that there was only one Higher Education (HE) institution that didn’t have a presence then in a virtual world. The number of registered users of SL has grown rapidly over the last years, and great numbers of educational institutions have become involved with it. Gartner Inc. (2007) claims that 80% of all active Internet users will have an avatar and will register in one or more virtual worlds by the end of 2011. Yee (2006, p. 18) reports that avatars “spend on average 22.72 hours (N=5471, SD=14.98) each week in world. The lower quartile and upper quartile boundaries are 11 and 30 respectively. The distribution revealed that about 8% of users spend 40 hours per week or more in these environments”. Further, there are almost 21 million users, nearly 1, 5 million of whom logged in past 60 days, and nearly 60,000 residents are online at any given time as of October 2010 in SL (Gridsurvey, n.d.). Users are free to download the platform but they must have a good computer graphics card and a reliable high speed bandwidth

Internet connection. Last but not least, the average age of adult users of SL is 33, being 15 the average age of the SL teens, those between the ages of 13 and 17, and females comprise 45% of the SL population (KZero, n.d.). The above data show that numerous institutions, companies, and individual users embrace SL and it is the virtual environment in which most educational events are happening.

Why virtual ethnography?

Prior to addressing the issue of "how" virtual ethnography could be used to examine the learning process in virtual worlds, it is perhaps important to firstly address "why". According to Hine (2000, p. 14), the Internet can be seen as a place in which culture is formed or as a product of culture, that is a cultural artefact. Thereby, the potential of using virtual ethnography for this purpose seems to explore and unpack the virtual experiences of participants in the virtual world in the same roots of Hine's feeling for the Internet. This is because virtual worlds may be platforms where users live their virtual everyday lives to *construct* knowledge by *participating,* or to enhance their cognitive skills since they may act in this virtual world as they are in the real world. Similarly, recent theorists emphasize that learning, knowledge and communication are constructed and distributed in the social and cultural context (Hutchins, 1995) and researching them is inseparable from the context. Due to this, learning can be considered as a process situated and distributed in the social and cultural context in which learning occurs naturally as a part of everyday life. This is another reason why it is interesting and of value studying virtual worlds from an ethnographic point of view. Another reason to look at virtual worlds and its communities from an ethnographic perspective is that several diverse media components, such as sound, image, text, and 3D appearance, can support the building of robust communication and interaction between users in virtual places, activities or communities helping them to be perceived "as real" as the physical. At the same time, the data generated may also be detailed and rich as the platform may provide a *natural* environment to share their experiences and express their thoughts and reflections.

In an educational context, my feeling is that the virtual ethnographic approach allows direct evaluation of competences, experiences, perceptions and behaviours of learners and educators in the virtual learning setting along with its online pedagogical frameworks.

Challenges and promises of virtual ethnography for virtual worlds

Hine's (2000, pp. 63-65) principles on virtual ethnography suggest that virtual ethnography is an ongoing process where research evolves. In other words, there are no certain sets of tenets to follow in order to conduct the ideal ethnography. This may be a challenge for the researcher. Equally important, there is no certain period of time for carrying out the fieldwork to generate most appropriate data. However, some ethnographers suggest that virtual ethnographic studies ought to be continued as long as new insights are being generated (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64). These characteristics of virtual ethnography raise some issues in practice, yet Hammersley (2006, p. 5) indicates one of the main problems in this approach as considering that people's behaviours and beliefs in virtual platforms also represent exactly who they are and what they do in the rest of their lives. As Hammersley stressed, this perception may be misleading since observations of the researcher are the product of a limited period of time and activities, rather than entire lives. In addition, there may be a problem of sampling and generalization, as the ethnographic study is considered to be a detailed, small study. Therefore, it could be argued that outcomes may not be representative for a wider sample and the data is not generalizable, perhaps not necessarily, beyond the boundaries of the institutions with which the researcher works. Yet another concern is that the researcher may become friends with participants over time and there is a potential risk that they may reveal private data. Hence, it may be challenging for the researcher to balance his/her position in the research.

Having said that, what Hine underlines for the virtual ethnography relates to websites, online forums, newsgroups, and virtual communities that are textual online environments and have a relatively linear and steady flow of interaction. Yet, I wish to argue that virtual ethnography can be adopted productively in 3D graphical virtual environment settings such as SL with the aim of seeking to understand users' perspectives and behaviours viewing from the inside and outside. Therefore, my aim is to contribute to the current discussion by adopting Hine's principles to the 3D graphical virtual environment, where spatial social relations and mediated interactions occur productively. In other words, the existing literature in this field mostly consists of observations and interpretations about interactions within websites. What I would like to contribute is the perspective of adapting virtual ethnography within virtual worlds, to have long-term immersive experience. I believe that the ethnographer can observe people and their behaviours and involve in experiences of virtual learning and teaching other than through their textual contributions in the graphical environment. This is also a key factor to separate virtual ethnography from other methodologies such as textual analysis, content analysis, and discourse or narrative analysis techniques due to intensive engagements. Virtual ethnography of SL therefore may look in detail at the ways in which virtual worlds are experienced in use.

Adapting virtual ethnography into virtual worlds: methods and techniques

Although it may vary with the nature of the methodology applied, virtual worlds offer various data collection tools to conduct inworld research for the virtual ethnographic approach. In this case, data collection may consist of observations, i.e., field notes, audio and video recording; structured, unstructured or semi-structured, thematic interviews; an online survey, i.e., inworld survey tools, web-forms within SL's internal internet browser, questionnaire kiosks or web-based survey; focus groups; panel discussions and the analysis of secondary data such as notecards, snapshots, machinimas (inworld film) over a certain period of time.

For instance, Boellstorff (2008) has investigated the culture of Second Life with observation and interview methods and draws conclusion suggesting that ethnography may be more compatible for the study of virtual worlds as the reader can be placed *virtually* in the culture of another. Similarly, Au (2008) has referred to the early years of Second Life and has explored the reasons behind the success of SL in the business sector by observing the environment, interviewing avatars, and creating vignettes.

Emerging ethical issues in virtual worlds

It is believed that the advent of virtual worlds leads to raise new ethical issues for conducting research in them, by becoming a primary means of communication and social interaction. Ethical concerns over virtual worlds are concentrated mainly on recruitment of participants, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and reputation of users and their avatars, data collection and storage, retaining anonymity, and approval of the research by the ethics committee of institutions. One of the issues is that raised by Williams (2007, p. 17) on the nature of communication that is privacy and publicity in virtual worlds. It is feasible to collect data and leave without contributing to inworld activities by altering the appearance of avatars or by recording behaviour and interactions covertly. In this respect, Williams draws attention onto ethical considerations in graphical environments and he emphasizes that the researcher is required to take a sensitive approach to observation since the distinction between public and private graphical spaces in online virtual environments is clear. In other words, conversations held within private spaces need to be conducted with a degree of sensitivity to maintain the anonymity of the informant and permission from the informer ought to be taken, should conversation be a part of the analysis. This problem can be handled by seeking informed consent from participants. The second issue is then related to the circumstances of informed consent. The common sense is that it needs to be sought for revealing information to the public even after certain precautions have been taken to protect the anonymity of participants (Sharf, 1999).

Similarly, The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) provides a set of ethical guidelines for educational research that concerns informed consent, deception, right to withdraw and ethical respect for any persons involved in research. Likewise, there are several guidelines to be followed when the research is conducted in virtual worlds. For instance, Terms of Service agreements (TOS) consist of information about acceptable behaviour in virtual communities. Moreover, there is a set of documents available at the SL website for privacy and community standards which address the issues of intolerance, harassment, assault, disclosure of one's personal information, indecency, online safety, etc. Accordingly, potential participants ought to be informed about the nature and the purpose of the research study to seek willingness of engagement with them. Taking into account the research structure, researchers may intend to gain informed consent from the research participants via inworld tools such as notecard giver tools. If the participant declares through an instant message that they have understood and agreed to participate, then that may be taken as their consent. Each participant ought to be informed that the findings of the study may be publicized, albeit neither the institutions nor individuals will be named or identified. Therefore, the researcher should not require participants to provide their real names and should not attempt to verify the participants' real identities albeit the identity of avatars can be verified with users' permission. This may create severe ethical problems in terms of privacy and consent, but researchers should always notify respondents that they would not be named and identified in the study. All participants should also be assured that they may withdraw, i.e., have the right to teleport out of the research situation if they are uncomfortable with any of the procedures or questions (Stanton, 2010, p. 12) from the research at any point. Questionnaires and interviews should not contain any questions of a troubling nature and request any responses of illegal or unethical behaviour or cause damage to their reputations, and places for the storage and dissemination of the study ought to be secured in order to protect respondents' identities. Data analysis should take place and be stored in a password-protected folder on secure and encrypted devices. In addition, participants should be assured that the audio and/or video recording of their activities made during the research may be used only for analysis and no other usage is made of them without their written permission. Further, researchers can indicate their position as "academic researcher" in their Heads-up display (HUD) that is over the avatar's head and disclose sufficient information about the study and him or her by completing an associated page of the avatar profile that can be viewed by anyone.

Conclusion

In accordance with the theory underpinning the research, virtual ethnography represents a longitudinal study and seeks to look through participants' eyes for a deep understanding of what residents actually do and say in terms of teaching and learning in virtual worlds. I believe that the virtual ethnographic approach will allow the researcher to understand a sense of cultural and educational practice in the context of everyday life in virtual worlds – SL in this case – and broaden the set of answers to the methodological questions raised.

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DOING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS IN SECOND LIFE: REFLECTIONS ON AN ONGOING PROJECT

Marta Sponsiello[1]

Introduction

In recent years researchers from different perspectives and with different aims have focused their attention on virtual worlds and their possible use in education, among other fields. In the meantime – thanks to this particular attention – virtual worlds have revealed their potentialities for educational purposes in many ways.

The starting point of the present research is the consideration of online environments, and virtual worlds in particular, as meaningful places for the construction and growth of social relations: the most common definition of *virtual worlds* can be considered incorrect and misleading if it is understood as being opposed to *real world*, because the experiences of online worlds are a meaningful part of the experience of an individual's everyday life, and actually contribute to shaping his/her life experience as a whole (Hine, 2000; Lehdonvirta, 2008; Miller & Slater, 2000; Rheingold, 1993). If we have to make a distinction, perhaps that of online/offline would be the most appropriate one.

The research interest in the different uses of online worlds for education has commonly been focused on the final results of teaching in online worlds in terms of effectiveness and efficacy, rather than on the role of the sociocultural dynamics which take place in an immersive educational context. Moreover, even when focusing on the social aspects of educational situations, the use of ethnographic methods for studying and analysing educational contexts in virtual worlds is still far from being common. This situation has led my research to focus on the study of some educational experiences in Second Life (SL). Through it I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the value of the educational experience lived in SL by taking into consideration various aspects, such as the different kind of educational experiences encountered in SL, the method of conducting and organizing classes, the social dynamics that can be observed in a class context in SL, and an overview and consideration of the class experience in SL as a student or a teacher.

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The route thus outlined starts from the knowledge and understanding of the particular context in which learning takes place and leads to a deepening of modalities of interaction, socialization, and appropriation of the educational experience in and for daily life. This path can bring out the sociocultural aspects of some educational events within the online world and seems to suggest ethnography as the most appropriate methodology to adopt for the research: as Murthy (2008) writes, “ethnography is about telling social stories” (p. 838).

Some conceptual issues emerged during the setup of the research methodology and during the early stages of fieldwork. They revealed the existence of some further topics to think about: since these revealed themselves to be relevant, they will be presented in this chapter.

The choice of ethnography; between tradition and innovation

The choice of ethnography in such a particular context implies the need to adapt the methodology to be adopted not only on the basis of research interests, but also in relation to the context in which it is conducted. In recent years, debate on the application of ethnographic methodology in new contexts such as the Internet has been focused on the differences that new contexts of analysis, new forms of sociality and new tools available to the researcher bring to the methodology, and how they influence the data that can be collected and the interpretations that can be produced. Issues such as the difficulty of defining the field of inquiry, participant observation and the role of writing in the work of the ethnographer were challenged when blogs, forums, social networks and chat rooms became the object of study. These “spaces on the net” have an open structure in which boundaries cease to exist, or at least cease to be insurmountable.

> An ethnography of purely virtual spaces is certainly the most radical attempt to move beyond the traditional "fieldwork" approach. It stretches ethnographic practice into an unknown area. On the other hand however, it moves so far beyond tradition that a virtual ethnography has to deal with a set of serious difficulties. (Wittel, 2000, para. 15)

The clear separation in research styles between conventional ethnography and what is described by the terms digital, virtual and online ethnography is grounded in the now popular distinction between the “real” and the “virtual”. In this chapter I will not discuss the issue with a philosophical approach; but a passage from the article by Wittel (2000) can help clarify the perspective adopted:

> I argue for a perspective that does not separate the virtual or online world from the real or offline world. On a theoretical level such a perspective is problematic, because it suggests the existence of a real reality, a reality that is not mediated. After all, the introduction of the term virtual did not contribute to a better understanding of current transformations of and within society. [...] Rather than emphasising the differences between material and digital spaces, we should introduce a more relational perspective and concentrate on the similarities, connections and overlappings. No method would be more appropriate to achieve this objective than a modernised version of fieldwork. (para. 22)

Similar reflections have been suggested by Boellstorff (2008), in connection to his recent SL ethnographic study: "My research has convinced me that the pivotal issue with regard to virtual worlds is their character as social worlds" (p. 31). In another relatively recent work, Guimarães Jr. (2005) presented the methodological approaches employed in an ethnography in cyberspace, with the following words:

> The term "social groups" is intentionally used here […]. The everyday use (and to some extent abuse) of the world 'virtual' attributes meaning to it that seems to refer to non-real entities, to experiences realized in a fantastic or imaginative sphere that lacks 'reality'. However, research has shown that in many cases users do not perceive their online experiences as 'not-real', as Watson describes: "My experience has been that people in the off-line world tend to see on-line communities as virtual, but that participants in the online communities see them as quite real" (Watson 1997: 129). (p. 145)

The term virtual ethnography covers different approaches, visions and topics: from the possibility of using digital tools for ethnographic research in traditional environments to the changes in the methodological discourse, as a consequence of the study of a new and unexplored context. With this last issue, which addresses major changes in methodology, consideration of the online world as a new research field cannot lead to the same conclusions or solutions that are proposed for other new research fields, even if equally virtual, online or digital.

The metamorphosis of the concept of field

As already stated by Paccagnella (1997) fifteen years ago, research in virtual worlds "can potentially take the task of the researcher extraordinarily close to that of traditional field anthropologists. […] Research on virtual communities will then be even more similar to research on traditional communities in 'real life'" (Paccagnella, 1997).

The choice of studying an immersive online environment thus recalls traditional ethnographic methods. The concept of field in virtual ethnography is being challenged by the number of spaces available to the researcher; an online world like Second Life – which is a large place but still bounded – shows once again some of the characteristics of the traditional notion of field. First of all, the same space to share at the same time, and the need for the researcher to be present in the community observed. The aim of ethnography, whether in traditional or digital spaces, is to understand and reveal contexts by taking into account the complexity of the meanings of a culture and by trying to interpret – with the expressions used by Geertz (1973) – the "web of significance" meaningful to the community. The intention is to produce "thick descriptions". According to Geertz, in order to achieve this purpose, immersion in the culture is necessary.

In a few words, the issue of virtual ethnography is interpreted in this light: as the metamorphosis of a traditional research method to understand completely new educational settings. This interpretation is different from the (more common?) position which relates the term virtual to the possibility of using new digital "tools" for studying any educational settings, whether traditional or innovative. The meaning of virtual ethnography adopted for this research thus refers to a new way of considering the traditional methods of ethnography, rather than to a reflection on the possibility of using new digital tools for studying traditional settings.

But what does immersion in a class context in Second Life mean? There are different aspects that can be analysed. However, they all relate to the metamorphosis of the concept of field as a crucial element: from traditional classroom to immersive environments, from open digital spaces back to defined places and times of learning, from offline realities to the blurring of other constraints.

Comparisons between offline and online environments are not likely to produce very relevant reflections, as they relate to different environments which are not always comparable. In any case, for a discourse on the methodological approach of the research where the intention is to borrow conventional methods and try to adapt them to new contexts, it is necessary to have a clear idea of the differences between the two contexts.

The classroom environment undergoes a physical mutation: an enclosed space with clear physical boundaries becomes something else in an online world. It is not necessarily very different from a traditional class in its organization, but it potentially changes its structure; it becomes a space that easily adapts to the specific needs of teachers. The classroom turns into an online lounge, an auditorium, a space to build together.

The social organization does not change, and it is what allows us still to use the term "class", even in such a different environment from the traditional one. Hence, what holds the class together and defines it in an online world is much more than physical structure; it is social structure: the presence of a teacher and a group that creates bonds, shares experiences and becomes culture.

The use of different online environments in education involves the expansion of a classroom structure that tends to spread on the net and replicate itself in several places: an example of this is the use, sometimes combined, of forums, classes or personal blogs, Facebook or its specific groups, and Twitter, wikis, etc. where the class moves in different times and spaces, for the construction of shared knowledge. In contrast to this type of educational organization on the net, the class organization in an immersive environment repeats the same constraints of time and space that characterize the traditional class. The group meets in a precise place at a scheduled time: the need to share space and time imposes, once again, the traditional classroom model.

The online world therefore assumes new features compared to those usually assigned to a conventional virtual environment, that normally "transcends the constraints of time, place and pace and adds a dimension to the experience of the learner" (Browne, 2003, p. 247). Although online worlds add a dimension to the experience of learning, they are often much more rigid environments than other conventional online environments, and they force us to reconsider the limits of the categories of space and time.

The class model of an immersive environment, however, differs from the traditional one in other aspects: in the online world, the closed environment of the traditional class loses its borders, opening itself to a variety of environments. Thematic areas, historical cities, distant or destroyed lands, fantasy environments that students can visit individually or with the teacher, often formally constitute part of the educational experience, either because they are used as opportunities for discussion and sharing ideas, or because they are in the syllabus of the class. That is the reason why a multi-sited ethnography can be a good solution to researching these sites:

> Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography. […] Multi-sited ethnographies define their objects of study through several different modes or techniques. These techniques might be understood as practices of construction through (preplanned or opportunistic) movement and of tracing within different settings of a complex cultural phenomenon given an initial, baseline conceptual identity that turns out to be contingent and malleable as one traces it. (Marcus, 1995, p. 12)

Finding connections in the similar approaches and class experiences encountered in Second Life made it possible to consider in the research project the observation activity of different classes. In this sense, a multi-sited approach allowed the inclusion of different places, located in the wider online context chosen for the research, in a single ethnography. Moreover, the possibility of following the class in its paths, moving from the class environment to the different places the group visited, added further meaning to the multi-sited approach used.

As the field changes, the role of the ethnographer changes too, and with it, the relationship between the researcher and the groups observed.

In a conventional online context, the researcher is usually invisible: having regard to written spaces (blogs, forums, wikis, e-learning platforms) the presence of the researcher remains unnoticed for the majority of time, even if his/her presence in those spaces has been declared at the beginning of the research. As a consequence of this, it is often easy for people being observed to ignore the fact that their writings will be examined for different purposes and interpreted in different ways (Beaulieu, 2004). Whilst the researcher in an online space is often a "lurker", in an immersive environment s/he inevitably becomes a visible presence, a third element in the class, thus recalling a very similar situation to offline realities.

Defining boundaries and instruments

As the research context becomes less defined, issues about the definition of the boundaries of the research arise:

> Ethnographic research in and on a network requires careful consideration about which areas and parts of the network to include, which ones to partially include and which ones to exclude. The necessity of spatially limiting the research area is nothing new. The classic field had to be constructed as well. However the construction of the field was facilitated by the fact that fields seemed to have supposedly pre-constructed borders anyway, geographic, social or cultural borders. Networks in contrast are somehow infinite, they are open structures and highly dynamic. By drawing boundaries, as indicated above, the ethnographer actively and consciously participates in the construction of spaces and in the spatialisation of difference. (Wittel, 2000, para. 9)

The class contexts observed, despite some connections among them, are different in several aspects. For instance, there are class contexts that include offline and online meetings (students and teacher meet online in Second Life and offline in their physical class) and there are classes that are held entirely online (students usually don't know each other and rarely meet their teacher offline).

The research focuses on the online contexts exclusively. This is due to different reasons: not only the physical impossibility of observing some class contexts and their relations between online and offline moments, but also the interest in considering the online spaces for their own meaning. Boellstorff writes:

> To demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for "context" presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts; it renders ethnographically inaccessible the fact that most residents of virtual worlds do not meet their fellow residents offline. If one wants to study collective meaning and virtual worlds as collectivities exist purely online, then studying them in their own terms is the appropriate methodology, one that goes against the grain of many assumptions concerning how virtual worlds work. (2008, p. 61)

In the research activities it is necessary to consider some consequences of this decision, above all the thin border between online and offline dimensions as a starting point for reflecting on the fluidity of social relations in educational experiences, between online and offline contexts and between online contexts themselves. Among other issues, the roles and relationships among some instruments of ethnography require great consideration. Participant observation and interviews in an immersive online context can differ very much from the conventional use.

The traditional methods of observation in offline contexts cannot be the same as in an immersive digital space, where relationships among all the participants are characterized by interactions of their avatars through textual chat or voice: on the one hand, the lack of gestures can make participant observation apparently poor. On the other hand, the richness of information collected through interviews and conversations can make the interpretative process very rich, and complex too. Taking notes, recording audio and video data and taking pictures at the same time can be very difficult and frustrating, due to technical problems. It can also distract from the conversations going on in those moments and lead to poor notes.

It seems that notes, which constitute the principal instrument that characterizes traditional ethnography, have a different value and use in an online context. Moreover, participant observation itself, in these particular educational online contexts, may be less useful, especially if limited to the class context only: the typical relational aspect of a traditional participant observation activity is quite difficult to manage. This seems to be a consequence of the organization of the educational context in its general terms, rather than being a consequence of its particular characteristic of being online: being present in class meetings allows observation of class interactions, but doesn't allow relationships with students to be built up easily, as this would constitute a distraction for them.

Students often experience this immersive world for the first time, and their participation in it mainly depends on the time of the class: they often go online for the class meetings exclusively and disconnect very soon after the end of the class. Most of the time they are informed about the presence of the researcher, but it does not seem to affect their behaviour. Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to find some time to approach them and talk with them.

A different attitude often develops during the focus group organized for the last day of class. By being accustomed to the presence of the researcher, the class members seem very happy to answer questions and they also start discussions, get involved in the research issues, and finally ask to be interviewed individually. Despite this, relationships with students often end with the ending of the class, as they rarely continue to come to SL regularly.

Therefore, it seems easier to build fruitful relationships with teachers rather than with students. Teachers, having experienced the immersive world via their educational interests, are often online even after the end of their class and find sharing their experience with the researcher interesting and stimulating: they are therefore more open to questioning and dialogue.

Interpretation and writing

Despite some deep differences, ethnographic research in immersive online contexts reveals the same profound connections we usually find in traditional ethnographies among three main phases: analysis, interpretation and writing. Writing itself, as a form for the organization of thinking during the phase of fieldwork, can become the starting point for further references to the process of “writing (educational) cultures” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

In the everyday work of participant observation, collecting notes and interviewing, the influence and power of writing is still evident: the simple action of taking notes becomes a first process of elaboration and interpretation of data; the general framework of the research is indeed a constant reference, when encouraging interesting aspects to emerge and finding key elements to focus on during later interviews. This phenomenon recalls Geertz's thought on the nature of anthropological writing, when he writes that “Anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third ones to boot” (Geertz, 1973, p. 15).

The border between culture as a natural, observed fact and as a constructed entity is confused even in an online environment, and the evidence that most of the writing collected may have been written by the observed themselves is not an advantage. Marcus defines fieldwork as “Synonymous with the activity of inscribing diverse contexts of oral discourse through field notes and recordings” (Marcus, 1986, p. 263).

In a conventional online environment, discourses are built exclusively by writing, while in an immersive environment discourses are created orally, too. The dimension of orality, lost in the initial phase of digital/virtual ethnography, can now be regained: in offline and online spaces, between oral and written discourses, we keep on following people, tracing paths, writing cultures.

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PART 3

ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY AND EDUCATION

TRAJECTORIES OF PARTICIPATION THROUGH ONLINE AFFINITY SPACES

Russell Francis[1]

> In an affinity space, people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability or social class. These latter variables are back grounded, though they can be used (or not) strategically by people if and when they choose to use them for their own purposes if and when they choose to use them for their own purposes. (Gee, 2005, p. 255)

Affinity groups may be dispersed across large spaces and involve people who work in different institutions or countries who share an allegiance to a shared interest and access to a specific set of practices (Gee, 2000, p. 105). In this respect, affinity groups are rarely embedded in a life world community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) nor confined to a specific geographical location. In the offline world people participate in multiple affinity groups (Gee, 2000). Some of these are "institutionally sanctioned" (i.e. workers support groups and after-school computer clubs). However, many emerge spontaneously as people come together to socialize, exchange information and share their passions (i.e. sports clubs, break-dance gangs, public speaking contests, etc.). Gee is particularly interested in "morally heated affinity groups" (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994) such as the pro-life movement, environmental pressure groups or school reformers who collaborate to bring about social change. Participation in affinity groups of this kind is voluntary. Nevertheless, affinity spaces support identity work. Gee (2000) stresses that affinity spaces are particularly important for thinking about the ways people become recognized as certain "kinds of persons" (Gee, 2000; Hacking, 1994). Moreover, they can help individuals resist or escape the identities that are imposed upon them by institutions as a result of their birth, race, class, education or other aspects of their identities over which they have little control.

In the 21st century, social media has radically expanded our capacity to participate in a burgeoning variety of online affinity groups. Gee (2004, 2009) elaborates the concept with reference to *Age of Mythology Heaven* (or *AoM Heaven*), a game fan site that allows players to share and celebrate their gaming experiences. *AoM Heaven* supports a vibrant exchange of knowledge and expertise among a globally distributed network of

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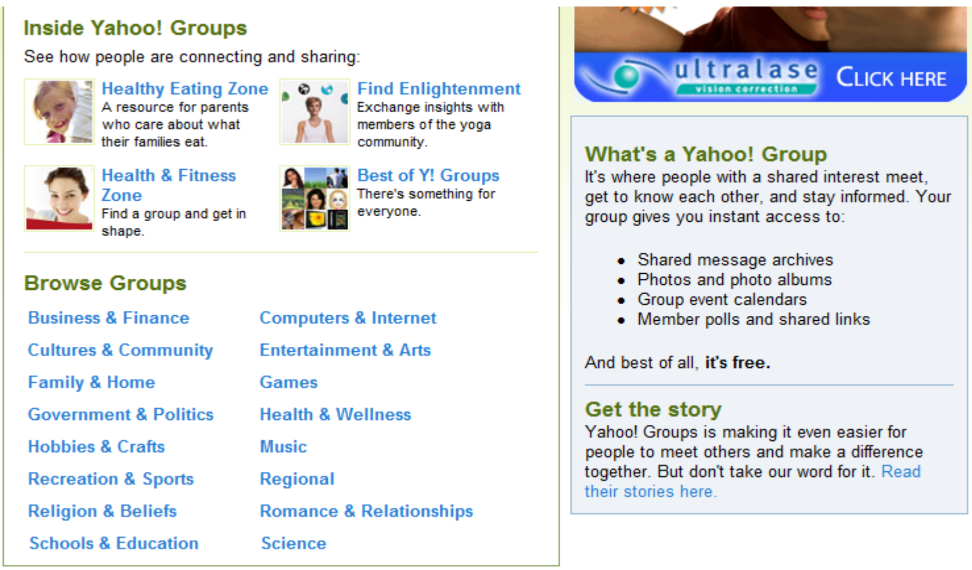
people, of all ages, who share very specific interests. Members can read reviews about the game, share hints and tips, upload artwork, download demos, find playmates and organize online tournaments. Much of the context is produced by participants themselves: "fans create new maps, new scenarios for the single-player and multi-player game, adjust or redesign the technical aspects of the game, create new artwork, and even give tutorials on mythology as it exists in the game or outside the game" (Gee, 2004, p. 85). Online activities also lead to offline spin-off activities. For example, Gee (2004, p. 84) argues that *AoM Heaven* "encourages people to learn about mythology in general, including mythological facts and systems that go beyond the *Age of Mythology* game itself". Today, massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* offer gamers unprecedented opportunities to come together, take on alternative identities and engage in shared activity (Linderoth & Bennerstedt, 2007; Linderoth & Säljö, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). However, these virtual play worlds remain somewhat exotic for the majority of people (White, 2007). In contrast, groupware technologies like *Yahoo*, *Facebook* and *Google* groups have now become integrated in the fabric of everyday life. A screenshot from *Yahoo Groups* suggests the diversity of online groups that has emerged as a result (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Screen shot from *Yahoo Group*'s front page



This screenshot includes groups for people interested in topics as diverse as "business and finance", "health and wellness" and "religion and beliefs", to name but a few. These groups allow members to share links and messages, monitor group calendars, post to group listservs and upload images with a click of a mouse. Today, professional networking tools like *LinkedIn* support thousands of special interest groups. These range from "just for fun" groups to highly focused special interest groups that allow young professions to build extended professional networks that transcend institutional boundaries.

Researching students' participation in online affinity spaces

As a research student I started to research students' informal use of social and participatory media (Francis, 2008). In developing this research trajectory I found that the concept of an online affinity space offered a powerful heuristic for identifying and conceptualizing emergent learning practices mediated by social media. However, methodological innovation was required to explore how students engaged with online groups in everyday life. Gee (1996) tends to infer practices supported by online groups from an analysis of screen-based content. As a consequence, the practices of active participants tends to eclipse the practices of those who participate but rarely post, contribute, comment or upload content. Gee himself highlights the need to combine analysis of screen-based content with practices and use (2005, p. 218). Nevertheless, it is not clear how this might be achieved.

There is no longer a shortage of research that explores students' use of social and participatory media more generally. However, many studies in this field rely on surveys methods to identify broad trends (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Seoane, 2008; Lonn & Teasley, 2009). Or attempt to map the 'experience' of learners drawing upon data generated by questionnaires, e-mail interviews and focus groups (Conole & Creanor, 2007; JISC, 2008; Masterman, 2009; Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006). In general, funding limitations and time constraints have led researchers in this field to rely on methods that tell us little about individual students' trajectories in and through online groups.[2] To address this challenge, I develop a method that could provide an insight into the ways individual students engaged and participated in specific online groups overtime. This chapter illustrates the kinds of insights that might be yielded by this approach. It illustrates how a student participated in multiple groups, delving in and out as need arose, to serve a loosely connected range of purposes over time.

Following the learner: a sociocultural approach

The approach I developed aimed to "following the learner" (Facer, Furlong, Sutherland, & Furlong, 2003; Francis, 2008) as s/he starts to use digital tools and online resources to address authentic learning needs. Informants were recruited from members of an interconnected friendship group of postgraduate students who lived and learnt in a

[2] Studies that fall under the banner of *Facebook* research have started to draw attention to a range of important issues (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007, 2009; Selwyn, 2007, 2009; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008; Wollam, 2008). Some of these studies provide original insider perspectives framed in participants own terms. However, no existing studies set out to explore how and why students' participate in *Facebook* groups. In short, there is a dearth of research that provides grounded insights in individuals' actual use and participation in online special interest groups.

collegiate environment. All were studying for postgraduate qualifications. Individuals who seemed willing to openly discuss their use of social and participatory media were then invited to complete a pre-interview questionnaire. I arranged to meet each participant in the place they most frequently worked on their computers (typically their study rooms). At that time, stimulated responses were recorded as students worked at their computers followed by an in-depth semi-structured interview. Following the initial case study face-to-face conversations, e-mail correspondence and later *Skype* conversations were used to probe particularly interesting points that emerged following preliminary analysis.[3] Selected participants took part in two or more in-depth interviews and stimulated response sessions. I used this method to gain a holistic insight into individuals' use of digital tools and online resources in general. However, as the study progressed, the case studies became progressively focused on students' use of social media and participatory media populated by user generated content. Further methodological innovation was then required to probe the students' participation in these online spaces.

Informants often discuss and demonstrate a particular online affinity group that they routinely engaged with. However, it was rarely possible to gain an in-depth or holistic insight into the purpose and function of the group without spending time as a participant observer as a group member. Therefore, I started to join selected online groups discussed or demonstrated by the informants. For example, I started to lurk in *Aids India*, *Flavour Pill*, *ChessBase* and *Millions against Monsanto*, *Deviant Art* and *The Battle of Wesnorth* open source development community following case study sessions with particular informants. In each case I spent time surfing around within the group: observing, making notes, writing memos, reading content uploaded by group members and making screenshots that were pasted into a folder on Microsoft's OneNote. These light touch virtual ethnographies allowed me to gain a much deeper insight into the dynamics of online groups discussed by participants during interview and observation in their study rooms.

This method resembles an approach called "virtual ethnography" recommended by Hine (2000), who spent time as a participant observer in various online spaces recording and documenting on-screen data to investigate a media event that erupted on the web during the trial of the British nanny Louise Woodward. However, it was motivated by a need to gain a deeper insight into the participatory practices of a particular individual. In this respect, it extended the principle of following the learner into an online space after face-to-face interviews and observation sessions to generate additional data and for triangulation purposes. Participant observation of this kind always aims to provide a more holistic understanding of an individual's engagement with an online space after the event. Hence, I now describe the method as "retrospective virtual ethnography" (Francis, 2008).

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[3] Several participants became more actively engaged in the study and started e-mailing insights into newly discovered tools and the associated strategies and tactics they had used to exploit their affordances as a learning resource. Interestingly they also started using concepts I had introduced them to during conversations. In each case I attempted to follow the learner as they started to use digital tools and online resources to address authentic needs. In practice this required me to spend a significant amount of time getting to know individuals in the college through informal conversations (typically in over lunch and in the student bar).

In practice, it was difficult to make blanket assumptions about the way a particular group might assist individual learners. The following extended vignette illustrates an individuals' trajectory of participation in and across multiple online affinity spaces over time (Dreier, 1999; Wenger, 1998). It is reconstructed from data produced from an in-depth interview, stimulated response sessions and short periods of retrospective virtual ethnography. In many respects, it illustrates the kinds of insights that can be gained by following the learner.

Vignette: Ardash's trajectory of participation through online affinity

Aids India

AIDS India is a *Yahoo Group* – founded on March 30th 2000, having now over 4000 members – which serves as a globally distributed open access affinity group for people engaged in combating the spread of AIDS on the Indian subcontinent. It promotes itself as a "virtual organization responding to HIV and AIDS crisis in India" and aims to connect stakeholders, facilitate networking, and promote communication and collaboration among those interested in HIV and AIDS related issues (Yahoo! Groups, 2007). The affinity space allows members to post AIDS related articles, engage in topical discussion via text-based chat forums, follow or add links and access a calendar which provides information about aids related virtual events and conferences. It constantly pulsates with activity (postings, new links and a constantly updated calendar) and persists over time.

Ardash joined the group so he could stay in touch with the most important and up-to-date developments on the ground. He commented, "a lot of the biggest NGO groups contribute to this and add stories to this and at first it was very useful to keep up-to-date". Nevertheless, he later became suspicious of the angle promoted by the group and the selection of the articles. He argued that it promoted an antigovernment agenda intentionally designed to promote sympathy for NGO groups working in India. As a result, he became suspicious of the bias in much of the content uploaded or shared and started to seek information through less partisan sources. In retrospect, he argued that his participation in the group had taught him, more than anything else, about the politics of the NGO sector and the various strategies employed by NGOs to promote their own organization's agendas. The use of web-based technologies appeared to play a fundamental role in NGOs capacity to influence AIDS related initiatives in the region.

Academici

Aids India is not specifically designed to support academic study. In contrast, *Academici* is an online service dedicated to facilitating collaboration among academics with specific interests working in different institutions. Indeed, *Academici* introduces itself as a "global resource providing a web-based environment in which knowledge workers can interact, collaborate, transfer knowledge and conduct commerce with each other, with commercial and governmental organisations". The space supports shared bookmarks, lists events and conferences, online forums focused on specific topics and special interest groups. As such, it mediates knowledge sharing among a globally dispersed community of academics who shared specific interests.

The service is clearly designed purposefully for the task of supporting globally distributed affinity groups of academics with very specific interests. Initially Ardash was extremely excited about the new possibilities for peer learning it might support. However, he struggled to find any groups that related directly to his interests or supported a lively exchange of ideas. At the time of the interview he said he made no use of it. Nevertheless, he remained a member and occasionally searched through the groups to see if anything new or interesting came up.

ChessBase

In contrast, Ardash had become a very active participant in *ChessBase*. This online space is open to anyone with an interest in Chess. It offers an example of a mature, non-exclusive online affinity space that serves a globally dispersed community of enthusiasts. Members can play chess against a computer, against a friend or against another member of the affinity group. It also affords players the opportunity to find other players at a similar ability level and links to discussion forums that allow chess enthusiasts to share and discuss chess-related news. Further, it provides tools that allow users to following tournaments and share, read and discuss chess-related articles. Referring to one article, Ardash commented: "So here's an article about a leading GM Susan Polgier who played 1021 consecutive games. In one session she faced 326 opponents simultaneously, walked 9.1 miles, and won an unprecedented 99.3% of the games".

Ardash pointed out that tools now exist to allow spectators to take an active role in ongoing games by grand masters. These allowed users to make moves as though they were an opponent, and compare their move to the one made by the real opponent. In effect, these tools allow spectators to become active participants in an ongoing tournament.

Ardash used these tools to develop his own game. He commented: "Yes, I'm testing myself, I'll never do what they do, but I'm interested in seeing how weird their moves are and how beautiful some of them end up becoming, it's just amazing".[4] He added, "my instincts in chess are becoming more and more developed through this process. I mean this is part of the learning process."

It is easy to assume that *ChessBase* constitutes a playful form of participation for leisure and entertainment purposes. However, within *ChessBase*, many of the topics under discussion had little to do with chess. For example, whilst demonstrating his use of the site, Ardash commented on a spin-off discussion on the theme of UFOs.

[4] *ChessBase* also gave users access to two artificially intelligent tutorial programmes, one called *Shredder* and the other *Chess Genius* that could analyse one's performance and provide critical feedback. Ardash had not used these tools, but was planning to do so.

Leading chess personalities had been posting various photographs that claimed to show UFOs and the group, including a Russian UFO expert, analysed and proposed possible arguments for and against the credibility of the claims made.

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The vignette illustrates how Ardash started to exploit access to a range of online affinity groups to engage in a process of (self-)education. Further, it hints at some of the trajectories of participation a student might take as s/he explores his/her changing interests. At a methodological level, it shows how we might start to describe an individuals' personalized trajectory of participation in and through multiple online affinity spaces. Moreover, it suggests that inbound trajectories – in which a student joins, engages and becomes increasingly active, are not typical. In this case, only *ChessBase* engaged Ardash in a deeply committed and passionate way. In fact, the vignette suggests that trajectories in which participants join, explore and start to engage but then withdraw or retain a legitimate peripheral (Lave & Wenger, 1991) mode of participation might be far more common. Other hypothetical models could be proposed. To map them all is beyond the scope of this chapter. Here, I have simply tried to suggest some of the tensions that shape an individual's trajectories of participation through and across affinity spaces. For example, this vignette shows that Ardash was developing a capacity to critically frame the agenda of the dominate group with an affinity space, and a capacity to strategically adjust his mode of participation accordingly. Furthermore, it shows how engagement in recreational spaces like *ChessBase* can generate additional interests in unrelated topics (e.g. the existence of UFOs). This suggests that affinity spaces cultures support radically personalized interest driven trajectories of participation. However, it also suggests that immersive modes of participation may absorb students to the degree that distracts them from their studies.

Discussion

According to Gee (2005, p. 228), there are "multiple different routes to participation" and "lots of different routes to status" in online affinity spaces. This chapter starts to suggest students' diverse trajectories of participation in and through affinity spaces. Nevertheless, it also suggests we require further methodological innovation to advance this field of inquiry. In particular, it suggests that we need qualitative methods that allow us to follow individual learners as they move in and across affinity spaces over time.

Compared to survey-based approaches or methods that infer practices from an analysis of screen-based content, the method describe as "following the learner" is labour intensive. It requires the researcher to spend time getting to know individuals in order to gain a holistic understanding of their needs, priorities and values. However, if an increasingly number of students all over the world are now connecting with others with very specific interests in a burgeoning variety of online affinity groups. For this reason, it seems critical that educational researchers develop an evidence-based understanding of this emerging arena of online learning activity. By following the learner and engaging in short periods of retrospective virtual ethnography we can develop a far more nuanced understanding of students' diverse trajectories of participation on and through online affinity spaces. Indeed, these methods allow us to develop far more fluid, flexible and amorphous models that capture an individual's capacity to move in and out of multiple affinity spaces, leveraging the distributed expertise of others, if and when required, to serve their changing purposes over time.

This approach also reveals the challenges and choices associated with group life. For example, the examples presented suggest that over-immersion in group life can distract, disorientate and usurp the agency of learners in undesirable ways. In short, we need to start mapping out the challenges and choices that students confront as well as the social media literacy required to negotiate this emergent sphere for online activity. For example, a capacity to critically frame the dominant agenda of the group and resist addictive and time wasting modes of participation might be regarded as important affinity space literacy. Nevertheless, in order to fully understand these practices, we need to first research into the non-contributory modes of participation. Methods that infer practices from screen-based content uploaded by active participations can only provide a surface level insight into the learning opportunities afforded.

Finally, I hope that this chapter suggests the fundamental importance of developing a more nuanced understanding of this emergent culture of learning more generally. Gee (2005, p. 233) asserts that "affinity spaces are a particularly common and important form today in our high-tech new-capitalist world". This work has led me to believe that the implications for the future of (self-)education are profound and wide-ranging and extend far beyond the concerns of educationalists.

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AN EXPLORATION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SECOND LIFE IN THE CONTEXT OF INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION: THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

Sabrina Fitzsimons[1]

Introduction

This methodological chapter addresses the processes of virtual ethnography within a recent, one might even say exotic, virtual world context that is Second Life.

The research enquiry is an exploration of teaching and learning in Second Life within the context of a programme of Initial Teacher Education.

Since a blueprint for qualitative research does not exist (Mason, 1996), the researcher proposes that educational practice within the context of Second Life can be researched through the creative adaption of a traditional ethnographic methodology (Eisenhart, 2001). This involves adjusting traditional methods of research to the unique virtual environment (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009). In choosing this route the researcher is aware of the "paradox of conducting a non-traditional ethnography in a non-traditional non-space with traditional sensibilities" (Markham, 1998, p. 62, as cited in Wilson, 2006, p. 308).

In this chapter, I argue that traditional ethnographic methodology can be employed creatively in the online education environment. First, by defining the research setting – Second Life. Second, by presenting the naturalistic paradigm that frames this study. The "basic beliefs" that define this paradigm are summarized in the choice of ontology, epistemology, methodology and treatment of ethics.

This chapter provides an account of how Wolcott's (1997) suggested methods for ethnography in education are reconfigured to best suit ethnographic study within this virtual environment. These methods will centre on: Participant observation; The use of written and non-written (digital) sources; Interviewing; Content analysis.

I further argue that the nature of the data for online participant observation in Second Life environment is rich and facilitates dense detailed accounts referred to by Geertz as "thick description" (1973, p. 6).

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The chapter concludes with an evaluating of the quality of the inquiry under three headings: the appropriateness of the research design, demonstration of truthfulness and rigour and finally the usefulness of the research to the research community.

An exploration of teaching and learning in Second Life in the context of Initial Teacher Education

I am an assistant lecturer in the School of Education, Mater Dei Institute of Education (MDI). MDI is a third level College of Education training post-primary teachers of Religious Education and an elective subject (English, History or Music). My interest in the study of virtual environments for educational purposes stems from my Masters research on the use of the computer game "The Sims" for teaching and learning of topics on the Junior Certificate Religious Education syllabus. As I moved from post-primary teaching into tertiary level teaching, my interest shifted to focus on how three dimensional virtual worlds, such as Second Life, can be employed for teaching and learning. This chapter outlines the methodology and ethnographic techniques I have employed for my doctoral research, tentatively titled "An exploration of teaching and learning in Second Life, within the context of Initial Teacher Education (ITE)".

First steps

The first step in the design of the research inquiry is to identify the purpose of the research and to define the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Palmer (1928), author of what is considered to be the first research "manual" for students, states the selection and definition of the mandated research problem as limiting: "the scope of the research to workable proportions as well as to define the kind of data which is to be selected from the mass of phenomena which confronts the investigator" (p. 5).

This qualitative research inquiry, following an emergent design, is an exploration of tertiary level teaching and learning in the context of a 3D virtual environment which is Second Life (SL). Investigations began at the macro-level with a panoramic exploration of teaching and learning in SL. Emerging themes from the macro investigation served to focus the themes of literature review and micro study. The study of the experience of others within a given context is referred to as "shadowed data" by Morse (2000). Whilst acknowledging the problems that foreshadowing can bring, Morse (2000) argues that the use of shadowed data is critical to the qualitative research inquiry since "It provides the investigator with some idea of the range of experiences and the domain of the phenomena beyond the single participant's personal experience, and it provides some explanation of the rationale for these differences" (p. 4).

The second, micro, phase of the research inquiry explores teaching and learning in SL in the specific context of initial teacher education. In this phase of the exploration, the researcher delivered a module in SL, "Religion in Cyberspace", for undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor of Religious Education degree in Mater Dei Institute of Education. This study has served as the "micro" field under investigation.

Defining the research setting: "identifying the field"

Second Life is a relatively "new" virtual world, a new frontier (Castronova, 2005). SL is a discrete, albeit virtual, location with similar characteristics to an actual face-to-face community (Kinnevy & Enosh, 2002). Virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are "places of human culture realized by computer programs through the internet" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 17). They are places, inhabited by persons, enabled by online technologies (Boellstorff, 2008; Castronova, 2005). Boellstorff (2008) argues that "Humans make culture in virtual and actual contexts; since humans are part of nature, and the virtual is part of a product of human intentionality; the virtual is as 'natural' as anything humans do in the actual world" (p. 19).

Early explorers of the virtual opened a path of discovery to Second Life. Many set root in this virtual space. Educational practice within SL began to flourish such as: CyberOne: Law in the Court of Public Opinion at Harvard College (in 2008), Second Health at Imperial College London (in 2007), and Canadian Border simulation at Loyalist College (in 2009), to name but a few. Missionaries and evangelizers made their way to this virtual space to preach the good news and convert through virtual means, and these included: Temple Beit Israel, The Bnei Baruch Education & Research Institute, The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, The Christian Church of Second Life. Commercial and economic organizations such as Adidas, Reebok, American Apparel, Dell, MTV, and Sky News opened their virtual doors. Politicians and campaign teams woke to the potential of this platform to extend to a new audience (McCullagh, 2007). Within this virtual landscape, "Parental Guidance" (PG)" and "Mature" areas evolved. One alarmed researcher found "something of a sex playground accreted around my land, catering for every fetish you can conceivably imagine. And the traffic was amazing" (Ellis, 2007). Vigilante behaviour grew as SL population increased and diversified as evident in the following statement: "Why did you bring this to our neighbourhood? You are entitled to your opinion...but...You are NOT entitled to negatively depreciate our neighbourhood. PLEASE MOVE OUT" [Anonymous sign placed outside the French National Front SL Headquarters].

"Griefers" using anonymity to its full potential found new forms of abuse. From the mildly humorous (exploding virtual pigs) to the more sinister involving "images of objects that are design to upset and offend, including huge swastikas and, once, a model of the World Trade Centre in flames" (Hutcheon, 2006).

The migratory pattern to Second Life is summed up by Castronova (2005):

> A simplified economic story would say that those doing relatively less well in one place face the risks of change and head off to a new place. They stake claims there but retain ties with their former neighbours. If they do well, they stay: if they don't they go back. (p. 11)

Evidently, many have chosen to "stay" in order to explore and exploit the potential of SL. Research, we are told, "provides the foundations for reports about and representations of 'the Other'" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1). In this research, the "other" is employed in educational practice within the context of SL.

Research paradigm

"Paradigm" is an elusive term. It has managed to avoid precise definition despite abundant attempts (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kuhn, 1970; Sanday, 1979). The paradigm is a construction of the researcher. It forms the framework to situate the qualitative research inquiry:

> A paradigm may be viewed as a set of *basic beliefs* (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 104)

It can be argued therefore that the chosen paradigm is, in essence, the lens through which the researcher situates herself. As the paradigm is a human construction, it is open to the possibility of error. The "basic beliefs" cannot be verified or falsified. A naturalistic inquiry paradigm is adhered to in this study. In this research the naturalistic inquiry paradigm is synonymous with interpretivism and constructivism (Robson, 2002, p. 27). I will discuss how this research is compliant with the naturalistic paradigm in the final section of this chapter.

The "basic beliefs" that define this paradigm are summarized in my choice of ontology, epistemology, methodology and treatment of ethics. It is to these topics that this chapter now turns.

Ontology

Ontology asks the question "what is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). Positivist inquiry asserts that reality is unchanging and "out there". This principle is referred to as realism (Guba, 1990, p. 19). This perspective "assumes all people experience the world in the same way, and thus, the goal of […] research is to learn more […] so that phenomena can be controlled or predicted" (Agostinho, 2005, p. 17). It is as though the inquirer is "standing behind a one-way mirror, viewing natural phenomena as they happen and recording them objectively" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). In contrast, the naturalistic inquiry affirms the principle of relativism. The relativist researcher takes issue with the notion that an "objective" reality can be known. Relativism argues that reality is represented through the eyes of the researcher and the participants. "Realities are apprehendible in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experiencially based, local and specific in nature" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

Phenomena are studied in their natural settings. In this research the natural setting, as outlined above in "*defining the field*", is a virtual world. Within the realm of this research "multiple constructions of realities exist" (Agostinho, 2005, p. 18). Reality is constructed and co-constructed by the researcher and research participants.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with "the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (knowable)" (Guba, 1990, p. 18). For the positivist researcher, objectivity is the "Archimedean point" (p. 19). The positivist researcher "does not influence the phenomena or vice versa" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). In contrast, this naturalistic epistemology asserts such a view is implausible: "We can no more separate our theories and concepts from our data and percepts than we can find a true Archimedean point – a god's-eye view – of ourselves and our world" (Shermer, 2007).

Here, the researcher is involved, creative and reflexive throughout the inquiry process. Firstly, the researcher becomes the "research instrument" through participant observation. This concept is directly influenced by the *Verstehen* method, outlined by Max Weber (1864-1920). Weber suggests there are two methods of *Verstehen* or understanding: direct observational understanding and explanatory understanding. Direct observational understanding is arguably a positivistic method, whereby the researcher tries to understand the phenomena by observation alone: what is *going* on. However, explanatory understanding occurs when the researcher tries to understand the phenomena by placing it in a wider context of meaning: *why* is it going on. It follows, therefore, that the researcher must become "part of the situation being studied in order to feel what it is like for people in that situation" (Sanday, 1979, p. 527). According to Agostinho (2005), no other method can adjust to appreciate multiple realities, can cope with indeterminacy, can respond immediately to data and can be trained to be trustworthy. Knowledge is, therefore, created and accumulated in the interaction between researcher and researched as the study progresses. In this inquiry the researcher and researched are co-creators who together help to construct reality: "The inquirer and the 'object' of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37).

Reality is neither subjective nor objective, "it is interpretive, mediating two worlds between a third" (Agar, 1982, p. 783). In this inquiry, the researcher will adopt creative methods to facilitate participant observation in a virtual world (outlined in methodology). Finally, in an effort to maintain validity in this epistemological approach, the researcher must report on "their personal beliefs, values, biases that may shape the inquiry" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). To ensure validity of the inquiry the researcher has engaged in critical reflection by maintaining a reflective journal throughout the entire study. The journal has facilitated reflexivity on the interactivity of the inquiry by engaging with the knowledge of the researcher, the participants, and the audience.

Methodology

Methodology asks the question "how can the inquirer (would be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). For the positivistic researcher, the methodology is experimental and manipulative (Guba, 1990, p. 30). The positivistic researcher believes only in that which can be tested under a controlled manner and either verified or falsified. Qualitative research does not aspire to match the positivistic criteria. According to the naturalistic paradigm, "in order to understand people's behavior we must use an approach that gives us access to the meanings that guide behavior" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 8). In keeping with the paradigm, this research follows an ethnographic methodology.

The goal of ethnography, "as of all social research, is to produce knowledge" (Hammersley, 2002, p. 15). Ethnography sets out to achieve this goal by researching "social action within a discrete location from first-hand experience" (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 17). Ethnography is, therefore, a function of the ethnographer. Ethnography is also a function of the group among whom the ethnographer is working. Ethnographies also depend on the nature of the audience (Agar, 1982, pp. 782-783). At its core, then, ethnography is a process of "mediating frames of meaning" (Giddens, 1976, as cited in Agar, 1982, p. 783).

Ethnography has a long history, some argue tainted by the connection with colonialism: "Early ethnography grew out of the interests of Westerners in the origins of culture and civilization and in the assumption that contemporary 'primitive' peoples, those thought by Westerners to be less civilized than themselves" (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 25).

This traditional period of ethnography is exemplified with the concept of the lone ethnographer (Rosaldo, 1989, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 15) studying "the other". This is illustrated in the works of Boas, Mead, Freeman, Malinowski and Strauss, to name but a few. Palmer (1928), of the Chicago School, argues that the ethnographer is "Like an adventurer in new lands, the student engaged in exploratory research must follow many blind trails, make unfruitful excursions in an effort to conquer the unknown, to map pathways through unfamiliar territory" (p. 6).

Despite the many contested (Delamont, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2000) "movements" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) through which ethnography has passed, it is argued that two elements remain constant: firstly, commitment to empirical study and, secondly, a concern with the exotic or strange (Cooper, Hine, Rachel, & Woolgar, 1995).

This research is committed to the empirical study of educational practice within a recent, one might even say exotic, virtual world context that is Second Life. Since a blueprint for qualitative research does not exist (Mason, 1996), the researcher proposes that educational practice within the context of SL can be researched through the creative adaption of a traditional ethnographic methodology (Eisenhart, 2001). This involves adjusting traditional methods of research to the unique virtual environment (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009). In choosing this route, the researcher is aware of the "paradox of conducting a non-traditional ethnography in a non-traditional non-space with traditional sensibilities" (Markham, 1998, p. 62, as cited in Wilson, 2006, p. 308).

Data collection techniques

The online ethnographer has a steep learning curve. The ethnographer must learn to participate and observe without a "physical" presence in the field, stepping out of the actual into the virtual. The ethnographer must adjust traditional methods of collecting and analysing data to the new environment and find ways to represent their research to the reader unfamiliar with the new virtual space (Garcia et al., 2009). However, Dowling and Brown (2010) suggest that the general issues, in online or offline ethnography, tend to be quite consistent and therefore offline methods can be employed effectively with some creativity on the part of the researcher. Brewer (as cited in Pole & Morrison, 2003) argues that method refers to the tools the researcher might employ to collect data. Ethnography is a nonlinear approach. Therefore, it is through the fluid interaction and interplay of methods that meaning and understanding emerge. Wolcott argues that triangulation of method is the trademark of ethnography. In his view, "The strength of ethnographic fieldwork lies in its 'triangulation,' obtaining information in many ways rather than solely relying on one" (Wolcott, 1997, p. 158).

This research will rely on Wolcott's suggested methods for ethnography in education. Given the context of this inquiry, a virtual world, Wolcott's traditional methods are reconfigured to best suit this study. These methods will centre on:

(1) Participant observation
(2) The use of written and non-written (digital) sources
(3) Interviewing
(4) Content analysis

(1) Participant observation

Methods should facilitate an exploration and help in the analysis of the key concern of ethnography: "what is going on here". The primary method of ethnographic research, flowing from the underpinning epistemology, is the "researcher as instrument" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The researcher is involved, creative and reflexive throughout the process. Underpinning the concept of "researcher as instrument" is researcher as participant observer. It is argued that the participant observation is not a method, nor is it a kind of data, rather, participant observation "is the situation that makes our work possible at all" (Agar, 1982, p. 793). The term "participant observation", some argue, is an oxymoron since "you cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 70) Yet, "it is within this paradox that ethnographers conduct their best work" (p. 70). Participant observation is fundamental to the research process: "Without such immersion in the process and life of the community, the researcher runs the risk of imposing a barren and preconceived frame of analysis that has little to do with the specific field of study" (Kinnevy & Enosh, 2002, p. 122).

Immersion in the field is a central task of the ethnographic researcher. The task involves initial exploration, "walking around doing nothing", a "Grand Tour" exercise (Spradley, 1980), "being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 2).

The virtual world lends itself to both covert and overt participant observation. Covert observation, lurking, for a period of time is considered an acceptable method of data collection in order to obtain a pattern of relevant aspects which can help focus future interview questions (Garcia et al., 2009). Remaining at such a level of pure detached observation leads to the possible danger of failing to understand the perspectives of participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). In contrast is the active participant observer role, sometimes referred to as participant-experiencer or complete participant contributor. In this role, the researcher joins the group and becomes totally immersed as though an ordinary member. This can be done openly by seeking permission from the relevant group or on a covert level whereby the researcher's role is kept secret (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), therefore, argue that although a variety of roles may be adopted, the "usual aim is to maintain a more or less marginal role" (p. 112), which allows the researcher access but establishes a boundary against overfamiliarity.

Whether participating through covert or overt methods, researchers, by their very presence in the environment, become involved in the co-construction of knowledge. Therefore, a movement from observer to participant shifts the role of the researcher "from archivist to accomplice". This is most evident in online research where "boundaries are not so much determined by 'location' as they are by 'interaction'" (Markham, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 802).

Methods of participant observation employed in this research

This research took place at two levels. First, the research began with a panoramic view of teaching and learning in other tertiary level educational contexts. Second, research took place with the micro study of teaching and learning within SL through the module "Religion in Cyberpsace". Throughout both levels of research, data was collected through participant observation and fieldnotes, both textual (log chat, researcher's observations) and digital (images, video of events).

SL teaching and learning in other educational contexts

Following the "levels of participation" model (Pole & Morrison, 2003) the researcher, given the vastness of the field, *attempted* to use a triangulation of participant observation methods. This included total covert participant observer (also referred to as total immersion) participation in the normal setting, and finally participation as observer. The logic for the triangulation of participant observer roles is summed up by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 123): "By systematically modifying field roles, it may be possible to collect different kinds of data whose comparison can greatly enhance interpretation of the social processes under study".

Firstly, research attempted to be conducted through total immersion, whereby the researcher's role was kept secret to all. It is argued that the "ethnographer should attempt to experience the online site the same way that actual participants routinely experience it" (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 56). However, entry into SL classes, of a sufficient length, was not forthcoming. Secondly, I sought permission from the "gatekeepers" of identified groups to participate without the knowledge of the other participants, thereby not affecting the naturalness of the setting. Again, this was not considered acceptable by the gatekeepers approached and therefore this level of participation did not occur. Finally, I participated fully as a student in an identified group, Dublin Institute of Technology "Is One Life Enough" module. In this phase all members of the group were aware of the researcher's identity. Participation took place over a twelve week period and the researcher participated fully as a student completing the module for credit.

Micro level research "religion in cyberspace"

Following the design and approval of the third year Bachelor of Religious Education module "Religion in Cyberspace", permission was sought through Mater Dei Institute of Education's Research Ethics Committee to conduct ethnographic research. All participating students were informed and consented to participate in the research project. The module ran over 11 weeks. After class one, all classes were delivered through SL. Eight students took the module for credit and completed it in full. During this module, the researcher acted as a constructivist guide for the students within SL. The role of the researcher falls into the category of participant observer, where the researcher's identity is known to all. As part of this module students participated in online events and prepared their own fieldnotes (textual, digital images, digital video). Wolcott (1997) argues that such sources are valuable to the ethnographic study. In a 2005 study of friendship in cyberspace, one researcher found that such methods proved fruitful: "by encouraging participants to write about their experiences in detail I was exploiting their storytelling as a form of narrative enquiry" (Carter, 2005, p. 151). Fieldnotes prepared by the participating students will serve to enhance the research inquiry.

It might be argued that such role of the research as teacher within this module could undermine the research paradigm and undermine the validity of the study. Firstly, such a module includes assessment: the role of researcher as teacher raises questions about the reliability of data generated since the groups are being assessed. The issue of assessment was addressed by having a second examiner present for the final assessment element of the module. Secondly, it could be argued that the module did not demonstrate sufficient prolonged engagement in the field. The module was delivered over an eleven week period with two hour sessions held per week. Given the context of the study, the length of times spent in-world is substantial.

Thirdly, it could be argued that the researcher created an environment to study rather than studying an environment and culture that has naturally evolved. The researcher argues that the students in question are part of an offline community of practice (third year student teachers). The students voluntarily chose to participate in this optional module and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research project. Over the course of the module, the students spent a substantial amount of time within this virtual space as learners. I argue that the teaching and learning that occurs within the context of the module can justifiably be studied through ethnographic methods.

(2) The use of written and non-written sources

The nature of the data for online participant observation in SL is rich and will facilitate dense detailed accounts referred to by Geertz as "thick description" (1973, p. 6). Geertz agues: "What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (Geertz, 1973, p. 9).

To facilitate a "thick description", the researcher must become the compulsive collector (Wolcott, 1997). To do this the researcher must determine "a priori what constitutes data in the first place" (Markham, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 806). In this research, data takes form in visual (avatar, "bodily" movements and gestures, visual behaviour, learning space, teaching and learning resources) aural (voice chat) and textual communication (linear and non-linear textual communication, description of non-verbal thoughts). The researcher has the ability to log chat, take digital snapshots and video events as they unfold. Boellstorff (2008) argues that the ability to capture events in such a variety of digital ways is "a great boon in comparison to actual-world environments where audio recording can be disruptive and one is often forced to rely on memory or hastily written handnotes" (p. 74). However, one must be clear that a print out or video clip of events after the event are not a substitute for "observing the interactional process which produced it" (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 60).

Whilst such access to such a wealth of rich data is clearly valuable, it can also be an administrative challenge. From the researcher's initial exploratory study of online environments, the body of data that is generated from even a short event is vast. Therefore, a high level of administrative discipline is required in the preparation of fieldnotes (Dowling & Brown, 2010). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest that fieldnote records should be taken in an unobtrusive manner, suited to the context. They also recommend that the researcher conducts careful preparatory work on fieldnote format to enhance the fieldwork process.

Fieldnotes are the essential method of data collection in ethnography. "Fieldnotes are accounts *describing* experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 5). Fieldnotes are representations of events carefully chosen and selected by the researcher. Therefore they are always tinted by the lens through which the researcher is viewing the action. In the online environment, fieldnotes are greatly enhanced through a chat log, digital images and digital video of events. Like fieldnote observations, multimodal data is never researcher neutral, it is always selected and thus representative of the researcher. Whatever the context the ethnographer finds herself within, this reality of re-presentation of the other must be addressed in the writing up stage. It is suggested that the process of writing fieldnotes "helps the field researcher to understand what he has been observing in the first place and, thus, enables him to participate in new ways, to hear with greater acuteness, and to observe with a new lens" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 15).

(3) Interview

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest that the combination of participant observation and interviews can provide rich, mutually illuminating data. Observing behaviour is "clearly a useful enquiry technique, but asking people directly about what is going on is an obvious short cut in seeking answers to questions" (Robson, 2002, p. 272). Employing a variety of methods to enhance exploration in the field enables the researcher to "cross check results obtained from observation and recorded in fieldnotes" (Sanday, 1979, p. 528). However, the boundary between participant observation methods and the interview method can become blurred. It is therefore useful for the researcher to articulate the intended interview methods prior to entry to the field. In this emergent research design, interviews will begin as unstructured followed by semi-structured. The interviews will take place in the virtual world: who is interviewed, when, and how will be decided as the research progresses (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

As participant observation progresses and data is generated from the unstructured interviews, the purposeful sample of individuals for participation in semi-structured interviews will be revealed. At this stage it can be said, with relative certainty, the purposeful sample will include individuals involved in educational practice (teaching and learning) in SL. Likewise, while the semi-structured interview has a predetermined topic: teaching and learning in SL, specific questions will emerge. Nevertheless, all interview methods are structured and directive to a varying degrees. It is likely every interview has some level of orchestration or structure: interviewer, choice of interviewee, context, and questions to name but a few. Clearly, whatever choice of interview method employed, the researcher must be aware that interviewing is never a neutral exchange: "The interviewer is a person, historically and contextually located, carrying unavoidable conscious or unconscious motives, desires, feelings and biases" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 695).

Both the interviewer and the interviewee have their own histories yet it is the meeting between the two, within the research context, that facilitates the creation of knowledge.

(4) Content analysis

Theorists vary on their opinion of *when* the process of content analysis should begin in the research inquiry (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 205). On the one hand it is argued that the process of analysis begins before one formally begins fieldwork: at the stage when the research question is formulated and clarified. Following this theory, analysis then continues through the fieldwork stage, descriptive stage and formally takes shape in the researcher's analytic notes. Analysis therefore begins at the moment of the research design and throughout the data collection period. On the other hand, it is argued that interpretation can only occur after the process of thick description: "content analysis can be performed only after ethnographic observation or involvement with a cyber community" (Kinnevy & Enosh, 2002, p. 121).

Either way, commitment to and the analysis and communication of written and non-written sources is central to the ethnographic task. They both require equal weighting as it is argued that "current online ethnographies tend to privilege textual aspects of the data and do not adequately integrate the visual, aural and kinetic phenomena" (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 65). The ethnographer then must learn how to translate and analyse that which is unstructured and multimodal, finally resulting in a report which is traditionally largely text based.

The flexible emergent design of this research implies the process of analysis is ongoing. It is argued that concepts and indicators (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 283) will emerge as the research progresses: through clarification of the research focus, literature review, foreshadowed data, through the triangulation of ethnographic methods and a process of reflexivity. Agar (1982) speaks of analysis as a hermeneutical and dialectical process which happens in the field. He speaks in terms of breakdown, resolution and analysis. Breakdowns occur when assumptions of coherence are challenged. Breakdowns are a function of the ethnographer, the group (or participants) and the audience (the reader). They are occasioned (happened upon) or mandated (a breakdown one sets out to create). They are core (central to the ethnographic process) or derivative (less important in the ethnographic process). The breakdown "signals a disjunction among worlds; the problem for the ethnographer is to give an account that eliminates it" (p. 783). Understanding the breakdown comes through an emergent process of resolution. The process of resolution involves long-term involvement in the field, participant observation and reflexivity. Language and tradition act together in the co-construction of new meaning. Coherence occurs "when an initial breakdown is resolved by changing knowledge in our tradition so that the breakdown is newly seen as an expression of some part of a plan" (p. 787). Put simply, we encounter breakdowns in our understanding, we go through a process of resolution which clarifies our understanding and leads us to what Gadamer (2004) refers to as an "aha" coherence. The ethnographer's role involves rigorous documentation of this process.

Ethics

All method decisions are ethics decisions (Markham, 2005). This inquiry employs a traditional methodology, ethnography, and applies it to an online setting. In the process of an ethnographic study we go to a culture "to learn something about Other and – when we think we have it figured out, to decide how to tell others what we think we know" (p. 811). Online ethnographic issues are wide ranging: shifting population, public vs. private discourse, online dis-inhibition, virtual informed consent and the supposed difficulty in achieving online anonymity. In this inquiry the researcher will adhere to the traditional ethical principles of research in relation to human subjects. The research is also situated within the framework outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 115) in relation to the issue of ethics within the naturalist (constructivist/interpretivist) paradigm. In the application of Guba and Lincoln's framework to this research, three important points need to be made.

1. Ethics are *intrinsic* to the paradigm as the ontology and epistemology argue the participant is a co-creator of knowledge.
2. There is an incentive – *a process tilt* – towards revelation of the researcher: "presence, affiliations and intentions to online community members" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 147). The process tilt assumes revelation is advantageous to the inquiry. The triangulation of roles of participant observation is to the advantage and validity of the inquiry. The role of complete participant observer will be adopted in the macro phase of the inquiry and traditional ethical principles will be adhered to.
3. The hermeneutical/dialectical methodology provides a strong but not infallible safeguard against deception.

In order to adhere to the principles outlined here, I will include all records regarding ethical conduct in my data archive and appendices. The principles lead to a further question concerning the quality of the inquiry itself.

Quality of this research inquiry

Agostinho contends that the quality of the research study is dependent on three factors:

- the design of the research: that is the appropriateness of the research design for the research problem;
- the process in which the inquiry is undertaken: that is, demonstrating rigor and how well the research process can facilitate "thrthful" and accurate findings; and
- the outcome of the research: that is, the usefulness of the research project to the research community. (2005, p. 20)

Appropriateness of research design

Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Agostinho, 2005) outline *three* mandatory requirements for labelling a study naturalistic. Firstly, the inquiry process must be consistent with "the ontological, epistemology and axiological assumptions of the five proposed axioms" (p. 18). I contend that the context is a natural setting, not artificially created for research purposes. The ontology, epistemology and methodology, as discussed above, exhibit congruence with the naturalistic paradigm. Secondly, the researcher "is committed to the development of skills to operate as an effective instrument" (2005, p. 18). The researcher shows commitment "to the development of a level of skill appropriate to a human instrument and sufficiently high to ward off criticism on the grounds of instrumental inadequacy" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 252). To verify this commitment the researcher will produce a rigorous audit trail. Thirdly, prior to implementation, the researcher "has made a serious effort to develop an initial design statement" (p. 250). This criterion is evident in the approved design proposal. I contend the research design is appropriate for the research problem.

Demonstration of trustworthiness and rigour

In "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry", Creswell and Miller (2000) outline nine different types of validity procedures. The procedures ensure the inquiry demonstrates trustworthiness and rigour. This inquiry meets seven of the nine criteria.

1. Triangulation

Triangulation is exhibited in the corroboration of data collection methods: participant observation, fieldnotes, written and non-written sources and interview (unstructured and semi-structured). The process of data collection occurs on two levels in this inquiry: the macro level (educational practice in SL) and the micro level (SL module). Thus the final account of the inquiry is valid as the researcher relies "on multiple forms of evidence rather than a single incident or data point in the study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

2. Prolonged engagement

Being "in the field" for a prolonged duration of time offers the researcher time to hear varying perspectives and "a better understanding of the context of participant views" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). The duration is dependent on the researcher and the inquiry. In this inquiry the researcher does not wish to follow the "Fateful hoaxing of Margaret Mead" (Freeman, 1999). Therefore prolonged engagement is evident in this inquiry as the researcher is involved as participant observer for one year duration.

3. Collaboration

"Credible data collection comes from close collaboration with participants throughout the process of research" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). In this inquiry, close collaboration is maintained with research participants via prolonged immersive participant-observer methods. The relativist ontology and epistemology underpinning this study firmly situates it as a collaborative endeavour.

4. Researcher reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is a "conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 210). Researcher reflexivity is demonstrated in this research in the keeping of a reflexive journal and methodological log for the duration of the study.

5. Thick description

Thick description forms the foundation of the ethnographic approach. Interpretation follows description. Description in this inquiry is "thick" as it is multimodal – textual, aural, visual, digital and from varying perspectives. In this inquiry, thick description is demonstrated in the narrative of the macro and micro study that will be presented in the doctoral thesis.

6. The audit trail

"The credibility of a study is established by turning to individuals external to the project, such as auditor – formally brought into the study – or readers who examine the narrative account and attest to its credibility" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128).

Halpern's (1983, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) six categories for reporting information when creating an audit trail:

- *Raw data* – including all raw data, written fieldnotes, unobtrusive measures (documents).
- *Data reduction and analysis products* – including summaries such as condensed notes, unitized information and quantitative summaries and theoretical notes.
- *Data reconstruction and synthesis products* – including structure of categories (themes, definitions, and relationships), findings and conclusions and a final report including connections to existing literatures and an integration of concepts, relationships, and interpretations.
- *Process notes* – including methodological notes (procedures, designs, strategies, rationales), trustworthiness notes (relating to credibility, dependability and confirmability) and audit trail notes.
- *Materials relating to intentions and dispositions* – including inquiry proposal, personal notes (reflexive notes and motivations) and expectations (predictions and intentions).
- *Instrument development information* – including pilot forms, preliminary schedules, observation formats. (Halpern, 1983, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 319-320).

An audit trail, based on Halpern's six categories, will be maintained in password protected electronic format in the researcher's personal computer. A back-up hard copy of this audit trail will be maintained throughout the inquiry.

7. Peer debriefing

Peer review (also known as peer debriefing) occurs formally and informally throughout this research. Informally, peer review occurs through discussion with colleagues (School of Education, MDI) and peers also engaged in doctoral studies. Formally, peer debriefing occurs over the course of the study through monthly critical feedback meetings and written feedback from the supervisor.

I contend that the criteria for establishing a rigour and credibility are met in this study.

The usefulness of the research to the research community

All research is concerned with making a contribution to knowledge. The challenges to quantitative research are numerous. Yet they have a similar commonality in their ultimate aim: "both qualitative and quantitative researchers think they know something about society worth telling to others, and they use a variety of forms, media and means to communicate their ideas and findings" (Becker, 1986, p. 122, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 11).

This research aims to make a significant and innovative contribution to the canon of knowledge on tertiary level teaching and learning in a digital age.

Conclusion

In this methodological chapter, I have outlined and justified the paradigm that frames this inquiry. Firstly, I situated the study by defining the research focus and research field. I then proceeded to demonstrate the manner in which the inquiry is consistent with the ontology, epistemology, methodology and ethics of the naturalistic paradigm. Finally, I concluded by evaluating the quality of the inquiry under three headings: the appropriateness of research design, demonstration of truthfulness and rigour and finally the usefulness of the research to the research community.

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PART 4

DOING THE FIELDWORK

"BEING THERE": RE-CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF SPACE/TIME, PLACE... AND POWER FOR ETHNOGRAPHERS IN HYBRID AND ONLINE/VIRTUAL EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Nalita James[1] and Hugh Busher[2]

Introduction: the nature of ethnographic research: site and sight?

For an understanding of human experience or relationships within a system or culture, different qualitative research approaches can be used to collect rich descriptive data and emphasize the possibilities of discovering new and unanticipated findings (Silverman, 1999). The fluidity and flexibility of such approaches make them adaptable for use in a variety of research settings. One such approach is ethnography. Ethnography involves:

- An extended exploratory observation in which the researcher is immersed in a bounded community that becomes the focus of the study;
- An extended exploratory sampling of particular events in particular surroundings;
- Experiencing events and exploring the meaning of these events to community insiders.

Ethnography uses a wide range of research methods, such as interviewing, participant observation, and focus groups, to collect rich, descriptive and contextually-situated data both face-to-face and in the online setting (Mann & Stewart, 2000). These methods have allowed researchers to understand cultural forms in depth and have involved participation in the online context.

Conventional ethnography places emphasis on studying "first hand" what people do or say in particular contexts (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4) and revealing the context and complexity of each community studied (Wittel, 2000). Studying the culture of a community or group is an organizing concept which involves a range of data collection techniques such as interviews and observation for understanding people's

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experiences of community/culture (Mariampolski, 1999). Making sense of culture requires the researcher to hear, see and write what has been witnessed (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 3). The "legacy of the field" in ethnography (Clifford, 1997, p. 88) emphasizes both the methodological and the symbolic importance of the field as a site (place) where research is conducted and where researchers engage in "real fieldwork".

In conventional on-site ethnography, the physical presence and interaction of the researcher provides a "bodily element" to the research context (Seymour, 2001). It privileges visual, face-to-face encounters and incorporates highly personal elements. These include social conventions such as dress, status, and use of language as well as the social characteristics of age, race, gender and organizational status (James & Busher, 2006). These are important signifiers which bring the participants into "sight". Some of this can be reconstructed in online communications using VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), such as Skype. In non-corporeal intercommunication it is the reiteration of a person's discourses that signifies presence, playing a critical part in developing and maintaining social encounters (Lee, 2006). It influences the ways in which researchers and participants construct their identities and those of others (Giddens, 1991) and how they assert their agency to make sense of the "territory" (social space) of the social interaction in the face-to-face encounter. Consequently, "the legacy of the field not only continues to determine what constitutes fieldwork, but also shapes people's research practices" (Eichorn, 2001, p. 568).

Yet, the idea of "context", the culture or community as a coherent entity unique and different from other cultures, has become increasingly difficult to sustain (Wittel, 2000). Communities have always overlapped and been part of wider constellations (Wenger, 1998). Essentialist perspectives of cultures have been displaced (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004) and become multi-faceted through media development, telecommunications, computer-mediated communications, globalization and migration (Giddens, 1990). Although many people have lived with a multi-faceted experience of physical and social community for a long time, the emergence of the Internet in the late twentieth century has brought that experience to a much wider range of people. "In a world where people's experiences of community and culture increasingly exist across geographic and temporal boundaries, ethnographers committed to understanding people's everyday experiences on an in-depth level may need to abandon their commitment to place and face-to-face encounters" (Eichorn, 2001, p. 577).

The Internet as a site for arenas of social interaction

The development of the Internet has seen the creation of online environments as cultural contexts in their own right (Hine, 2000) and the construction of (online) communities which may or may not have a relationship with particular physical communities. This has led to a "methodological shift" and the "claiming of the online context as an ethnographic field site" (Hine, 2005, p. 8).

The Internet provides a virtual social arena where practices, meanings and identities can intermingle between researchers and participants in ways that may not be possible in the real or physical world (Domínguez et al., 2007). It has become a site in which small cultures (Holliday, 1999) are constructed and reconstructed as people meet and negotiate new ways of being (Holliday et al., 2004). It has also become a site where the social interactions of individuals and communities can be researched and where the construction of practices, meanings and identities can be investigated. As part of the discourses (Gee, 1999, as cited in Holliday et al., 2004) of globalization, it has reconfigured the way in which individuals communicate and connect with each other, despite great physical distances and the social and language differences between them, through the many social sites that now exist, e.g. Facebook, but also through the use of email, blogs (the blogosphere), Twitter, bulletin boards and websites on any number of topics. For example, Madge and O'Connor (2005) investigated a website for new mothers and the blandishments of the media to contact them online. The Internet, however, might also be a site for "glocalisation" (Deleuze, as cited in Doel, 2000), where global and local influences and perceptions wrap round each other as people (re)construct meanings for their lives. These discourses are influenced and constructed by different modalities of power (Foucault, 1975), and power used in a range of ways for different purposes such as promoting companies' commercial interests, appealing to participants' desire for fame or gain, or asserting states' claimed strategic interests which dominant social groups peddle at particular times.

Cyberspace has rich and complex connections with face-to-face contexts and situations (Hine, 2005). Holliday et al. (2004, p. 27) construe this as a form of cultural dealing in which participants draw on a variety of cultural influences to construct new relationships with new people they meet, in this case in cyberspace. It can involve researchers becoming immersed in a virtual culture or community, adapting conventional research methods of data collection, such as interviewing or observation, to collect data in online settings, possibly over a sustained period of time (Mann & Stewart, 2000). For example, researchers may carry out anthropological research into the cultures of social groups in Second Life (SL), a virtual world where people, through their avatars, engage in a range of interactions which may not be possible in physical life (Boellstorff, 2008), investigate static (e.g. webpages) or dynamic (see above, Twitter, etc.) culturally constructed artefacts or use cyberspace as a research medium in the social sciences, including education, opening up innovative ways for researchers to examine human inter/actions and experiences in new contexts. For example, it offers a different space and dimension in which individuals can write about who they are and what they know.

Easy access to the Internet has made it a "place" in which people can chat and play, as well as develop relationships and alternative forms of identity, as a daily part of their lives rather than as just a special place to visit occasionally. It has reconfigured the way in which individuals communicate with each other as "authentic experiences of self" (Lee, 2006, p. 20) and provided opportunities for them to construct the reality of their everyday lives with people who are distant from them in time and space as well as those who are geographically proximate to them.

On the other hand, access to the Internet is heavily differentiated globally. There are issues about who controls the dispersion of space (Foucault, 1977) and how space is used to assert control and decide whose voice is heard. To some extent, this relates to technical issues, e.g. who has access to computers of what specification, or who has specific technical knowledge of different types of online communications. In various parts of the world, as well as in certain social groups in Western countries, people have not been able to take advantage of Internet opportunities. For example, in Lebanon only about 25% of people are registered as having an Internet connection (Zein, 2011). Issues also concern whose voice is heard online, and how people are expected to construct their voices so that they are heard – i.e. there are post-colonial perspectives on who speaks or who is allowed to speak (Spivak, as cited in Morton, 2003), when and in what terms (Said, as cited in Gregory, 2000), and who controls that. In many parts of the world states and companies monitor Internet traffic, often in the alleged interests of security, and control who may access the Internet and when (James & Busher, 2009).

In addition to issues of access to the Internet, online communication raises questions about the extent to which and how participants claim to understand the "other" who may have very different cultural influences from their own. In part this relates to how people construct language to bear meanings that are specific to their own cultural contexts (Barton & Tusting, 2005), but may be understood differently by people with other cultural heritages. It also relates in part to the risk always inherent in online research that researchers will only hear particular voices and also distort the voices of the "other" through the ways in which they influence the constructions of the small cultures (Holliday, 1999) of research projects (Busher & James, in press). "Online, as interviewers we co-construct the spaces we study. This is not a minor point. Our interactions with participants are not simple events in these online spaces, but are constitutive and organising elements of the space" (Markham, 2004, p. 144).

The Internet has altered the context in which research can take place by offering different space/time and place dimensions. This includes differences in online communication and interpersonal cultural and identity construction between the asynchronous and text-based world and the synchronous and possibly speech-based world (e.g. through Skype, or in chatrooms), as well as the virtual communities such as Second Life. The "here and now" (Berger & Luckman, 1966, as cited in Zhao, 2006) of conventional ethnographic research is now joined by the "there and now" (Giddens, 1990) of online research, although the "here" and "there" are not necessarily socially similar. The "here" and "there", however, as part of the process of "otherisation", are constructed by people individually and differently on the basis of their cultural influences (Holliday et al., 2004). As all social relationships are "bearers of power", researchers and research participants must consider how space and time are used by participants in research projects to construct those power relationships (Massey, as cited in Rodgers, 2004, p. 281).

The nature of space/time and place in online and on-site ethnographic research, and the extent to which these spaces interconnect to combine the virtually real and the actually real (Hammersley, 2006), or the virtually real and physically real, are problematic. Embodied reality interacts with virtual reality, the projected self, in complex ways.

Identities and performance in time and space

The Internet is not simply "…a virtual space in which human actors can be observed. It is also a medium through which a wide variety of statements are produced" (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002, p. 234). That is to say, it provides a medium through which people (re)produce themselves through various social artefacts such as photographs and texts. In asynchronous online conversations each (re)presentation of text can be separated by several hours, days or even weeks, but participants still feel they are present in a conversation. People construct multiple identities that alter subtly as they change contexts in both online (James & Busher, 2009) and offline (Benjamin, 2002) environments. These reflect the ways in which they position themselves in different social situations to fit within the boundaries of the particular community with which they are engaging at any one time (Zhao, 2006).

Virtual ethnography, like face-to-face ethnography, includes locating people's perspectives of action in wider social and cultural contexts (Hine, 2005). Online ethnography takes many forms, however. It may be online ethnography of online sites, or online methods used in part to investigate offline sites, or online and offline methods used to investigate complex social interactions involving the borderlands and liminality of online and offline interactions in constructing particular social processes. This has led researchers to challenge the view that "online practice" should be the predominant concern of virtual ethnography, by exploring how it overlaps with the "offline" in the making of ethnography itself (Teli, Francesco, & Hakken, 2007). Cyberspace has rich and complex connections with real life and face-to-face contexts and situations (Hine, 2000). In Miller and Slater's (2000) fieldwork on the state of e-commerce in Trinidad, they used several methods of gathering data including textual analysis of web pages and interviews with government officials, business owners, Internet providers and ordinary users. They also frequented the Internet cafes, chatted with people and sought formal and informal interactions with their participants. Although they used traditional features of ethnography to study cultures, their research highlights how the processes of social interaction and communication in the virtual space and everyday life can be intertwined.

Some online researchers have argued that to understand life online one needs to understand the broader context because "being online and being offline are intersecting and interweaving experiences" that are influenced and shaped by cultural and social elements (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007, p. 4). Identity is fluid and potentially multiple on the Internet, but people similarly engage in these practices in other areas of their lives and did so prior to the existence of the Internet. In other words, there is a “connected space” in which individuals exist online and offline simultaneously (Kendall, 1999, p. 6).

Hine (2000) asks: “how can you live in an online setting?” (p. 21). The work of Boellstorff (2008), however, has begun to address this question through an ethnographic study of Second Life. Markham (1998), and Madge and O’Connor (2005) were both participants in and observers of life online. Despite the open questions and level of control, Markham (1998) allowed her participants to discuss what they wanted to; the life she was participating in was in part a product of her prompting, constructing the very phenomena she was researching. A number of primary methodological concerns arise when researchers are working in online settings:

- In virtual communities there will be much ambiguity over the credibility of the participant’s representation of a setting, the interpretation of these representations in written description, and the underpinning reality upon which participants’ representations are based (Fox & Roberts, 1999).
- Lurkers are always present in virtual communities. These lurkers, invisible to other participants as well as the researcher, can also represent a threat to the credibility of the research (Rutter & Smith, 2005).
- It can be difficult for a researcher to maintain a stable presence in a virtual community when participants cannot see that he/she is there. Offline, ethnographic researchers live in or work in their chosen field site, observe, take photographs, ask questions and interview people to explore and understand their participants' experiences from their perspective. In online research, the researcher has to decide whether to eschew ethnography by, perhaps, becoming a non-participant in a community, investigating, for example, existing cultural artefacts such as homepages, or be a known but inactive member of online communities. Alternatively researchers can be an active participant wanting to understand how participants construct social relationships within a virtual community.

How people perform online is framed by the social structures in which they are located. These limit and empower the actions people can take. In online interactions cyber social reality is shaped by online and socially located cultures, social and systemic structures (including the technologies of the Internet), and people’s mediated interpersonal interactions (Gotved, 2006, p. 472). The social construction of self is important to an understanding of the processes of virtual ethnography.

When the Internet is used for the collection of research data, it can provide a site in which research participants can construct their identities using a variety of techniques to present themselves online. One perspective is that the distance between body and performance online means that it does become difficult for researchers to authenticate the claims that participants make about themselves. On the other hand, as Lee (2006) notes, how people use language and repeat stories or use particular reference points helps to build up a reasonable understanding of the person with whom a researcher is communicating, as it does in physical social interactions. Bodily presence in a face-to-face interview can signify mutuality, commitment and trust through a sense of shared purpose (Seymour, 2001). Further, outward acts of movement, posture and emotional expression are important elements in determining how individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by others. In the online text-based interview, however, this bodily presence and language of gesture are removed. Yet, a disembodied online interaction can also encourage individuals to disclose information. In an online study of elderly Japanese people (Kanayama, 2003), the participants did not mask their identities and become someone else. The participants' disclosure was really important in the process of constructing relationships online. They actively engendered identifiable personalities through naming themselves or disclosing personal information. This in turn created an informal interviewing atmosphere. In presenting the self online, the absence of bodily presence for these participants, as well as outward acts of movement, posture and emotional expression, were important as they felt free from the perceptions of age and gender that often limited their contact with others.

The scope for participants to control the presentation of the self increases, leading to both the production and disclosure of new online personas, as well as those that can be concealed (Mann & Stewart, 2000). This raises issues about the nature of "performance" that can take place online, in terms of how both participants and researchers can "play" with their identity in the social space (Hardey, 2004). The opportunities for experimenting with self-presentation are a deliberate feature of some virtual worlds. Some online researchers have found that participants work to "reincorporate their experiences of themselves and of others' selves into integrated, consistent wholes" (Kendall, 1999, p. 62). Identity is not always fragmented but can be stable and unified. This stability is constructed through the ongoing dialogues and discourses emerging online. To understand her participants' sense of self and the meanings they gave to their online participation, Kendall spent time with her participants, observing what they did online as well as what they said about what they did. In her study *Bluesky*, an important part of the interaction took place offline. This affected participants' interpretation of the online interaction as they sometimes tried to phone or write to other participants who had disappeared from the Multi-User Dimension (MUD) for a time.

Participants may choose then to negotiate the boundary between the private and the public in online self-presentation, thus taking advantage of the disembodiment and anonymity of the virtual environment. This liminality denotes both a space and a time of betweenness and allows for individual identities to be explored and also developed. Yet, that is not to say that these experiences will not include embodied experiences. In the "Cyberparents" project, O'Connor and Madge (2001) found that cyberspace allowed new mothers to try out different versions of motherhood, resulting in the production of new selves. They argued that the mother of a newborn baby can simultaneously breastfeed whilst trying out different versions of her new motherhood online. It is here where virtually real and physically real spaces can blend in time and space, through an interplay of online and offline practices suggesting that individuals never leave the body behind. Practices that form an integral part of who we are online come from embodied, material everyday practices. These are shaped by, and in turn shape, how we move socially through the world.

What is evident is that in order for researchers to understand their participants' lives, they need to participate in their lives (Eichorn, 2001). This experience of doing will include being simultaneously online and offline, here and there in every negotiation of time and space. Nonetheless, this does not address the problem of what it means for an ethnographic researcher to "be there" on the site of a study, or present among ("in sight of") the other participants. Nor does it help researchers to disentangle how people interact at border crossings (Bhabha, 1994) and perform in liminal spaces, a concept that can denote both a space and time of betweenness, made up of both online and offline communications to construct their identity (body and performance), Goffman's (1959) "self", when negotiating with others online.

Interpreting time and space

In the social sciences, researchers have greatly expanded their methodological horizons, exploring the potential of ethnographic research in spaces where physical entry may not be possible. One of the first studies was that of Markham (1998), an ethnography of life on the Internet, which used as research methods synchronous interviews followed by a period of lurking in chatrooms and MUDs, however ethically dubious that practice is now thought to be. Methodologically, the application of ethnographic approaches to the online setting raises questions about the interrelationship between time and space. This suggests that space and time are interlinked and socially produced rather than existing beyond social action (Burgess, 2010; Massey, 2005). Capturing this connectedness, however, requires a methodology that can research the connected spaces, the real contexts and actions of the research participants and their exploits in cyberspace.

Although time and space appear to be collapsed in online exchanges, whether these are of a synchronous or asynchronous nature, some forms of space/time and cultural differences remain between communicators online (Busher & James, 2007). The global "village" is not quite as "local" as some of its proponents would like to claim. If, however, online communications generate closer social proximity than the physical time/space differences of the "there and now" (Giddens, 1990) might lead observers to expect, socialized space/distance (Allen, 2000) can exist even when people are physically proximate.

The nature of the physical environment (space/time) which people encounter also shapes the activities in which they engage. For online processes this: "can be the game world's geography, the threads of the newsgroup, or the frame around the chat. [...] it is defined primarily by the software (programs [sic], protocols, services, etc.) and to a lesser degree by the hardware" (Gotved, 2006, p. 479).

Time both separates people, e.g. time zones, and brings them together either physically or contemporaneously: I can co-habit a space with somebody at the same time and be physically proximate to them, or I can be very distant from them but occupy the same period of time, and communicate with them online or telephonically. I can "talk"/talk with somebody several time zones away and, if I do this asynchronously, I can write a textual exchange with them even if I cannot engage with them physically, face-to-face or orally/aurally. In the term "talk"/talk can be seen the complexity of online communication at present, since it facilitates both text-based exchanges ("talk") through various processes including inhabiting social worlds and oral/aural telephonic exchanges through VOIP. Online communications offer the opportunity for communicants to shift the time-boundedness of face-to-face conversations to time frames that suit themselves.

In the constructed spaces of the Internet what interacts are researchers' and participants' constructed (re)presentations of themselves, their avatars. These may or may not reflect their authors' views of themselves or others' views of the authors' identities in specific cultural or organizational contexts. A person's understanding and presentation of self is related to her/his "here and now" (Berger & Luckman, 1966, as cited in Zhao, 2006). "Here" is a person's construction of their current social and physical location, as well as their spatial practices. "Now" is a person's current location in time as that person constructs it in her/his social settings. Such understandings are always in a process of becoming (Rodgers, 2004). They are not static but provisional, changing as the actors' relationships with others alter in the multiple contexts which they inhabit at different times sequentially and simultaneously.

Conclusion

As well as challenging the idea of being on-site, research online also challenges the primacy of sight. Although talking to and interacting with research participants is an important part of ethnographic research, the flexibilities of time and space in online research make it possible for researchers to engage with participants whom they might not otherwise have reached, to participate in their lives through a shared set of textual and technological practices. As people's experiences of community and culture increasingly exist across geographical and temporal boundaries through online communication, researchers may have to rethink their understanding of ethnography as confined to place and face-to-face encounters. This raises questions as to how researchers can ensure research authenticity and identify the person who is behind the name. This presents further dilemmas about how possible it is to trust anything that the individual claims it to be (Slater, 2002), whether they inhabit online or offline worlds. Online researchers should not be surprised to find that "…people bring place and identity with them as they simultaneously find themselves in a new space in which they are creating…perhaps new identities" (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004, p. 185).

Of course, virtual ethnography is not without its methodological and ethical challenges. The online communities that people inhabit can shape the ways in which research participants will be willing to respond to conversations with and questions from researchers. They will affect the language people choose to use as well as the topics on which they may be willing to talk. They will shape how researchers are perceived and how participants perceive each other. This will shape the stories that people are willing to tell and the degree of conversational intimacy in which they are willing to engage.

What can researchers do to examine and explore the simultaneity of online/on-site experiences? Certainly, computer-mediated communications (YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, blogs, Second Life, Skype, and commonplace discussion boards for many different topics) have made it easier for people and researchers to participate in online sites and be “in sight” of each other in particular contexts. Such media can be used to authenticate participants’ interactions and the claims that they make about themselves. Yet they can also add a further rich layer to ethnography, offering opportunities for researchers to participate in these “communities” and experience the world as they see it.

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PART 5

ETHICS IN ONLINE RESEARCH

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES TO RECRUIT AND ENGAGE WITH TEENAGE PARTICIPANTS

Helen Hearn[1]

In this chapter I will consider how traditional methods can be unsuitable for engaging with teenage participants on sensitive issues and whether online methods can be used as an alternative. I will explore the popularity of Social Networking Sites (SNS) and how Facebook has successfully been used as a research tool with adult participants. My experience of trying to use Facebook as a research tool to recruit and engage with teenage girls will be discussed. The ethical dilemmas I encountered, in particular how to gain parental consent online, will be examined. I will conclude with how a SNS can be used to conduct research with teenage girls.

Online methods as an alternative way to engage with teenage participants

Traditional methods are inappropriate for engaging with teenage girls on bullying

The use of online methods should be effective in engaging with teenage participants who may find face-to-face interaction with adult researchers intimidating, especially when discussing sensitive topics. In my research topic of girls' bullying, offline methods are often used and are usually focus groups or group interviews listening to teenage girls perspectives on indirect aggression (for example, Lloyd, 2005; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Simmons, 2002; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009). This approach may be popular as it allows interaction which can result in longer and more detailed responses (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Ribbins, 2007).

Focus groups, however, may not be appropriate for a sensitive topic such as bullying. Similar opinions are likely to be heard, with stronger personalities dominating the discussion (Bryman, 2008; Mann & Stewart, 2000). If participants recruited are from the same friendship or peer group, there is the risk there could be a bully and a victim in the group unknown to the researcher. This could affect the responses given

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in the focus group. Creative methods can be used to engage with teenage participants (Jones & Tannock, 2000). James and Owens (2005) used a letter writing methodology to listen to girls' experiences and opinions of indirect aggression. I was influenced by this study and thought that a modern version of this could be to use a SNS to conduct a discussion online.

Facebook as a research tool

Social Network Sites are used by the majority of teenage girls as part of their social life to communicate and make plans with their offline friends (Boyd, 2008; Merchant, 2001). The most popular SNS with both teenagers and adults is Facebook (FB), with more than 500 million users worldwide (Barnett, 2010). Brickman-Bhutta (2009) recognized the potential of FB being used as a research tool to recruit and conduct research online. She successfully recruited adult participants to complete a survey about adult baptized Catholics. This study shows that SNS can be used as a research tool. The possibility of using a SNS as a research tool for under 18 years old does not appear to have been explored.

Blurred ethical guidelines for online methods with young people

A problem with using any online method with teenage participants is the lack of ethical guidance. Literature on online methods usually focuses on research with adult participants. Using online research methods with adolescents is an emerging area and there is a lack of established ethical guidelines. It is unclear how to address issues such as how to gain parental consent.

Stern (2004) had low response rates from teenage participants recruited online when she requested for a parental consent form to be printed off, signed and returned to her. Online parental consent forms are difficult to verify as digital signatures are not commonly used (Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder, 2008; Löfberg, 2003; Mann & Stewart, 2000). The debate on how to gain parental consent when recruiting young people online and if it is needed for teenage participants has been between academics (for example, David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001; Eynon et al., 2008; Löfberg, 2003). However, there has been some online research conducted on young people using instant messaging interviews and surveys (for example, Shenton, 2007; Stieger & Göritz, 2006). This type of research allows individual responses to be heard. Using a SNS as the venue for an online focus group will enable group interaction and discussion.

Facebook as a research tool

For my masters dissertation I aimed to use a Facebook group page to recruit teenage girl participants and to conduct an online asynchronous focus group. The discussion would have consisted of comments sent by members with my role as a mediator checking that the responses stayed on the topic. Members would be able to send comments when convenient to them and would accommodate individuals from other countries with different time zones.

I created a Facebook group called "the anti-bullying research group for girls" in April 2010. On the FB group page I explained who I was and that I wanted to listen to teenage girls' opinions on taking part in research online on the subject of bullying. I described how I wanted the members of the group to start a discussion on whether parental consent was needed to take part in research online. I explained that this was important as being able to use online research methods with teenage girls would allow researchers to gain an understanding of the social world girls' experience. I chose for the group to be closed with limited public content, so I could have control of who could become a member of my group and who could see the posts or comments written.

By joining the group, girls were agreeing to take part in the research. It was made clear that ethical permission was pending, so the group was not active. University email addresses of me and my supervisor were given. It was clarified that my role was of a researcher and if girls needed to talk to someone about bullying they should contact a bullying charity. Websites and telephone numbers of *Childline* (www.childline.org.uk), *Bullybusters* (www.bullybusters.org.uk), *Bullying UK* (www.bullying.co.uk) and *Cybermentors* (www.cybermentors.org.uk) were listed. Details were given of a blog I produced explaining the research and my background as a researcher in more depth. Both the FB group and blog was written in age appropriate language for the teenage participants.

Theoretical problems of using Facebook as a research tool

Before I created the FB group page I realized there were four theoretical problems: 1) safety concerns, 2) contacting potential participants, 3) parental consent, and 4) the identity of participants.

1) Safety concerns

When recruiting teenage girl participants online it is important to recognize that they are vulnerable and at risk of being approached by sexual predators (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002). It is important therefore to give detailed information about the research study, the researcher and an affiliation with an educational establishment (Brickman-Bhutta, 2009; Wolak et al., 2002). This is why I produced a blog with details of my research, my academic background and a photograph of myself to support my FB group page.

2) Contacting potential participants

When contacting potential participants online, it is important to recognize that there is an unwritten protocol of the appropriate way to do this. Brickman-Bhutta (2009) suggests that joining a FB group in order to gain access to the members is deception and should be avoided. Asking FB group administrators to contact members directly can be seen as invading their privacy (Brickman-Bhutta, 2009). She advises that the appropriate way is to ask group administrators to post details of your FB group and research for potential participants to see (Brickman-Bhutta, 2009).

3*) Parental consent*

Recruiting participants online who are under the age of 18 years has the complication of how to gain parental consent and if parental consent is needed. Guidelines are blurred concerning the appropriate way to gain parental consent and if consent received is actually informed consent (Eynon et al., 2008; Homan, 2001).

In the UK, for medical therapeutic research, participants can self-consent aged 16 years old or younger if competency can be proven because of the perceived benefits of this type of research (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007; Wiles, Heath, Crow, & Charles, 2005). For medical non-therapeutic research and social science research in the UK, the general practice is to gain both parental and participant consent for under 18 year olds, depending on individual ethics committees' decisions on appropriate self-consenting age (Coyne, 2010). However, Wiles et al. (2005) report in their literature review on informed consent in social research that individuals aged 16 years and over are capable of self-consent. In the UK, Masson (2004) suggests that conducting research on self-consenting participants aged under 16 years old without parental permission is not against the law but may lead to legal proceedings if "a claim of harm was made by the child" (Wiles et al., 2005, p. 9). Heath, Charles, Crow, and Wiles (2004, p. 5) argue that it is "legitimate" to conduct research with self-consenting participants aged under 16 years despite normal practice by ethics committees to also request parental consent. UK National Research Ethics Service suggests that the Gillick competence, where children can demonstrate "sufficient understanding", can be used in medical non-therapeutic research for under 16 years old to self-consent, but should not be used for individuals under 10 year olds (Lambert & Glacken, 2011, p. 4). The confusion over the legal age young people can make decisions themselves is not unique to research ethics, but is also evident in the different ages individuals can make personal choices such as being able to vote, get married, leave home, drive a car and access contraception without parental permission (Hamilton, Fiddy, & Paton, 2004; Masson, 2004; TheSite.org, n.d.).

The ethics committee at my institution follows British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines which do not specifically state at what age a child or a teenager can self-consent without parental permission.

BERA ethical guidelines state that,

> In the case of participants whose age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role, researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which they can be enabled to make authentic responses. In such circumstances, researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship (e.g. parents) or as 'responsible others' (i.e. those who have responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the participants e.g. social workers). (BERA, 2011, para. 18, pp. 6-7)

This deliberate vagueness in the ethical guidelines allows individual ethics committees to decide at what age an individual should be able to self-consent (Wiles et al., 2005). At my institution, they normally request both parental and participant consent for under 18 year olds.

Parental responsibility and their right to information about research their children take part in are important factors to consider for studies involving children and adolescents. However, as children get older and mature, parental responsibility declines (Masson, 2005). At what age a child is seen as being "mature" is debatable. It could be argued that providing parents with information about research is important even if teenage participants self-consent. I argue that this can depend on the research environment and topic.

An online environment such as Facebook is a place away from adult supervision where adolescents can socialize with their friends and can experiment with different online identities (Boyd, 2008; Wang, Bianchi, & Raley, 2005). Parents may be unaware of the amount of time their children spend on the internet, as young people can access the online world via mobile phones and game consoles as well as through their own or family shared laptops or PCs (Bray, 2010; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Young people may have profiles on SNS such as Facebook without their parents' knowledge or permission. Asking teenagers to print off a form for their parents to sign and send back to me could result in lower response rates as it did for Stern (2004). Parental information about the study could be posted on FB for participants to show their mother, father or guardian. The researcher, however, would have no knowledge or evidence that parents had been shown this information. As the online environment is a place adolescents can socialize away from parental control, sometimes without parents' knowledge, asking for parental consent or for participants to give their parents information about a research study online could deter and potentially greatly reduce the number of participants who would volunteer.

When I applied for ethical approval, I proposed that, as the teenage girls I would be trying to recruit should be over 13 years old, they should be able to give their own informed consent online. The reason I proposed age 13 and over for self-consent was that this is the age individuals are supposed to be to have a Facebook profile. An older minimum age such as 16 years would have been difficult to carry out as for security reasons most profiles do not have the year of birth listed. The ethics committee at my institution suggested age 14 and over should be the self-consent age for this type of research where written parental consent is difficult to obtain.

4) Identity of participants

Online, people are not always who they say they are. The group could have attracted paedophiles or other adults such as parents interested in the topic. There was also a risk that girls younger than 13 years old could have joined and had lied about their age.

I chose that it should be a closed group, where individuals could only join with my approval. I would have to use my judgment that they were teenagers through their profile picture which would not guarantee that only girls aged 13-19 joined the group; but it was more restrictive than an open group that anyone could access. The fact that not everyone is truthful on the internet impacted my decision not to have an online parental consent form as it would easy for a teenage to complete it without their parents' knowledge. I will now discuss the practical considerations.

Practical considerations

After creating the Facebook group page and blog and while making a submission to the ethics committee for approval to conduct this research, I discovered three practical issues. These were: 1) difficulty obtaining ethical permission, 2) misunderstanding of the purpose of the FB group, and 3) no response from the target audience.

1) Difficulty obtaining ethical permission

The ethics committee at my university agreed that gaining teenage girls' perspectives on the issue of parental consent was important, but they had concerns with my decision to dismiss the important principle of written parental consent. They argued that, if parental consent was not going to be sought, other safeguards should be put into place. This included more detailed information about the research on the FB group page was needed for consent to be informed consent and more information was needed to show anonymity, privacy and confidentiality was to be ensured. On the participant information sheet and consent forms that I intended to post on my FB group I added more detail about what the research would entail and that pseudonyms would be used and no personal details of the participants would be revealed. Other concerns included that the group should be checked by my supervisor, that the FB group page and the consent form specified that participants were a certain age justifying this with the research aims and that I could not guarantee that everyone in the group was aged 13-19 years. This demonstrates the ethical obstacles need to be negotiated when trying to make research easier and more attractive for teenagers to take part. Time constraints prevented me from making the changes to gain ethical approval and to have time to recruit participants and carry out the study. I had to abandon FB as a research tool for my dissertation and I decided to use face-to-face methods.

2) Misunderstanding of the purpose of the Facebook group

I received requests to join the FB group from four of the group administrators I had contacted. I also received a request from an adult woman who I had not communicated with. This suggested that despite the group name, others saw membership as a way of supporting the topic and had not read properly that the group was only for teenage girls.

3) No response from target audience

The FB group was active for four months and no teenage girls requested to join. I contacted 15 anti-bullying group administrators and received four responses who all agreed to post details of my FB group on their group page. Members of these groups may have decided not to join my group because it was not of interest to them or they might have not been on the group page to see the post. Other possible reasons why teenage girls may have been put off joining my FB group were that the group had no members. Perhaps it would have been suitable to recruit some girls offline to encourage others from their network of online friends or other girls in the FB community to join.

Conclusions

To engage with adolescents and to understand their social world, online methods should be considered. Online research with under 18 year olds may be difficult but should not be impossible. Ethical considerations need to be addressed and compromises may be required such as recruiting and gaining written parental consent offline before conducting the research online. A private SNS created by the researcher, for example using *Ning* (www.ning.com), is a possibility. This would allow for written parental consent to be gained, the researcher would know the identity of the participants and the parents and participants would meet and know the identity of the researcher. By discussing the ethical dilemmas I encountered, I have aimed to help others planning to use online ethnography to think about the issues needed to be addressed when researching online communities and interactions.

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