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## **Ethnography, education and on-line research (OLR)**

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***This paper 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 co-ordinated by the Faculty of Education and Language Studies at The Open University [www.vital.ac.uk/](http://www.vital.ac.uk/)***

A much shorter earlier draft version of this paper was given at the Qualitative Research For Web 2.0/3.0: The Next Leap! 25 & 26 March 2010 in Berlin. Organised by Merlien.

**To be presented to the ECER Conference August 2010 in Helsinki by Bob Jeffrey, The Open University. Contact [r.a.jeffrey@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.a.jeffrey@open.ac.uk).**

**The arguments and references in this paper are almost all to be found in two books –one authored and one edited – by Professor Christine Hine of Surrey University, UK (Hine 2000; Hine 2005)**

## **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. (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 (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.

There is more to be gained from applying traditional qualitative or ethnographic methodologies - which can contain quantitative analysis – to on line social groups (OLSG) than spending time trying to discern whether the on line 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 (CMC) are more tenuous and need interpreting and understanding (Rutter and 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 legitimisation. 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

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 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 organisation of social relationships in time and space? Is this different to the way in which 'real life' is organised 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 their own analytical advantage: its 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 computer mediated communication (CMC) was conceptualised 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, ie: 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 deindividuation.

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 and 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 and Woolger 1997).

### ***Technology as Text***

Technology as text (ibid.) 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 (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 nor 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 (ibid. 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 textualised 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, eg: 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 artefact, 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 interdeterminacy of the 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 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 group and that to be meaningfully drawn (Rutter and Smith 1999; Rutter and Smith 2005). On line data leave traces – logs files, message archives and hyperlinks (Beaulieu 2004; Beaulieu 2005).

Email as textual data could firstly be seen (Mackay 2005) 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 marginalise 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, eg: an approach applied in specific bounded settings compare with CMC that disrupts the notion of boundaries. Ethnographers have often settled for studying either on-line or off line 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 (Kitchin 1998) summarises proposed effects of cyberspace into 3 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 conceptualisations 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 (Jones, Watson) but others say they cannot be considered such if participants can simply log out, the level of intimacy is insufficient, ie: pseudocommunity (Benniger 1987) in contrast to an idealised 'traditional community' (Wellman and 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 contextualised meaning to it (Guimarães 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 1995 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?' (Guimaraes 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 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***

On line activities in online social groups question an understanding of a research site and the kinds of possible interactions therein and involve the building of relationships, autonomous self disclosure and it can be used 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 et al. 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 (Saunders 2005). Hyperpersonal interaction (Walther 1996) has four factors – sharing, optimising 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 and Slater 2000). Internet chat enhances indigenous culture rather than homogenising it.

### ***Time***

For Giddens (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 distancing. 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 on line 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 and Troman 2004) in online social groups in that often activity, interchange and explorations happen quickly and speedily in bursts (Guimaraes 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 departures of participants. This will be more prolific in traditional ethnographic sites where physical structures and highly structured organisations 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 self reflexivity as a *cul de sac* (Moore 1993).

C] To incorporate a destabilisation 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 argues that we don't have to choose but she follows Hammersley's (Hammersley 1990) perspective that we make judgements about relevance – the purposes the description serve. However, she doesn't explicitly add the other two criteria to legitimise an ethnography, that of plausibility and credibility, nor does she invoke 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 et al. 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 'socialised competencies' (Hammersley and 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 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 recognise 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, eg: 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 on-line relations can be formed and an online presences 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, focussing 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 on line, 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 anonymised data obviating the need for participation consent being agreed (Sanders 2005).

On-line ethnography describes places that are not material spaces but places where disembodied persons act and perform (Rutter and Smith 2005). We have deskwork rather than fieldwork (Fox and Roberts 1999) and so internet ethnographers use more

'observation only' practices than participant observation, more unobtrusive measures (Webb, Campbell et al. 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 developed 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 is drawn away from holism towards connectivity, a field of relations rather than a site (Marcus 1995; Olwig and Hastrop 1997) as an organising 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), eg: 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 organised round connection rather than location – flows of people, information, money, circulate between nodes which form a network of associations increasingly independent of specific local context (Castells 1996; Castells 1996; Castells 1997). Online ethnographies, despatialise 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 artefact
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 organising 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 is 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 ethnographers 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/>

### ***New pedagogies (Sheehy, Ferguson et al. 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 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.

### ***Online distance education – social presence enhancing (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.

### ***Learning Cultures in Online Education (Goodfellow and 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. On line learning with multi-cultural contexts and cultures, e.g.: telecollaboration in language learning and the problem of single cultural learning identities and new communication practices, online cultural hybridity, formal education as an obstruction in a globalised world.

***When Educational Worlds Collide (Twining 2009)***

The Scheme 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 Scheme Park Programme and contrasts them with those found in schools. It provides specific examples to illustrate clashes of culture between self-directed learning in Scheme Park and the culture of schools in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA).

***Women working in science and engineering use online networking for career and professional development purposes. (Donelan, Herman et al. 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.

***Student use of technologies (Gráinne) (Gráinne 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.

***The use of blogging to improve study skills (Minocha and Kerawalla 2010)***

The chapter reports 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. We have focussed 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, help towards becoming confident writers, and in facilitating 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 of, or membership of, an online community where academic events are flagged, resources are shared, research is advertised, and ideas and comments are exchanged. We 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. We hope that our findings will help in guiding students, educators and institutions considering the use of blogging in university education.

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