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Ethnography and Digital Technologies: Face to Face Interaction

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Digital education for older generation non native users: a focused ethnography study of a pilot project

*Cristina Strada, Eleonora Brivio, Carlo Galimberti**

Abstract

Older non natives are often excluded from using new technological devices and little research literature is available on their ability to interact with technology. This research aims at studying how people excluded from technological use because of their education and age interact with each other and with a tablet during new technologies training courses.

A Focused Ethnography approach was used to study six groups of 18/20 participants to a training course for tablet use.

Four focuses were considered for ethnographic observations:

1. relationship between trainer and the group of participants, both mediated and non mediated by the tablet
2. relationship between the trainer and the single participant, both mediated and non mediated by the tablet
3. interaction between participant and her/his tablet
4. interaction between a group of participants and the tablets.

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Results help us to understand the difficulties in interactions between tablet and trainer. Evidence is shown that most difficulties in training sessions were related to the translation from digital culture to participants' culture.

Keywords: focused ethnography, interaction, training, tablet, video recorded data

Introduction

Nowadays it is no longer possible to exclude mobile technologies from our life and it is necessary to consider them as an integral part of it. However, part of the population that is still excluded from the use of mobile technologies: the older generation non-natives usually retired does not have enough chances to enter in contact and use mobile devices. For this reason, a training class was designed to provide basic information and a practice ground for approaching mobile technology. A focused ethnography perspective was used to investigate the people's aged over 55 relationship with such technologies and their feelings during interaction.

Literature background

A large share of citizens is still excluded from technological innovations, and either ignores or passively approaches them. The potential offered by such technologies is therefore often out of reach for them. A number of adoption barriers can be identified, including innovation aversion and avoidance, unwillingness to admit their lack of ability in using such technologies and pride.

Given the ease of use and the almost training-free usage curve that such devices have for young learners, no training courses are usually provided, effectively preventing the non-digital native users from entering into this technological world. By 2020, the average age of European population will increase significantly, with the 75+ age group experiencing the largest increase (Ijsselsteijn *et al.*, 2007). Since the seniors of the current generation have not been significantly exposed to information technology, it is very likely that they have an inaccurate representation of how this technology works, and may not

have a clear idea of the potential applications to their everyday lives. There is little published literature available regarding mental models about technology representation built by seniors in comparison to younger generations. Several studies (Docampo Rama, 2001; Van Hees, 1994) highlighted that elderly users should unlearn some of their previously accumulated knowledge and remove their previously constructed user interface model in order to fully exploit potential of the new technologies by building the correct mental models.

The main factors for healthy aging are social interaction, independent lifestyle and mobility, concurring also to create an enjoyable ageing. The Internet and social networks have shown the potential to support personal well-being and connectedness (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). The introduction of social networks to elderlies has been a challenging task because of the computer skill prerequisites required to take advantage of the Social Web (Czaja *et al.*, 2006, Xie, 2006).

Ethnography offers a clue to study groups with a specific culture, that is, beliefs, behaviors, norms, attitudes, and forms of expression that create the lifestyle of the members of a community (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Ethnography is always conducted in a natural environment, to directly observe the way in which members of a particular cultural group live. The information that ethnographers seek and collect is often very personal and occasionally idiosyncratic. Some ethnographers choose to work in teams so that they can pool and compare results from different researchers in similar contexts (Murchison, 2010).

In this study, ethnography in its classical version could not have been used, as the interaction between people and tablets in a training setting is a localized phenomenon identified a priori.

This is why a focused ethnography (FE) stance (Knoblauch, 2005) is adopted to produce and to analyse data. FE is a derivation of ethnography and focuses on contemporary social phenomena. Unlike classical ethnography, FE is characterized by short periods of observations and unlike the classical approach, it does not study social groups or particular cultures, but communicative activities and communication experiences. Moreover, in a FE study, it is

not necessary that participants know each other but it is important for the researcher to study their common behaviors related to the experience they are sharing (Richards & Morse, 2012). The short duration of the training course and consequently the short duration of the stay, in the social field is compensated by the use of recorded audio and video material. The object of this research study called for a FE approach and as a matter of fact, our work does not qualify as intensive, but as a work of producing and analyzing data intensively, thanks to the use of audio and video recordings. While in the traditional approach ethnographical notes are mainly used, in this case, in addition to writing, audiovisual material supported our analysis, as requested by the FE approach. To better summarize the differences between ethnography and FE please see the Table 1

Table 1. Conventional Ethnography and Focused Ethnography (adapted from Knoblauch, 2005).

Conventional Ethnography	Focused Ethnography
long-term field visits	short-term field visits
experientially intensive	data/analysis intensity
time extensity	time intensity
writing	recording
solitary data collection and analysis	data session groups
open	focused
social fields	communicative activities
participant role	field- observer role
insider knowledge	background knowledge
subjective understanding	conservation
notes	notes and transcripts
coding	coding and sequential analysis

The aim of the research is to study interactions between people and tablets (in this research we used a Vodafone Smart Tab) within a specific context, such as training courses; in these training courses observers were engaged also to evaluate interaction process.

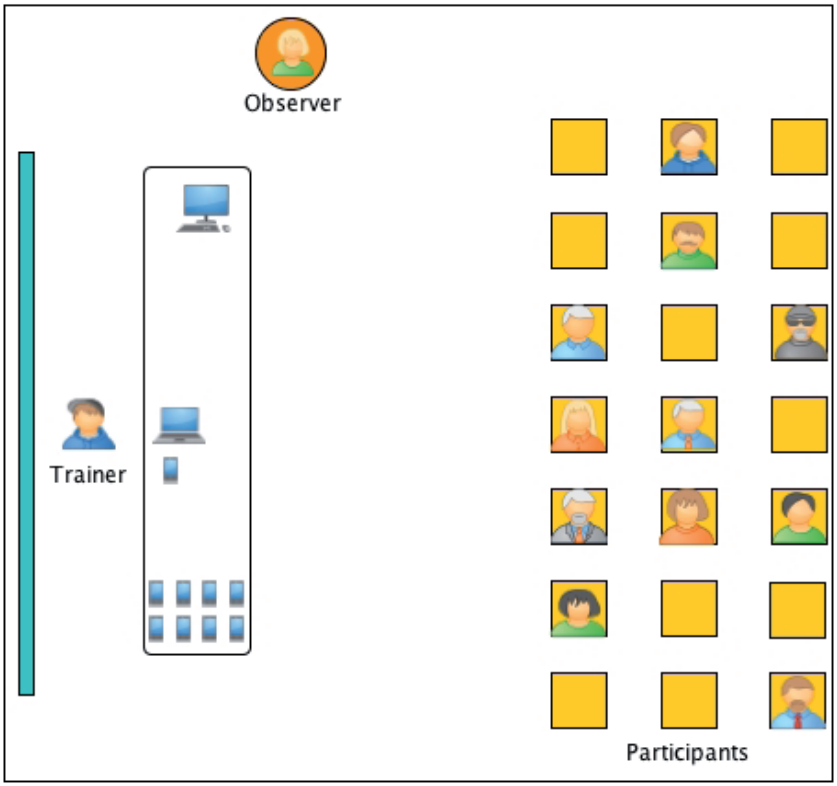
Method

This research has been carried out within a pilot project focusing on older generation non-native users, aged over 55 with little or no knowledge of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) familiarizing with the use of tablets.

The training course was articulated in five two-hour sessions. Content was first explained from a theoretical point of view, and then practiced on a tablet. The course was held during the month of January 2013, on Mondays and Thursdays. Six groups of people aged over 55 participated, each made up of 18-20 participants, chosen using a snowball sampling technique. As the participants were recruited for the training course and were screened just for the age, no other information was available. Participants were informed of the aim of the research and signed an informed consent form allowing photos and videos to be taken during the course for research purposes. The training sessions were held within the facilities of the Catholic University in Milan, and organized in three different time schedules (Table 2). Class setting is shown in Figure 1.

Rooms were equipped with one computer and one beamer: the trainer used the computer to show a PowerPoint presentation on the topic of the day, and a tablet identical to the one of the participants, connected to the beamer, to show the different steps to all the participants and have they repeat the procedure. Every lesson was held by a professional trainer, in the presence of an observer, for a total of three trainers alternating during the different timeslots, and two observers covering the two parallel groups during each timeslot.

Figure 1. The classroom setting showing the relative position of the trainer, the observer and participants



The observations were split between the observers as reported in the Table 2:

Table 2. Training Sessions Schedule and allocation of trainers and observers

Session		
10 a.m.-12 a.m	Trainer 1 – Observator 1	Trainer 2 – Observator 2
2 p.m-4 p.m.	Trainer 3 – Observator 2	Trainer 2 – Observator 1
6 p.m.-8 p.m.	Trainer 1 – Observator 2	Trainer 3 – Observator 1

Observers were equipped with an iPad to capture video content of key aspects chosen inter-subjectively by the two observers looking for recurring aspects emerging during the lesson. The choice of not having a fixed camera, visible and positioned in a specific room position, was deliberately made so as not to explicitly influence the participants. Furthermore, observers used an observation grid with four columns: event, description of the event, ethnographic notes and countertransferal elements. As foreseen by FE approach and thanks to the ease of use of the iPad for videorecording, observers were enabled to concurrently take videos and notes.

Each observer also had two lists of pre-determined observation categories: trainer's use of language and content, and relationship between participants, tablets and trainer. The observation was overt and participant.

Results were produced by *in vivo* ethnographic notes and observation of video recorded data.

Analysis

Data Reporting

Focuses of observations were guided by but not limited to the following categories[1]:

1. Relationship between trainer and participants
2. Relationship between trainer and participants, mediated by the tablet
3. Interaction between the single participant and his/her tablet
4. Interaction between the group of participants and the tablet.

Relationship between trainer and participants

The first focus of the observation was the typology of people the course was targeted to: the trainer was a professional ICT consultant, even if not a digital native, but the participants were people aged

[1] These categories are somehow inspired to the four dimensions featuring any essay made to shape cyberplaces in a intersubjective way (Galimberti, 2011, p.12).

over 55 with little or no previous knowledge of the topic. For this reason it was necessary to consider that the learning curve was long and the approach they had to the device was characterized by the need to know and weight all action opportunities, resulting in the tendency to avoid acting by trial and error, as they were cautious and afraid of making mistakes.

Observing the relationship between trainer and participants it is possible to see that having a previous knowledge about mobile devices (i.e. smartphone) could be helpful for the training process.

Relationship between participants and tablets

The interaction occurred between the participants and the mobile device was quite complex, and while it developed along the five days of class it remained quite stilted. Physical interaction with the tablet (swiping between screens, pressing buttons on the screen, finding icons) remained a frustrating exercise to the very end of the course: participants looked confused when their tablet did not exactly match what was shown by the trainer (tablet on home screen, trainer's on app screen), when it did not respond to their actions (i.e. pressing the home icon too hard and causing the tablet to freeze), or when they themselves did not know how to perform a particular action requested by the trainer (i.e. finding an app). The very basic actions seemed to elude the participants: one of the most problematic actions was to make the keyboard appear or disappear. A second kind of interaction that aroused frustration and disappointment in the participants was when they did some kind of action on their tablet and it responded unexpectedly, for example accidentally starting an unwanted application. This second kind of interaction was also a reaction to previous frustration: when the participants could not execute the tasks they wanted, they tended to 'muddle through', trying different actions which may lead the tablet give an unexpected response. This interaction prompted a round of help requests that follows a specific pattern:

1. Participant is unable to perform the assigned task, i.e. email account creation or taking a picture, obtains an unexpected result from the tablet.

2. Participant leans toward their neighbour and looks at his/her tablet to observe how the task is to be carried out. If the participant understands how the action is to be performed he/she returns to his/her own tablet to do so (for an extract, please see https://www. youtube.com/watch?v=4_KE_FiT4xs)[2]
3. If participant does not understand how to perform the task, he/she ask his/her neighbour to guide him/her through each step to get to the results. If they do solve the problem, they both return to their own tablet (please see https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=URMjVxcPIbk)
4. If the problem remains unsolved, the participant gives his/her tablet to his/her neighbour so this person can actually obtain the results while the participant watches (please see https://www. youtube.com/watch?v=KeQFt7hpl2s).
5. If the problem is not resolved, if the neighbour is in the same situation or if the participant is sitting alone, then he/she calls the trainer for help (please see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v= GdhzKCrJnhQ).
6. The trainer then can decide to help in two ways, contingent to the situation:

    a. Asks the participant to explain the problem, leaves the tablet in the participant's hand and shows the necessary steps on the participant's tablet by performing them him/herself or by guiding the participant (please see https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=egWADfnwxYE).
    b. Asks the participant to explain the problem, takes the participant's tablet, does the task and returns the tablet to the participants. The trainers showed to prefer this solution when there were time constraints or if several participants were waiting for their help (please see http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=bUgHr3dFslU).

[2] At these links it is possible to see some examples of the interaction patterns occurred during training class; these links are unlisted videos from YouTube: a video unlisted means that only people who have the link to the video can view it. Unlisted videos will not appear in any of YouTube's public spaces

This last solution and the general inability to perform a task on the tablet generated emotional reactions that vary from light frustration to anger and feelings of incompetence. Several participants had to be reassured and persuaded to stay in the class when the feelings of frustration became too much: such feelings were expressed by lack of action during class (sitting and leaving the tablet unattended) and with discussion with the trainer and observer and other participants after class.

On the other end of the spectrum, a positive result in performing a task created a feeling of empowerment and accomplishment in the participants, made evident by the willingness to help other participants and asking confirmation and positive recognition from the trainer.

Discussion

From the interaction with the trainer and with the tablet, it was evident that the computer language spoken both by tablet and trainer is often unknown to the participants. For example, the meaning of "scroll the page/screen" while is linguistically similar to the one known by the participants ("scroll the page *of a book*") it implies a semantic (and pragmatic) meaning which has no equivalence for them. More generally, while the trainer inhabited a cyberplace (Brivio, Cilento & Galimberti, 2010) based on a specific technology and language, filled with meanings, the access to such place and its working was barred to the participants, who did not possess the basic language and meaning to get the environment (hardware and software components) to work and therefore could not fully comprehend the interactive meaning of the apps. In this scenario the trainer becomes a translator, a mediator, between the language that the technology uses and the one the participants use. The trainers, while not digital natives, are still fluent in the technology language and part of the digital culture. They had to go through three different translation steps to make the digital language understandable and functional for the participants:

1. Translate a digital icon language into a digital verbal equivalent (digital culture)

2. Translate the digital verbal language into the Italian equivalent, if it exists
3. Translate the correct Italian or original digital term into a term or set of terms that are semantically and pragmatically understandable for the participants (participants' culture).

Often there were entire processes and concepts familiar to technology users that are completely extraneous to the 'uninitiated', such as the people aged over 55 involved in this study. For example, registering an account for a service becomes impossible if the participants do not grasp the need for an email address as a form of ID recognition. In this case, the trainer has to act as a mediator and explain in concrete terms why an email address is needed for registration in a service. The trainers often used metaphors and similes that referred to the lived experience of the participants to reach understanding with them (for examples, please see the Table 3).

Table 3. Examples of metaphors and their function and meanings as used by the traininers.

Digital Culture	Function	Participants' culture
Email address	Availability/traceability	Home address
User name	Individual distinctiveness	Nickname / name
App store	Exchange/market	Service (i.e. Supermarket)

Sager (1997) said about the general translation process

> [...] which means considering translation as one possible step in a communication process between two cultures. This widened scope includes the writer and the reader, between whom the translator has a mediating role. In this role the translator has the choice of equivalence [...] in function of the situation created by the demand for a translation. This choice is chiefly exercised in terms of what is known about the requirements of the person who has requested [...] the translation. (p. 26)

If we consider the two cultures in Sager's citation as the digital culture and the participant's culture and text as the tablet/app language,

then the trainer is the mediator between the two and is his role to choose how to get the meaning across to the participants.

Taking into account all the above discussed, the following results can be drawn:

- The way participants interact with their tablet is strongly influenced by the approach followed by the trainer
- Participants heterogeneity and their relative distribution within the classroom leads to different emotional reactions and activations
- Tablet model and network speed are also very important factors that influence the success of the training sessions
- The number of students of each classroom may impact the training session.

Concluding, it is possible to report that trainers were not able to guide participants into *cyberplace* (Galimberti, 2011); the participants succeded only in sharing the *cyberspace* experience.

Conclusion and implications for tablet education

This FE study helped us to understand what are the difficulties in interactions among tablet and trainer and participants.

Current reality can be identified as being 'on edge', neither completely online nor completely offline, in continuous presence of technology. This *edge* reality needs to be studied by social scientists to understand the underlying dynamics of the interactive phenomena between *real people* while truly representing their complexity. This can be possible only if the very same social psychologists understand the need for the adaptation of reference theories, methodologies, tools and techniques of data production and analysis. Among the latter, video-recording holds a particularly important role, being the only instrument enabling the psycho-social researcher to observe the complexity of phenomena taking place on the *edge* (Galimberti & Brivio, 2013). Videorecording techniques offer to the researcher the possibility not only to observe how participants interact in the two

contexts (face to face and cyberplace), but to record how all the participants (camera and researcher included) concur to the overall process of data production. In this research, it would be very interesting to also retrieve data related to what happens within the device, so as to have the complete mapping of interactions happening both outside and inside the device, i.e. using LOG files.
Considering the implications relevant for future tablet education courses, the following categories should be given specific attention: style of teaching (amount of content per lesson, monitoring participants' progress), group and participants (number and homogeneity), language used, and the tablet device with its related difficulties, support material to be provided to participants, presence of a classroom tutor (the trainer can't at the same time take care of contents and provide resolution of individual's problems), setting (not scholastic, to foster collaboration).

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