Special issue
Ethnography and Digital Technologies: Face to Face Interaction

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Indice

Editorial: Technology, research and education
   Valentina Grion, Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos 5

STUDIES

Digital technology and ethnographic research
   Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos 17

Conceptual maps as a methodological approach in educational research
   Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos, Luís Paulo Cruz Borges, Paula Almeida de Castro 32

Digital education for older generation non native users: a focused ethnography study of a pilot project
   Cristina Strada, Eleonora Brivio, Carlo Galimberti 44

A “walk” between real and virtual contexts: why blended ethnography?
   Cinzia Ferranti 58

“And I’m a (social media) Mormon”: digital ritual, techno-faith, and religious transmedia
   Benjamin Burroughs 71
This special issue of Qwerty presents some educational experiences involving a new software CoFFEE (Collaborative Face-to-Face Educational Environment) and a new approach to collaborative problem solving in education. The four articles and the editorial of the issue provide several experiences and reflections, both theoretical and methodological, that emerged during years of experimentation with CoFFEE.

The editorial is written in the form of a dialogue between a psychologist and a computer scientist in an attempt to represent through the text the very dialogical and collaborative nature of working with CoFFEE. It also reflects the thinking that developed over several years of design and experimentation aimed at drawing new ideas and teaching practices.

In the first paper, “Guidelines for a computer-mediated discussion in the classroom” by the project LEAD authors, van Diggelen and Overdijk, the theoretical framework of the CoFFEE project that blends the design of tools and the pedagogical goals to obtain actual improvements in classroom collaboration is discussed.

The article “Software appropriation: A teacher one year after” by Ligorio, Dell’Olio and Ritella describes the development of teacher competence in using CoFFEE, underlying how the process of appropriation of a powerful software like CoFFEE is an important resource for teaching.

In “A Framework to support web-based inquiry-learning activities with WebQuests” by Malandrino, Manno and Palmieri, the versatility of CoFFEE is discussed. The software is fully featured to support an inquiry-learning activity, the WebQuest. Even if it was not designed for this purpose, CoFFEE can support this activity from design to assessment.

Finally, Fornarelli and Ligorio’s article “Gender and computer: Effects of the context in a computer-supported classroom activity” develops the idea of gender differences, using CoFFEE as a research tool. By analyzing the software logs, it describes how the virtual space of interaction can be used to study the group dynamics with respect to gender.
A “walk” between real and virtual contexts: why blended ethnography?

Cinzia Ferranti*

Abstract

The article provides an account of a blended ethnographic research study that allowed participant observation of a professional community. This community uses online and offline tools and spaces to exchange knowledge, to share professional cases and discuss their problems of interpretation and application of laws that regulate their profession. With the purpose to describe the characteristics of the context suitable for blended ethnography, we want to provide some basic guidelines for conducting ethnographic research in the domain of online educational technologies: the traits of participant observation, the moment of access into the field, the choice of observable events and data collection tools, the selection of the model of organization and interpretation of the data. We will also present some criticalities of the method connected to the management of the entire process of investigation and related to some epistemological considerations on the validity of the results.

Keywords: Blended ethnography, research design, educational technology, professional community, activity.

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Blended ethnography: a professional community case

The article provides an account of a blended ethnographic research study that allowed participant observation of a community of professionals who are involved in animal health and food hygiene. The ethnographic approach allowed us to:

- Conduct an in-depth study of a developing blended professional community, outlining the specific characteristics of that community (Stringer et al., 1997);
- Give voice to participants who provide information, perceptions and dynamics related to their practices, their activity system and their specific framework of knowledge;
- Represent some relationships between the community and other important elements of the activity system they belong to;
- Understand the directions of systemic learning for that community;
- Understand the role of communication and educational technologies for the growth of the community.

The choice to carry out an ethnographic investigation is related to the research objectives: outlining the professional and organizational culture of the community with the aim to define the role of educational technologies for community development within its central activity system (Engeström, 1987, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2001).

Ethnography in general, and blended ethnography in particular, is a method that has allowed greater design flexibility, and the ability to continuously restructure the information which emerges from the study. It proves to be a valid method when you want to investigate some elements of the life of a group, a social context, an institution, an organization.

It also allows the representation of aspects that the subjects themselves indicate as relevant (McDermott & Varenne, 2006). In short, ethnographic researches are considered generative, inductive, constructive and subjective (Goetz & LeCompte, 1991).

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1 For further information on the activity system model of Engeström we recommend “Learning by Expanding: an activity-theoretical approach to developmental research” (Engeström, 1987).
Why blended ethnography?

Blended ethnography in educational settings is a form of ethnography that integrates techniques of traditional face-to-face research with those of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000). It uses online and offline methods of data collection; it observes phenomena that occur face-to-face and phenomena that are typical of the web (Kosinets, 2009; Maintz, 2009; Miller & Slater, 2000; Orgad, 2009; Sade-Beck, 2004; Slater, 2002;).

The data are used as sources of evidence, the research project develops and progresses from the data themselves. The presence of subjective elements is due to the existence of two factors:

– The researcher leaves space and expression to the emic\(^2\) side (Pike, 1999), using the participants’ categories and ways of conceptualizing their experience;

– The researcher expresses his own characteristics, training and viewpoint with the interpretative models used.

Ethnography is therefore a method that is not based on the control of the setting, nor on that of data-gathering tools, which are defined as non-standardized. The ethnographer shifts his focus (Piasere, 2002) to the phenomena which gradually emerge and need clarification.

In the case of our inquiry, the research design was outlined *in fieri*. Right from the moment of the access to the field, we shifted the focus whenever we considered new spaces, concepts and meanings (in the online or offline discourses) that needed better interpreting. A form of behavior, a sentence, a digital artifact or a forum discussion thread could spark new directions for investigation, which were not predictable *a priori*.

\(^2\)The distinction between *emic* and *ethic* comes from linguistics (Pike, 1967). *Emic* derives from *phonemic* and refers to the vision of the system from within, it is the vision of someone who is familiar with it, that knows the operation, being a member participant. *Ethic* is for *phonetic* and refers to a vision of the system from outside. In this sense, the ethnographer moves between these two positions trying to capture the *emic* aspects from the inside and the ethical, outermost, noting also the logical aspects of the system. A history of the distinction between *emic* and *ethic* can be found in Harris (1976).
It is a process that dislocate, or constantly shifting, the position of researcher, who can reorganize and unify the data only in the phase of analysis. He films the phenomena, to use a movie metaphor, reducing or extending the visual field, moving in on the details and back to a wide angle view. From the point of view of time, the researcher goes back to phenomena, he investigates them through the testimony of a single subject and then tries to grasp the aspects which are most commonly shared by the community. He is situated on the boundary between familiarity and extraneousness to the context. In our case, the initial extraneousness was very marked, not only because we do not belong to the group, but also because the technical and scientific knowledge, the professional and organizational culture of this group is very far from ours. Our approach was abductive\(^3\) (Pierce, 1984): starting from a sign, a gap or a clue we sought hypotheses and answers that have allowed us to proceed.

This method led us to:

- Switch between posts on discussion forum to the interviews and then return to the thread with a different understanding of their online discourses;
- Start from a sentence spoken by a participant during a lesson in order to better understand the meaning and integrate the whole process of ethnographic inquiry;
- Involve other participants to understand the extent to which they shared the issues raised.

The abductive process allowed us to gradually understand the professional culture of the subjects: their practices, their dynamics, the internal and external relationship, the representation of the central activity system. At the same time we progressively acquired greater understanding of their specific language and knowledge the different situations surfaced from their discourses; we detected the underlying problems, their institutional relationships and the specificity of their practices. Extraneousness makes the field particularly interesting and

\(^3\) The “abduction”, according to Peirce, is a form of reasoning that allows us to increase the knowledge. It promotes an attitude of discovery that enabling to imagine new ideas or to present new conjectures.
creates the force that leads the researcher to perceive better the underlying issues which influence the behavior of members during their professional activities.

The results of the ethnographic study are connected locally to the specificity of the group under analysis, but we propose more abstract models that are significant and transferable to other contexts.

The nature of the community examined, which develops both online and offline, required a suitable form of participant observation. The result is a methodology that integrates practices commonly used in more traditional ethnographic research (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006) with those typical of the investigation of phenomena that occur only online. The characteristics of the educational environment itself required the combination of these techniques. We believe that the outcomes of this integrated investigation process may also be of interest to other studies in which the contexts have some analogies; the methodological approach adopted could be transferred to other educational projects involving technology-mediated learning.

The two main situations of our ethnography are the face-to-face training sessions and the educational and discursive online spaces. These two different environments have their own specificities: the phenomena that occur face-to-face are different from those that occur online.

In the first case are the scheduled classroom lessons, the meetings and the social situations; in the second case are the events in the online platform, which presents several “rooms” where the participants:

- Discuss professional issues together in the forum called “Agora”;
- Collaborate at a distance in other forums or in shared documents;
- Seek information or documents through a custom search engine, archives and database set up by themselves;
- Create digital artifacts for peer training or for external communication (addressed to the food business operators, educators and citizens).

The blended ethnographic approach thus combines the characteristics of virtual ethnography with those of traditional ethnography. Hine (2000, 2008), one of the most important contributors to virtual ethnography, defined the characteristics of this form of ethnography, presenting
analysis of some cases. She refers to events, speeches, documents, social situations that occur primarily on the Internet. According to Hine, Internet can be considered both a social and cultural space that we can observe from inside, but also a cultural artifact, a product of our culture, thanks to a new set of technologies. Internet, as a social space, becomes the collection of social relations mediated by communication technologies. The aim of virtual ethnographic studies is to investigate: online behavior and relationships, the living space of online communities, the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) and discursive performances.

There are authors (Orgad, 2009) who advocate the use of blended ethnography to obtain greater completeness and richness of data. In our case, we agree with this need, but we believe it is the type of phenomena and contexts that require an integration of data. The community was created only thanks to the online platform, it already existed as a regional network of professionals. It was previously active with processes of sharing professional practices, with a common specific territory, with the same health system and the same organization of work. Doubtless the community also participates in many phenomena and virtual spaces; in any case we moved from offline to online and viceversa.

Data collection and research instruments: a possible path

The fieldwork was carried out in different phases. Initially, through silent observation without note-taking, we facilitated our access to the field by fostering relationships with members. In the second stage we started writing field notes during classes. Then we made a qualitative analysis of the Agora Forum thread to outline a number of interviews in order to better understand the underlying reasons of their online single interventions and the problems discussed online. Then we prepared a guide for semi-structured interviews to hold with a greater number of members (about half of the participants) in order to make a comparison between their observations.

The interview guide is based on the following areas of inquiry: the function and the characteristics of the Agora Forum, the value
of reading and writing in the forum, the sense of community, the
meaning of the online discussions, the link between the forum topics
and the daily work practices of participants, the effects of the
division of labor or health service organization, the main directions
of the system contradictions that suggest new learning directions.
Finally we selected digital artifacts made by participants in some
workshops on digital storytelling, trying to understand how to place
these artifacts in the activity system, pointing out possible uses and
functions for them.

Data analysis during and after fieldwork

The analysis was carried out in two phases: during the fieldwork and
when data collection was finished.

In the first case the discursive data from the Agorà forum were
analyzed while the discussion progressed, providing input for the first
round of ethnographic interviews that helped us to understand the
issues underlying the discussions. A subsequent analysis of these first
interviews allowed us to draw up a guide for some semi-structured
interviews with the aim of involving a larger base of participants. This
last step allowed us to recursively bring out aspects related to the
issues under investigation (the emic ones of the community and those
related to activity system). In each of these procedures the recorded
audio data were crossed with ethnographic notes.

In the second case, the analysis was done at the end of the empirical
investigation in the field. We coded the forum discussions and the
transcribed interviews, reorganizing the data related to the following
aspects:

– Within the community: the role of the Agora forum, the participation
  and the sense of community, the role of online reading and writing;
– External to the community: based on the theoretical perspective of
  Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1995, 2005), in order to highlight
  the main system contradictions. A proposal for a training course to
  intentionally promote expansive learning was developed from this.

We also took into analysis some digital artifacts in order to understand
the role of technology and multimedia writing within the member
community’s activity system. Even at this stage we crossed the content analysis and analysis of digital artifacts with the ethnographic notes.

**Some critical issues in blended ethnography**

Blended ethnography presents some criticalities and difficulties due on the one hand to the type of methodology, on the other to different situations connected to the management of the entire process of investigation.

**Field access**

Firstly blended ethnography, which takes place in the field, requires a stage of field access. At this juncture it is possible find several difficulties: problems of acceptance and negotiation in order to make the participant observation transparent; the research subjects have to know and permit the insertion of a figure that is usually foreign to the context (in extremely complex cases there are researchers who simulate their identity). There are therefore some institutional obstacles of entry to overcome and the importance of the acceptance of the research subjects themselves. There is also the problem of real possibility of access to online and offline contexts (one of the two places could be precluded). So even at this very early stage of empirical research you should ask yourself a few questions: how do I want to present myself and how can I act in the field? With which stated or explicit role? Which ethical process of negotiation emerges in defense of the position of observer?

**Leading research process**

During the entire process of investigation you may have to:

- Evaluate which real and virtual relationships have equal knowledge validity to the research objectives;
- Choose the phenomena or events to be observed;
- Choose the extent to which the search is to be grounded and to what extent instead the choice of interpretative models can help to organize and outline the observed phenomena;
Express the researcher’s ability to de-localize or situate yourself in a border area (Powell, 2006). In this way the ratio between familiarity and unfamiliarity (of the context or of the group under observation) can lead to the insights which are not merely projections of the researcher.

**Data selection**

Usually, during the data collection, the ethnographer writes and notes (also by audio and video recording) everything that he considers interesting in the field: the events that appear most relevant to the research objectives or others, which are noticed and are of interest during observation, which could be used at a later time. At the time of data processing there is a hard problem, summarized in the following questions: What further selection will the researcher have to make with the data collected? Could he seek a clear direction of interpretation, manage the data overload, look for a completed form or structure? Can a specific theoretical model help to organize and better understand the phenomena detected (i.e. we have used the Activity theory framework to organize and make explicit the significant system contradictions to design further lines of expansive learning (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001)?)

**Degree of validity of the research**

Usually ethnographic research, a qualitative form of naturalistic research, suffers from some recognized limitations. Ethnography is not generalizable and it is based on local memories. It gives voice to marginal individuals inside specific contexts (Pink, Kürti, Alfonso, 2004), instead of pursuing the generalizability, it aspires to perspicacity (Stewart, 1998).

For this kind of research it is more common to outline and recognize the degree of transferability to other contexts, above all as regards the emergence of some constructs or the applicability of some models based on the specific investigation but useful in other situations. Ethnography shows a form of subjectivity due to the presence of the ethnographer (two different researchers, in the
same research project, obtain different outcomes) and also to the emic side of knowledge offered by participants to the observer.

Conclusions

In conclusion we would like to summarize and propose some methodological and operational principles (see Table 1) to choose and lead blended ethnography in education: we will do this by answering some basic questions to be posed in the preliminary phase of research design.

Table 1. Methodological and operational advices for a blended ethnography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>SHORT ANSWER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEN?</td>
<td>Ethnography is a research method that you can adopt when you are in the presence of blended training events, where the use of online educational technologies is integrated with face to face training (classroom, workshops, discussion tables, outdoor training, real work context).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO?</td>
<td>The subjects involved in such investigation may be groups or communities that share a blended training context or a blended professional space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHY?</td>
<td>The main reasons that encourage people to use a such methodology is the desire to bring out the cultural aspects of the group to examine (Israel et al., 2012), and further to develop considerations that are more specifically linked to the educational sciences (for instance the design of the development of the group or the organization).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHERE?</td>
<td>The places that require investigation with a blended ethnographic approach are contexts and spaces where the life of groups or communities happens thanks to really blended or only online environments, where it is also possible to use traditional ethnographic techniques in order to have a more complete vision of the group investigated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOW?</td>
<td>It is possible to conduct ethnography using mixed techniques to detect and analyze discourse, artifacts or digital contexts, with tools typical of virtual (or digital) ethnography; it is also possible to follow more established paths in traditional ethnography such as participant observation and ethnographic interviews in presence (Hammersley, 2006).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These basic questions allow us to have a view of the road ahead and explore tools to apply or develop during the entire investigation.

References


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