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Digital technology and ethnographic research

*Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos**

Abstract

Drawing primarily on the work of Frederick Erickson and Erving Goffman, this article studies the nature of digital ethnography and its implications for educational research. The framework thus used acknowledges that to integrate digital culture into an analogical world while also reducing socio-educational inequalities, researchers must look at how education is assimilating digital tools. The main goals of this article are to develop a social and educational sensibility for digital culture and its benefits, and to expand the critical-reflexive thinking of researchers, educators, and students. In the process, this paper may contribute to both an understanding of knowledge advancement in ethnography and the formulation of new research and teaching pedagogies involving digital technologies.

Keywords: ethnography, technology, digital ethnography

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Introduction

This article examines the convergence of digital technology and ethnographic research. The main question it addresses is: how does digital ethnography affect the scope of educational ethnographic research? In order to address this question, researchers must start with previous studies involving digital ethnography, looking, for instance, at the social interactions that evolved from print and analogue cultures. They must also assume that the contemporaneous ecologies of interaction between themselves and other people, along with accompanying modifications to research concepts, have changed in step with the movement from written/real to digital/virtual interactions.

Object of study and definition of digital ethnography

Digital ethnography is defined in this paper as a way of using digital products, processes, and technologies to develop ethnographic research. Digital ethnography is an investigative innovation that, through the use of digital technologies, aims to signify, interpret, and describe communicative or educational interactions among individuals, or within groups or societies.

Defining digital ethnography and its use in education is a complex task because traditionally, ethnographic interactions among people have been restricted to a geographically-delimited space and time, which ethnographers describe as a *setting*, *locus*, or *observational field*. However, the digitalization of knowledge in contemporary societies has required that these ethnographic spatial and temporal concepts be modified to include people who are in digital environments and who are using digital tools and virtual ways of interacting. Accordingly, Lèvy's expanded definition of the term *cyberspace* (1994) includes such technological developments as digital television, computers and mini computers, the growing social networks accessed through the internet and satellite communication, and a variety of tools: laptops, e-books, iPods, tablets, mobiles, interactive whiteboards, and holography, all of which substitute for and/or represent reality. These significant

technological developments are affecting people's individual lives as well as society at large.

Yet in terms of education, digital space has not helped to improve the quality of learning, to diminish inequalities, or to promote access to knowledge among either those who rely on digital tools or those who rarely use them. Although technology has provided new ways to access knowledge – for instance, distance education courses – such access has not necessarily provided high-quality education (Belloni, 2002, 2003).

Hence, questions arise about what kinds of interactions these digital tools are promoting and why these interactions attract so many people today. The main reasons for the appeal of digital phenomena such as the social networking site Facebook are the virtual sensations of socializing and belonging (Lèvy, 1994). Launched in 2004 (Mezrich, 2009), Facebook now has millions of users worldwide; of current social networks, it has the greatest influence over how different social segments develop their patterns of consumption.

People using social networks feel a sense of belonging not within a shared geographical space but within a common virtual one (Lèvy, 1994) where everything is possible. Some of these people can be considered “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), i.e., people who were born into a digital society and are living in digitally shaped social spaces. These social networkers coexist with individuals who have had to acquire digital skills as adults. However, neither digital natives nor those who have had to learn later on how to engage in the digital world have benefitted academically from digital technology. In Brazil, for instance, the use of technologies intended to diminish social inequalities has actually ended up helping to exclude some people while producing a false sense of inclusion, either real or digital.

The idea that situations that simulate inclusion may actually reinforce hidden exclusion was theorized by such authors as Bauman (2009), who discussed the structural liquidity of social institutions; Giddens (1991), who described schools as socializing institutions that have survived modern changes and crises; and Castel (2004), who pointed to the negative decriminalization experienced by the poor. These authors' theories have shaped the dialogue on digital

ethnography and the conceptual frameworks that this article aims to advance.

This article would, of course, require a much more extensive discussion on the issue of digital ethnography in order for it to be considered to have contributed new knowledge to the field of education and ethnography. I also wish to point out the importance of clear definitions and common ground in academic writing, and to emphasize that ethnography, like any other research paradigm, is based on conceptual frameworks as well as empirical findings.

Digital ethnography in other knowledge fields

Among the areas in which digital ethnography has recently been used with notable success are communication, media, and marketing. Interactive media laboratories utilize traditional ethnographic tools such as focal groups, interviews, and image and sound recording to identify, study, and interpret the different behaviors, values, attitudes, and desires of social subjects (often called “consumers”) involved in studies. These studies aim to outline consumer profiles for particular products or services.

Digital ethnography has also been used as an instrument for data collection and analysis in studies investigating consumers’ behavior on the internet (Reis, 2011). According to Reis (2011), digital ethnography has good potential for the study of interactive behavior. Reis studies computer users’ attitudes as evidenced by their online navigation choices. Specifically, her work shows that researchers can use digital ethnography to collect information about consumers’ relationships with the digital environment in order to understand how digital technology affects internet users – in some cases, by excluding them socially. This methodology can help researchers to study the day-to-day lives of people using the internet, their use of the environment, and the ways in which they relate to the virtual worlds they participate in. In so doing, digital ethnography offers new insights into online searching, digital technology and ethnographic research, and the online environment itself.

The combined use of two essential research tools, questionnaires and interviews (both online and in person, and moderated by a qualitative researcher), can help researchers to measure and understand the use of digital ethnography. These two tools can assist in juxtaposing actual against declared behavior, thus not only enriching the research but also increasing the reliability of the results.

Collecting such information through digital ethnography suggests the intention of increasing consumption by improving how well the market is in tune with the consumer, since the internet is accessible to any user who is capable of understanding the information posted there. The application of digital methodology to understand the behavior of these users is directed to the study of immediate consumer interests.

In Brazilian society, the consumption of material goods frequently exceeds the consumption of culture and knowledge. National politicians and celebrities – football players, models, artists, and musicians – often become public idols despite having only the most basic education. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the public appreciation of national models of power and prestige also represents a tendency to appreciate consumer-marketed, non-academic goods and values – that is, to be swayed by marketing linked to the political, technological, and educational shaping of a nation's populations.

In such a society, the biggest challenge for educational researchers, public school administrators, teachers, and students is to develop basic education programs that build knowledge aimed at decreasing socio-cultural and educational inequalities while also providing less advantaged social groups with access to digital technologies in a critically reflective manner. In the school environment, some identified expected challenges will arise as researchers and teachers work to achieve these aims while also respecting the students and their right to develop their own habits, attitudes, values, and beliefs. Studies into the successful use of digital tools in the areas of communications, marketing, and media nevertheless suggest that researchers in education can also use digital tools with similar success.

At the same time, although these tools would clearly provide benefits via different teaching plans and school policies, implementations of digital tools often apparently fail to consider the needs of the students

and teachers trying to use those tools. This disregard for the main users' interests and needs, along with teachers' and students' lack of appreciation for the potential benefits of digital technologies, could explain both the continuing prevalence of traditional school practices and school resistance to the use of digital tools. Yet the predominance of digital writing (as opposed to mechanical writing, the main tools of which are pencils, pens, typewriters, and even the first computers) as well as the transformation of printed texts themselves to digital formats have, to some extent, shifted the locus for learning from the classroom and library to the digital world. In the process, new spaces and forms of interaction have been created.

Hence, the term "ethnography," while still maintaining its original methodological roots, has had to expand in meaning to include digital technologies. The descriptive narrative writing that characterizes ethnography can therefore now embrace new formats, including digital ones. This development also changes how readers in a technological society understand and acquire knowledge.

Ethnography and microethnography

This section describes the ethnographic and microethnographic approaches I have used over the last three decades (Mattos, 1984, 1992, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012), methods which have been strongly influenced by the work of Frederick Erickson. Ethnography has been used in educational research mainly to allow research participants to express their views. In addition to giving voice to students, teachers, and school staff, however, educational researchers also need to listen critically and reflectively to the participants, especially to students, in order to obtain from them data that sensitively renders their perceptions about their worlds. Ethnography thus requires its researchers to have keen eyes, a commitment to strict procedures, and an ability to derive and share socially relevant scientific work.

Ethnographers seek to be more than research designers; they might, for instance, intend that their acts of researching become scientific paradigms with epistemological and scientific contours. Within the ethnographic framework, this article intends to expand

the understanding of how microethnographic data collection and analysis can function as strategies that use tools such as audio/video, film-making, and analytical software, as well as the traditional non-digital tools of ethnography that Erickson and many other school ethnographers have been successfully applying for over 30 years in their innovative ethnographic work in education. Certainly, the traditional tools of ethnography can continue to serve researchers who want also to build knowledge toward a sensitive use of digital/virtual technology in collecting data involving human interactions.

Microethnography originated in the challenges experienced by ethnographers trying to analyze discourse (Erickson, 1982, 1986, 1996) and content (Bardin, 2006). Researchers realized that in order to avoid misinterpreting the events described by research participants, they had to examine the interactive process of speaking itself. According to Erickson (1982, 1986, 2006), Bateson (1972), and Mead (1982), the microanalysis of interaction may follow any of the following six approaches: 1) context analysis; 2) discursive analysis of communication; 3) interactional organizational analysis of conversation (Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1974); 4) self-presentation analysis in the workplace (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1981); 5) conversational analysis, which was developed in the 1990s by several researchers in ethnography; and 6) the structuralist and post-structuralist approaches represented by Bourdieu (1977), Habermas (1984), Foucault (1979), and Bakhtin (1981), important interpreters of the teacher-student relationship as a microcosm of society's asymmetrical power relations. These forms of analysis account for the development of active reflectivity among ethnographers and also help them to better understand and interpret participants' voices during the data collection and analysis processes.

Combining digital tools (digital recording, iPads, online communication, etc.) and traditional tools such as long-term participant observation and open interviews, my research group and I (Castro & Mattos, 2011; Mattos & Castro, 2012; Mourão, 2011) have been guided in our microethnography by the traditional principles and objectives of ethnographic research that I articulated previously (2001): that data collection and analysis should combine traditional emphases – spending considerable time in the field and featuring

subjects' voices when interpreting data – with new techniques like describing data using dense narratives and digital technology.

While it is important to emphasize that the costs and constraints of any ethnographic research affect the scope of its findings, the use of audio and video recorders and other digital technologies (Mattos, 2012) is, on a cost-benefit basis, worth the expense for the researcher. These tools help to produce recursiveness, and the recursiveness of an event contributes greatly to the validity and reliability of analysis. Nevertheless, using digital devices involves some risks, including the (de)contextualization of data when it is removed from the context of participant observation, and difficulties in data triangulation that limit the use of various instruments. If, on the one hand, digital technology allows the researcher an extended presence in the field, on the other hand it restricts his or her view to the data thus featured in the foreground. Face-to-face interaction therefore remains the most direct source of data collection. In terms of the microethnography of interaction, we have found holistic ethnography to be effective. Evelyn Jacob (1987) explained that by focusing on beliefs and practices, the holistic ethnographer is able to describe, in whole or in part, a culture, a community, or a group. Thus, the singularities of the group's actions contribute to a unified understanding of their actions in general.

Holistic ethnography, according to Jacob (1987), had its origins in the works of Boas (1889) and Malinowski (1922). Jacob saw the two authors not only as contributing to traditional ethnography, but in their holistic ethnography as also setting a benchmark in the use of image and sound in ethnography generally. In holistic ethnography, the core concept of culture includes studies of behavior patterns which are understood as “norms,” systems that define what something is; what it can be; how it is felt; what it can do; and how it will be done (Goodenough, 1971). These norms are seen in the group's conformity and are used in analyzing predictability in social life, without, however, considering deterministic behaviors (Barrett, 1984).

Holistic ethnography assumes that aspects of culture are fundamental to an understanding of life in society. These aspects include social organization, economic and family structures, religion, political practices, rituals, patterns of acculturation, and ritualized

behavior (Pelto, 1970). Holistic ethnography also assumes that these cultural features form a single, unified set of interdependent parts (Mead, 1970). Thus, Pelto's and Mead's studies help researchers to describe, analyze, and understand the culture of a group as a unique whole. Although the techniques used in holistic ethnography can vary, its researchers inevitably employ certain basic principles, as Malinowski (1922) pointed out: they *a*) gather empirical evidence directly by using participant observation and other tools; *b*) become involved in the culture of those being studied; *c*) make efforts to document the views of these participants, preferably through their complete statements; *d*) collect a wide range of data using a variety of research tools; and *e*) analyze that data qualitatively.

Holistic ethnography, according to Lutz (1981), is intended to identify the overall social system to which participants belong by studying actions, investigated in the particular context in which those people produce them, and interactive relationships, as interpreted and explained by those involved in those relationships. Ethnographers taking this approach interact and organize themselves collaboratively and naturally with the participants in their studies. Thus researchers take part in the routines of those being researched, watching, listening, and asking questions connected to the subject of the investigation, and then relating the resulting data comprehensively to the research issue.

The main contribution of holistic ethnography to the micro-ethnography of interaction lies in its representativeness, the ability of holistic ethnography to capture a single event in both its particularity and its global sense. The consequence of this approach is a greater understanding of a social network not only as a social event but also as a particular way in which an individual tries to belong to a social environment.

At this point, one may ask how Frederick Erickson's and Erving Goffman's work can contribute to digital ethnography. First, researchers using digital technology in virtually situated encounters can ask the same questions that these two pioneers used to interpret and analyse face-to-face conversations. For example, how are pauses used? What type of unwritten words can the persons involved read? Is theirs a commonly-spoken language, or a particular set of words used

only by them or a group to communicate their feelings and ideas? And how does this form of communication fit into the “regular” form of communication used within the environment in which the people interacting live?

Erickson used microethnographic images to study interpretations of interaction, asserting that by listening and watching a particular scene or event, researchers may capture the unique quality of that interaction. For instance, during interactions among students or between students and their teacher in class, he recorded individuals’ body language and gestural cues by filming an event and then focusing on a particular feature, such as a hand gesture, the nod of a head, or the amount of time that elapsed between the teacher’s question and children’s answers. In this way, Erickson combined a close focus on a particular behavior with his search for patterns of meaning for those involved in the interaction (Erickson, 1996).

While Goffman saw interactions as being constructed in society at large, he also explained that there is an *interactional order* by which the preconceived ideas that originate in society influence how individuals interpret scenes and events. Goffman (1959, 1961) investigated differences in perception of gender among men and women. He used photos of males and females dressed to portray commonly-attributed social roles in American society. He sliced the photos of each person into three parts and asked participants to identify them by gender. The majority of the participants did so according to preconceptions about social roles for females and males, regardless of the kinds of professions the photos represented. Goffman argued that his research showed evidence of institutions’ reflexivity in the maintaining of roles for social conduct, for order in behavior, and therefore for certain social interactional patterns.

Goffman also asserted that the order and meaning of an interaction has an independent character that emerges from its constraints. This character reflects the consistent foundation of the participants’ commitment to shared practices. Those practices belong to and are shaped by the interaction order per se, rather than having been imposed on the interactions either by institutions and the corresponding inequalities of the status quo, or by individual

inclination. For Goffman, “the workings of the interactional order can easily be viewed as the consequence of systems of enabling conventions, in the sense of the ground rules of a game” (Goffman, 1983, p. 5).

Goffman’s research notions of interactional order and social reflexivity in interactions can also be used in digital ethnography, for instance to anticipate or to predict the form of interaction within a certain group in a particular environment at a particular time. For example, in August 2013 in Brazil, Facebook’s social network was used for one of the largest political mobilizations among “ordinary Brazilian citizens” in recent years. The event surprised and enormously embarrassed the federal government. The event was a small increase (0,20 Reais) in public transportation costs, a change that the government clearly expected the people to accept with their customary patience and passivity. The unusual public response that actually occurred can be analysed using the methodologies of both authors mentioned here.

Goffman’s approach would suggest that the institutional reflexivity among Brazilian citizens made it feasible for the government to predict that the change would be accepted peacefully by the general population as a necessary measure, an *institutional order* established according to social standards (Goffman, 1967). However, the public’s overall perception of the event was changed through Facebook, which created a new pattern of behavior and new *institutional order* that was accepted by millions of Brazilians sharing political ideas virtually, outside of controlling traditional social institutions. In this event, Facebook became the new institution articulating a new order.

Erickson’s approach to interactional communication and interpretation also sheds light on this event. The views of ordinary Brazilian citizens using Facebook to discuss the transportation price increase changed; reading and seeing others’ reactions and thoughts through virtual interactions, people became aware of their power to organize socially in opposition to “political order.” The result was their unpredictable reaction to the government announcement.

Clearly, researchers should consider Erickson’s and Goffman’s approaches to analysis when using digital tools as well as when relying

on traditional face-to-face methods. While the technology may change, people's reactions during personal encounters still are based on their conventional conversational expectations for exchanges on the topics that matter to them.

Final considerations

Has this article achieved its original goal, to develop a social and educational sensibility for digital culture among students, researchers, and teachers? The task of completely clarifying the potential for digital ethnography in the ethnography of education is one that will be accomplished on a practical level eventually, rather than a theoretical one immediately. However, this article does represent an initial effort to show the usefulness of digital ethnography as a research approach. The original question here may also continue to shape discussions about whether or not digital ethnography will be undermined, as ethnography in education has been, not only by those who initially doubted the power of visual tools to develop good ethnography, but also by those who still do not acknowledge ethnography's contributions to the field of education.

This article has explored the potential role and importance to educational researchers of digital ethnography. It has also alerted new researchers in education to how digital ethnography has been successfully used in other fields. Finally, it has linked old concepts of ethnography to new ones. In so doing, this article has proposed a culturally sensitive notion of how the new assets of digital ethnography can assist researchers in building on the legacy of traditional ethnographic tools and concepts.

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