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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 system¹ (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).

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*.

²The 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. *Ethics* 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 abductive³ (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

³The “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

QUESTION	SHORT ANSWER
WHEN?	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)..
WHO?	The subjects involved in such investigation may be groups or communities that share a blended training context or a blended professional space.
WHY?	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 <i>et al.</i> , 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).
WHERE?	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.
HOW?	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).

These basic questions allow us to have a view of the road ahead and explore tools to apply or develop during the entire investigation.

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