

Chapter 17

Cyber–Ethnography: The Emerging Research Approach for 21st Century Research Investigation

Elizabeth Keeley-Browne
Oxford Brookes University, UK

ABSTRACT

As the use of technology in teaching and learning grows at a pace a new research approach is gaining in popularity among student researchers and academics. This article describes the development of cyber-ethnography as a research tool, identifies its use as a research method and provides summary to a research project that examines interaction between lecturers and learners engaged on a Masters degree in Education delivered on-line. Drawing on the benefits provided by cyber-ethnography as a research tool, new perspectives on the student learning experience are identified and explored. The research provides insight into the experience of staff and students alike. The course specific research findings are discussed and the process of researching in virtual space is evaluated. The findings identify advantages to the learner when asynchronous communication provides time for reflection and considered response. Further advantages are identified in the opportunity to consult across the globe on issues of practice. The creation of communities of personal support networks that reach beyond the considerations of the course are identified and assessed. Disadvantages are identified with the technology itself and associated issues of access, equity and support. Recommendations arising from the research are for greater focus on the role of the tutor in virtual learning situations with consideration given to the time commitment required of lecturing staff. Evaluation of the research methodology highlights the need for a clearer definition of cyber ethnography, greater understanding of the social worlds inhabited in cyberspace and

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Ethnography always has been adaptive, and ethnographers always have explored myriad cultural connections, but sometimes we risk forgetting these facts.—Christine Hinewww.openanthropology.org/ANTH498/

WHAT IS CYBER-ETHNOGRAPHY?

Cyber-ethnology is a new research methodology located within an interpretive research paradigm, gaining momentum in use and credibility in reputation. With its routes in 'ethnography', as part of the social science branch of anthropology, the focus is on the study of mankind and its cultures. Cyber-ethnography as a research methodology is part of the move to reconceptualise the traditional notion of 'the field' as adopted by ethnographers. In cyberspace, the boundaries of the observed field are both virtual and free from location in place and geography. As people conduct more activities online and leave digital tracks (pictures, blogs, emails, and such), researchers have begun to study human behaviour in cyberspace. Cyber-ethnographers participate in and observe blogs, web sites, and chat rooms. They analyse how people form social networks or groups online and establish cultural identity.

When applied to interrogate the developing use of technology as a means of teaching and learning, cyber-ethnography permits the investigation of the social and cultural conditions that best promote learner engagement. Through cyber-ethnography we can explore how digital technologies support the needs, abilities, aspirations and circumstances of learners and learning communities. The digital world is massive producing a digital discourse of blogs, wikis, texting, instant messaging, internet art, video games, virtual worlds, websites, emails, podcasting, hypertext fiction and graphical user interfaces.

Cyber-ethnography permits the exploration of the conditions of the technological environments most likely to improve productivity of practitioner and learner time, thus revealing how

collaborative learning environments are best utilized. It provides evidence-informed analysis of the benefits and roots of personalisation of learning through technology across the life course. Through cyber-ethnograph we can explore how digital technologies can help to support the needs, abilities, aspirations and circumstances of learners and learning communities. In addition Cyber-ethnography enables the exploration of the social support networks that connect learners to learn where, when and with whom they wish. It gives easy access to personal learning environments and offers culturally, educational and psychologically appropriate tools, resources and support for their learning.

Technology is now a common aspect of learning and everyday life. In 2005 UK research revealed that 68% of 15 year olds report using computers frequently for school work with larger numbers routinely using ICT for entertainment and communication. Estimates in May 2005 by Nielsen/NetRatings indicate there are 455 million inhabitants of the 'digital universe' who spend roughly 26.5 hours per month of their time at home connected to the Internet.

In addition there has been a rapid increase in all education sectors in the provision and use of technology to support learners. Since 2002 the use of subject specific software in schools has more than trebled. In Further Education there has been a 15% growth each year in the number of colleges delivering a broad range of activities through learning platforms. Nine in every ten institutions report delivering substantial amounts of teaching material in this way (www.dti.gov.uk/innovation/technologystrategy/tsb/index/html)

The Ubiquitous Use of Technology

The research takes inspiration from the global phenomena of 'emergence', the internet domination of interactive, self-evolving non-hierarchical structures. Johnson (2001) claims such structures develop self-sustaining intelligence through user

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