Coventry
University

Coventry University Repository for the Virtual Environment (CURVE)

http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open

Sue Rivers; Virtual auto-ethnography: exploring the boundaries of student experience or bordering on self-indulgence?

Coventry University, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: sue.rivers@coventry.ac.uk

Keywords & Précis:

virtual auto-ethnography	student experience	methodology

This paper examines the value of virtual auto-ethnography (being an online student/researcher) as a way of exploring the student experience of online learning. The paper explores the benefits and challenges of using this methodology and concludes that this is a valuable way of increasing our understanding of the student experience.

Short biography of the author:

Dr Sue Rivers is Acting Dean of the School of Lifelong Learning at Coventry University. She is a Barrister, Chartered Surveyor and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research interests are centred on the student experience of learning. Her Doctorate in Education was successfully completed at the University of Sheffield in 2008.

Full Paper:

Virtual Auto-Ethnography: Exploring the boundaries of student experience or bordering on self-indulgence?

Abstract

This paper examines the value of being an online student/researcher, as a way of exploring the student experience of online learning. The study's virtual auto-ethnographic approach, in which the researcher experienced online learning first-hand as a student, aimed to put the learner's perspective at the centre of the research. The research examined an online programme for educational professionals who were, or would be, implementing e-learning in their institutions in the United Kingdom. Its focus was a series of online collaborative discussions about aspects of e-learning. The particular issues arising from this methodology are examined, including the benefits and challenges. The conclusion is that there are ethical issues which must always be addressed in pursuing this methodology but that this is a useful and valuable way of increasing our understanding of the student experience.

1. Introduction

There is much emphasis on student-centred approaches to learning, and the student experience is high on political and institutional policy agendas. This doctoral research used virtual auto-ethnography to explore the experience of a student/researcher who studied an online learning programme *about* online learning. The research questions were: how and what do people learn through online "conversations" and what is the significance for learning of (a) online "lurking" and (b) the use of metaphor in online "conversations".

The aim of this paper is to discuss the potential of using virtual auto-ethnography to explore the student experience of online learning. The paper gives details of the researched programme and what was entailed in the methodology, then discusses some of the benefits and challenges of this approach.

2. Background

Students on the researched programme were educational professionals implementing e-learning projects in their institutions. The programme was available worldwide, but, in the cohort studied, all students came from the United Kingdom. The 9-month programme was at honours degree level (Level 6). Students had either previously completed an online programme or had equivalent e-learning experience. The researcher was a fully active student on this programme and simultaneously researched it.

The programme used minimal online learning materials and the main focus was on seven tutor-facilitated asynchronous conferences. There were originally seven students in the cohort but one withdrew, leaving three women and three men; there was one male tutor. The programme used proprietary computer conferencing including a discussion board and a separate social area. Students were required at minimum to post one message per month and to lead one conference. The discussions were about e-learning, with specific topics chosen by each conference leader. Students were required to keep a peer-reviewed log recording progress on their implementation project. Assessment was by portfolio.

3. Virtual auto-ethnography

3.1 Definitions

Ethnography is a way of studying cultures in their natural state by participating in peoples' daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1).

'Virtual ethnography' indicates that fieldwork was conducted online. A virtual ethnography can be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it (Hine 2000: 8). The ethnography of the Internet does not involve physical travel, or face-to-face contact with the other subjects of the study, but the ethnographer is still uniquely placed to give an account of the field site, based on their experience of it and their interaction with it (*ibid.*: 45–6).

Auto-ethnography has been defined as:

> An autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural… autoethnographers gaze first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focussing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward exposing a vulnerable self… (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739).

In this context, auto-ethnography refers to the fact that I enrolled on the researched programme in order to experience this learning from the perspective of myself as a student and that, in writing up my thesis, I set this experience in the context of various other educational experiences I have had in my life.

3.2 What was involved?

I participated fully in the online programme researched, including taking the assessment. I took part in all online conferences, posting messages either of my own accord or in response to postings made by others. I also led a conference. In classic anthropological ethnographic studies (such as Malinowski, 1922) the researcher is a stranger who studies a "foreign" culture by observing and taking part in its rituals with the aim of "making the strange familiar". This is often referred to as "participant observation". However, I used the term "participant *participation*" for my approach in order to emphasize the active role I played in the researched programme.

My methods included interviewing the tutor and my fellow-students (apart from one who had withdrawn from the programme and one who could not be contacted). In keeping with my virtual auto-ethnographic approach, I felt it was important for my voice as a student, rather than just as a researcher, to be heard, and I therefore arranged be interviewed myself. It felt democratic and

equitable: otherwise I would have been the only student who took part in the conferencing and completed the programme who was not interviewed. It also allowed me time for reflection and fitted in with the need for me to make sense of what had happened.

My thesis itself was mainly written in the first person but included a prologue in the form of a short story in the third person. The prologue relates real events, educational experiences that happened but expressed as a story, in the style of an ethnographic novel. It provides an autobiographical account of some of the defining educational experiences of my life as a personal context for the thesis. It also introduces two key questions (which became research questions) which have been important in my life: how and what do people learn?

> In September 1962 a small girl approached the Victorian infants' school building… After a morning devoted to the basics of English… the girl looked forward to a more stimulating, more challenging afternoon… The afternoon began with the form teacher opening a large cupboard… crammed full of toys… The girl could not hide her astonishment and disappointment… the teacher asked her, quite insistently, why she looked so dismayed. She replied, honestly, "I came here to learn, not to play." The teacher… took out a blue and brown wooden 12-inch ruler and hit her several times across her small, white outstretched hands… So ended the first lesson: but what was learned, and how?
> (Rivers 2008: 7)

3.3 Rationale and justification

Early research into online learning was often conducted from a teacher's perspective (for example, Henri 1992, Garrison and Anderson 2003). Despite the movement towards acknowledging the active role of students in learning (such as Dewey 1897 and 1916, Vygotsky 1986, Piaget 1928, 1959, 1969 and 1971) and thus towards student-centred learning (Laurillard 2002) there appeared to be further room for expressing the student's voice and for research which took the learner's perspective, putting the learner's experience at the centre of the research (Goodyear *et al*. 2005, Light and Light 1999). One way to do this in my research was to experience online learning first-hand as a student and to pursue the idea of the student as researcher.

Ethnography is well-established within educational settings and is acknowledged as an appropriate approach for social scientific research of the online world (Kendall 1999: 57). There are precedents for this in important studies of cyberspace (such as Turkle 1995, Hine 2000). My primary object was to collect data that would convey the subjective reality and lived experience of this particular group of student/educators (Pole and Morrison 2003). As Hammersley (1992: 43–4) points out, by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people in their ordinary lives, we can understand their behaviours more accurately than by any other approach.

Ethnography was appropriate to address my first research question (about how people learn online). As Steinberg and Kincheloe (1998: 2–3) put it, students as researchers gain new ways of knowing and producing knowledge (power literacy and critical literacy) that challenge the commonsense views of reality with which most individuals have grown so comfortable. The anthropological roots of ethnography made it particularly appropriate for my second research question, about the significance for learning of online lurking, as this has cultural overtones.

There has been a move away from strongly authored narratives in ethnography (Atkinson and Coffey 1995). More modern writing styles make the author visible and bring the perspectives of all participants to the foreground (Hertz 1997). Mine belongs to the genre of narrative ethnographies, in that I included my own experiences in the text (Tedlock 2000: 460). My fieldwork was concerned with my own experiences as well as those of the other learners. It may be more common, if not better practice, to separate the narratives of the field and the self. However, Atkinson (1990) feels that the two can be intertwined without adversely affecting the purity or conviction of the text. It is a way of giving the researcher a voice and acknowledges that all ethnographic writing is to some extent autobiographical (Coffey 1999: 119). Recent trends have been to locate the self more centrally not just in the fieldwork but in the analysis and the written account (*ibid.*: 125).

I was enrolled on the programme as a learner; it was not possible or, arguably, desirable, for me to adopt the model of stranger or peripheral observer in my research. I was actively contributing to creating the online culture; there was no question of distancing myself from it:

> I really felt that that I lived in that world; that was my world. I felt confident enough to put up messages which… I was not totally sure what the reaction would be… Almost like when you come in from work and you need someone or somewhere to offload what has happened in the day and you tend to do that to people who are close to you, not necessarily your husband or friends but someone you feel comfortable with, even your neighbours… or your staff room…
> (Sue, interview 4.3).

4. Boundaries and borders

4.1 Exploring the boundaries

I was able to experience first-hand what it is like to be an online student and to engage in this in a highly reflective way (Markham 1998). I was both active and visible; as Hine (2000: 23) points out, making the shift from analysis of passive discourse to being an active participant in its creation allows for a deeper sense of understanding of meaning creation. Instead of being a detached and invisible analyst, the ethnographer becomes visible and active within the field setting.

Learning and emotion are closely related and students invest emotional as well as financial capital in their learning. By active participation I had a deeper emotional engagement than a researcher would get by simply analysing transcripts of a programme s/he had not been part of. For example, at one point I received an email from the tutor informing me that I was not contributing enough. I was extremely upset and angered by the tone and content of this email but the effect was that I learned to increase my contributions:

> I tried to do a short message, very general not too wonderful. I felt better putting something on. A few hours later the same day I put another message on. I felt the tone of the email from tutor was affecting me – the quantity of my contributions went into a frenzy of putting as much on as I possibly can…
> (Sue, interview).

I learned to be aware of the emotions of others and how these could be roused by seemingly innocuous choice of words:

> Websites with all the flash etc would be very nice if I had time to play but mostly I just want to get to the point!
> (Sue, posting 7.2.5).

> Flash, etc has its place and it is not "to play" but generally Flash is employed badly or just because they can.
> (Male 3, posting 7.2.6).

> Thanks for those points… Having read what you say I have a feeling that I'd like to actually see some examples. Do you have any examples of good and bad use of technology that we could all look at…?
> (Sue, posting 7.2.7).

I had challenged the status of "Flash" by associating it with play. The response (which was typed in Bold font style) was to refute my claim by making a statement that brooked no contradiction and seemed designed to end further discussion on this issue. I was aware of the possible anger here and diffused the situation by saying thanks and turning the conversation back onto the possible applications for learning.

I originally trained to use the computer programme NVivo for data analysis but abandoned this as it moved me too far away from my data and the actual experiences and emotions of being a learner/researcher. Instead I immersed myself in my data, analysed and re-analysed this in the light of my research questions. I was able to capitalize on the fact that I was present and took part in the online conferences from which much of the data were derived. It was a real advantage to be able to

link threads from different conferences just because I had taken part and knew who had said what and when. I was able to form my own interpretation of what was going on and then compare this with established theories derived from the literature.

4.2 Issues and challenges

Identity

I was registered on this programme and took the full assessment along with my fellow students. It is important to stress that I was not a double agent content to be a member until I had got my data but then happy to depart (Tedlock 2000). However, a possible result was the potential for developing a blurring of identity: I acted online variously as student, educator, manager or researcher.

I acknowledge that being a researcher added to my motivation as a student. I was sometimes conscious of trying to encourage people to contribute. One example was when I used a rather shocking headline ("Car Crash due to Joyriders") which I hoped would engage people and encourage them to post. I was a frustrated student wanting others to participate in the discussions but conscious that anything I did was also part of my research. Coffey (1999: 22–3) acknowledges this to an extent, suggesting that oversimplification of the "ethnographic stranger" may be misleading and may render mute the ethnographic process.

Self-indulgent?

A key focus of my research was the learner's experience of online education, with myself as one of the learners. I did not just want to learn how others learn; I wanted to know and reflect on how I learned: a kind of auto-metacognition. Lofland and Lofland (1995) acknowledge that fieldwork is likely to involve a topic you care enough about to study but nevertheless caution the researcher against what might amount to "autobiographical sociology", or which might give rise to criticism as being self-indulgent, narcissist, exhibitionist or just plain uninteresting.

Coffey (1999: 5) suggests that if we simply see the "self" in fieldwork in terms of getting the job done we may ignore that the notion of self includes an emotional as well as a physical self. However, while Lofland and Lofland (1995) acknowledge that the best work in the field of sociology/social sciences is grounded in the biography of its author(s), they do not encourage researchers to write themselves into the resulting product. In my case my research is openly auto-biographical and I would justify this in stating that this research and thesis are not just theoretically but actually and tangibly built on the basis of the knowledge and experience(s) I have had in education so far.

Ethics

My position and identity as both researcher and participant in the programme led to some complex ethical issues. Whilst I was comfortable with wearing a number of different hats (such as student, teacher, lawyer, manager and researcher) during the programme and when conducting the interviews, it became clear that this was confusing for others. For me these were all simply different aspects of myself but my fellow students saw me as a fully involved student (with views and opinions to discuss freely) rather than a neutral researcher:

> I tried to form an impression of what people were like. I did with you. I saw people walking down the corridor and I thought "No that can't be her". You're not quite what I thought. I was thinking you would be more robust and more opinionated… 'cos on the [discussion board] you were more opinionated.
> (Male 3, interview, 9.9).

I therefore revised my interview style from detached questioning (researcher), as in my original research design, to discussion (student). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 265) put it, participants may forget that research is taking place once they come to know the ethnographer as a person, and it would be disruptive for the researcher continually to issue the equivalent of a police caution.

Conducting research of this kind inevitably raises issues around informed consent. From the outset I obtained permission from the providing institution and undertook to abide by the conditions it imposed on this, including obtaining the consent of my fellow students in the way that the institution prescribed. In addition, before each interview I explained more about my research and again sought

consent. Although my fellow students knew that I was a researcher and a student from the outset and consented, they (and I) did not know at the time exactly how I would interpret what was said and what happened or how I would write it up. A similar example is Burgess's study (1989) of school teachers which involved observing behaviour in the staff common room. He could not predict that racist remarks would be made during the course of a social gathering. Staff knew he was there to conduct research, but could not be told, at the time, how his notes would eventually be used since he, himself, did not know.

Eisenhart (2001) suggests that collaborative relationships between the researcher and the researched, and a commitment to representing multiple "voices", including the researcher's, is a good approach to dealing with the potential danger to others when intimate details of their lives are revealed in ethnographic accounts. In order to address this, I gave participants a voice by showing them extracts from the conference transcripts, enabling them to give their interpretation of them before I conducted the analysis.

5. Conclusions

One of the strengths of being a student/researcher was that it put the students at the centre of the study, enabling all learners' voices, including my own, to be heard. I had a deeper understanding of events than if I had simply analysed transcripts of conferences that I had not taken part in. This enabled me to go to the boundaries of the student experience being very much in touch with the culture of the group and experiencing first hand the emotions involved, not just the words, and knowing how it felt when certain things happened.

My methodology also enabled me to put myself in the centre of my research, via my persona as an online learner. I was able to fulfil my personal objective of finding out more about myself, particularly myself as a learner, and to put the thesis and the research into the context of myself as a lifelong learner.

Being both student and researcher gave rise to a number of ethical issues. Blurring of my identity led me to change the style of my interviews, for example. Obtaining informed consent was a particular issue but was overcome by my commitment to representing multiple "voices" and practical measures such as showing interviewees extracts from the conference transcripts.

Becoming a student/researcher may not be practical for all researchers because of the amount of time involved, and accessibility issues, but, if we are committed to improving the student experience, we should seek ways of overcoming the barriers to this valuable first hand experience of the student's perspective and virtual auto-ethnography may be one such way.

References

Atkinson, P. (1990) *The Ethnographic Imagination*. London: Routledge

Atkinson, P. and Coffey, A. (1995) "Realism and its Discontents: On the crisis of cultural representation in ethnographic texts." In Adam, B. and Allen, S. [eds] *Theorizing Culture: an Interdisciplinary Critique after Post-Modernism*. London: UCL Press: 41–57

Burgess, R. (1989) "Grey Areas: Ethical dilemmas in educational ethnography." In Burgess, R. [ed.] *The Ethics of Educational Research (Social Research and Educational Studies Series: 8).* London: Routledge Falmer: pp. 60–76

Coffey, A. (1999) *The Ethnographic Self, Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: Sage

Dewey, J. (1897) "My Pedagogic Creed." *The School Journal*, LIV (3), pp.77–80

Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan

Eisenhart, M. (2001) "Educational Ethnography Past, Present and Future: Ideas to think with." *Educational Researcher* 30 (8), pp.16–27

Ellis, C. and Bochner, A.P. (2000) 2nd edn. "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as subject." In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. [eds] *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage: pp.733–68

Garrison, D.R. and Anderson, T. (2003) *E-learning in the 21st Century: A framework for research and practice.* Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer

Goodyear, P., Jones, C., Arensio, M., Hodgson, V. and Steeples, C. (2005) "Networked Learning in Higher Education: Students' expectations and experiences." *Higher Education* 50, pp.473–508

Hammersley, M. (1992) *What's Wrong with Ethnography? Methodological explorations.* London: Routledge

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, A. (1995) 2nd edn. *Ethnography: Principles in practice.* London: Routledge

Henri, F. (1992) "Computer Conferencing and Content Analysis." In Kaye, A.R. [ed.] *Collaborative Learning Through Computer Conferencing: The Najaden Papers.* New York, Springer: pp.117–36

Hertz, R. (ed.) (1997) *Reflexivity and Voice*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

Hine, C. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography.* London: Sage

Kendall, L. (1999) "Recontextualizing 'Cyberspace': Methodological considerations for on-line research." In Jones, S. [ed.] *Doing Internet Research.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage: pp. 57–74

Laurillard, D. (2002) 2nd edn. *Rethinking University Teaching: A framework for the effective use of educational technology.* London: Routledge

Light, P. and Light, V. (1999) "Analysing Asynchronous Learning Interactions: Computer-mediated communication in a conventional undergraduate setting." In Littleton, K. and Light, P. [eds] *Learning with Computers: Analyzing Productive Interaction*. London: Routledge: pp. 62–178

Lofland , J. and Lofland, L.H. (1995) 3rd edn. *Analyzing Social Settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis.* Belmont, California: Wadsworth

Malinowski, B. (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul

Markham, A. (1998) *Life Online: Researching real experience in virtual space.* Walnut Creek: Altamira

Piaget, J. (1928) 3rd edn. *Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Piaget, J. (1959) *The Language and Thought of the Child.* trans. by Gabain, M. and Gabain, R. London: Routledge

Piaget, J. (1969) *The Mechanisms of Perception.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Piaget, J. (1971 reprint) *The Psychology of Intelligence*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Pole, C. and Morrison, M. (2003) *Ethnography for Education.* Maidenhead: Open University Press

Rivers, S. (2008) *Conversations and Silence: Learning by word of mouse?* Unpublished EdD Thesis, University of Sheffield

Steinberg, S.R. and Kincheloe, J.L. (1998) *Students as Researchers: Creating classrooms that matter*. London: Falmer Press

Tedlock, B. (2000) 2nd edn. "Ethnography and Ethnographic Representation." In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. [eds] *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage: pp.455–86

Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of the internet.* New York: Simon and Schuster

Vygotsky, L. (1986) *Thought and Language*. trans. by Kozulin, A. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press