Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Reconceptualising fieldwork in a netnography of an online community of English language teachers

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Netnography is an approach to studying online communities and cultures to arrive at an ethnographic understanding. Drawing on our own experiences and methodological choices in a netnography of a multi-site online community of practice of English language teachers, known as Webheads in Action, this article illustrates how ethnographic fieldwork practices change when carried out with communities that exist primarily online. Focusing on illustrative examples from our 10-month netnographic fieldwork data, we argue that concepts of 'the field, participant observation, interviews, and researcher survival skills' are experienced in fundamentally different ways in netnography as opposed to in-person ethnography, which calls for reconceptualisation of fieldwork practices in online communities because of the dynamics of online environments and the use of web-based technologies.

Keywords: netnography; online ethnography; online fieldwork; community of practice

Introduction

Ethnography is a qualitative approach that focuses on studying a culture-sharing group in order to discover shared patterns of beliefs, values, and behaviours among its members (Creswell 2007). The assumption that guides ethnographic inquiry is that 'any group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve a culture' (Patton 2002, 81), and ethnographers study these people's everyday life and experiences focusing on culture (Anderson-Levitt 2006; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Whereas cultures are previously understood as geographically bound groups, 'geography can no longer be the defining framework for culture' (boyd 2009, 27), as people construct cultures and communities on the Internet through computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies. This possibility of interacting with others via CMC technologies on the Internet has also enabled teachers to connect with other teachers and educators, and form communities online, such as Classroom 2.0 (http://www.classroom20.com/), Tapped-In (http://www.tappedin.org) or TeachBook (http://teachbook.com/), to name a few.

These online communities open up opportunities for researchers to study new types of culture-building and culture-sharing groups, which calls for an adaptation of in-person ethnographic fieldwork. Various terms, such as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000), 'online ethnography' (Markham 1998, 2005) and 'netnography' (Kozinets 1998, 2002, 2010) (among others), have been used to describe this adapted

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ethnographic approach. Kozinets (1998) initially defined netnography as 'an interpretive method to investigate the consumer behaviour of cultures and communities present on the Internet' (366) introducing it as an online methodology particularly for marketing and consumer research. Further developed as a methodology to study online communities to arrive at an ethnographic understanding of their cultures, netnography has also been employed in other disciplines, such as sociology, economics and management (Bengry-Howell et al. 2011). Regardless, its use in educational research with online educational communities is still quite rare.

In this paper, based on our fieldwork experiences and methodological choices in a larger netnographic study that we conducted with a global online community of English language teachers, namely Webheads in Action (WiA), we argue that some fundamental ethnographic fieldwork practices are reshaped when ethnography is conducted with an online community rather than a geographically-bound one. Before we develop and illustrate our arguments, we first provide an overview of WiA and our larger netnography because it enables to contextualise our discussion and experiences. Then, through our specific experiences, and excerpts and examples from our netnographic fieldwork data, we illustrate how notions of the field, participant observation, observational versus archival data, interviews and researcher skills bear meanings different from in-person ethnographic field methods. Therefore, this paper focuses on the concept of netnography, and the methodological choices and practices that would be unique to netnography due to the nature of online fieldwork mediated through CMC technologies.

WiA and our netnography

The community of our larger netnography is named WiA, an online community of practice (CoP) (Wenger 1998) composed of English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) professionals (teachers, teacher educators, teacher candidates, etc.) from around the world. This community came together initially in 2002, in an online workshop organised by Vance Stevens, as part of the 2nd annual Electronic Village Online (EVO) sessions (http://evosessions.pbworks.com/) sponsored by Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section (CALL-IS) (Stevens 2007). The group in this online workshop gradually grew into a large global online CoP over the years, who continue to call themselves Webheads. They share, exchange and explore the pedagogical uses and applications of web-based communication tools in language teaching (d'Eca and Gonzalez 2006).

Webheads communicate primarily through a Yahoo Group email list created for the 2002 workshop, the evonline2002_webheads (the evonline2002, henceforth). However, they also interact across multiple online venues (e.g. social media, wikis, blogs), which makes WiA a multi-site online community. In addition to the email list, they have maintained a tradition of chatting online on Sundays at Tapped-In, an online workplace for education professionals (Schlager, Fusco, and Schank 2002). From mid-January to mid-February, they continue to offer an annual EVO workshop, now called *Becoming a Webhead* (BaW). These 5–6-week online workshops offer an opportunity for new members to become oriented towards the practice, values and members of WiA. Also, members follow a weekly syllabus; each

week they read, experience and complete tasks on the pedagogical uses of a CMC technology (e.g. wikis, blogs and voice-over Internet protocol (VoIP)) for language teaching purposes. At the end, they 'graduate' as Webheads, and are invited to register with the evonline2002 Yahoo Group.

As newer technologies emerge, the CMC technologies and virtual spaces that Webheads use continue to expand. Although in the past, the group relied primarily upon Yahoo Groups, Yahoo Messenger and Tapped-In, they are currently making use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL), and various Web 2.0 technologies as their online venues for interacting. They not only use these tools to interact with each other, but also to collaborate, experiment with and explore their pedagogical uses.

From 2005 to 2009, Webheads collaboratively organised a bi-annual online conference, Webheads in Action Online Convergence (WIAOC), participation for which was free and took place completely online. All the content for the conference, from planning to the actual conference delivery, was voluntarily co-constructed and organised by Webheads using open-source Web 2.0 tools. In September 2010, these conferences were replaced by weekly Learning2gether events (http://learning2gether. pbworks.com). Since then, interested members have been meeting synchronously every Sunday on Blackboard Collaborate (previously Elluminate). Members are invited to add themselves to the available slots on the Learning2gether wiki if they wish to present or lead a discussion on some aspect of technology and language learning/teaching.

The main purpose of our larger netnography was to understand the culture of this global teacher CoP, which exists primarily online, over multiple sites on the Internet. Given that it is a unique online community with its long history, and multi-sited and practice-oriented nature, we aimed at exploring the community's culture focusing on main activities, practices and perspectives. Because WiA members interact and develop their collective practice through online means, the community, its culture and activities exist entirely online. Therefore, netnography was the most appropriate approach to utilise in our research.

In accordance with netnographic methodology, all the data collection procedures took place entirely online. Our data were based on a 12-month fieldwork through online participant observation, which included

- participation in the main events of the community (the annual BaW workshop, Learning2gether events and Sunday Tapped-In Chats);
- archived email communication in the evonline2002 email list;
- interviews with three moderators, the community founder and five members (interviews range from 30 to 90 minutes);
- reflective observational fieldnotes of observations, experiences and the technologies used in these events (e.g. observations of how the BaW workshop wiki is organised), as well as a subset of the email communications and archived events (such as previously organised WiAOC);
- and screenshots of observations to complement the fieldnotes.

In order to observe ethical procedures (Sveningsson 2004), we did not consider anonymity as a possible option, since this would be a type of identity deception (Garcia et al. 2009). Therefore, a website was created (https://sites.google.com/site/

wianetnography/) to give detailed information about the researcher and the study procedures, and shared with the WiA community.

Fieldwork in netnography vs. in-person ethnography

Netnography is a methodology that relies on participant observation that takes place online through a computer connected to the Internet, 'to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon' (Kozinets 2010, 60). According to Kozinets, what differs from in-person ethnography is the fact that all research in netnography is conducted entirely online through computer-mediated technologies, because the community under investigation exists completely online. Although in the past, the netnographic data would mainly constitute textual data consisting downloaded files of postings, chat logs and emails (Kozinets 1998), today's technology allows other types of data including multimodal texts, video and sound recordings, and data collection procedures through real-time multichannel interaction via synchronous CMC tools such as Skype and Blackboard Collaborate (Kozinets 2010; Salmons 2010).

Both in-person ethnographic research and netnography use participant observation as the main method of fieldwork. However, the nature of the fieldsite being online in the latter inevitably changes the nature of this participant observation, and the ways of collecting data (Kozinets 2010) in certain dimensions. In the next sections, in the light of our experiences with our netnography of WiA, we describe some of these dimensions and aspects in netnographic fieldwork that lead to new understandings of some fundamental ethnographic fieldwork practices when they are conducted in online contexts by means of CMC technologies. Specifically discussing five different issues with netnographic data collection procedures and illustrating them with our experiences (defining the field, participant observation, observational vs. archival data, online interviews and survival skills for a netnographer), we demonstrate these new ways of understanding the meaning of fieldwork in netnography as well as further adaptations needed with netnographies of multi-site online communities of educators.

Defining the field

In in-person ethnography, a community's geographical location helps determine the field boundaries. However, in netnography, field-sites can be diverse, because an online community can exist in a single site or multiple sites. A geographical location in ethnography, therefore, sometimes translates into a website, or a bulletin board or a forum in netnography, and the users of these online platforms form the community to be studied (Baym 2000; Correll 1995; Kozinets 2002). Additionally, virtual worlds such as SL and communities that use these virtual worlds as their interactional spaces could also be field-sites for netnographers (Kozinets 2010). For example, a researcher can study the culture of SL in and of itself, or the culture of a group or community that exists in SL. In online contexts, such single-site communities (with their resemblance to a single geographical location) can help researchers determine their boundaries. However, when the community to be investigated interacts over multiple venues (i.e. a multi-site community), determining the boundaries of the field by specifying only one site or platform may not give an accurate picture of the

culture of this community. In this case, the researcher needs to identify other ways of determining boundaries in netnography, and the 'field' may no longer be defined as an online site.

WiA is such a multi-site community, whose members interact, communicate and organize activities over multiple platforms via multiple CMC technologies. Rather than one particular website or an online forum, what holds Webheads together as a community are its members, their activities and their practices. In other words, WiA is associated primarily with the group's shared practice, expertise and activities that focus on web-based technologies in language teaching. Because of this, previous familiarity with the community and our previously-defined research focus helped us identify the community's main activities and determine the field boundaries of our netnography according to these activities. In that sense, the 'field' in our netnography becomes the range of activities of this community. For example, in our netnography, the researcher (i.e. the first author) entered the field by taking the BaW online workshop, one of the main activities of the community. During the fieldwork, she also joined the other activities (e.g. Learning2gether events) organised by the community. When she needed to leave the field, she discontinued her engagement with the community's activities. As such, 'entering the field' meant as 'starting to engage in the community's activities' rather than logging in to an online site, while 'leaving the field' referred to 'disengagement' with these activities.

Therefore, in netnography with a multi-site online community, 'the field' and its boundaries may need to be reconceptualised, no longer as a website, an online forum or a chat room that would be analogous to a physical location, but rather to a set of practices and activities carried out over multiple online platforms.

The nature of participation in online participant observation

Both ethnographic and netnographic research are based on the broader method of participant observation, which necessitates the researcher to establish a participant role within the community observed (Atkinson and Hammersley 1998). Although what constitutes *participation* differs from one community to another, Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) identify varying levels of participation. According to them, *non-participation* occurs when the researcher learns about the culture outside the research setting, through media, documents or fiction, whereas *passive participation* happens when the researcher is physically present but observes the community like a bystander without interacting with the people. In that sense, participant observation method requires some degree of at least passive participation in in-person ethnographic research. *Moderate participation*, on the other hand, suggests that the researcher is identifiable as a researcher, and only occasionally interacts with the people. Both *active participation* and *complete participation* mean that the researcher is actively engaged and involved in almost all the activities of the community. What differentiates the two is the fact that the researcher is already a member of the community in the latter (e.g. a jazz musician studying jazz musicians), while in the former, the researcher becomes a member for research purposes (e.g. ethnographers who become a cab driver for a while to study cab drivers). Drawing on Adler and Adler's (1987) typology of membership roles, they argue that non-participation and passive participation do not require a membership role, while moderate, active

and complete participation require peripheral, active and full membership in the community, respectively.

On the other hand, these levels of participation and membership do not describe experiences of a netnographer thoroughly. For example, when studying an online community, a netnographer inevitably accesses the community and its culture from a distance (i.e. through his/her computer), which would coincide with *non-participation* in an in-person ethnographic fieldwork. Meanwhile, s/he needs to become a member of the community (i.e. register with the site) in order to have access to the community, which assigns a membership role to him/her. Using Dewalt and Dewalt's terms, then, in online participant observation, it is possible to assume a non-participant role with a full membership in the community, while this is not possible in offline participant observation. Similarly, in an interview in our netnography, a member defined a Webhead as 'somebody who is on that Yahoo Group [the evonline2002]' (Nancy, Interview, 30 October 2011), which identifies the researcher as a Webhead since she is a member of that Yahoo Group. Likewise, full membership may correspond to a complete participant observer in in-person ethnography. However, in netnography, even though the researcher is ascribed full membership, as was the case in our netnography, she may still maintain a passive or moderate participation as long as she does not engage in the activity and remain unobtrusive at a distance.

Another notion that bears different meanings in netnography and in-person ethnography is the notion of 'presence'. In an ethnographic fieldwork, being physically present in the community is a necessary condition for participant observation, because the researcher must be co-present in the community in order to be able to both participate and observe, and consequently, s/he is necessarily 'visible' to other community members. In netnography, however, the researcher is present in the online site immediately after s/he logs in to the site through his/her computer. However, if the researcher is not participating actively, or engaged in the community activities, others may not be aware that s/he is 'there'. In this sense, while in Dewalt and Dewalt's terms, non-participation occurs when the researcher is not co-present in the field, in netnography, it can still occur when the researcher is co-present. Similarly, while the ethnographer is automatically visible to others when s/he is present in the field, the netnographer needs to make an additional effort in order to be visible to the community by interacting with others, and becoming involved in the community's activities. For instance, Webheads archive their synchronous Learning2gether events, which allows the researcher to observe them later. Therefore, although logging in to the site and watching the recordings asynchronously would be sufficient in order to understand the characteristics of these activities, we chose to participate in some of them synchronously in order to balance visibility to the community. In that sense, in netnography, rather than simply the researcher's presence or membership in the community, it is his/her visibility to others who help define the boundary between non-participation and participation.

Likewise, in a multi-site online community, because the community spreads over multiple venues and platforms, the netnographer may need to negotiate the level of active participation to be maintained, by being an active participant in some events, while remaining more passive in others. For example, in our netnography, because the BaW workshop is one of the community's main activities and lasts only 5 weeks, we decided more active participation (i.e. joining and engaging in the activities) was necessary in order to 'experience' the workshop like a regular participant and gain an

insider (emic) perspective. On the other hand, because the email communication is continuous and it is easier to take over a conversation or lead a topic in the emails, we decided that remaining more passive in the emails would help keep a balance between a researcher role and full participation in the community. However, determining an appropriate level of participation may also necessitate previous engagement with the community. For instance, in our case, the researcher was introduced to Webheads and its practice in the BaW 2007 workshop. During that time, she actively contributed to community activities by being involved in discussions, sharing and creating content for the community. She then distanced herself from the community for three years before re-entering the field and becoming active in the role of a researcher. This previous engagement with the community helped us identify active membership and leadership roles, and typical participation patterns, which, in turn, helped balance an insider (emic) as well as an outsider (etic) perspective accordingly.

Observational vs. archival data in netnography

Observing is an act of watching. According to Dewalt and Dewalt (2002), in in-person ethnography, observation involves observing 'physical and social scenes' (70), as well as 'a representative set of activities and events' (76). In contrast, in netnography, since most of the activities are conducted through text-based communication, and settings involve webpages that are mainly textual, observation also involves 'watching text and images on a computer screen' (Garcia et al. 2009, 58). As a result, what constitutes 'observation' in netnography differs from in-person ethnography in that it involves extensive 'reading' and making meaning of textual communication in addition to watching the text and images. Because of this, while observation and archived data are clearly two separate phenomena in in-person ethnography, this distinction becomes blurred in netnography given the textual (and often archived) nature of what is observed. Along these lines, we believe that there are two types of netnographic data that blur the line between 'observational' and 'archival' in netnography: emails and recorded synchronous sessions.

At first sight, email communication appears to be a form of archival data since it is textual and can be downloaded and archived by the researcher (Kozinets 2010). However, in our netnography, we found that it can also be considered observational data. To illustrate, WiA mainly communicates through the Yahoo Group email list while they also create separate group email lists for each annual BaW workshops for communication between workshop participants. The former remains the main communication platform and has always been active since 2002, while the latter changes every year and gradually becomes inactive with the next year's workshop. Because the BaW email list is considered a part of the main BaW workshop 'event', we chose not to archive the BaW emails, but only 'observed' them, by reading the emails from time to time and summarising the email discussions in fieldnotes. This procedure was considered sufficient in order to understand the function of the BaW email lists within the main BaW workshops, because our research question explored the characteristics of the 'main' activities, and the BaW email list was not the main activity itself, but a tool (among others) used to carry out one of the main activities (i.e. BaW workshops). In contrast, the interaction in the main Yahoo Group email list was both 'observed' and 'archived' for further coding and analysis, since it is the

main communication activity for the WiA community, with an average of 5 email exchanges per day (and 143 per month) during our fieldwork. For this reason, it was considered a primary data source for participant observation and as one of the main activities of the community.

Complementary to participant observation, fieldnotes are also a crucial data source not only in in-person ethnography but also in netnography. Particularly when the online fieldsite is already publicly accessible, it represents the unique contribution of a netnographer since s/he adds 'valuable interpretive insight' into what is already publicly accessible on the Internet (Kozinets 2010, 113). Therefore, the netnographer takes fieldnotes of not only what is seen on the screen, but also his/her interpretations, and reflections derived from his/her lived experiences. However, when everything is archived and accessible, especially in the case of textual data (e.g. emails) that can be treated both as observational and as archival data, determining what to inscribe in the fieldnotes may pose challenges for the netnographer. Along these lines, for example, in our netnography, the content of our fieldnotes of emails varied depending on whether or not the emails were 'archived'. As can be seen from the following excerpts from our fieldnote data, when emails were both archived and observed (i.e. the emails in the main evonline2002 email list), the focus was more on the researcher's experiences, interpretations and reflections on the discussion in those emails rather than descriptions of the email interactions (in both excerpts, the researcher's experiences, interpretations and reflections are italicised for emphasis):

I'm looking at main email list recent digest. [Name] asks for a screencast tool. A member sends a link to a list of such resources. [Name] also replies back with a recommendation for Jing. *I'm familiar with Jing, but haven't used it myself before. I have used CamStudio for screencasting.* I clicked on the link to the list sent by one member. The list says "20 Free Screen Recording Tools for Creating Tutorials and Presentations". *I see CamStudio there as well. This list is a very comprehensive one with brief reviews for each too.* I look at what other tools there are quickly. *At the same time, I forgot this option. I can actually prepare screencasts for my students in my graduate class as well. For their technology-infused culture-teaching materials, I can show how to use some of the technology tools, by using a screen recording tool, as they seem to be struggling with it, and we don't have much time to go over each different tool in class.*

I see that Screenjelly says that you can share your screen recordings via Twitter and Facebook as well. *This sounds cool!* There is another one, called Webineria. It says that you can add your voice and edit the recorded file later. *I wonder how that happens. That's actually nice, because from my previous experience, I know that when you record and talk at the same time, there is usually unnecessary talk, and the recording could actually be half way shorter. I remember CamStudio's video quality was not good. I wonder how these options are in terms of video/visual quality.*

I'm now looking at Digest #3441. On March 9, [Name] writes about TESOL wiki and blog. She asks those who will participate in this year's convention to enter their info on the webheads wiki created for TESOL 2011. There is also a "Webheads & Friends" blog. She gives links to both in her email. *This seems to be a tradition now. I remember her creating a blog for the 2007 convention as well. I don't remember if there was a wiki by then, but [Name] certainly had created a blog for the convention people, and they were as if broadcasting from the convention. I didn't participate in the convention at that time, but was able to follow what's going on from that blog. She seems to have, intentionally or not, assumed that role for herself in the community.* I chose to click on the wiki first. [The fieldnotes that follow afterwards describe the blog]. (Fieldnotes, March 10, 2011)

As can be seen from this excerpt, about 60% of our fieldnotes included reflections, experiences and impressions, while about 40% summarises or describes the email communication observed. On the other hand, when the email communication was not the main activity of the community (i.e. BaW emails) and thus only observed but not archived for further analysis, the fieldnotes consisted of more detailed summaries or descriptions, but less reflection:

> I am looking at and reading today's emails on BaW email list. [Name] sent a tutorial for Tweetdeck in one of the emails. *It seems to be new to many people including the coordinators.* [Name] (one of the coordinators) says that she's going to put these instructions to the "Doubts" page. She also suggested her to write this tutorial previously; that's why, [Name] sent this email with instructions. Several other members sent their thanks to her in other emails. *I realize that I have not seen this "Doubts" page on the wiki before, so I decide to visit it today later.*
>
> There is another tool recommended by a participant, Symbaloo. I have not heard this tool before. It also seems to me that people tend to let others know about their achievements and others always respond with encouragement in these emails.
>
> *There are also out-of-the-syllabus activities taking place apparently.* From these emails, I see that several members have chatted about Tweetdeck last night, and together they explored this tool. Now many of the emails in today's digest are about Tweetdeck, and their experiences last night. *I feel impatient to explore and learn what it is.*
>
> I just saw a message from [Name], an Arab participant. She shares a video link with the group. The link is about current protests in Tunisia and Twitter. *I'm curious to see it.*
>
> Another tool, nicenet.org, is recommended with a brief review by a participant. The participant says that it is similar to Twiducate.
>
> A participant is sharing a widget she put on their department's website and asks others to visit it. Another participant comments that her students also like such widgets as well. Others also give feedback, so that she could check it. (Fieldnotes, 28 January 2011)

As opposed to the previous excerpt, this one includes about 30% of reflections, and it presents a summary of the emails since these emails were not archived. When emails are not considered a main activity and a separate detailed analysis is not intended of those emails, they are not archived but treated as observational data only. In these cases, summaries of a series of emails are inscribed in the fieldnotes as part of observations.

In addition to the emails, real-time multimodal interaction (e.g. webconferences) recorded and archived constitutes another type of data that can blur the line between observational and archival data in netnography. In our netnography, the weekly synchronous Learning2gether events conducted over Blackboard Collaborate (previously Elluminate) were recorded and archived on a wiki. Therefore, it was possible to participate in these events synchronously or view them asynchronously at a later time, which is also a common practice of the Webheads who cannot attend synchronously. In that case, the netnographer is both a participant and an observer in the event when s/he participates synchronously because s/he not only becomes visible to other participants but also engages in the discussion. However, when s/he instead watches the recorded event later asynchronously, although s/he does not participate, s/he still observes the event and people's interactions and actions from

the recording in a 'spectator or bystander' role (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002, 19), and takes fieldnotes based on his/her observations. In contrast, in in-person ethnography, video recordings would most likely be considered archival data, or documentations of an event in which the researcher was most likely a co-present participant during the time of the recording.

Additionally, with these synchronous and recorded sessions, the netnographer is engaged in observations of multichannel interactions that need to be considered in inscribing fieldnotes. In these cases, the netnographer needs to follow the written as well as spoken interaction. The following excerpt from our fieldnotes data further illustrates how observations of these sessions were inscribed in fieldnotes:

...The session is titled as "The Future of Learning in A Networked World"

[...] Vance – session leader. He introduces the participants and gives brief background information about each of them. [Name] and [Name] – are listed as moderators. *I guess because they are invited as guests previously by Vance, they are given moderator privileges during this session*. The other participants are [Name], [Name], [Name], and [Name]. [...][One of the moderators] is joining in from Australia. [...] Webtour is enabled, and it lets the participants to click on different pages on the screen at their own will. **On the chat window** at the same time, there is a bit of talk about Australia. [...] **On the whiteboard screen**, there are these items:

Technologies to watch Aust – NZ Horizon Report 2010

Mobile Internet Devices, eBooks – 1 year

Open content, Augmented reality – 2–3 years

Gesture-based computing, Visual data analysis – 4–5 years

I learn in this session that gesture-based computing refers to the touch-based devices, and devices that are controlled by physical activities, such as wii. [...]After a while, **[Name] joined the session** [...]. During the session, **participants are talking about Netstick**, something that you connect to your mobile provider to have access to the Internet I guess. I haven't used one myself, and I haven't seen one myself. Apparently, especially those participants who have to travel a lot, are more familiar with them. **They say** that they are available for purchase in computer stores, convenient for travelling, and you are just always connected. [...] Then **the discussion moves towards** the use of mobile devices in class. [...] They later discuss how in some countries social networking sites such as Facebook is blocked in school computers. **[Name] says – "this is the kind of think we are up against...This technology is everywhere but banned inside educational institutions".** I kind of agree with him. I don't like to forbid something that is widely used around the world in schools; [...] **On the chat window** [Name] also shares her opinion about the issue – as long as students are on task I would not care what they bring to class. (Fieldnotes, 20 May 2011)

As can be seen, fieldnotes consist of the actions including when a new participant joins the discussion and what is shared on the whiteboard, interactions through the chat window or microphone, and her own ideas and reflections on the session content.

Drawing on these examples, in an online community, the primary means of communication and community activities can provide both archival and observational data. The research questions and the characteristics of the community, then,

remain the determining factors in deciding what should be treated as archival and what as observational data, as well as how to inscribe fieldnotes about these textual and multimodal data.

The impact of medium of communication on interview dynamics

Interviewing in qualitative research is an essential method since it enables a researcher to 'understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 1). In face-to-face interviews, perhaps the only medium of communication that needs to be considered is the language of the interview, especially when the first language of the researcher and the interviewee is not the same. In online interviews, however, another important consideration is the type of CMC technology chosen by the researcher.

While synchronous textual communication, such as chat and instant messaging, can serve as a medium of conducting online interviews (Markham 1998; Salmons 2010), face-to-face online interviews are also possible with the use of a video-enabled VoIP such as Skype. The use of such technology enables the netnographer to make use of the social cues available in the interview context, and to get a sense of the participant's identity (ethnicity, gender, age, etc.). Although some of this information is retrievable or observable in textual communication, the dual channels (auditory and visual) provide richer contextual information and clues. Moreover, online interviews can now be conducted over multichannel online meeting spaces such as Blackboard Collaborate, which allows application sharing, two-way audio, text chat and a shared whiteboard at the same time (Salmons 2010).

There is no doubt that the nature of the CMC technology used in the interviews affects the interview dynamics in different ways. For example, Markham (1998) conducted her online interviews through text, and realised that mere textual communication without nonverbal cues affected how she presented herself and how she interpreted others. 'Online, I can't see the other person's face, hear their voice, or get any sense of who they are beyond the words I see scrolling up my own screen [. . .] I get to express myself as a writer, in writing, more than in any other aspect of my life' (71). In addition, she also admits that by conducting interviews via online chat, it is "difficult to manage the basic elements of conversation, such as taking turns at the appropriate time, nodding, or mm-hmm-ing . . ." (Markham 1998, 71).

Although new advances in new CMC technologies allow conducting real-time, face-to-face, multichannel interviews online (Salmons 2010), these technologies also impact interview dynamics. We further illustrate these differences by highlighting our experiences with the use of Skype, and the video-conferencing tool Blackboard Collaborate.

First of all, in our netnography, because the community members are technologically sophisticated, the choice of the VoIP to conduct interviews was a matter of 'conforming to the community norms' (Garcia et al. 2009) by selecting the common tools used in their regular communication and activities. As such, Skype was chosen as the tool to conduct the interviews because of its common use by Webheads.

Although Skype interviews enable video, not all participants were comfortable with activating their webcam during our interviews. One participant, Beren (a

pseudonym), explicitly stated in our preliminary chat on Skype prior to the interview that she prefers not to enable her webcam at that point because she was not in a good mood. Similarly, another participant, Amal (a pseudonym) indicated prior to the interview that she feels nervous when video is enabled, so the interview was conducted without the webcams activated. The fact that the videos were not enabled put more pressure on the netnographer to give oral cues of 'active listening' (with more frequent backchannel vocalisations such as 'mm-hmm' and 'okay'), whereas these verbal responses were replaced with more non-verbal indications of listening (e.g. nods and smiles) when videos were enabled.

Another dynamic affected in online video-enabled interviews is because of the notion of 'virtual eye contact' (Yuzer 2007). Eye contact can be understood differently over a VoIP because a webcam is usually placed on top of the screen, whereas the participant is seen in a window on the screen. In order to establish exact eye contact with the participant, the netnographer may need to look into the webcam, which does not allow him/her to see the interviewee. Similarly, if s/he wants to see the participant, s/he needs to look at the participant's video on the screen, which results in the eye contact being skewed. In our case, we found that looking directly at the webcam (instead of the video image of the interviewee on the screen) to be more distracting and less natural when conducting online interviews. It was more difficult to focus on what the participant was saying, and it was similar to just listening to the participant but focusing on somewhere else at the same time. Therefore, eye contact in VoIPs is clearly not the same as eye contact in face-to-face interviewing, and skewed, virtual eye contact seems to be treated as a natural dynamic in online interviewing.

Another particular aspect of online interviews that we conducted over VoIPs was the fact that all began with a few lines of text messages in the chat window before the actual call. In our case, for example, when the interview time came, instead of directly calling the participant, a quick greeting in the chat window to signal the beginning of the interview (such as 'Hi Amal!') was used as the first step. Once participant said 'Hi!', this indicated that she was actually 'there'. This quick exchange was followed up with a direct signal to start the call (e.g. 'Are you ready for our interview?', 'Shall I call you now?', etc.). Once the confirmation was received, the netnographer called the participant. Immediately after the call started, what typically followed was the sound check before even greeting each other. In that sense, the questions 'Can you hear me?' or 'Can you see me?' can be regarded as typical questions that start an online interview as opposed to face-to-face interviews.

The notion of overlapping talk is another dynamic to be affected by the choice of a CMC technology. Qualitative interviewing is seen as a co-constructed dialogue between an interviewer and an interviewee (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In our case, we experienced that the choice of a CMC technology may interfere with some of the natural features of dialogue. For example, although we offered a Skype interview with the co-founder of the community, Vance Stevens, he suggested that we turn it into a Learning2gether event, in which case the interview was conducted over Blackboard Collaborate. On Blackboard Collaborate, one needs to activate his/her microphone in order to speak, and silence it to allow others to speak. In our case, this prevented overlapping talk and thus natural turn-taking that could occur in a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. It was difficult to prompt the interviewee with another follow-up question on the basis of his answer, as the interviewee tried to

address each question as fully as possible in one turn. Meanwhile, when the interviewee began answering a question, it was impossible for the researcher to provide active listening cues orally. Therefore, in order to demonstrate active listening behaviours, the researcher posted short comments on the chat window in response to what the interviewee was saying. This allows for a possibility of the online interviews to be treated as a multimedium and multimodal acts.

'Survival' skills needed in online fieldwork

While in-person ethnographers may be faced with several 'survival issues', ranging from diet changes and disease risks to cultural and climate adaptation, netnographers seem to have the luxury of inhabiting familiar spaces when conducting research online. However, one area that might be reconceptualised as a 'survival skill' for a netnographer is technological expertise.

Because online communities rely on CMC technologies for their existence, advanced comfort level with specific technologies that a community uses becomes an essential survival skill for the netnographer. For instance, in our netnography, because our community's interest and expertise revolves around web-based technologies and their application in language learning and teaching, members use these technologies extensively in their interaction and activities. This necessitated not only holding accounts on several online networks and sites such as Facebook, Skype, Yahoo Groups, SL and Twitter, but also having moderate experience in using them. To illustrate further, in one specific instance, a Learning2gether event was being held in SL. Although the researcher had an avatar on SL, because she was not active there, she had to first figure out how to 'teleport' (the name of the action to travel in SL) herself to the Webheads' conference area, Edunation, which resulted in her being late to the session. Additionally, having to control her avatar's movements during the event distracted her during the session and affected her participant observation. As can be seen from the fieldnotes below, this resembled something akin to 'culture shock' that an in-person ethnographer might experience:

> I joined a Learning2gether session on SL today. I was late because although I had an account, I was not very familiar with it. The last time I logged into my account must have been at least 3 years ago. I was able to log in and see my avatar. But then, no clue. I tried some things, I knew I had to teleport myself to Edunation but somehow I was not quite able to do so, and I became frustrated. I could hear people but not see anybody. Then I felt like maybe writing in the chat would help. I wrote it, and then they started sending me friend requests. Some of these avatar names, I am familiar with ... but some are quite unfamiliar. Then they teleported me to where they are. Phew, huge relief, and feelings of safety ... At some point, our tour guide, [Name], said "this is what happens even in a virtual community like this, you first feel a culture shock". Then I wrote in the chat window that this was what I was actually feeling when I had trouble coming to Edunation. (Fieldnotes, 24 April 2011)

Therefore, although technological expertise could be an additional advantage in in-person ethnography, it is an essential survival skill for data collection in online fieldwork, especially in a multi-site online community that makes extensive use of various web-based technologies.

Conclusion

In this paper, through specific examples and data samples from our fieldwork, we have illustrated some of the ways that the nature of ethnographic practices change when studying online communities. Alongside these experiences, we conclude that fieldwork practices should be reconceptualised and perhaps redefined for netnography because they are experienced differently than in in-person ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, as we illustrate above and as would be in in-person ethnographies, a data form or data collection method in one netnography may still pose necessary reconsiderations for another netnography conducted with a different online community that uses different CMC technologies. Therefore, researchers who choose to conduct ethnography with an online community should not only be aware of how these practices are reshaped but also realise how these technologies will impact data collection procedures, as well as the required skills for the researcher.

Although the focus in this paper has been a methodological one, there is enormous potential for netnography for online educational communities. For example, one aspect of the community that we studied is that it is a global community, which inevitably fosters intercultural dialogue. This aspect might also be observed in other global online teacher communities and might pose a potential research question for netnographers. Furthermore, the culture of teacher collaboration in such global online communities would be another topic to explore. How do teachers initiate, encourage and sustain collaboration at a distance? What typical practices does teacher telecollaboration involve?

Although higher education institutions that offer distance learning programmes are already a common phenomenon for researchers conducting online research, virtual high schools where all the instruction is carried out entirely online still offer interesting online educational contexts for netnography since such schools have recently started to emerge. What does a classroom look like in a virtual high school? How are teacher–teacher, teacher–student, teacher–parent and student–student interactions enacted? How is the teaching/learning culture in these schools mediated by the CMC technologies?

Another emerging online educational context for netnographers would be the growing number of virtual campuses of universities in SL. What does 'campus life' look like in these campuses? What are codes-of-conduct for professors, students and administrators in these campuses? What professional dispositions are displayed by professors and students?

Overall, netnography proves to be a research approach to offer potentially rich data for ethnographers to study online educational communities. While not known 20 years ago, such communities have rapidly become everyday phenomena in the twenty-first century, which leads us to shift our conceptualisations of the notions of field and fieldwork in ethnography conducted online.

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