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# CRAFTING ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCES: WAYS OF KNOWING FACEBOOK

INFLUENCES OF A PRACTICE-BASED APPROACH ON RESEARCH ON EVERYDAY DIGITAL LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents reflections on ethnographic research, which was undertaken in 2010 exploring the link between Facebook and the use of it by undergraduate students studying in Higher Education at one UK university. The focus of this paper is interrogating the use of practice-based methods within an ethnographic methodology. I present reflections on using design thinking, craft skills and card modeling to supported analyses of participants social interactions on the social media site, Facebook, in coming to know the digital space. Jungnickel and Hjorth (2014, 136) propose that ethnography and practice-based art research have a long ‘tacit history’ and that ‘the process of making and thinking through art is an integral part of doing research’. Using the data collected during the ethnography from my time spent in the field. I take a reflexive view of my translation of the data into material form and discuss the analytical process I went through in coming to know Facebook as ‘narrative interpretation’ and ‘thinking with my hands’.

**Keywords:** *Digital, Process, Materiality*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a research project, which explored the everyday use of the social network site (SNS) Facebook by first-year undergraduate students in their transition to university. The focus of this paper is interrogating the use of practice-based methods within an ethnographic methodology. I present reflections on using design thinking, craft skills and card modeling to supported analyses of participants social interactions on the social media site, Facebook. I take a reflexive approach explore this research methodology and the impact this had on coming to know my participants Facebook practices and the significance of the model making to the issue being studied. This paper presents retrospective theorising about tacit responses and ways of working.

The data discussed in this paper is taken from an empirical study undertaken in 2010 on how first-year undergraduate students in the UK use Facebook (Stirling, 2014). The study used ethnographic methods to observe student Facebook use, and then looked at whether Facebook helped or hindered the students’ transition into university life. It explored the cultural practices of the students’ use of this social network site in the context of their university experience. The students, their habits and their rituals were of interest, along with

their interplay with technology. The findings of the study showed Facebook was both a pathway and a destination, one that the students used on a daily basis as part of their everyday lives. This site was (and still is) ubiquitous in a great many of the lives of young (18-21 year old) undergraduate students in the UK (CLEX, 2009; Ipsos MORI, 2008), with research findings (at the time of the study) showing that 91% of undergraduate students describe themselves as using SNS 'regularly' or 'sometimes' (Ipsos MORI, 2008, 10). Research in this area suggests that Facebook is a key tool used for social support and supporting academic study (Madge et al., 2009; Selwyn, 2009). It is acknowledged that students do use other SNS and that not all students use Facebook, but this particular site is embedded in everyday student life, and it was the nature of this 'embeddedness' that was the focus of the research.

## **CONTEXT**

### **A designerly approach to investigating social media**

There has been an intrinsic link between the social network site Facebook and young undergraduate students since the website's inception by students' studying at Harvard University in 2003. Social network sites are among the most popular everyday life activity destinations on the web and Facebook is the most popular of these sites (other examples are Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr) with currently 1.19 billion monthly active users worldwide (Protalinski, 2013). The study, which is the focus of this paper, was of first-year undergraduate students' uses of Facebook to negotiate their transition into their first year at a UK university. I did this through a mixed method two-phase approach of large-scale questionnaires (n=692) and a longitudinal (year-long) connective ethnography (n=6), which took place across Facebook and the university campus.

Design thinking influenced my research approach. My background previous to becoming a doctoral researcher was in product and interior design practice and lecturing. I have been tacitly influenced by the transdisciplinary approach, which is important in design thinking and design research (Cross, 2011, Trowler, 2012). Designers research and draw on a range of expertise in this pursuit of discovery and in a similar manner I explored undergraduate Facebook use through drawing upon the plurality of method that a practice-based process affords (Lawson, 2006) within an ethnographic methodology. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) propose the use of a range of methods and the plurality of methods as 'bricolage' (p.159), using a range of tactics that are linked to the context being studied and appropriate to the research question. Law (2004) is in support of the unconventional and suggests the concept of mess as a theoretical and methodological focus in social science research and that to understand the messiness and complexity of social life, researchers should not stick to traditional methodological approaches and should use 'methods unusual to or unknown in social science' (p.2). In this manner I turned towards my existing and tacit skill set to understand and make sense of the data I collected through my ethnographic experiences. For me design thinking and architectural model making process were used as ways of knowing social media use.

### **Digital ethnography and anthropology**

#### **Facebook in Everyday Life**

Observing the everyday life of my participants in their natural settings of Facebook and the university environment was the main focus of my ethnographic approach. In researching both the digital and the physical environments of the undergraduate students, I took the view that there is nothing particularly new or special in researching 'Facebook' as a digital

environment but that it was the cultural practices within it, which were the focus of my ethnographic observation. As boyd states, (2008, p.31) 'Internet ethnography is not about the technology - it is about the people, their practices and the cultures they form'. The people, their habits and rituals are what interested me, along with their interplay with technology. The Internet is a pathway to connections with other people or information and I see Facebook as a pathway and a destination, one that the students use on a daily basis as part of their everyday lives. The Facebook project took a multi-sited connective ethnographic approach to researching both the digital and the physical environments of the undergraduate students. This built upon a previous study that took a solely digital approach to studying Facebook use (Stirling, 2009), which found that to view the digital only was missing many of the social practices which included face-to-face interactions. When studying something that can be transient and fluid, across the digital and the physical, the concept of a field site becomes fuzzy and less rigid. The importance of being embedded in the practices of the participants in order to have an insider view was paramount in understanding this. One of the findings from this study was that students used Facebook Group Chat within lectures. Being an insider Group member was key to viewing these practices and digital methods facilitated this.

#### **Thinking through fieldwork (Okely, 1994)**

In this study I was significantly influenced by anthropological approaches to both my data collection, through undertaking the ethnography, and also in my analysis of the rich dataset. Okely (1994, 32) proposes that the interpretation of this material is a 'continuing and creative experience' and that there are 'serendipitous connections to be made'. These interpretations and connections are made when I move between field, modeling, writing and analysis, data and experiences, myself and my FbF. The development of the analytical framework of the study time, came from this process of self-immersing in the data. I found this to be an experience that was grounded in my own lived experiences of Facebook use. Serendipitous experiences have littered this research project, particularly at the intersection between architectural and new media theories – these led me down a different path or a different way of seeing the data.

#### **Architectural models as a research method**

Scale architectural models are something I have made and used in my practice, as an interior designer, many times. I am interested in the way people inhabit spaces, both digital spaces and physical spaces. I believe the architectural model is important to the design process as it helps the designer visualise the design scheme and can often help the client understand the spatial layout more easily than reading 2D CAD plans. More often than not in current interior design practice the card model is replaced by a 3D CAD rendered perspective view or walkthrough created on 3DS MAX, for example. Analogue models are still produced and I believe the materiality of the architectural model offers us more in the research process than a computer render can. Smith (2004) suggests the importance of architectural scale models through history, as a medium, a message and a maquette. They are used in a variety of ways; 'a thinking and defining mechanism for understanding and demonstrating' (p.3). Often the model is used to explain the design process and is an artifact as an elicitation tool. Smith (2004, 63) also proposes that architectural models can be used for defining a culture, something that 'reflects the manner of today'. Degen et al (2015) discuss how computer generated images are used to evoke the atmosphere of a new building or city through materialising the place. In this situation I am interested in our current cultural obsession with digital technologies and pose that to use an

analogue process to interrogate the digital we can trouble, what could be taken for granted, in investigating in a solely digital manner. Architectural model making fits into the discourse on 'practice-led' or 'practice-based' research. Jungnickel and Hjorth (2014, 136) propose that ethnography and practice-based art research have a long 'tacit history' and that 'the process of making and thinking through art is an integral part of doing research' (ibid). There are methodological entanglements when working across social science and practice-based design led research approaches. Traditional and non traditional modes of making, presenting and transmitting knowledge (Jungnickel and Hjorth, 2014) are the focus of this paper. Crafting card models could be seen as an inventive method (Lury and Wakeford, 2012). Lury and Wakeford (2012, 3) suggest that using these methods cannot be separated from the 'research problems at hand'.

## **Reflexive approach**

Ways of knowing through practice-based methods and specifically, ways of knowing Facebook are the underpinning themes of this paper. How we come to know the social world and the lives of our participants are what we do as ethnographers. How I analyse and then account for my experiences and my impact on the lives of others is by being reflexive. Cunliffe (2003, 985) suggests, that to be reflexive 'we need to go further than questioning the truth claims of others, to question how we as researchers (and practitioners) also make truth claims and construct meaning'. Reflexivity is a central part of any research involving interactions with participants. Research is not value free and to be reflexive is to be aware of your analytical approach to the study and how this may influence your behaviour in the field and to acknowledge this throughout, particularly when representing the experiences of the participants and yourself (Clifford, 1986; Greenbank, 2003). The aim is to be authentic within and about the culture being studied and also to be authentic and transparent about the data collected and to interrogate the methods of analysis. Taking a reflexive stance within the research project, has an understanding that research practices are part of the wider world being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The case, which is the focus of this paper – I made sense of Facebook practices through my own use of Facebook, both personally and as a research tool. To support my reflexive approach I found it helpful to record 'critical incidences', which I found to be important at various intervals throughout the study. This approach opened up space for me to critically question the situated nature of the knowledge I produced (Cunliffe, 2003) and to deal with the 'messy realities' (Laws (2004) of social research.

I recorded 'critical incidences' or moments of interest on Facebook through taking a screen shot of the Facebook page I was on. The concept of 'critical incidences' relates to the work of David Tripp (1998) and the process of reflexivity. Through this process, the researcher not only develops understandings about the data, but also examines the ways in which these developing understandings influence the researcher. A 'critical incident' defines the point at which these understandings come together and a new understanding is created, which influences the research project and researcher, thus effecting change in some way. To come to this level of deeper understanding, my critical incidence screenshots were reviewed on a monthly basis and reflexive field notes were written alongside. By using this notion of critical incidences I was able to acknowledge my key moments of understanding. These then formed a major part of my analysis and decisions about which key pieces of data made it into each of my student narratives. The card model was produced as a result of the amalgamation of these critical incidences' to support me to construct meaning from them.

Going forward this paper takes a critical reflexive approach to interrogate the influence of making the card model on the research project – exploring the data it produced and how this supported my analysis; the concept generation and the forms I produced within the model and how these translated my field experiences into an architectural space and how reflecting on these impacted on the findings of the study.

## DATA

As a result of the year-log ethnography, the data collected during my time spent in the field were: fieldnotes, scratch notes, critical incidence screen shots, interview transcripts, photographs and videos (a selection shown see fig. 1). These were all part of the bricolage that formed the basis for my modelmaking practice.

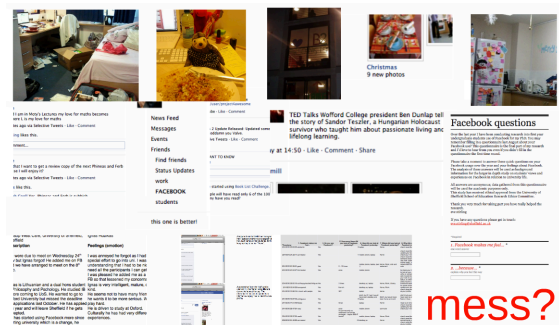


Fig. 1 Field data – messy realities of social research

## Process - Model making forms of Facebook architecture

This section details the process of architectural model making as a research method using my auto-ethnographic model (fig.2), which I produced mid-study, as an example. The model is entitled 'A Site of Possibility: Facebook an Auto-Ethnography. An Architectural Metaphor', the model is part art-work and part analytical sketching. The model was produced to exhibit at The Centre for the Study of New Literacies 2010 Conference, University of Sheffield, UK - *Materialising Research*.



Fig. 2 A Site of Possibility: Facebook an Auto-Ethnography. An Architectural Metaphor. Scale: NTS



The next section talks in detail about the making -process of creating materiality from, and of, my ethnographic data. I used my experiences (in the field) and visualised my ethnographic data by re-presenting it to make a card architectural model of my Facebook Profile. In this manner integrating experiential knowledge and knowing into architectural design concepts.

The forms within the model are created to represent the social practices, which took place within the differing sections of my Facebook Profile. These I specified for the model were; Wall, Newsfeed and Chat. These are now described in three ways: Firstly, a screenshot of the element of my Facebook, secondly, a written description of the social practices which took place and finally a photograph of the corresponding area on the architectural model. Through each description and analysis I reflect upon how I arrived at the specific forms to model and what I learnt through the process of modeling and my reflections based on the models I produced.

Wall, is open and yet closed from the Newsfeed. The curved Wall on the model (see fig.3) has four staggered steps running across and up it and these represent the layers of conversation which took place on my Facebook Wall (fig.4) The layered nature of the steps illustrates the manner in which the differing conversations may be viewed by other Facebook Friends – some conversations can be observed, some can be interacted with and others cannot be seen at all. Some of the conversations are open for others to see and some are more private (see fig.3). There is a linked walkway to link some parts of the Wall to the Newsfeed, which is the main central structure of the model. This represents the backwards and forwards relationship between posting on my Wall and it appearing on my Newsfeed.



Fig. 3 My Wall Architectural Model







Fig. 4 My Facebook Wall 2010

Newsfeed, is the main imposing cube within the model (see fig.2). It has two voids running through its centre (see fig.7), the larger of the two represents the private and personal News, which featured on my Wall, and the smaller represents the more public News from the Pages and Groups, which I follow (see fig. 6). The bridge between the Newsfeed and the Wall (see fig. 5), representing the Wall/Newsfeed interlink is intentionally narrow to echo the closeness between the two places within my Profile.



Fig. 6 My Facebook Newsfeed 2010

Fig. 5 My Newsfeed Architectural Model (Wall in the foreground) 2010



Fig. 7 My Newsfeed, internal view 2010



Chat, is a private space between two people, one of whom is me. In the model only three Chats are represented (see fig. 8) as, in 2010 in my Facebook use I rarely chatted to more than three people at a time on Chat (see fig.9). The sloping sides represent that I am able to see the other Friends I chat to but that they cannot see each other. The Chat section is high above the rest of the model (see fig. 2) as Chat takes place as a layer over the top of the rest of the Facebook practices.



Fig. 8 My Chat Architectural Model 2010

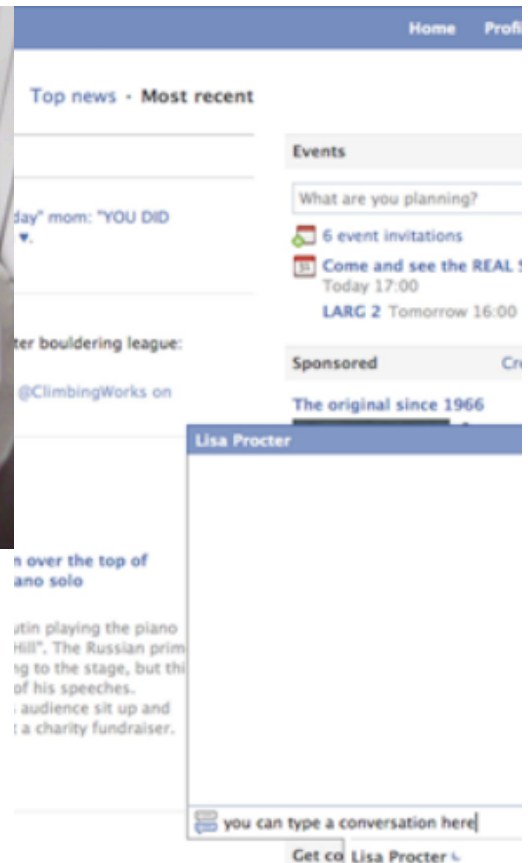


Fig. 9 My Facebook Chat 2010

These artefacts were created by drawing upon practice based skills and approaches I learnt prior to training as a researcher. These skills were tacit in my ethnographic research approach to data analysis, which I discuss in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

### Narrative interpretation

A narrative tells a story, it talks of the person, the object or the space and their experiences. In the Facebook study I used a narrative approach to structure my analysis of the ethnography by creating interpretive stories for each participant (McCormack, 2004). These stories were underpinned by the analysis, which took place when creating the card model. In my creative interpretation of the field dataset into an architectural model I was influenced by practice-based designer/researchers in interior design Danko & Meneely (2006), who draw on narrative methodologies to understand human interactions and the interrelated nature of peoples' stories and the influence these can have on the design process when designing new spatial experiences. They suggest that:

Narrative, like design, is context dependent. Both are a creative outgrowth of the details and situational events that characterize a particular time and place. Narrative, like design, is socially entwined, focusing on the potential points of tension related to various human activities while attempting to deepen our understanding of human nature (p.12).

The social context of each of the Facebook spaces and places I described and created were intertwined with the architectural programme and layout of the card model. Interpreting these gave me an insight into how the environment of Facebook is inhabited and supported my creation of the narratives of my students' participant lives, which formed the main part of the presentation of data and study findings.

The making of the model was a space-time for me to immerse myself in the experience of using Facebook; to interpret the social interactions of my Facebook Friends. The process of crafting, gave me space to be away from (and yet inhabit) the field. The process of making the model influenced the study findings in a number of ways - making the model, presenting it at the conference and sharing the process with others, helped me understand the importance of the model making as an analytical tool. By playing with the social narratives of Facebook and recreating the everyday interactions and rituals within the card model, I came to an understanding that Facebook is social and inhabited - a digital space as well as a place. This was a key moment in knowledge creation within the study. From this I created a written monologue, 'An Architecture of Facebook' which details the different spaces and places of Facebook and describes the social interactions and practices that take place within (see Stirling, 2014).

## Thinking Through My Hands

Although not a traditional approach in the social sciences the notion of visualising the ethnographic field data as an architectural model appealed to the interior designer in me – drawing on my 'tools of the trade' (Jungnickel and Hjorth, 2014, 137). The process of making '*A site of possibility*', the process of knowing Facebook, was hands on. The process of crafting, choosing the type of card, exploring its property – will the card be straight and strong or will it curve and bend? How does that property relate to the social practice, which took place in that particular place within Facebook? Using a knife to make a cut, to resize The Wall, my hands were helping me interpret the material nature of an imagined Facebook spatial narrative. I was thinking and analysing through my making skills. All of the decisions I made impacted on the way knowledge was produced. In my practice there was a symbiotic relationship between the experiential knowledge and making practice (ethnography and modelling). Jungnickel and Hjorth, (2014) propose that ethnography involves translation from the fieldwork to the reader as art involves translation from the studio to the gallery. I translated my ethnographic knowledge and experiences and represent these as a three-dimensional card model to explore the notion of experiencing digital space. The purpose of this was to translate the 'mess' of data from the fieldwork to the reader. To support this translation, the model was an interface (Degen et al., 2015) to realise my ethnographic experience.

These different data sets offered a multi-dimensional view of Facebook use. I propose that designers can imagine and (re)present the social worlds of their participants. By crafting

three-dimensional architectural models these could be used as talking points to develop discussion with participants and discuss behaviours and experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The everyday life practices of Facebook users are nuanced and varied. Undertaking an ethnography of my FBF gave me insights into some of their practices within the digital places of Facebook. Taking these digital ethnographic experiences and translating them, through card modelling into a three dimensional architectural space offered me a different way to immerse myself in the data and experiences. This step for me was an analytical tool – taking the digital, two-dimensional data, organising it, as I would for a building programme or schedule of accommodation. I then translated and materialised the data into a design concept model. The very nature of the participatory observation within ethnographic research is extremely personal and immersive. The model was an interface for me to analyse these experiences, communicate them in an alternative format that, subsequently enabled me to understand and make meaning from the spaces and places I created in card. In this paper I have taken a reflexive view by opening up my personal practice and interrogating the process of representing my experiences and analyses through card modeling. The methodological entanglements my positionality tacitly offered me of ‘designerly thinking’ and ‘being ethnographic’ were surfaced. The usefulness of crafting the digital spaces and places of Facebook offers a different way of knowing Facebook practices and the architectural forms ‘speak back to’ (Pink, 2016) the development of ethnographic theory in a different, material way of knowing.

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