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Adapting ethnographic action research to study responses to educational technology

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Introduction

The introduction of ICT has challenged established pedagogical practices, with social media adding further complexity. Studies in educational technology focus mostly on the needs of traditional undergraduates. Yet mature learners have different needs and are under different pressures to develop familiarity with social media if they are not to be dismissed as 'digital immigrants'. This paper reports on the methodology adopted to study the perspective of such learners on the introduction of social media in an online Master's programme in professional communication offered by Sheffield Hallam University. It briefly outlines the research context and initial research design before summarising the key principles of ethnographic action research (EAR), a little used yet promising methodology for educational research. Finally the paper discusses the potential of EAR to investigate the introduction and effects of educational technologies.

Research content and initial research design

Master's courses are popular with professionals wishing to extend their perspectives on their area of practice. Many courses, such as the Master's Programme in Professional Communication (MAPPC), are offered online to offer greatest flexibility to professionals. This programme recruits mature students working in the fields of corporate communication, technical communication, and community engagement, where expertise in technology-mediated communication is valued. Yet few had experience of social media even though they are increasingly used in organisations. This lack of experience may be seen as a "second order digital divide" (Brotcorne et al. 2010) where the difficulties are not those of access or even of skill, but those of practices and identities. Social media were introduced in the MAPPC to help mature students to support their learning as postgraduate students and to develop their potential as "digital residents" (White and Le Cornu 2011), an alternative labelling for digital expertise that does not refer to generations but to the confidence and identity that anyone may develop in relation to ICTs.

An Academic Literacies conceptual framework was chosen to design and research the introduction of social media on the MAPPC. This framework was initially developed to research student writing in Higher Education, including writing in online environments; it has since developed to research digital

literacies since “so much of students’ digital engagement involves the reading and production of texts” (Lea and Jones 2011). Lea and Street (1998) conceptualised three overlapping approaches to student writing. The skills perspective envisages writing as an individual ability to manipulate the surface features of language; more socially focused, the academic socialisation perspective views writing as a means of acculturating students into their chosen disciplines. In contrast, the academic literacies perspective conceptualises writing as socially and culturally situated, and shaped by social identities and power relations. Using extensively as a “critique frame”, it is also as a “design frame” (Lea 2004; Lea and Goodfellow 2009; Lillis 2003) and, as such, informed the pedagogical approach taken to create tasks and support students in their use of various social media in the MAPPCC (social bookmarking, collective blogging, screencast feedback and micro-blogging).

The initial research design for investigating the introduction and effects of social media was that of a multiple case studies, to be undertaken in an action research paradigm. This was in keeping with the Academic Literacies literature which privileges ethnographically rich case studies, “taking a close up and contextual view of students’... literacy practices” (Lea and Goodfellow 2009). In my research, the selected academic practices are reading, reflection and assessment, all of which were supported by social media. The first case study focused on students’ reactions to the use of social bookmarking to support reading activities prior to writing a literature review (Dujardin et al. 2012). Unfortunately the contextual view on technology use and academic practice was rather limited as the initial research design did not prompt me to consider such issues. The serendipitous find of the EAR methodology (outlined below) enabled me to rethink the research design and to envisage my research as a contribution to the “reconciliation of new discourses of the digital with the continuing development of critical pedagogical and social practice in the academy and the public sphere” (Lea and Goodfellow 2009).

Ethnographic action research as alternative research design

EAR originates from Development Studies, and evolved from a recognition of the limitations of ethnography as an approach to research ICT measures designed to lessen the “digital divide” (Norris 2001); unless local communities participated and owned such measures, the impact of ethnographic work is likely to be limited (Hearn et al. 2009). Associated with action research, however, ethnographic research is more “likely to be useful and usable by those working on the ground... and to address the identified gaps between research and the ability to implement its findings” (Tacchi et al. 2009). Participative approaches such as involving community members and training local people are designed to help communities develop a sense of ownership of the technology introduced in their midst and to “link the [ethnographic] research back into the project’s plans and activities” (Tacchi et al. 2003). EAR was conceived as an approach to evaluate community-based ICT initiatives, “built-in... [to] allow for ongoing monitoring and evaluation that will affect how the project develops” (Hearn et al. 2009).

Like classic ethnographers, EAR researchers requires long-term immersion in the local setting, to understand community issues and relate them to wider cultural issues. An initial stage of an EAR project is to provide a ‘social mapping’, that is, a baseline the social needs which the ICT project is designed to address. This involves gathering information about participants and stakeholders, and about the existing ‘communicative ecology’, that is, “the processes that involve a mix of media...

through which people connect with their social networks” (Tacchi *et al.* 2003) to satisfy their information and communication needs. As ethnographic action research is not a technologically deterministic approach, the ecology involves more than a technological layer: it also includes people’s social activities and a discursive layer comprising the “conversations and narratives of the ecology” (Foth and Hearn 2007).

EAR projects are characterised by the involvement of “sociocultural animators”, workers who are embedded in the ICT initiative and are trained to contribute to the action research. Their role is to “mobilis[e] the social and cultural participation of individuals and community members so that they become engaged in their personal development and in the development of their community” (Foth 2006). This means working with other ICT project workers and with local people to seek their perspectives on community issues when shaping and monitoring the ICT project. EAR researchers use a “toolbox” of research methods (Tacchi *et al.* 2003) including classic ethnographic methods such as observations, interviews and diaries as well as media-based virtual-ethnographic methods, including access logs, browsing histories, and media content analysis (e.g. of websites).

Value of EAR to educational research

Why ‘borrow’ EAR at all? Its focus on communities and their response to the introduction of technology was pertinent to my research, and more widely, to educational research focusing on the introduction of learning technologies within specific learning communities. The ethnographic dimension can enrich case studies by relating students’ perspectives on technology to wider issues, such as their needs and expectations as professionals working in the knowledge society, and the potential of technology to challenge educational practices. It can also help avoid a ‘fish lens’ effect whereby studies on educational technology foreground technology, thus distorting or minimising the wider background of higher education practices, government policies and/or business interests. Taking into account contextual issues can also improve pedagogical practice – an important consideration for action research. As Tacchi *et al.* (2003) note, “we have to bring together media with histories and institutions, creatively adapting them to make something new and effective, and – importantly – locally relevant and appropriate.” For example, the introduction of collective blogging on the MA programme reflected practices used by multinationals to foster communities of practice (as reported in, e.g., Huh *et al.* 2007).

Using EAR also allowed for a tighter ‘fit’ between the methodology and the chosen conceptual framework of Academic Literacies. The ethnographic dimension focuses attention on what people do with technology (rather than on the skills they possess or lack), particularly when using it to support learning in a Higher Education context. Reporting on undergraduates practices with new media, Lea and Jones (2011) point out that, while these practices may appear to challenge academic practices, students rely on tutors’ authority to guide them through reading and writing activities, thus limiting any potential challenge that technology may appear to offer. Using EAR led me to a similar conclusion. Lea and Jones (*ibid*) also highlight the role of educators (as ‘sociocultural animators’) in introducing technology and in designing learning activities that help students uncover the potential of technology for meaning making. In the research context discussed in this paper, there was no pressure from mature students to introduce social media; they were introduced to support collaborative meaning-making as this is emerging as a new textual and/or multimodal

practice in the knowledge society. Students welcomed the use of blogs, social bookmarking, screencasts and micro-blogging as different and authentic ways of learning and as a means of developing a situated knowledge of technology-mediated communication.

EAR was designed to be an adaptable methodology (Tacchi *et al.* 2003). Two modifications to the seminal EAR methodology were made to reflect the environment in which my research was conducted. First, the research is that of a practitioner-researcher, a case not covered in the original studies where researchers worked in large multicultural teams. This is not incompatible with the EAR approach, however, as it highlights the role of the educator as 'sociocultural animator'. A reflexive auto-ethnographic study was conducted as a result, to identify influences and decisions underpinning pedagogy and research (Dujardin 2012). Secondly, my research focused on an entirely online educational environment. On the one hand, this worked well with the original focus of EAR studies on communities and their reaction to the introduction of technology. On the other hand, the methods toolbox needed to be expanded to include approaches used in Internet Studies (e.g. Hine 2000, 2013; Markham *et al.* 2012). These modifications provide examples supporting the claim to adaptability made by the original EAR researchers.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the potential of ethnographic action research in educational research studies. Little used in this field so far, EAR could offer a useful complementary methodology, particularly for practitioner-researchers. The ethnographic component invites careful consideration of wider social factors which may be lacking in action research, while the concept of sociocultural animation offers scope to reflect on practice. Such attributes also make EAR a suitable methodology for research adopting an Academic Literacies framework, which situates local practices within wider institutional contexts. The framework invites both researchers and practitioners to attend to "relationship between the social, the textual and the technological, which... sits at the heart of understanding digital literacies" (Lea and Jones 2011). EAR offers a possible methodology to explore mature students' activities with and perspectives on social media, to understand what the second order digital divide means in practice and to suggest possible pedagogical approaches to address this divide. Further research is needed to further explore the potential of EAR.

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