Networked together: designing participatory research in online ethnography
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Framing multi-sited ethnography as an approach for coping with the complexity of young people's ways of learning, communicating and expressing themselves in and outside secondary schools

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Abstract. This paper discusses the epistemological and methodological implications of a research project which seeks to understand what occurs when young people observe, reflect, narrate and share how they learn to communicate and express themselves, in and outside secondary school. We undertook this task through a series of five multi-sited ethnographies that move through school, home and virtual environments. To accomplish this complex objective, the notion of multi-sited ethnography is used both as a conceptual and methodological framework. We start by discussing what it means to research young people's learning experiences from a multi-sited ethnographical approach. We then describe the role of virtual environments as tools for sharing, communicating and disseminating the research process and experiences. Finally, we confront the experience of doing multi-sited ethnographic research based on young people's ethnographical studies of their own learning practices and opening up new challenges and possibilities for educational ethnography.

Keywords. Secondary school, collaborative research, learning mobilities, mobile learning, virtual ethnography

1. Researching young people's learning experiences from a multi-sited ethnographical approach

This paper is part of the research project "*Living and learning with new literacies in and outside school: contributions for reducing school drop-out, exclusion and abandonment among youth"* (Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competiveness. EDU2011-24122). This national project seeks to understand, through a series of five multi-sited ethnographies (Marcus 1995; Faizon 2009) that move through school and home (Anderson 1989: Denzin 1997; Ttroman and Waldorf, 2005), and virtual environments (Hine 2000; Hine 2005; Jhons, Shin-gling and Hall, 2004), the social life that occurs when young people observe, reflect, narrate and share how they learn to communicate and express themselves, in and outside secondary school.

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To accomplish this complex objective, the notion of multi-sited ethnography is used both as a conceptual and methodological framework. It was originally Marcus (Marcus 1995) who questioned the hegemonic conception of an ethnographic site, as a "container of a particular set of social relations, which could be studied and possibly compared with the contents of other containers elsewhere" (Faizon 2009:1), by pointing out the notion of multi-sited ethnography. Confronting a position which had been preeminent for many years in (educational) ethnography, what Marcus argues in his seminal contribution is that the study of social phenomena cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single site. At stake in this claim is not only the question of the borders of any given social practice in an interconnected world, but the fantasy of educational ethnographers, who still imagine that the limits of the field are defined by what falls under their scrutiny.

To understand youth learning experiences we need, as Faizon has mentioned, a method that "involves a spatially dispersed field through which the ethnographer moves – actually, via sojourns in two or more places, or conceptually, by means of techniques of juxtaposition of data" (Faizon 2009:2). For us, this issue is not a question of location, site or perspective, but one that recalls a greater necessity, that of recognizing the impossibility of covering the complexity of the social life of young people. For this reason when we use multi-sitedness we are not claiming an impossible holistic positionality in ethnographic educational research, but rather we seek an openness of the research imagination that doesn't avoid the difficulties of accompanying a group of young people in their learning paths in and outside schools… while they themselves make that journey through an ethnographic experience.

In our case, we understand that young people's learning experiences transit beyond school borders and move without contention through their social relations in extracurricular activities, social networks, personal hobbies, at home, and so on. Our goal, therefore, is to carry out research where the focus is on how to capture some of the consequences of the juxtapositions of all these sites. Within this perspective, when we study young people's learning experiences in and outside secondary schools, we transit, as Milne (Milne 2006) notes, through "the interplay between physical spaces and virtual spaces" (Sharpe, Beetham and De Freitas, 2010: xvii).

Like Milne, we identify in our ethnographical research formal physical spaces (classrooms and seminar rooms), physical social spaces (playgrounds), physical transition spaces (corridors), physical private spaces (students' residences), and virtual social spaces (in the case of this research: Facebook, Dropbox, Googlesite among others). What seems clear is that for any learning activity, young people "may combine or recombine various combinations of these types of spaces" (Sharpe, Beetham and De Freitas, 2010: xviii). These spaces also configure the multi-sited fields where our ethnographic research takes place. To explore them could be a possible response for coping with the complexity of young people's ways of learning, communicating and expressing themselves in and outside secondary schools.

2. The role of virtual environments as tools for sharing, communicating and disseminating the research process and experiences

In our research, looking at our use of virtual environments to store, share, exchange, analyze and communicate we observe that this set of actions could be converted into a virtual ethnography in itself. We were developing a multi-sited ethnography, which had

to cope with virtual, online environments. But even more, we were doing it in a collaborative manner with five groups of students, secondary school teachers and university researchers (Domingo, Sánchez and Sancho, 2014). In this process, to find the *right* tools to ease the communication among partners and facilitate the development of work was crucial. Therefore, the five groups dedicated a good deal of time to deciding the most suitable digital tools for them according to their preferences, accessibility and confidence.

At this point, it's interesting to point out the different position young people adopted regarding social network services such as Facebook. Some of them were very eager to use them as a way to get to know all the participants in the project and exchange more personal information. A young person from one school opened a closed group in Facebook and invited all project participants (of all ages) to join in, at an early stage of the project. However, initially there was not a large response from the young people who were not from her school. We saw that many young people were quite reserved and reticent; they did not want to use a setting they understood as strictly personal in a context they assumed as part of their school tasks (even if their participation in the project was voluntary). Furthermore, far from the increasing lack of concern young people seem to have regarding their privacy (Mallan 2009), some of them expressed a great concern about sharing personal information with anybody beyond their selected friends. Nevertheless, by the end of the process, and especially once all participants had met in the final presentation of the project at the University of Barcelona, practically all participants decided to join the closed group. Here we have evidence that we must not confuse the social networking services with real social networks.

The following is a summary of the uses of digital technologies and virtual environments that each of the five groups developed during the process of carrying out their collaborative ethnographies.

2.1. Virolai

During the ethnographic research, the most used digital resources were a website (GoogleSites) and the documents shared online. According to the young people, the use of the website enabled them to monitor the evolution of the research and carry out their project, since the website displayed a record of the work sessions in chronological order, with the significant corresponding information located in a single shared space. For example, when the young people produced the report of their project, on one of the pages of their website they placed the document's table of contents and linked the main points to documents shared online.

According to them, the shared documents facilitated the task of creating collaborative knowledge by giving all group members access to the group contributions. At the same time, the tool was efficient and reliable, allowing them to always know where the information was and that it would be updated with the latest entry. During this process of creation and analysis, according to them, they had the experience of knowledge as a social and negotiated collaboration, which evolved from a shared re-elaboration, where they mainly interacted through dialogue and questions. When they finished the project, the young people emphasised that they observed and analysed differently and that their writing skills had significantly improved

In this case, the website housed the documents in an organized manner. Having the information available and establishing a practice of sharing the writing and other

productions among the group supporting a work dynamic that led to the conclusions shared here.

2.2. Els Alfacs

This group used different online services to manage both the group and the project's process. A closed group in Facebook was created and would be used for internal formal relationships and communication among group members; this group was managed by all the participants throughout the duration of the project. In addition, members of this group also created another closed Facebook group (mentioned earlier) to encourage communication and exchange with the other four school groups involved in the project.

In addition to Facebook, GoogleDrive was used for sharing and storing documentation, such as the individual contributions as well as any work produced by the group during the work sessions. Folders were arranged not by date but by author or project. This format facilitated how the group organised the findings and the service provided great flexibility for sharing and creating files according to their needs. The young people ended up contributing textual, auditory, visual and audio-visual resources, maps and digital presentations.

The combination of digital applications this group used was understood by group members to be a key factor for the collaborative research and the learning that they gradually constructed. The folders in GoogleDrive provided a map of how the project should be developing, as folders were created based on group decisions of how the work should proceed and then were filled with material (for the most part, a few folders remained empty...). Having a folder for each participant also placed an emphasis on the accountability of each person within the group dynamic. The group did not question the use of two different environments (Facebook and GoogleDrive). Rather, the division between a communication and social platform and a site for storing and sharing material seemed like 'common sense' to the group. Finally, because this school was 180 km from Barcelona, having easy access to material and group members was very helpful for one of the researchers who commuted weekly for her fieldwork.

2.3. La Mallola

After the first meetings, the need to broaden communication and collaboration beyond the confines of the school were considered, in order to share the material produced and in order to be able to stay in touch during the week.

Initially, the researchers in this group tried to avoid using Facebook because one of the two researchers didn't have an account. Researchers proposed using email as a way of staying in touch, and an online service for sharing documents and collaborating. The young people were unaware of most online services that were proposed, although some of them remembered having used GoogleDrive (then GoogleDocs) in the school at one time. They also claimed that they never check their email and said it would be ineffective for staying in touch.

In the end they decided to create a closed group in Facebook, in order to maintain contact and share material. When this decision was taken, one of the students created it in a moment on his notebook, even though this social network was blocked by the school. Apparently the students know their way around the Firewall.

From this moment on, the main use of this social network consisted of the university researchers summarising for the group the decisions made during the

sessions and reminding the group of the work to be done during the week. Facebook was also used to share material (photos, videos, presentations...) and was sometimes used to continue a conversation started during a work session. As the presentation time approached, the occasional collaboration became accumulative. All the members of the group carried out the assigned tasks (writing texts, producing photos, videos, etc.) to create the multimedia presentation that represented their work.

The use of Facebook had mixed results. Facebook was useful as a tool for communication and helped the group organise itself. However, on entry into the group, there was no immediate way to find the shared material, and therefore its format didn't enhance the research process. Some young people had difficulty finding documents, or documents were shared and people didn't see them initially. In short, Facebook was selected as the easiest choice for a group of students that initially had low implication in the project, but the ease of use didn't ensure a high level of participation in the digital platform.

2.4. El Palau

To share the information collected and make collaboration easier, after considering different options, this group decided to create a closed group in in a social network service (Facebook). This group was basically used as a repository for storing and sharing what was produced, with occasional interventions by the university researchers in the news forum, providing reminders about the contents of some sessions, sharing documents to include or prepare changes of programme, etc.

The use, therefore, was very similar to how this network was employed by the group in La Mallola. However, they did not report having communication problems related to the platform's use.

2.5. Ribera Baixa

After analysing different options together, this group agreed on a file storage service in the cloud (Dropbox) to facilitate asynchronous collaboration and used e-mail to exchange day-to-day information, like scheduling matters, reminders, etc. This group specifically chose not to use the social network service they normally use because for the students (admittedly for some of them more than others) using those networks implicated their private and social lives, and people did not want to mix them with the research project.

E-mail was largely used to monitor the whole process. For students, teachers, and university researchers, this mode of communication allowed participants to feel that they were in touch, communicating unexpected events that resulted in work schedule changes or even to resolving misunderstandings. Also, messages turn out to be valuable sources of shared field notes.

Through the file storage service, group members were able to share and access the produced documents and information. As this tool does not allow users to edit documents simultaneously, the production of the final report involved both a commitment from the youth and the creation of work shifts to make sure changes were not erased and that everybody could add their contribution.

To summarize, in the five cases, digital resources were used for: storing the information produced during the research (notes, photographs, observations, texts, and so on...); sharing and communicating with group members; and developing

relationships and a sense of community. While participating in this process, we found that physical and virtual environments are interconnected; each type of space contributes to improving our understanding of social life in schools; and what develops within a virtual space can be narrated and analysed in the same way we approach other types of spaces.

What we find interesting (though not entirely surprising) is the assumption on behalf of the young people that we would be able to make use of virtual spaces to support our research project. Although there was variation among the youth regarding their knowledge of or fluency with different technologies as well as their interest in using them, the suggestion that we work with online services seemed logical to everyone. We also observed that most of the schools we were working in also provide an electronic platform to support learning and so in general this process seemed naturalized among the groups we encountered.

While we can observe how the use of digital technologies and Internet access is now a part of the learning process, we ask what implications that has for our research method. In their revision of so-called mobile learning, Kress and Pachler (Kress and Pachler 2007) argue that the qualifier *mobile* does not refer to the use of different digital technologies in different spaces but rather is determined by a new *habitus*:

> [T]hose who 'have' it are accustomed to immediate access to the world… The habitus has made and then left the individual constantly mobile – which does not refer, necessarily, to a physical mobility at all but to a constant expectancy, a state of contingency, of incompletion, of moving toward completion... The answer to 'who is mobile?' is therefore 'everyone who inhabits the new habitus' (p. 27. Emphasis is original).

This new *habitus* refers to a way of learning that is not based on knowledge acquisition but on knowledge construction, or the idea that individuals use and select information to create knowledge for a specific purpose (Ibid, p. 22). Market demands as well as technological innovation have helped to reposition the learner in a broader context both spatially and temporally (illustrated by terms like "ubiquitous learning" or "lifelong learning"). In our case, we can observe that online access to our materials extended the physical and temporal boundaries of our project, allowing it to take place outside of our 1-2 hour weekly sessions. Further, having a common repository where all members had the same capability to add and access information was a way to democratize our learning environment. This also corresponds to the *habitus* described above, where the digital format supported the dissemination of the responsibility throughout the group.

3. The experience of doing multi-sited ethnographic research based on young people's ethnographical studies of their own learning practices

While carrying out our collaborative research, we were able to observe young people's use of different technologies, both in and beyond the context of our project. We are interested in the role these technologies played in our research, paying attention to how they effected the development of our collaborative ethnographies and what their use reveals about the ways secondary students are learning today. However, mobile learning (or m-learning) is not itself the focus of our work. Instead, we are interested in the concept of mobility and in generating a non-site-specific understanding of learning,

one that is learner-centred rather than reflecting curricular objectives. To address this issue, we try to inquire not only into m-learning but also into learning mobilities.

Mobilities as an area of inquiry have been embraced recently within cultural geography. This concept provides an orientation for our project, which seeks to better capture the landscape of young people's learning. From a geographical perspective, the term mobilities differs from more classical notions from the field, such as migration or transportation, which also involve movement. Unlike the later terms, mobility is an emerging, interdisciplinary approach that shifts the aim of geographical research. The ontological position of mobilities insists that mobility, understood as the "entanglement of physical movement, representation and practice" (Cresswell, 2012: 160) is a starting point, an object of inquiry in and of itself.

If we dissect Cresswell's categorization, looking at movement, representation and practice, we can begin to construct a complex framework for approaching learning mobilities without reducing it exclusively to the portability of technological devices. *Movement*, in our case, is useful for considering the degree of access people have to mobility and allows us to ask when and where (and for whom) movement is available or limited. When entering the schools we observed that mobile learning (from a technological perspective) was varied. While not all young people did have smartphones they did have cell phones (mostly with WiFi connectivity), personal computers and/or notebooks and internet access at home. While m-learning is a technological reality, we observed that that doesn't mean the young people we worked with had the same type of access; not everyone can avail themselves of the wide range of digital options that exist to support learning.

The *representation* of learning mobilities invites a reflection on the discourse that surrounds technology-enhanced learning and the responsibility of an ethnographic project like ours in contributing to this conversation. Prior to beginning our fieldwork we reviewed cases (Patel-Stevens, 2005; Ito, Baumer, Bittanti, et al., 2010) that revealed the disconnection between young people's engagement at school versus their participation in extracurricular activities that require a high-level of technological expertise and overall time commitment. On one hand these studies emphasize the rich learning practices young people develop that are not directly related to their school experiences, and thus appeal to our desire to expand the discussion surrounding school success and failure (Hernández-Hernández & Padilla-Petry, 2013). On the other hand, we also question the prevalence in the literature of what we suspect as being 'exceptional cases'. Rather than create a hard binary that cast the school as a negative learning environment, we wished for our research experience to become a productive site for questioning the very notion of learning "in and outside" school. When working with the young people, the nature and relevance of this distinction (in/out) became as much a focus of our inquiry as was the documentation of learning practices.

The third dimension Cresswell (Cresswell 2012: 165) names for studying mobilities is *practice*. Reflecting on Deleuze and Guatarri's (Deleuze and Guatarri 1987) description of nomadology, he reminds us that:

> mobility is 'channelled' into acceptable conduits. Smooth space is a field without conduits or channels. Producing order and predictability is not simply a matter of fixing in space but of channelling motion - of producing correct mobilities through the designation of routes.

To address this, in schools we posited the question: what elements from "in" leave the school and what elements from "outside" go in? The young people had an easier

time explaining why school was useful outside the classroom than identifying experiences from outside that were relevant within the school. These conversations about flow and friction began to give us a different understanding of the nature of school boundaries. It appears that they are not uniformly constructed; it is easier to go out than it is to get in.

This three dimensional perspective within the study of mobilities provides a road map for researching youth learning practices. We find that our question of how to study learning in and outside school is better answered by engaging with this entanglement, as it provides a structure for thinking through the different ways we discussed learning in our five research groups. Placing the emphasis on mobility was useful when collaborating with young people because the term learning on it's own is diffuse and hard to address, while introducing strategies related to mapping or representing the transition between in and out of school was a productive starting point for our ethnographic work.

4. Opening up educational ethnography to different sites/sights

By focusing on the multi-sited and mobile aspect of learning, our ethnographic approach tries to respond to and respect the complexity of young people's ways of learning. If learning is being re-conceived as a personalised and learner-centred activity then inviting secondary students to reflect on and share how this phenomenon is experienced may help us gain a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between physical, virtual and educational mobility. Leander, Phillips and Headrick Taylor (Leander, Phillips and Headrick Taylor 2010) propose three "expansive metaphors" for "the study of learning in space–time" (p. 330): learning-in-place, learning trajectories, and learning networks. Arguing against "historically sedimented geography within education research" (Ibid), their review of learning mobilities methodologically reveals what we experienced, that learning is not a fixed phenomenon but is produced across varied contexts and within a range of social practices.

Institutional pedagogy has a narrower understanding of learning, which in a school context tends to be prescriptive and curriculum-based. Our project, therefore, disrupted young people's established relationship with school as we invited them to reflect critically on the role of learning in their lives. The research practice engaged a *mobile habitus* where the five research groups began to actively construct their own understanding of learning practices based on the evidences they were able to gather and share. Virtual environments supported this process and were particularly useful in creating a work environment that was less at risk of reproducing the more unidirectional dynamic found in a classroom. Furthermore, our use of social networks and cloud services also became evidence that speaks to the learning practices of young people.

After this fieldwork experience, we could argue that in an effort to respond with integrity to our research topic we opted for a multi-*sighted* approach to the issue. The collaborative design imbedded in our project destabilized the eye of the ethnographer and redistributed the expertise in each group among the two university researchers, the six (or more) young participants and, in some cases, with the collaborating teachers as well. Perhaps opening the investigation up to a collective is a key step for developing a mobile methodology. The group approach forced the university researchers to confront their underlying assumptions about learning while negotiating the terms of the inquiry

with the younger collaborators (themes that we wished to develop didn't always resonate with them, for example) and created a more fertile environment for exchanging ideas, observations and analyses. In this context the site was not what lay in the line of vision of a single researcher. Instead, our work focused on a layered and polyphonic representation of learning, creating a virtual field based on the mobile practices of young people.

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