

Thoughts on blogging as an ethnographic tool

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The personal development that takes place within the institutional framework of the PhD has in the last decade attracted the attention of researchers and bureaucrats in Australia. The institutional framework that supports the degree, the experiences of individual students at set points in their process, the experiences of supervisors and the development of pedagogies of research have all been subject to investigation. However, the development of web logging software (blogging) has now made it possible to undertake a longitudinal study of a group of candidates. My project aims to create a community of PhD candidates who are prepared to both maintain weblogs (blogs) themselves and to read and comment on the blogs maintained by the other members of the group. Through these blogs I hope to 'open a window' onto an experience that has been characterised as mysterious and even inherently distressing. Issues have been raised concerning both studies and education conducted in online mediums: whether the internet is a culture or a cultural artefact, how it is understood and viewed by its users, and whether the degree of performativity inherent in self-presentation on the internet might be fatal to authenticity. These discussions are pivotal to the development of my PhD.

Keywords: online ethnography, doctoral process, blogs as research tools, research pedagogy

Introduction

The journey of development that researchers and scholars take within the institutional framework of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has in the last ten years attracted the attention of both academic researchers and bureaucrats in Australia. Some researchers (Neumann, 2003; McWilliam, 2002) have been concerned with the institutional framework that supports the degree, Others (Pearson & Brew, 2002) have researched the way that supervisors approach their task and made recommendations about the training that might be appropriate for this role. Still others (Lee & Green, 1998; Lee & Williams, 1999; Lee, 1999; Johnson, Lee & Green, 2000; Macauley, 2001; Vilkinas, 2005; Boud & Lee, 2005) have been more interested in what the experience of individual students reveals about both supervision pedagogy and the dominant discourses within academia concerning this highest rank of examinable degrees.

No study has thus far followed and tracked a group of candidates through their degrees, perhaps because until now there has not been an easy way for a group of candidates to interact and share their experiences as they happen. The development of software that supports the real-time online recording of events as they happen, a process called web logging (colloquially known as blogging), has now made a longitudinal study of this kind possible. My PhD project is to examine the process of development of a small group of PhD candidates over a period of at least one year by providing each of them with a blog and asking them to keep it updated at least semi-regularly and also to read and comment on the blogs of others in the project. In this paper I want to look at some of the issues of doing research online (methodology), what blogs are and why I am using them for this study (method) and briefly at some of the theories about how people learn online, and then discuss how both these theories and the results of my study might contribute to the development of one pedagogy of research skills.

Methodology

Debates concerning the purpose of ethnographic writing are ongoing, and are difficult to disentangle from the debates concerning both reflexivity and the political implications of writing ethnographies. If an ethnography is the story of a people, bounded by time and place, and ethnographers immerse themselves in the lives of communities they study to somehow 'know' them, how much does the Ethnographer's Tale become an element of the ethnography? And how much can or should a community be changed by the experience of being the subject of an ethnography? Then there is the vexed question of how the

ethnographer can ethically re-present her subjects. These issues have been the subject of much of my thinking in the year since I enrolled in a PhD, with the purpose of creating a community of PhD candidates in order to get some insight on the process of becoming a scholar, the making of a doctor.

A two-part special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (1999), with the general title *Reflections at the Millennium's Turn*, surveys current thinking about ethnography and its future. Denzin's essay 'Interpretive ethnography for the next century' makes a heartfelt plea for ethnography to become more political:

This is a return to narrative as a political act, a minimal ethnography with political teeth. It asks how power is exercised in concrete human relationships. It understands that power means empowerment, the give and take of scarce material resources. It seeks performance texts that tell stories about how humans experience moral community. (Denzin, 1999, p.510)

The issue of how 'power is exercised in concrete human relationships' between supervisors and candidates in the academy, which prides itself on being a 'moral community', has been discussed and dissected by Lee and Williams (1999) and Johnson, Lee and Green (2000). Their insights into the lenses with which PhD development has been viewed in the academy have been fruitful in the development of my thinking about what a PhD is, should be, could be and might be.

Doing ethnography online

Ethnographers have traditionally gone somewhere to study a community; online ethnography is done "on the seat of the pants" (Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998). It's the ethnography you can do without leaving your desk. Ethnographers traditionally 'immerse themselves in the life of a community' – does reading email in a closed group or participating in a chatroom provide material for an ethnography? Further, what does 'life of a community' mean in this context – as Rutter and Smith (2005) write at the completion of their ethnography conducted in a newsgroup, "What does withdrawal amount to when you have never really been fully 'there'?" (p. 88). Finally, when members of a community live most of their lives outside the context that forms the basis of a study (although not outside its influence, a point which will be discussed below), the 'immersion in the life of a community' that ethnographers aim for raises issues about the meaning of time in an online ethnography. Hine (2000) talks about "temporal dislocation" (p.65) to describe the feeling of moving 'in' and 'out' of online communities, which may move on where you're not there, but will also leave a permanent record of all changes. In my project, not only am I (as the ethnographer) a visitor to this community – the community that I have created – but even the subjects only visit this community intermittently. Yet in a sense we are 'there' all the time, while the study progresses: our words are there and can be responded to even when we are not.

The question of the distinction between 'real life' and the discussions that take place in 'virtual life', and which informs what when, is also ongoing. However, following Baym's seminal study of online discussion groups (1995) it is usually considered that "online groups are ... woven into the fabric of offline life rather than set in opposition to it" (quoted in Hine, 2000, p. 144). In my project, as in Hine's ethnographic study of websites that grew up around the 1997 arrest in New York State for murder and subsequent trial, conviction and deportation of the young British nanny Louise Woodward, offline experiences will actually create the fabric of the online. Additionally, online discussions may in turn influence the offline, which may then create more material for the online community, and so on....

Hine (2000) begins her book with a long discussion about the nature of ethnography as it is conducted in cyberspace, starting with the question of whether the internet is a cultural artefact or constitutes a culture in itself. How this question is answered by a researcher will determine both how a study is conducted and how its results are contextualised. How it is understood by ethnographic subjects will determine how they respond to an ethnographer.

Her answer, in short, is that it is both. Being both created by and used by humans as a tool, it is a cultural artefact. Joinson (2003) uses Vygotsky's (1978) word 'mediation' (explaining how tools allow for the extension of human capabilities), in his discussion of how word processing has affected the way we think about writing and editing. The online environment, similarly, has affected the way we think about written

communication. Until now, all internet communication has been written; now images repositories such as flickr, video repositories such as U-tube, and VOIP (voice over internet – effectively free phone calls using internet connections instead of mobile or landline networks) are helping to create what is becoming known as the Web2 environment – an environment that users create for themselves rather than being passive consumers. The word ‘producers’ has been coined to describe this phenomenon, and it remains to be seen how these will affect the way we view communication in the future.

I would suggest that in the six years since Hine published *Virtual Ethnographies*, the internet has become a kind of super-artefact: the meanings that its users attach to it have been shown to be out of the control of its inventors, of the individuals who continue to develop and maintain it, and of governments and institutions of any kind. Microsoft attempted to control its use with its Internet Explorer and Outlook programs, but was not entirely successful; open source software is rapidly taking their place, at least among savvy users and outside the corporate world. The Chinese government is (also unsuccessfully, for the most part) attempting to control its citizens’ use of it at the present time.

As a culture, the internet is as diverse as the cultures that make up any nation. But even this statement is, in a sense, meaningless. Hine (2000) considers herself to be "a culturally competent web surfer" (p.142). But she also points out that her claim is without evidential foundation – who could measure such a thing? There are whole continents of cyberspace that I have never visited and have only the vaguest idea about. They could turn out to be reflections of what I already know, or they may be entirely different – I have no idea. Yet I would consider myself to be an advanced web surfer – I know how to navigate it and read it, to have a gut feeling for the reality it is presenting me; I use it in very sophisticated ways.

Incidentally, I think that it is interesting that we use such geographical terms – place, space, continent, navigate to describe our adventures in cyberspace. Cyberspace is a medium – a word that immediately conjures up thoughts of unreality, of ‘in-betweenness’ between the real and the unreal, the corporeal and the spiritual. Also, quoting the old joke, is it a ‘medium’ because, like television, it’s neither rare nor well-done? But it is also a real place where real things happen. There have even been attempts to map cyberspace: www.cybergeography.org gives a history and describes current theories of ‘mapping’ in cyberspace. However, I would suggest that change on the Internet is so ubiquitous that it’s impossible to map it in any useful way, at least using maps that are modelled on real-world maps. The territory you have come to know and understand today may have changed its significance entirely – if it still exists – in six month’s time. In the blogging community I am creating, the blogs will change and morph throughout the period of the study.

Cyberspace has boundaries, but they are of a negative space – we are not ‘there’ when we are away from our computers – although of course that statement is also becoming outdated as mobile technologies give us the opportunity of being connected 24/7. It has laws, but they are contested and variable from one ‘region’ to another: in some places it is fine to be aggressive and to ‘flame’ other ‘residents’; in others this is a reason to be banned from interaction. Although it is often held that it is not good behaviour to repeat what is written in cyberspace in another forum, whole areas are dedicated to mocking the communications of others. The landscape is mysterious and unknown – markers change from day to day and the outcome of repeated actions may be variable. It often feels shifting, unsafe and uncertain. Rutter and Smith (2005) liken their involvement in a newsgroup to a telephone call: “... the place inhabited by the ... newsgroup is defined only by acts of interaction and communication” (p. 85).

So what landmarks do we use when we are moving around cyberspace? Hine (2000) suggests that the spatiality of the web is related to the territory of different websites (or blogs). You recognise them as soon as they open – you know ‘where you are’. When the Sydney Morning Herald redesigned its web page this year I was quite lost for several days, looking for my favourite links in the wrong places! And Hine also points out that we make meaning in cyberspace from the connections between sites as much as from the sites themselves – in my study the connections that the participants make between their blogs (i.e. between their reported experiences) in their comments will create the data for my thesis as much as the blogs themselves.

Ethnographers need bounded sites for their study; they define a bounded culture as their subject. I am creating a bounded site – the blogs won’t be visible to the trawling bots of a search engine, although people can give others the address of their own blog if they want to. And the study takes place within the

bounded culture of Sydney University, which occupies a physical place on earth. However, unlike an ethnography conducted in a bounded geographical area, the participants will bring many different cultures to this 'place' that I am creating the shell for, and that they will furnish and decorate: their cultural backgrounds, their disciplinary culture, their lives – as graduate students and whatever else. And of course we will all create a new culture, one of PhD bloggers that will be unique to our site. The spatiality issues in this study, the spatial divides and dimensions of the blogging community, will be provided by the disciplines, epistemologies and methodologies of the participants, not by their physical placement in the geographical sense (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

This study seems to be unique in its longitudinal nature and the level of immersion – other published studies of the PhD process have taken slices at progress points and conducted interviews, although Vilkinas (2005) asked candidates and recent graduates to each write a piece reflecting on their process. My idea of taking a group of candidates, keeping them in touch with each other for an extended period of time – maybe up to two years – and keeping a record of their interactions, will produce a lot of data, and should reveal something of what the PhD process means for the participants. One of the key pillars of the study is that it will depend on asynchronous communication.

There is a long history to the idea that asynchronous written communication can build relationships (e.g. war brides, pen pals). Salmon (1999; 2002) (among many others) has discussed how asynchronicity can lead to deeper and more reflective discussion in an online community – it will be interesting to see if this is borne out in my study, because my initial research question is “To what extent can PhD candidates be sustained in their development as researchers through the use of blogging?”.

Questions of time in cyberspace, as we have seen, are closely linked to issues of presence and absence, which lead in turn to questions about embodiment and performativity. The absence of embodied presence in online communication foregrounds the performativity of the experience. As Markham explains

To be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied there is to participate. To participate is to know enough about the rules for interaction and movement so that movement and interaction with and within this space is possible. Although this may not be so different than what we experience whenever we enter any strange context, it seems very blatant in cyberspace, perhaps because this process cannot be ignored, and because movement and interaction create embodied presence, not simply accompany it. (Markham, 1998, p. 24)

I have often been asked whether it will be a problem for my study that I can't see my participants – that they may be lying or may not even be who they say they are. I find this an interesting question, as it reveals a belief that participants in face-to-face interviews would never lie, or that the researcher would be able to discern if they did. As many famous historical examples have demonstrated, participants in ethnographies have been lying to ethnographers since ethnographies began. As my study is of long duration it would require a considerable effort to construct and maintain a false identity within it. Hine, anticipating such criticisms of her defence for doing ethnography online, finishes her study with this explanation:

I set out, not to investigate who people really were, but to interact with the features of their identities with which I came into contact. Identities [in this study] have been treated as situated performances, and as resources for the undermining of accounts. (Hine, 2000, p. 144)

Similarly, in my study I am not setting out to create an 'authentic account' of what a PhD is and how it is done; I am attempting to 'interact with the features of their identities' that participants choose to share.

Method

What is a blog and why is it a suitable tool for a study of the PhD process? A blog is most quickly described as an online diary. It is a special kind of webpage that has inbuilt features that enable the user to easily update it regularly. It has also has the capacity to store and display files, links and photographs,

both in the text of the entries themselves and in sidebar areas. Importantly, blogs come with the built-in facility for readers to make comments on what they have read.

Blogs have been described by Williams and Jacobs (2004) as having 'the capacity to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate, where complex and expensive technology has failed' (p.232). A blog is not only a space to write, but also a place to store and display pictures and graphics and make lists of links to useful references, to your work in progress, and to work completed. A blog is thus more like a cyber-desk than just a place to make and store notes, and a blog's ability to be shared adds the dimension of an ongoing conversation – the cyberdesk has a place for passers-by to add their comments to what they read, and in this study it is intended that the blogs of group members will be open to each other for comments, and that the blogs will be the tool for community building within the group. Although academic thinking about the uses of blogs in higher education is in its infancy, these uses are also continually being charted, discussed, predicted, reported and glossed in detail on blogs such as *Weblogs in Higher Education*. A very short list of education blogs (commonly called edublogs) is appended to the reference list. This tendency of blogs to comment on and aggregate the contents of other blogs is often referred to as 'the blogosphere'. As a 'region' of the internet (Hine, 2000) blogs are both a culture of their own and a cultural artefact. In this study they are the tool for gathering data, but they will also create a culture for the period of time that they exist.

I had originally thought of using an email list to conduct my study. However, websites, having the ability to be personalised with colour, text styles, pictures and layout, express personality more broadly than plain text. As Forte says, "Websites do not just tell stories; they contain stories within them about themselves." Both Forte (2005) and Hine (2000) believe that websites are given meaning by the links between them – by the communities that grow around, among and between them. With the addition of pictures, embedded links and the ability to leave comments, frequently updated weblogs give their owners the power to make strong statements about themselves, their feelings, beliefs and values. The availability of cheap and even free blogging software in the last five years has made it easy for even a novice to create and maintain a blog. Bloggers generally feel a sense of ownership in their blogs, and I hope that my participants will enact their own personal performances within the space I provide.

In addition, blogging seems particularly appropriate for my study because

- it is always everywhere available – this is literally true with the introduction of moblogging – the facility to post both text and pictures to a blog from a mobile phone
- PhD candidates are already familiar with the internet as a source of information, communication, and perhaps also support and organization
- participants retain control of their blog – it doesn't disappear at the end of a 60 minute interview
- it emphasises the idea of PhD as process rather than project.

The non-educational social nature of blogging has been explored by Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004) who claim that "blogs create the audience, but the audience also creates the blog". Their study of 23 social blogs maintained by university students, graduates and graduate students also found that the social dimension of blogging made blogs much more than online diaries; they classified the motivations that bloggers had to continue their blogging activities as to (p. 4):

- update others on activities and whereabouts
- express opinions to influence others
- seek others' opinions and feedback
- "think by writing"
- release emotional tension

With the possible exception of the first item in this list, which is the most transparent motivation for anyone to keep a blog, each of these objectives will provide a dimension in this study on the socialization of PhD candidates into academic argumentation and research culture. The last two are particularly interesting in the terms of writing about both the place of writing in the creation of 'the doctor' (Lee, 1998) and the 'distress' inherent in the PhD process in Australia (Lee, 1999).

Postgraduate pedagogies/online pedagogies

Johnson et al. (2000) explore the development of the 'autonomous researcher' in the terms of the traditional model of PhD pedagogy, which Leder (1995) refers to as having an 'apprentice-like' quality. Its fundamental aim was to teach candidates independence, using techniques that mostly amounted to varying degrees of abandonment. However, some supervisors who have challenged these practices and attempted to undertake a pastoral supervisory role report being overwhelmed by the needs of their students. Johnson et al. suggest that autonomy may need to be *developed* in candidates, rather than *revealed*, and point out that "new modes of knowledge production" (p143) and the current trend toward more collaborative production of knowledge within universities will require that researchers have more skills in collaboration, supported as they are, increasingly, by joint process. More recently Boud and Lee (2005) suggest that

a more appropriate pedagogic discourse should draw on the familiar notion of 'peer' from the world of research. It argues that peer learning, appropriately theorized and situated within a notion of communities of research practice, might be a productive frame through which to view research education. (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 501)

This proposed more constructivist approach to postgraduate pedagogy has echoes in the theories of how people learn online. Most successful online learning is associated with constructivist pedagogies (Maor, 2003). The well-known and often-repeated advice to teachers going online that they will have to move from their position as the 'sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side' implies the pedagogical position that students learning online are constructing their own knowledge from the available information, rather than accepting their knowledge whole from 'the master'.

The development of blogs and wikis (online tools for collaborative authorship) as educational tools has the potential to reduce the role of the 'guide on the side' even further – perhaps online teachers, like the absent supervisors reported in so many studies of doctoral candidate development, are now becoming 'the ghost with no post'. While those words are mine, the fear that teachers will largely disappear from education is often related to the development of educational technology without an attendant pedagogical framework (e.g., Taylor, 1995). Students working online can be left to share, discuss, problem-solve, and develop their own knowledge from sources of information that are now vast – indeed, as has already been discussed, the resources presented by the internet seem almost limitless. They must learn to judge the validity of what they find for themselves, and to develop the skills necessary to defend their positions within and through a group of people whom they may never see face-to-face. The (often misunderstood) role of 'guide on the side' is crucial to the success of this kind of educational setting (Salmon 1999; 2002).

Economic pressure rather than pedagogical preference is often the driver for institutional movement toward online teaching. It is also economic pressure that has raised the interest of both bureaucrats and academics in postgraduate pedagogy: pressure to lift completion rates has conflicted with increased time pressure on academics and an expressed wish by some academics for a 'softer', more supportive model for PhD supervision (Johnson et al, 2000).

Figure 1 uses a composite theory of online pedagogy to show how blogging might support the development of candidates. As online tasks move from academic engagement in reading material that has been placed online, through the social engagement of chat rooms and the more thoughtful and reflective work that results from reading and contributing to asynchronous discussion, participants move toward involving their emotions in the learning experience (Salmon, 1999). It is this involvement of the emotional dimension that has been identified by Lee and Green (1998), by Johnson et al. (2000) and by Boud and Lee (2005) as the most under-theorised part of PhD pedagogy. The use of blogging over time in this study will provide an online environment that will enable trust to build in the community, so that participants might establish emotional connections and relate in new and unpredictable ways.

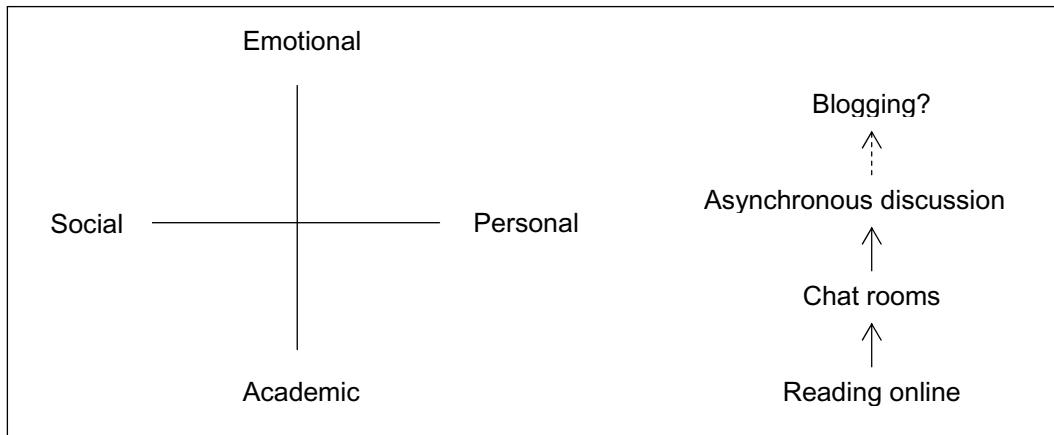


Figure 1: The pedagogy of cyber learning

A community of blogging PhD candidates has the capacity to bring together people who are learning how to become – how to negotiate for themselves – the building of the identity of ‘doctor’, both against and within disciplinary cultures and institutional strictures that can be traced back to the ideas of Voltaire and Rousseau (Johnson et al., 2000). Supervisors, of course, are themselves the product of this process and have been profoundly influenced by their own process of self-creation in their doctoral role (Pearson & Brew, 2002). This study will contribute to the complex question of how pedagogy can be understood within the supervisor/candidate relationship as discussed by Lee and Green (1998), and, most importantly, will be understood and enacted in the university of the future. At the heart of these issues lie the questions posed at the end of their article:

How is pedagogy to be best understood, in all its complexity and necessity, within the symbolic-disciplinary economy of the Academy? What stories (and counter-stories) need to be told? What spaces are there for different practices and voices in post-graduate contexts, including research in and for postgraduate studies and pedagogy? What new imaginings are necessary for teaching and research in and for the emerging postmodern university? (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000, p. 44)

Despite the differences in epistemologies that have often been categorised across disciplines (e.g., Becher and Trowler, 2001), the blogging by individuals of the common ground of their struggle (which may, in any discipline, involve ‘distress’, according to Lee and Williams, 1999) has the potential to create shared narratives of development.

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Educational weblogs

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- Incorporated Subversion (James Farmer)
<http://incsub.org/blog>
- elearnspace (Gerry Seimens)
<http://www.elearnspace.org/blog>

Bionotes

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