

Pedagogic Insights and Life History in Cyber-space

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Abstract

This article explores the opportunities available for using Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a tool for information gathering and research. A newly emerging research methodology known as cyber-ethnography is discussed. The aim is to explore how on-line research might support better understandings of the role that social communication plays in the learning process. The article also identifies a potential for on-line communication as a research resource for the life history tradition. Drawing on research into one teaching programme using technology to reach students across the globe two key questions are asked. The first relates to the potential for creating communities of discourse when participating in on-line interaction. The second considers the nature of the information revealed in providing insight to the learning experiences of those engaging in on-line programmes of study. Practical issues associated with the ethics of disclosure and ownership of cyber information are considered. Finally the value of this information for the oral historian is assessed as is the potential of ethnography as a research tool for life history.

Introduction

This article explores the opportunities available for using Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a source of information and research. A newly emerging research methodology known as 'cyber-ethnography' is discussed. The aim is to explore how online research might support better understandings of the role that social communication plays in the learning process. The article also identifies a potential for online communication as a research resource for the life history tradition. Drawing on research into one teaching programme using technology to reach students across the globe two key questions are asked. The first relates to the potential for creating communities of discourse when participating in online interaction. The second considers the nature of the information revealed in providing insight to the learning experiences of those engaging in online programmes of study. Practical issues associated with the ethics of disclosure and ownership of cyber information are considered. Finally, the value of this information for the oral historian is assessed as is the potential of ethnography as a research tool for life history.

What is Life History?

For many years the debate as to what constitutes oral and life history has occupied the minds of academics interested in stories from our past (Yow, 1994). Life history involves participants in reporting on their personal lives, through narrative, as a memory and testament to personal experiences. Oral history draws more on biography and personal reflections of specific historic events. This article is premised on the belief that e-communication is providing new sources of information for the oral and life historian. Researchers from this tradition are divided as to whether research data gathered in virtual space is oral history, life history or no type of history at all. Traditionally the oral and life history traditions have used in-depth interview techniques to draw on the memories of those whose testimony may often have been forgotten and excluded from documented history (Humphries, 1988), thus bringing history to life (Perks, 1995). Life history gives voice to the ordinary person whose testimony can concur or otherwise with the official documentation of historic and social facts (Bryam, 2001).

Researching Online

A new research methodology known as 'cyber-ethnography' (Ward, 1999) which enables the researcher to observe in ethereal terms, whilst conversations and histories are being run, is revealing unexpected sources of information previously not accessible to the researcher. Flick and Goodall writing on the use of interactive multimedia material in 1996 (Perks, 1995, p. 421) predicted the impact that ICT would have on the oral history tradition:

'Interactive multimedia is not only a tool for new presentations of history but a tool for reflection on our own roles and our craft itself.'

Hooper in 1979 recorded the influential part that the tape recorder played in making oral history a powerful movement. It is suggested that communication using ICT is adding a further dimension to oral and life history, giving it greater focus as a record of life experiences and life stories. This suggestion is contested by many oral and life historians who reject the premise that conversations in space constitute documentary evidence of the past (Perks, 1995). This article is presented to support the debate in favour of virtual documentary evidence as a record of our history. The example below describes how online discussions carried out at a global level provided insight into a world event.

Internet Legends

A centre page article in the British Times Higher Education Supplement, in 2002, focused on the net legends that have developed as a result of the terrible events in America on September 11th 2002. One persistent story focused on an unburned Bible in the wreckage of the Pentagon. According to this e-legend, a rescue worker found the Bible on an undisturbed stool whilst all around it was carnage. The propagation of the legend is an outcome of the global internet age. September 11th was the first major global event which resulted in millions of people using technology to find out what was happening and to pass on information (THES, 2002). Such developments pose questions for the oral historian regarding their information sources. Historians need to consider the impact of net legends and global narrative on our perceptions of world events.

Issues to be Addressed

There are a number of questions to ask. Firstly: what impact might the use of communication technology have on our understanding of events and what might be the impact of this medium as a research tool for life history? When virtual communication is used to support the delivery of educational programmes, what specific information is revealed and how might it, in the case of research into education, provide insight into the learning experiences of those engaging in online programmes of study? These specific questions arise out of the author's particular interests in learning communities and the role that social interaction plays in supporting adult learners engaged in education. There are, of course, a range of other issues that could be addressed.

The Technology

The most commonly understood use of internet communication involves email discussion which can cross barriers of time, place and space (Bosworth, 1985) to link people across the world. Telephone text messaging adds another dimension and research interest is developing into how this interaction is impacting on language with online discourse or electronic 'paralanguage' promoting debate in linguistic research circles (Mann and Stewart, 2000). This research focuses on internet chat rooms as established for academic purposes.

Purists may argue that researching communication in cyber-space is nothing more than the observation, participant or otherwise, of a number of interrelated conversations. However, the interconnectivity of the discussion makes virtual conversation more than a recorded debate, it is history in the making, developing at such a speed that past, present and in some cases (where time zones are crossed) the future, are recorded before they have reached the world media (I refer specifically to the communications between two students in this research who discussed online the political tensions in Nepal prior to the slaughter of the Royal Family in 2001).

So What is Cyber-Ethnography and What Can it Offer the Oral History Tradition?

Cyber-ethnography is the generic term used to describe research carried out in virtual communities.

It involves the researcher analysing interaction between people brought together through some common interest or goal:

'Cyber-ethnography is a study of online interaction. It allows the subjects being studied to talk back even as the process is occurring. The talking back is part of the cyber-ethnographic process.' (Gajjala, 1997)

Cyber-ethnography has the potential to explore the multiple facets of human communication. One example of research using the cyber-ethnographic method is Ward's use of cyber-ethnography to analyse communication between female email abuse victims sharing a virtual web victim support site (Women Halting Online Abuse [WHOA]) (see Ward, 1999).

The process of carrying out cyber-ethnography is not well-documented (Jones, 1997 and 1998). Gibbs calls for more research into online discourse using this methodology (2003). Cyber-ethnography provides a tool to enhance existing research methodologies such as the interview, the questionnaire and content analysis, and it also opens up the opportunity to research an emerging culture, namely that of interaction, communication and community on the Internet.

The Research Methodology

This research draws on evidence gathered using non-participant observation on a conference site developed to deliver part of a Masters degree offered through Open Learning. For researchers using ICT to deliver education programmes cyber debate can offer new insights into how students learn. This, it is maintained, can support theorists in the identification of key moments in the tutor-learner relationship which might lead to the success or failure of the student. ICT communication is providing insight into the learning experience and enabling researchers to track back to critical incidences in the history of the programme.

This research was carried out between 2000 and 2002 explored the impact of ICT on teaching and learning. Data was collected by the researcher observing the internet chat room of an International Education Masters programme delivered over two years by mixed mode. The mix was created through face-to-face lecturing on a two week summer school and ICT delivery through computer conferencing to facilitate the delivery of nine modules of study. This course was chosen for the

innovative delivery methods employed at the time. The research focused on the nature of teaching and learning in the virtual environment and field notes were made of discussion themes as they appeared on the conference site. These were then analysed into themes based on specific interest areas of course content, pedagogic issues, social interaction and community. The participants were aware of the researcher's presence, the researcher having met and discussed the research with the participants during the summer school. Interestingly the students never referred to the research in their discussions. It was as if the researcher was an invisible guest lurking unseen and perhaps forgotten, in the virtual community.

To provide further information, a questionnaire was sent electronically, using the conference site, to the 25 participants. This contained mainly closed tick box questions to give general information about the student group, age, sex, profession, and previous ICT experience. A further open question encouraged the participants to reflect on their experience of the course particularly in relation to the delivery method and its impact on teaching and learning. To support triangulation, in-depth interviews were carried out with the staff team who had developed and were teaching the programme.

The data, in the form of discussions between the students, produced from observing the virtual site, provided insight into substantive areas of what can be called evidence. The evidence available is discussed in relation to the two areas of interest addressed in this article: the first is testimony from the life stories of the course participants, the second relates more to pedagogic issues and provides insight into how the participant and academic staff adapted their approaches to teaching and learning to accommodate the new course methodology. The course under the virtual microscope involved the students and four staff working on a new initiative to deliver the Masters degree online using a virtual bulletin board and email communication.

Findings

The cyber-ethnographic research showed that as students communicated online to achieve their academic objectives, a community of learners developed which shared more than just academic aspiration in common. The research revealed that a network of support, with conversational

frameworks of 'we-relevant' information (Wilbur, 1997) developed between the course participants and staff. The discourse was personal and detailed. It is argued that the stories told highlight a dimension of life history which gives focus not only on the individual but also his/her position within the community they inhabit. That community is not static or even formally defined, it is created by virtual communication. 'Community', as a phenomenon of post-modern society, has been described as fluid. Membership is based on understanding, rather than proximity, of shared experience and common goal rather than regular association (Schuler, cited Jones, 1997). Cyber-ethnography gives the life historian access to the community and to a debate that illustrates a multiple world view. The researcher found evidence of an emerging virtual community. The research data provided further evidence of pedagogic import in offering insight into the complex features of adult learning. To examine this, the research evidence will be discussed under the headings of 'virtual community' and 'conversational learning'.

Evidence of the Virtual Community and the Life History Revealed

The existence of community in virtual space is much debated (Browne, 2003). It cannot be assumed that those involved in virtual communication automatically become a community, they are a group of people brought together through a common interest establishing the reality, status and principles of the group membership. Cyber-ethnographic analysis provides flashes of insight, a 'phenomenological snap-shot' (Wakeford, 2000). It allows the researcher to observe the participants whilst interacting, and provides opportunity to check understandings, re-visit areas of interest and observe developments as other issues interplay with the subject of study. This research revealed the growth and depth of communication over time and this leads the researcher to maintain that a community of mutual support was established between the course participants and the lecturing staff engaged in the debate (Browne, 2003).

One of the benefits of cyber-ethnography is the opportunity it affords for the researcher to re-visit the web site to seek further clarification or test out newly emerging perspectives. Multiple and sometimes conflicting views are expressed. The electronic record, rather like that of the tape-recorded interview, remains accessible to the

researcher should they wish to save it. In the case of debate in virtual terms, as opposed to the taped interview, it is the participants who establish the parameters of the discussion and define the status of the group (Ward, 1999).

In the research case, information shared with the community varied from participant to participant and over time. Immediately following the summer school face-to-face meetings the conference debate focused on the journey home, preparations for return to work and annual family events such as birthdays and anniversaries. Gradually more personal information was revealed: problems with teenage children and elderly relatives, forthcoming elections, the impact of government change and concern over a world recession. After six months of observation and involvement, it became apparent that participants were looking to one another more and more, not just for support with the demands of the course, but with life experiences and life situations. The lack of facial contact, far from restricting conversation, produced greater revelations. One participant recorded sadness at the second anniversary of her husband's death. This led to other reminiscences, followed by discussion about the role the course was playing in filling a gap in a number of lives.

By observing the site, the researcher gained information about the tensions between the members of the Nepalese royal family, the impact of an earthquake in India, first-hand information on contestants in the Para-Olympics which later became an international headline. A reflection on the inhuman treatment by the Taliban of the women of Afghanistan made in August 2000, which stated that

'Men who do this to women kind are a severe danger to humanity',

contains great poignancy in relation to the historic events which followed.

The conference space became an international parliament for worldwide discussion of key issues with a variety of perspectives presented reflecting the diversity of culture and ideology represented by the group members. The site also became the discussion board for problems at work. The participants were all teachers who gradually started to share their working lives. Advice was sought on employment issues, how to manage a disruptive child and how to support pupils when a classmate died after suffering a brain tumour. The

bulletin board became the support mechanism to carry the participants through their personal lives, the tapestry of joy and disaster which each felt able to share with the other. A mutual support group developed with major concern expressed if one member failed to communicate over a period of time. The course bulletin board became the nucleus of the community, and a vehicle for group support and counselling during the course. The cyber debate had produced oral history from a community of people across the world. The story told was from members of an ethereal community producing an oral history of their lives as they unfolded.

Conversational Learning

ICT is increasingly associated with greater learning opportunities for the self-empowerment of the individual learner. This 'rhetoric of technology' (Fitzsimmons-Hunter et al, 1998) is present in much that is written about ICT and teaching and learning.

In order to meet the ICT imperative, degree level qualifications which rely on the use of computer conferencing have taken the tenets of 'conversational learning' (Pask, 1976) and applied the model to produce interactive learning opportunities. The MA programme studied here is based on this theoretical model.

The concept of a conversational theory of learning proposes that learning occurs through conversations which seek to make knowledge explicit. The learning process is further enhanced through discussion and testing out of understanding with another. The theory as proposed by Pask (1976) provides a model which supports the investigation of the processes involved in learning complex subjects under controlled conditions. The starting point for conversational theory is the idea that:

'complex human learning is a concept involving communication between the participants in the learning process, who commonly occupy the roles of learner and teacher' (Pask, 1976, p. 45).

Very little research evidence is available to illustrate the pedagogic processes involved in ICT reliant teaching and learning. It is here that the life history tradition has much to offer. Just as life history has had a 'transforming impact' upon the history of the family (Perks, 1995), so it is suggested will the cyber-ethnographic research tool provide new

evidence as to how students learn.

The MA course studied here is modular by design. Course participants are required to achieve nine modules at pass grade or above. Each module follows a similar structure of theoretical input, workshop activity, set tasks, participant-led seminars and individual conference time with a tutor to refine the focus of the assessed work. By gaining access to the interactive process involved in the degree, the researcher was able to observe the development of a seminar debate about the role of the tutor. The virtual space of the computer conferencing facility supported by in-depth interviews with the staff team, provided evidence of what Laurillard (2002, p. 23) has referred to as 'adaptivity, discussion and reflectivity'. Evidence of adaptivity was found in the face-to-face interviews with the staff team who recollected starting the term by recording in type that they were entering the virtual classroom, opening the windows, setting out the tables and chairs, and looking forward to the discussion they expected to emanate from the selected text.

'The skill of conducting a fruitful dialogue via conferencing, unlike one-to-one or one-to-many, is as important here for the success of the interaction as it is in face-to-face situations, perhaps more so as there is less information from body language and facial expression to help the interlocutors' (Laurillard, 2002, p. 166).

One lecturer commented on the "touchy feely" nature of the course participants who required more personal support than was apparent with other groups. A strong bond of mutual concern and support had developed between the students at the Summer School and this continued in conference discussion throughout the course. The cyber-ethnographic research provided evidence of student support mechanisms proving to be instrumental in supporting retention and success. One student 'conferenced' (a new verb, evidence of developing ethereal language!) her thanks to the group for keeping her on track during a difficult time. The evidence supports Seely-Brown and Duguid's (1996) research on 'communities of learning' and gives greater insight into life events which can affect student achievement.

For the operation of the taught sessions a set text formed the basis of work studied in each module. When the course delivery methodology changed to include a student choice of study text, this

led to concern among the student group and to frustrations expressed when participants failed to engage. This led to an open debate about participant responsibility with agreement made by all course members to be more aware of the implications for others when one or two fail to take part. Readers with experience of traditional course delivery will know that differing levels of student engagement in group activity is a common problem rarely so amicably resolved. What is of interest to the student of life history is the openness with which the problem was discussed and a solution negotiated. Discussion as to why certain student members are not participating is not always easy in education circles due to the requirements for course leaders to remain impartial. The ethereal link between the course participants had facilitate a great depth of openness between the course members.

The level of debate prompted by the conferencing mode was, in fact, according to one member of staff, "beyond our wildest dreams". Lecturers admitted concerns that the level of debate would be stifled by computerised discussion. Contrary to their fears, the freedom of time to respond (the conferencing could not be synchronous because it crossed hemispheres) enabled a deeper level of discussion and debate (Browne, 2003). Students were spending more time thinking about responses to issues raised, as were the staff. The necessity of committing to type produced a more considered discussion. A review of the data produced from the cyber debate illustrates the conceptual level of discursive engagement and demonstrates how ICT is supporting a great depth of analysis. A student recorded how the methodology suited her:

'Having time to consider and respond online is particularly encouraging for me, a hesitant learner.'

The time allowed for reflection and analysis on courses using virtual methods is far greater than that provided by traditional methods which are tied to time, place and pace (Browne, 2003). Reference has already been made to the comments of one student who as a hesitant learner found the space between conferences, in terms of time, very beneficial. The interviews with the lecturing staff provided even more evidence to support this process. Two of the staff mentioned surprise at the quality of student responses during seminar session which were:

'much more considered than the quick response given in traditional debate.'

One of the lecturers drew attention to the extra time demands this was making on the staff team, since they too were having to offer more conceptually considered responses than might be expected in an open discussion in the traditional format.

This element of reflectivity and opportunity for additional time is particularly useful for courses which involve the combined elements of theory and practice. During the course conferencing debate, produced online, one student commented that she found the seminars most useful when the discussion centred around practice. She specifically focused on the opportunity provided to improve her own practice with support from all over the world.

The process is enhanced by the opportunity for reflection, observation and support from other students as well as the staff team. Students were able to reflect on email bulletin comments, try out something new in the classroom and report back the following day on their own success or otherwise. The links of theory to practice became real as course participants communicated with one another and suggested solutions to problems.

Once established, the group took on a maturity which enabled them to continue the course without the professional support of the lecturers. When the university communication system went off-line during a scheduled holiday up-grade, the students continued supporting one another and carried on with the weekly task until the staff were again available to join the discussion. The data revealed an initial period of anxiety before the students became confident to continue unaided.

Another specific aspect of student experience is worthy of mention, namely the recorded concern expressed when personnel changes in the university created a change of tutor for the student group. Detailed analysis of the data revealed how disconcerting and de-motivating this had been for the student cohort. One student admits to being "completely phased" by the change of tutor, particularly as she did not have much time to meet the new appointee during the Summer School. The cyber debate illustrates how hard the new tutor had to work to establish her credibility with the group. Eventually a student conceded:

'I now feel confident that you will support

us, but it has taken me some time to adjust to this change. I hope that you will remain our tutor for the rest of the course.'

This type of data supports the argument of Harkin et al (2001) in their focus on communication between student and teacher in the teacher-learner relationship. Harkin et al give particular focus to the style of communication that learners find supportive, illustrating how important this relationship is to the success of the course participant. The cyber-ethnographic data revealed that tutor/learner relationships are an important component in adult provision relying on ICT course delivery.

Work by Jameson (2000) has identified a period of 'creative mess' experienced by adult learners using ICT. She applies the term 'disarmament' to describe relationship breakdown in the teaching and learning process and advocates 'supportive scaffolding' to remove potential barriers to learning. Her research identifies the need for a model to help teachers understand and support the learning processes involved in ICT course delivery. The life history of learners adapting to new teaching and learning methodologies, as recorded in the cyber-ethnographic data, provides information to assist with this approach.

From the perspective of the students and the staff involved in the MA, this is clearly a success story in conversational learning. The questionnaire data revealed how much fun one student was having in communicating across the world whilst learning at the same time. However some anxieties are apparent during the conferencing. Since the debate was happening so naturally there were concerns that assignment writing would be more difficult.

'This is an extremely lazy and surreal way to study, by talking to people across different continents but it works!'

'The conferencing is so much fun that when it comes to having to produce the assignments, it becomes more difficult.'

Evidence from the student work showed these concerns to be unfounded. The staff team, when interviewed, all commented on the quality, depth and focus of the work produced, arguing that it was, in most cases, of greater depth than that produced through face-to-face delivery.

There is another dimension relevant to the success of conversational learning using ICT and that is

the issue of accessibility. This is a global success story but the oyster is only as large as issues of finance, language and access permit. The twenty-five students discussed here will all agree that they experienced something very novel and exciting but there is still a long way to go if we are to make it possible for people from all over the world to benefit from e-learning. The mutual benefit to all learners who can support and learn from one another, and gain enriching experiences from discovering how different cultures learn, practice and deliver pedagogy, is an opportunity opening up to us all as we embrace the scope of opportunities that ICT has in store.

It is apparent from this research that the opportunity to reflect, not only on the taught material but on the process by which the course was being delivered, has produced critically thinking Masters-level students who are committed to e-learning as a quality experience. The students, who are practising teachers, discussed how they could use the methodology in their own teaching. All of the students had experienced a new type of learning and will be prepared to sing the praises of electronic learning in the future. From the positive experiences of this cohort of students, it will be possible to record the progress of e-learning and map, over a period of time, the growing use of ICT in teaching and learning. The cyber-ethnographic data is providing evidence of history in the making as new methods of teaching and learning are tried and developed. Cyber research is highlighting critical moments in the teaching and learning process and giving greater insight into how students learn. What also is being recorded here for the life historian is a transformation in the way knowledge is disseminated and a reconfiguring of teacher-learner relationship. The data available are live and real, not subject to the twists and turns of memory, and as such does not fall into the criticism often levelled at life history of reminiscence by the unimportant and easily open to lapse of memory (Prins, 1991). Once the story has been committed to the screen the moment has passed, and that which is transmitted in the ether is life history.

Ethical Issues

In cyber-ethnographic research, there are the same ethical issues common to all qualitative research, that is the problem of the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. This is just as crucial with ethereal community

membership as it is with any group. In virtual research the researcher identifies which critical episodes to investigate thus leaving her open to criticisms of bias and subjectivity.

In the analysis and presentation of data, issues of honest brokerage apply. The unequal relationship, use of power, the intrusive nature of the research are all issues to be considered, as is the potential for exploitation of the innocent who could be unaware of the research underway. Cyber-ethnographic research raises an additional ethical concern in that the researcher has the opportunity to remain anonymous whilst viewing the discussion, a covert participant with an undeclared interest. The strong ethical code that exists in the research community should render this unlikely but at the time of writing there are no established codes of ethics which cover the virtual landscape. The potentially exploitive nature of the relationship in terms of authentic identities is an issue which needs serious consideration. Other ethical concerns involve issues to do with ownership of the data and the need for controls over how the research information is disseminated. However, there is a possibility that controls may restrict the current free flow of discussion and any ethical code needs to safeguard the public right to express themselves freely as new media tools become more accessible:

'Some communities of interest are ill-served by the dogma that insists on the universal extension of copyright protection on the internet' (Morrison, 2002).

The Future

This article has highlighted an emerging research tool which, it is argued, has much to offer life history. Cyber-ethnography has the potential to present a people perspective of history as it occurs before our very eyes, to give a broad brush vista of understanding to a social issue as the plot unfolds. Cyber-ethnography has the potential to become the research tool for the life historian, to re-define life history as a powerful medium for the twenty-first century. What proponents of the life history tradition have to do is to seize this opportunity and work with those researching online to demonstrate the benefits of such research for the research community of the future.

One of the advantages of the cyber-ethnographic research is the opportunity to cross barriers of culture, race and class. Life history is often

criticised for presenting a limited world picture but with the potential growth of ICT communication across a world wide spectrum, there is opportunity to record the testimony of a wide spectrum of perspective and viewpoint. The wider the net of coverage, the more likelihood of serendipitous discovery of new perspectives and histories. Life history is powerful and has a much respected tradition. What proponents of life history must do is realise the potential that ethereal research has to offer to their cause and become fully engaged in researching the truths of the virtual age.

Biography

Whilst working in Further Education, the author became interested in the increasing use of ICT to support the delivery of subject pedagogy. Upon moving to Oxford Brookes University, as a lecturer, but now Director of Secondary and Post-compulsory Education. Liz has pursued this interest in her research activities. She has written on the Management of Change in both Further and Higher Education and is particularly interested in current proposals to employ ICT more effectively in the delivery of the secondary school curriculum.

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