Abstract. Early definitions of virtual learning communities often abstracted participants from their offline environments. However, often students’ virtual and physical environments are not essentially separated. Likewise, scholars should become more sensitive to and aware of their research principles and practices guiding studies in virtual settings and especially, in the intersections of on- and offline contexts. The participant experience method discussed in this paper, grants access also to the events outside the virtual learning context connecting various social settings and simultaneous events. However, the use of participant experience methods requires critical reflection during its various phases and levels of implementation. Firstly, during the fieldwork, the relationship between researcher and researched should be reflected and the representation and reconstruction of these, often intense, field experiences into the field texts should be focused on. Secondly, the process and the inquiry that moulds the field documents into the research account should be highlighted. In order to represent both the researchers’ voices and the voices of the other social actors from the field, a multi-voiced analysis implemented as a split-text narrative is proposed.

Keywords: learning community, virtual learning community, virtual ethnography, personal experience methods, higher education, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

Early research on virtual communities often seemed to draw on the binary representation of the real and the virtual, in line with discussions over the Internet in general. But, as Jones and Kucker (2001) say, the ‘virtual’ cannot be totally...
disassociated from the ‘real’ and virtual communities are not an isolated social phenomenon in people’s daily lives – they are only one part of cultural and communicational practices as is suggested by Wellmann and Gulia (1999). In higher education, virtual environments are likely to provide a robust combination of distance and face-to-face education (Dillenbourg, 2000) and often, students’ on- and offline relationships are not essentially separated (Sterne, 1999).

However, the online context differs from face-to-face situations and also the dissimilarities should be explored and adapted to the concepts and to research practices in general (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Likewise, scholars should become more aware of their research principles guiding studies in virtual settings and especially, become sensitive to how they generate articulations between on- and offline worlds (Jones, 2002). Mann and Stewart (2000) point to a methodological shift from ‘research about Internet to Internet research’ (p. 4; see also Hine, 2000; Lotfalian, 1996). As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state, ‘If new tools have to be invented, or pieced together, then the researcher will do this’ (p. 2).

In this paper, a methodological perspective particularly aimed at capturing participants’ experiences in both virtual- and physical learning environments is discussed. The method was implemented as a combination of participants’ online diaries as text- and visual-based notes and through observations in virtual and face-to-face settings. Also, the material available in the online learning environment (i.e. project log and online questionnaires) was analysed. Because a community may be difficult to sense and to define from the ‘outside’, as it is argued for example by Shumar and Renninger (2002), the value of using this method was to identify the evolving virtual learning community through highlighting participants’ perspectives on community practices. In this paper the emphasis is on describing the participant experience method and its implementation in a higher education context. Firstly, online diary as a tool for investigating participants’ experiences is discussed briefly. Secondly, being aware of the complexity of the ‘researcher-researched’ dilemma and also acknowledging the demanding process of creating a balanced research account based on field experiences and field texts, a short fragment from a multi-voiced analysis is presented. In order to highlight the decisions undertaken by researchers during the research processes, participant’s experiences and researchers’ representation of the fieldwork and the other participants will be presented in parallel as a split-text narrative.

2. STUDYING EXPERIENCE

2.1. Narratives

Narration has a central part in human communication providing consistency and permanence to one’s experience (Bruner, 1990). Also, Carr (1986) argues, when people note something of their experience, either to themselves or to others, they do this in a storied form. Traditionally, in ethnographic studies, texts have played a minor role while oral interaction has been considered as the main resource for the analysis. Nevertheless, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), texts deserve
more detailed attention and deserve not only to be considered as worth of study, but also seen as ethnographic material, which can highlight participants’ understanding and experiences concerning the social practices they are participating in. However, it is important to combine a view of texts with an understanding of the cultural contexts they belong to (Thompson, 1995). The narratives become ethnographically and socially meaningful and relevant only when there is a setting in which to situate them.

2.2 Using diaries for collecting experiences

Basically, diary is a record of experience or activity, which may provoke participants’ different moods and states of mind on a daily basis. It can record events that may otherwise be inaccessible or are taking place simultaneously (Mann & Stewart, 2000). By means of this tool researchers will have access to participant’s perspective- an ‘insider’s’ view. However, diaries sit alongside other forms of data gathering to complement the data and represent divergent documentary evidence that can be made available for research purposes (Brady, 1999).

2.2.1 Text notes as emails

The design of an online diary specifies the kind of information that should be recorded or focused on. One option is to request participants to fill in a form and to send the file back at the end of the data-gathering period. This allows students to look back and refer to what they have written previously. Another possibility is to solicit students to send diary entries as emails at regular intervals over the study period. Online diaries, when carried out in the form of ordinary emailed entries, are comparable to ‘snap-shots’ at particular points in time. Again, as Mann and Stewart (2000) further add, the quick note-taking style of much email correspondence might decrease the sensation of being burdened by the assignment of writing journal entries on a regular basis. Participants’ thoughts might also be more ‘authentic’ since they do not have the former entries in front of them.

Even though an email diary is expected to be less time consuming than a traditional one, this method asks a lot from the respondents in terms of commitment. If the researcher is able to make personal contact and explain clearly to the participants what is expected from them and what is the purpose behind the request, obtaining, and also, retaining the co-operation of the participants might become easier. If respondents are ready and enthusiastic to be open about their personal feelings, the researcher must take care to build a trusting relationship with them. Also, it is important to agree procedures and detailed instructions concerning the aspects to be focused on in the diaries (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

2.2.2 Visual notes as photographs

Photographs taken by participants may allow another perspective or a ‘sequence’ on the working processes to be presented simultaneously with the other forms of data. With participants’ visual notes of other actors or of remarkable places and significant experiences, it is possible to capture special items or fragments that have
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a certain meaning for the participants. Since photographs are, according to Becker (1974), reflections of the photographer’s point of view, the taken-for-granted assumptions behind the pictures should be made visible (Harper, 1998). The more information there is about the occasion a particular photo came into existence, why it was taken and in what situation, the more ‘validity’ it has to the visualisation of the working processes. When including the point of view, voice and the experience of the author by means of a depiction or a short narrative, a single photographic image becomes part of larger narratives of participants’ personal experiences.

3. EXPERIENCING THE EXPERIENCIES: THE STUDY

3.1 Description of the study

The subjects of this study were teacher trainees majoring in English philology at the University of Jyväskylä (n=13) and University of Oulu (n=9). The staff members (university lecturers and researchers) came from the University of Oulu (n=2), University of Jyväskylä (n=3) and University of Leuven (n=1). The data were collected during a web-based course in the autumn 2002. The aim of the problem-based casework was to formulate joint research topics that were connected with the domains of culture and communication in virtual environments to construct the basis for further joint research projects in sub-groups. Students were requested to visit the web-based learning environment (called Discendum Optima) at least once a week during the eight-week period of project work.

The project work was carried out in four different phases. In the first phase Oulu and Jyväskylä had local face-to-face meetings where the web environment was introduced and the contents and the nature of the work was discussed with the participants. One of the course assignments for Jyväskylä participants was to collect a personal notebook during the entire period of project work. In the opening session the instructions on how to compose online diary entries were given and the procedures and the various details concerning the contents and the purposes behind the request were discussed personally with the respondents. Also, the disposable cameras for taking visual notes were given to the students. The interval over which the participants were expected to send the diary entries was negotiated together with the respondents.

The web work in Oulu and in Jyväskylä started at different times. Jyväskylä participants were initiated into the web discussions two weeks later than the students in Oulu. In this second phase students from both universities formed joint study circles and were discussing the main themes and concepts of the course with their fellow students. On the basis of the discussions participants defined their specific areas of interest and formulated research themes for the group workshops. In the third phase the participants worked together in sub-groups on the topics and questions defined collaboratively in the previous phase. The scope was to make a profound analysis of their research topics and to arrive at a research report including not only the description of their research topic but also consisting of the reflections of the shared research process. In the fourth phase the students presented their
studies during a videoconference meeting between Oulu and Jyväskylä participants. The project finished with an evaluation discourse concerning the content, organisation and the working processes of the course. The conversations took place in the discussion forums in the web-based environment.

In the study, the online diary was particularly designed to give access also to participant’s experiences outside the online context and to highlight processes that may otherwise remain ‘invisible’ or be simultaneous. The diary was implemented in the form of text notes (regular personal emails with the researcher) and visual notes (photographs and captions). Also, other forms of on-line material (log files, joint documents like project log, discussions in the discussion forums) and pre-, post- and in-progress questionnaires were gathered during the working processes. Additionally, the data included observations in physical environment, (videotaped face-to-face meetings) and recorded ‘Netmeetings’ and videoconferences. In the following representation the main focus is on the analysis of personal online diaries, jointly created project log and on the conversations in the discussion forums.

3.2 Multi-voiced analysis of participant’s experiences

The realisation of and writing on the research subject requires intensive reflection and elaboration of all of the various steps taken by the researcher(s) during the fieldwork and during the analysing and writing processes. To increase awareness and to elaborate the findings and the process of creating the research text, a multi-voiced analysis was chosen to highlight these practices. By using the split-text representation it was possible to make the research endeavour, the difficult and challenging step from the field texts to the research account, more visible and open to reflection. This issue becomes critical especially when the researcher shares the same ‘culture’ with the participants and is either a member or in some other way attached to the community practices.

3.2.1 Sara’s tale

In the following section multi-voiced analysis is illustrated with an example from an early phase of the study. The interpretation focuses on one participant’s (Sara’s) experiences during the process of forming the research group in both physical and virtual environments. The researchers’ reconstruction of the processes is portrayed as a split-text narrative. The representation of Sara’s voice is supported by quotations from her online diary entries, discussion forum messages and jointly prepared project log. However, in the final presentation, the analysis will be accompanied with more detailed and profound analysis of the multidimensional data available from both on- and offline environments. In the table 1 below, an example from the split-text narrative (Sara’s tale) is given.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researchers’ voice</th>
<th>Sara’s voice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Episode 2</td>
<td>[...] ‘Especially I think it is problematic that the people in Oulu have had this web course going on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This was a preliminary phase of the research</td>
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workshop. During this period, web work was mainly done in the ‘Key Concepts’-discussion list, but also the discussions in ‘Who’s who’-discussion forum did continue. During this phase the aim was to form research groups. Students were active to find common interests with each other.

[*The participants charted the field of this course by analysing the key concepts (culture, communication and virtual environments) and reading articles of their own choice or from the reading list (in the folder Resource Library).]

To join a group of Oulu participants’ was not motivating Sara. She did not find their topics very interesting. Sara was relieved that students were allowed to create their own group in Jyväskylä, around a more interesting topic. During a face-to-face meeting, she coupled with a fellow student, Lisa, from her local group in Jyväskylä. Sara and Lisa found a common topic that was related to the other studies they have to accomplish. In her diary Sara was writing that this experience was saving time, because they already have some previous knowledge and in this way they could process their thesis further. They were preparing for their bachelor thesis on autobiographies in which they would focus on how people reflect their experiences.

The next step to Sara and Lisa was to invite more members to join their research workshop.

for so much longer than we (a week, two?). They already have discussed their ideas and made study circles, whereas we are only learning to function in the environment. I think it would be easier for me, if we had started at the same time.’ […]
(Diary entry by Sara, 3.10.2002)

[…] ‘All the people in Oulu seem so ’professional’ in these kinds of things, whereas my experience is limited to e-mail and surfing on the net. They (people from Oulu) have a very ’sophisticated’ view of these things, are better in arguing their points, are better in using academic language etc. It seems that I have a problem of self-confidence! Anyway, it is not easy to go there and reveal one’s ignorance.’ […] (Diary entry by Sara, 3.10.2002)

[…] ‘This whole project began in the minds of two teacher trainees who have no previous knowledge of working in Optima or any other such environment. Due to their poor knowledge on anything that is related to the Internet (all these chats, avatars, largs, ircs and virtuality), they did not quite find anything to interest them in the discussions. So, they decided to come up with a topic of their own! These two students were Lisa and Sara…’ […]” (Project log, Group history, Sara, 4.11.2002)

[…] ‘[About the topic] ‘So, a point of true interest for us and also a very economical topic, since we can both use our previous knowledge on the subject and also start processing a point of view for our proseminar. So, I am happy today!’ […]
(Diary entry by Sara, 17.10.2002)

‘Pictures from digital camera by Sara. and Lisa, 17.10.2002, time: 14-16
Situation: Creating a new folder in Optima for our group (Communicating thoughts), in the room reserved for us.’

'I took this picture because this was probably the first time we came to an Optima meeting and were quite happy about that. Or at least that was the
Sara and Lisa had already posted a message together to the ‘Communicating thoughts’-discussion list. In this message they gave some information concerning their topic (the background and the reasons why they find this topic especially interesting). They also wanted to invite more people to join their group. Sara and Lisa also indicated their commitment and serious attitude towards their project by expressing that the research workshop in Optima is linked with the preparation of their thesis.

In her diary entry Sara was also expressing, that she would warmly welcome Oulu students if they would like to join their research topic. A day earlier, when Sara was writing in her diary entry in the classroom during a face-to-face meeting, there was a discussion about forming a research group and especially, with whom to form it. The words ‘(at least mine is)’ might have indicated, that Sara was not sharing the same feelings with some of her fellow students. In her diary, she was also pointing out that working from distance would make the use of the learning environment more meaningful and real.

During the discussions in the phase of forming their research group Sara and Lisa got some support from Rita (a university teacher). Rita was also commenting the ‘serious-on-this’-discussion. Obviously, Sara and Lisa felt that there was a certain ‘need’ to explain the meaning of ‘being serious’, so they replied to Rita’s message. Their messages in Optima gave an impression that they were afraid of nobody willing to join their workshop, for the reason of the their ‘non-academic’ previous messages. Their message indicated that their earlier messages were bothering them.

During that same day, when Sara and Lisa were still approving their commitment, Tina from Oulu-group sent a message to ask (kindly), if she could join to their research group.

Sara was pleased, when an active member, Tina, from the Oulu-group, wanted to join their project. In her diary entry she shows that she had been situation with me (Sara). We are just about all grouped. [...] [...] ‘We are all getting on quite well with Optima (I suppose, all of us having our topics just about decided), and that is great!’ [...] (Diary entry as a visual note by Sara, 17.10.2002)

‘Hello everyone! This is Sara and Lisa from Jyväskylä. We are going to start a discussion here:) Actually, we are doing our proseminar (teacher training) on autobiographies, or more exactly on how people reflect their experiences about language learning. So, this is our starting point for this new topic.’ [...] [...] ‘Join us, all you interested in this kind of a project!’ [...] [...] ‘And, we really are serious on this.’ [...] [...] ‘Kind of feeling not-so-academic already. We’ll get back to you soon.’ [...] (Key Concepts-discussion forum, Sara and Lisa, 16.10.2002)

 [...] ‘And topics that are (at least mine is) completely open for the Oulu people to join if they are interested. So, no need for “them” to try to be interested in our topics and no need for us to be interested in LARP, IRC and the other letters.’ [...] [...] ‘It would be very nice to have some Oulu people (I have to stop using this negative term, but it is so descriptive... Maybe I should start considering it as a positive one?) in our group, because they are using the personal logs in Optima, and also they might have a little bit different views since they seem more “technological”. And, it would make the virtual learning environment -learning more authentic for us. [...] (Diary entry by Sara, 17.10.2002)

 [...] ‘Actually we did not claim that we might not be serious with this whole Optima-thing. It was just that our letter to all you others was not very “academic” because of the rather long day... So, we are serious with this project (been that all autumn long), but we are also serious with our topic and would really like you all to join us (well, not all of you, but those who are interested...!) So, see you in research workshop!’ [...] (Key Concepts-discussion forum, 17.10.2002)

‘Hi there, Sara and Lisa, I would like to join your group, if it’s OK =) Tina’ [...] (Key Concepts-discussion forum, Tina, 17.10.2002)

‘So... I am thrilled! We have a very active Oulu-person (Tina) in our group. So, no we get a real experience of virtual learning, I’ve been keeping...’
following the other participants activities in Optima - who is active and who is not…

She also expressed her positive feelings to Tina straightforward in the discussion forum messages.

According to the statistics of 25th of October available in Optima it was possible to verify that Tina was the most active student during that time; Sara’s impression was correct.

The grouping seemed to be inspiring and also later on Sara was thinking over how this all did happen. She was wondering how they ‘found’ each other, because ‘Netmeeting’ was the only situation compared to face-to-face conditions. During the Netmeeting Sara noticed that they are so alike; for example they share similar ideas and they have the same sense of humour. She was wondering how did they sense all these aspects in a virtual environment. The answer might be found from the very beginning of the web work (Phase 1), when all the participants were introducing themselves in the ‘Who’s who’-discussion forum. During this preliminary phase Sara and Tina had a long discussion in which they both were revealing intimate details from their family life. In these non-formal and out-of-the-topic discussions they might have found ‘soul mates’ in each other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistics at the 25th of October</th>
<th>Tina, 24.10. 2002</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1when, 2object opened, 3created documents, 4sent messages, 5read messages</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

4 DISCUSSION

The adequate use of personal experience methods requires intensive reflection and elaboration of its various aspects and different steps (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Firstly, during the fieldwork, the critical relation between researcher and those researched should be emphasised; secondly, the representation and reconstruction of the field experience as a text should be focused on and also, the process and the inquiry that shapes the field texts into a research account should be highlighted.

Hine (2000) argues that the ethnographer inhabits a kind of in-between world, being simultaneously a native and a stranger; seeking for a balance between being an involved co-participant and an independent researcher. However, the researcher’s relationship with the participants affects the collection of data and the memories are present in the reconstruction of the field experiences. Likewise, the process of shaping the field documents into the research descriptions by looking for various patterns, narrative threads and themes of the texts is depended upon and created by the writer’s experiences during the interaction in the fieldwork (Coffey, 1999).

Although there are several methodological reasons for maintaining critical distance between the researcher and the ‘informants’, it is also unrealistic to assume that researchers do not become, even partially, tied to the communities in some manner. Additionally, studies are not always conducted by complete strangers to the ‘culture’ and the concept of an outsider or insider may to some extent be relative and
blurred (Jones, 2002). Not to be sensitive to the centrality of relationships in doing research may lead to problematical misconceptions and deceptions (Crites, 1979).

To apply ethnography in a virtual environment involves different kind of interaction and objects to do research from conventional ethnographic studies (Hine, 2000). Hine embraces virtual ethnography both as a textual practice and as lived activity. Rather than only downloading archives and mainly relying on textual analysis, a more active form of ethnographic engagement with participants is needed. The shift from the analysis of passive discourse to becoming a more active participant in its creation may allow for a more profound sense of understanding the processes itself. Questions can be asked and emerging concepts refined together with the other social actors. The definition of ethnography as participation highlights the interactive aspect of ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995.)

Further, to acquire a holistic sense of social processes in virtual communities, online or offline, scholars should focus not only on the community level, but also on individuals- to understand individuals and their relationships together (Jones, 1999). Also, people tend to participate in several social contexts and social practices, with different personal meaning and commitment involved in them (Dreier, 1999) and these aspects may be critical to understanding the engagement and the relationships in virtual learning communities too.

5. AFFILIATIONS

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