Ethnographies across virtual and physical spaces: a reflexive commentary on a live Canadian/UK ethnography of distributed medical education

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Abstract

This article draws on an ongoing ethnography of distributed medical education provision in Canada in order to explore the methodological choices of the researchers as well as the wider pluralisation of ethnographic frameworks that is reflected within current research literature. The article begins with a consideration of the technologically mediated ways in which the researchers do their work, a way of work that is paralleled within the distributed medical education curriculum that forms the focus of the ethnography. The article goes on to problematise relationships amongst the researchers and between the researchers and the field of research, and to consider the ways in which methodological choices are mediated. In so doing, the article proposes an acceptance of methodological pluralism that is tempered by the need to acknowledge the sometimes-slight differences that distinguish ethnographic paradigms.

Key words

Inclusive ethnography; institutional ethnography; medical education; methodology; multi-sited ethnography; virtual ethnography.

Introduction: a technologically saturated field of research

Hybrid learning communities are those that make use of a range of multimodal technologies to develop formal or informal learning. (James and Busher, 2013: 195)

Higher Education in a Digital Economy (HEDE) is a three-year ethnography, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The broad aims of the project are to explore issues that surround the implementation of a new medical education curriculum that is enacted across two university campuses in two provinces in Canada (New Brunswick and Nova Scotia). The new medical education curriculum has been designed to rest on information and communication technologies (ICTs) 'from the ground up': that is to say, the use of technology (digital video, digital learning platforms, e-learning devices and such like) functions as a means to enact synchronously a curriculum across two distinct locations, as distinct from the use of technology as an 'additional' feature within a curriculum that could still be delivered were the technology not present. Thus, instead of simply designating a curriculum as being an example of 'blended learning' through the post- hoc provision of e-learning resources alongside or on top of an existing 'real world' curriculum delivery model, this new medical education curriculum can be understood as only being possible through the affordances offered by ICTs. Without ICTs, this curriculum could not have been written and enacted in the ways that it has been. Moreover, mindful of the distributed nature of this new curriculum, it is perhaps appropriate that the research team that is exploring this new curriculum – both its adoption and the ongoing experiences of the staff, students and faculty who are enrolled within it – should be similarly distributed, and thus similarly reliant on ICTs for their work together. The research team consists of eighteen people: the majority of the team are in Canada (distributed across three provinces), and two are in the UK. Thus, both the new curriculum and the research team that is exploring this Distributed Medical Education (DME) provision, are accomplished through and because of ICTs.

The project is approaching the halfway stage, having been active for about eighteen months. Much has been accomplished in this period. The literature relating to distributed medical education has been reviewed. The theoretical tenets of institutional ethnography and actor-network theory (the two significant theoretical foundations for the project, although the latter is not a subject of inquiry within the present article) have been debated, critiqued and sometimes disagreed with during the research team's online meetings (which have ranged in style from informal discussions to formal presentations by individual members of the team). Policies and protocols for the analysis of paper-based and online textual documents, including photographs and videos (one of the major sources of primary research data for the project) have been discussed, piloted and then rolled out across the research team. Thus far, 60 different texts ranging from institutional policy documents to YouTube videos have been analysed by 11 different members of the research team. The first tranche of semi-structured observations has also been carried

out. At the time of writing, 108 observations of lectures, seminars, and staff meetings have been conducted by 5 members of the team across the two research sites and a framework for analysis based on Spradley (1980) has been discussed, piloted and then operationalised. Data from the observations is, at the time of writing, being analysed as part of the preparation of two distinct papers being written by different members of the research team. Protocols relating to access and use of the data developed by the team are close to being finalised: an 'open access' approach is being established in order to allow shared access to and ownership of the data across the research team (and which in itself is the focus of a third paper being prepared by some of the other team members), a practice which is facilitated through the use of a web-based data management system. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, the members of the research team have got to know each other, to talk, joke and share frustrations with each other as we discuss issues such as data access, the analysis of online as opposed to paper-based texts, or the desirability or otherwise of anonymity in research.

During this time, a number of interesting and important methodological and epistemological questions have begun to emerge. What is the nature of the relationship between the different members of the research team – the ethnographers – and the field that they are researching? How does the team actually do its work? How has the field been constructed or described? Are the ethnographic frameworks and concepts that the research team have drawn on doing enough to explain or make sense sufficiently of the work that is being done within the HEDE project? Or, to put it another way, what might a *reflexive* critique – here understood as a characteristic of ethnography/ethnographers that requires a critique of the structural preconditions that shape the practices of and the relationships between the researchers and the researched (Crang and Cook, 2007) – of the project shed light on in terms of method, of methodology, and of epistemological and ontological assumption?

Higher Education in a Digital Economy: a framework for inquiry

> *Institutional ethnography (IE) is a method of inquiry that uses interviews, observations and document analysis to investigate how work done with texts in organisations coordinates local, lived experiences.* (Walby, 2013: 141)

Our research aims to explore the lived experience of students and faculty as participants within a distributed, technologically-mediated medical education curriculum, and to contrast these experiences with the dominant discourses of technologically-distributed medical education that are scripted by the institutional context – the context of not only a specific faculty at one university, but within HE more generally in Canada and North America (and, arguably, other national contexts as well). As ethnographers, we are interested in the ways in which the people who actually 'do' the curriculum – students, staff, ancillary and support staff – work within it, make sense of it and talk about it. We are

interested, therefore, in what these people do at a local level, in lecture halls, tutorial rooms or videoconference rooms, on an everyday basis. As opposed to a 'top down' perspective on curricular renewal and implementation, we are interested instead in a 'grassroots' standpoint.

Such a focus on the everyday experiences and everyday vernacular knowledge of people is characteristic of *institutional ethnography* (IE), as is a consequent focus on the ways in which these experiences are coordinated (Campbell and Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005, 2006; Taber, 2010; Walby, 2013). IE therefore has provided us, as researchers, with a number of important and useful conceptual tools. IE explores the ways in which everyday work (understood in IE as being anything that people do that requires effort, intent and some acquired competence) at a *local* level. In our research this locality might be the lecture hall or seminar room. The local, in IE, is always linked to the *trans-local*: those social, administrative or geographical spaces that are outside the boundaries of people's everyday experience. In our research the trans-local consists of two elements: firstly, the wider institutional culture of the university within which the curriculum is delivered; secondly, the wider political and professional arena of medical education. The ways in which the trans-local shapes and influences the local is understood in IE to be mediated by *multi-modal* texts, which might be paper-based, screen-based, words, images and so forth (Kress, 2003). Thus, institutional discourses are translated into people's work through a *text-reader conversation* (Campbell and Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005; Tummons, 2010), a key concept in IE, which describes the moment that a reader takes up a text and then acts upon it, or in response to it in some way. In turn, a lecturer would engage in such a conversation when reading and making meaning from a curriculum document, or from watching a YouTube video that provided instructions concerning the use of the new Videoconferencing facilities, for example. A student reading an assessment brief or viewing lecture notes on her/his laptop screen would similarly constitute a text-reader conversation. And because many such interactions in themselves might lead to the inscription of new texts (something that is particularly true of a university curriculum), IE leads the researcher to consider the *inter-textual hierarchies* of – the relationships between – the different texts that are produced, read and acted upon (Smith, 2005).

In order to explore and explicate these practices, IE draws primarily upon participant observation, text analysis, and interviews. If the researcher is to understand the discursively-organised setting in which the problematic of the research is located, it follows that the ways in which that setting is organised need to be observed with a particular focus on the observation of the use of texts and inscription devices (Diamond, 2006; Jones et al., 2014), and talked about with the people who work in that setting in interviews with a parallel focus on the texts that people use and create (Devault and McCoy, 2001; McCoy, 2006). The analysis of text, with a particular focus on the ways in which texts represent and promulgate the dominant discourses of the institution, takes place alongside these other methods of data construction. In our research all three of these data-construction methods are being employed, across

both physical and virtual sites where necessary: observations have been carried out in lecture halls but also of on-line lectures, and the behaviours of students in both real and virtual spaces have been explored; a variety of modes of text have been analysed, ranging from institutional pdf documents that set out the ICT policies of the institution as they pertain to the medical education curriculum, to YouTube clips made by student groups.

The final distinctive features of IE as a mode of inquiry to be discussed here relate to what in IE is termed *standpoint*, defined as "a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge or political economy" (Smith, 2005: 10). IE places a focus on the perspectives, interests and knowledge of people, as distinct from the overarching explanations of the researcher, reflecting the feminist and Marxist roots that underpin IE. In our research this standpoint allows us to foreground the perspectives of the students and the lecturers who actually work within the medical curriculum – their experiences of distributed education, of working with and responding to the technologies that the curriculum rests on, and of moving between physical and virtual spaces during their work.

Problematic issues in ethnography: unpacking research methodology

Unless you, as institutional ethnographer, self-consciously attend to your own research stance, you may leave behind the problematic of the everyday world... (Campbell and Gregor, 2004: 52)

Having established that our research rests on key concepts drawn – not uncritically – from IE, we now return to a broader reflexive critique of our methodology. The first element of this reflexive critique rests on an unpacking of a number of issues that can be categorised as *problematic*. By problematic (appropriately, a concept drawn from institutional ethnography) we mean to draw attention to problems or questions that may not yet have been posed but which are nevertheless latent in the experiences of a social actor (Campbell and Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005).

Some of these problematic issues are procedural. Consider, for example, the role of ICTs in enabling the research team to do our work. It is and has been taken for granted that ICTs are needed in order to allow the team to do their work as an integral element of the ethnography. And, as has been seen in other similar ethnographies, problems can and do emerge relating to the time needed to learn how to use the technology, the reliability of different ICTs, how to respond when technology breaks down, and so forth (Gallagher and Freeman, 2011). Our research team has begun to respond to a number of such matters. Many of these are quite practical, almost prosaic. How do we mute our microphones when we are talking live and sharing PowerPoint slides using the GoToMeeting web conferencing tool? Should

we use N-Vivo or Atlas-Ti – two excellent but somewhat different qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) programmes – to organise, collate and code our qualitative data, and how long will our chosen software take to learn to use? (In the end, we went with Atlas-Ti.) Given that project members span eight different time zones, how can we ensure that we choose appropriate on-line meeting times? Even though ICT's can overcome physical distance, they are unable to bend time. Questions such as these are of course straightforwardly anticipated. That is to say, it is a simple task to imagine questions such as these arising amongst or being anticipated by a team of researchers, not all of whom have necessarily conducted ethnographic research – or educational research more broadly – before now, but who are experienced researchers in other fields, users of other ICTs and so forth.

However, in addition to the kinds of problems listed above relating to the technical and practical work of our ethnography, the doing of the research work within and through a technologically mediated environment leads to questions that can be seen as being more profound, certainly less procedural and certainly more philosophical. Some of these relate to the ways in which the researchers' identities are constructed. The mediation of identity through ICTs raises considerable epistemological and ontological concerns. The production of discourse in an online space that is physically apart from the body is one such concern (Markham, 2005), necessarily resulting in a diminished space for paralanguage (facial expression, gesture and movement) within communication that necessarily impedes particular forms of communication and of meaning making (Duck and McMahan, 2012). The rendering permanent (or 'concretisation') of discourses that would, outside an environment mediated by ICTs, be temporary, is another (James and Busher, 2013). The knowledge that what one says is also being recorded and can be scrutinised by people who did not take part in the original (on-line) conversation can lead to changes in how one talks and, thus, to changes in how one presents and engages as a social being – a process that can be more or less deliberate (Angrosino, 2007).

And at the same time we need to acknowledge three particular critiques of IE that can also be seen as pertinent to qualitative inquiry more generally. Firstly, as ethnographers, we need to investigate rigorously IE's claim to cause to disappear from view the standpoint of the researcher in explicating the interests of those about whom the research/knowledge is being constructed (Hammersley, 2008: 25 ff.). Secondly, we need to consider the extent to which IE engenders what has been termed a "qualitative realism" (Walby, 2013: 151) that purports to represent what "is actually happening" in the field (Campbell and Gregor, 2004: 94). And thirdly, we need to account satisfactorily for inequalities of power within the relationships between researcher and researched (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Kvale, 2006). These are critiques that are under-explored in IE literature but which are found in wider literature relating to qualitative research and which we are addressing in our ongoing work.

The vital nature of these questions (and, perhaps, other questions that have yet to emerge from our work) is, appositely, reflected in the themes that have begun to emerge from our empirical data. Consider the issues raised above relating to the mediation of meaning in a virtual space, or the impact on meaning-making of restrictions in movement or facial expression. These same problematics are emerging in a parallel form in our fieldwork (and are the focus of one of the aforementioned forthcoming papers). The experience of delivering a plenary lecture, delivered at one campus location but simultaneously streamed to the other, provides a good, and typical, example. The lecturer is required to stand or walk only in a very narrow space, marked out on the floor, so that her or his image and speech can be reliably captured. Whilst attending to the students who are present in the same physical lecture room, the lecturer also has to be mindful of the students who are present in the remote location: s/he has to observe the remote students who only appear on screen whilst also paying attention to her/his teaching materials that will appear on a different screen. Something as simple as walking around the lecture room in order to gain students' attention or to emphasise a point becomes impossible. In order for students at both sites to take part in question-and-answer sessions, a push-button system has been introduced. Students – at both sites – push a button next to an adjacent microphone when they wish to raise a point, and the lecturer pushes a button at the podium in order to 'activate' the next question in the queue. But questions are answered in the order that they are 'asked', not in any order of relevance or logical progression to a preceding point or theme. And for a question that has been asked by a student at the remote site, the lecturer cannot rely on paralanguage, on gesture or other action, as a way of ascertaining that the response has been understood fully.

The ways in which technologies (webcams, laptops, software, web browsers, ipads) change how we talk, look, act and even write are enfolded in the practice of our Higher Education in a Digital Economy ethnography – in the practices of the students and staff whom we are researching and in our own practices as ethnographers. And these are *problematic* because they constitute a set of questions that are fundamental, yet latent, to the ethnography: they are present within the ethnography but have taken time to emerge and become foci for reflexive attention.

Wicked issues in ethnography: unpacking research paradigms

> *Wicked issues are ill-understood, there are many causal levels, there is no clear 'stopping point'*
> *where a solution has been reached and solutions are not clearly right or wrong.* (Trowler, 2012: 273)

An ethnography such as this one, that is both characterised by and defined through technology, raises not only problematic issues relating to method and methodology such as those outlined above but also complex and messy issues relating to whatever it might mean when we – or others – talk and write about 'ethnography' in terms of research model or methodology. Such arguments reflect both historical and contemporary discussions surrounding ethnography. In turn, our discussions – the ways we talk and write about our ethnography – are informed more specifically by insights offered to us from institutional ethnography, as we have outlined above (Smith, 2005), but also from multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), and from online ethnography (Gatson, 2011) – themes that we shall return to later. These arguments, we suggest, can be best understood as being 'wicked', and by 'wicked', we mean to refer to problems that are complex, and defined or described differently by different social actors with consequently different – and by no means commensurable – solutions (Bore and Wright, 2009; Trowler, 2012). Wickedity is, therefore, the second element of our reflexive critique. We discuss two wicked issues here. Firstly, we consider the *field* that our research project is seeking to explore, and secondly we consider how different kinds or categories or *types* of ethnography might be constructed.

Wicked problems [i]: field

How are we to understand the construction or description of the field that, as ethnographers, we will be researching for HEDE*?* It is not a field in the sense that 'field' is understood by 'traditional' anthropological ethnography, not least as significant aspects of this field do not exist in a physical sense. After all, it is not a field that, in its entirety, can be materially connected with the ethnographers. In this context, it is impossible for us as researchers always to perform the expected roles of the ethnographer as having direct, personal experience of the places or spaces being researched (Landri, 2013).

When defining the field of our research, a number of factors need to be considered. We need to think about the organisational context of the ethnography. We need to consider the consequences of having several research team members working at different locations within the organisation in question whilst others are very much without. Issues of location and access are made complex in our research: the 'insider knowledge' that allows some of our research team quickly to negotiate routes to gatekeepers and key informants is tempered by the need – as for any researcher of their own workplace – to prevent damage to their organisation, and to prevent harm to their colleagues or vulnerable others (Gibbs, 2007; Neyland, 2008). But the field of our research is not straightforwardly aligned with this organisational context. By this we mean to stress that our ethnography is not 'of' an organisation ('institutional' ethnography is not simply ethnography of an institution (Smith, 2005), and 'organisational' ethnography is

something else again (Neyland, 2008)). Our field encompasses not only two campuses which are geographically distant (but which at least are straightforward to identify and therefore put boundaries around) but also a more nebulous online space and place, mediated by ICTs. At the same time, different members of the research team have differential relationships to these spaces, in terms of not only geographical proximity (or lack thereof), but also organisational and hence, arguably, cultural proximity as well: some of the team are insider-researchers; others are very much outsiders. Questions that are complicated to some lead to answers that are simple to others.

The relationship between the research team and the field is, therefore, somewhat complex. In part this is due to the nature of the research team; and in part this is due to the nature of the field. And it seems right – obvious, even – to highlight this. How can researchers who are living and studying in the UK be seen to conduct ethnographic research within a medical education curriculum in Nova Scotia in the same or a comparable way as those researchers who are members of staff, both academic and professional, at the institution in question? And how ought a field that consists of both the virtual and the physical be made sense of within an educational ethnography paradigm?

The problem of field – how it is defined or constructed, and how ethnographers are related to it and move around within it – is enfolded within and necessarily leads us to a wider discussion of types of ethnography and of ethnographic method. We draw on IE in order to conceptualise our research, which can be seen as a quite specific framework for inquiry but which nonetheless sits within a wider ethnographic tradition. Our research is field-based; it is inductive; it is immersive research; and it rests on methods that are common within ethnographic research more generally: interviews, observations and the analysis of cultural artefacts (which in the case of our research predominantly consist of different kinds of multi-modal texts, both paper and screen based, and of the different technologies that are used by students and faculty). These elements are typical of ethnography (Angrosino, 2007; Angrosino and de Pérez, 2000; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Tedlock, 2000) and it is within this tradition that the HEDE project is situated.

So what of field? Knowing what we know about IE's commitment to an interpretivist, rather than positivist, epistemology, it is perhaps unsurprising that IE in turn subscribes to a social ontology (Tummons, 2010). Thus, reflecting IE's central focus on texts and textually-mediated knowing and action, fields or *sites of interest* (to use the language of IE) are distinguished by two characteristics. Firstly, a site of interest is discursively constructed. In this ethnography, our site of interest constitutes both a curriculum and the places, real and virtual, where that curriculum is delivered. Secondly, any site of interest has two elements: the local, the everyday/everynight world where life is experienced by people (in this ethnography, for example, a lecture hall or a meeting room – the everyday working places of students and staff); and the trans-local, which is outside the bounds of people's everyday experience (Campbell and Gregor, 2004: 28-29) but which, through text-based artefacts, influences people's everyday lives (in

this ethnography, the textual mediation of the medical curriculum through artefacts as diverse as curriculum documents, PowerPoint slides, course texts and so forth).

Wicked problems [ii]: framework

Continuing our reflexive turn, therefore, we find ourselves considering the extent to which IE's conceptualisation of field (as discursively constructed, and as being characterised by both the local and the trans-local) provides a theoretical framework that is sufficient for HEDE. We should point out that this discussion does not seek to dismantle the methodological and empirical validity of the initial project proposal: as researchers, we are satisfied that institutional ethnography provides us with meaningful conceptual tools that are theoretically aligned to Actor-Network Theory (Law, 1994; Latour, 2005; Fenwick and Edwards, 2010; Tummons, 2010), the other significant theoretical element of our project (and the subject of another paper that is currently being prepared by some members of the research team). But is IE the 'only' way?

Consider the example of, and the perspectives afforded to researchers by, multi-sited ethnography (MSE). The methodology of MSE is distinct from that of traditional anthropological ethnography in a number of ways. MSE ranges across sites, in a spatial as well as temporal sense, in order to explore the many and various people, cultural meanings, identities and artefacts that are of interest or concern to the researchers. It is through the study of how these things actually move across these sites, that the argument of the ethnography emerges (Marcus, 1995). Relationships between or across these sites are important as well, and these also need to be identified or established and then accounted for by the ethnographer (Hannerz, 2003). MSE is more dependent on interviews than traditional single-site studies (Hannerz, 2003), reflecting the postmodern turn in ethnographic research that foregrounds the co-production of data between the researcher and those whom s/he is researching. Indeed, if multiple sites can be based as much on cultural or spatial differences as on geographical ones, then the people who move and act within these sites can help the researcher to define them (Falzon, 2009). And MSE and IE occupy much common ground. MSE's encompassing of borders within research to link the global to the local sits quite comfortably alongside IE's concern to link the local and the trans-local, in contrast to the single-site that characterises traditional anthropological ethnography (Marcus, 1995). MSE's focus on the material artefacts of a culture is aligned to IE's interest in the artefacts that mediate peoples' work, a focus that foregrounds the effects of tools, artefacts and other aspects of material culture in a manner which, it has been argued, can be lost sight of in traditional anthropological ethnography (Landri, 2013). And finally, MSE (within broader discourses of postmodernism and globalization) positions the researcher and the researched as co-participants in the research process, dismantling the anthropologist/other and centre/periphery binaries that placed the researcher as all-

knowing outsider, better able to understand the social and/or cultural practices of the field than the actors who populate it, in alignment with the standpoint epistemology of IE which distinguishes itself from ethnographic traditions drawn from anthropology and symbolic interactionism (Campbell and Gregor, 2004; Pierides, 2010). In fact, it would be perfectly possible to construct HEDE in terms of concepts drawn from multi-sited ethnography instead of those concepts explicated here that derive from institutional ethnography. From both pragmatic and theoretical perspectives, as research paradigms they achieve more-or-less the same things and afford very similar empirical and ontological possibilities to the researchers.

Multi-sited ethnography offers one series of alternatives to our chosen methodological and conceptual framework, therefore. Virtual ethnography, internet ethnography and on-line ethnography (all three descriptors can be readily found in the literature, notwithstanding their synonymy) offer a second (Angrosino, 2007; Gatson, 2011; Hine, 2000; Landri, 2013). What might be seen as the tenets of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000: 63-65) allow some recognisable elements of 'traditional' anthropological inquiry – the location of the ethnographer, the definition of field and boundary – to be refashioned to take account of the networked and fluid worlds that the ethnographer is interested in. Thus, the ethnographer is understood as being mobile, rather than located in a particular place (or series of places within MSE), and field and boundary are understood as being discursively constructed, to be explored through the course of the ethnography rather than assumed to be in a priori existence. Meantime, other key tenets – the identity and presence and/or absence of informants, immersion in the field – are more profoundly problematised and redefined. Thus, informants might say that they are one thing but might 'really' be another (the deliberate confusion over gender identity within online forums being a conspicuous example), and are understood as being able to absent themselves from the field (that is to say, be off-line), whilst the immersion of the ethnographer is similarly positioned as interstitial and intermittent. The establishment of significant relationships (such as those that exist between the researcher and the researched) is taken for granted, not problematised, in an online environment. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that ethnography has to be refashioned, leading to what can be seen as the intellectual deconstruction of the role of the ethnographer (Shumar and Madison, 2013), as researchers consider multiple realities of online representation, the disembodied and technologically-distributed presence of the ethnographer and the disruption of the meanings of space and place.

And so we arrive at our *wicked* problem. It might be argued, based on the above, that distinctions between different kinds of ethnography are based simply on scholarly tradition, the cultures and habits of particular academic *tribes* (Becher and Trowler, 2003). The different kinds of ethnography that we have outlined here share epistemological and ontological perspectives; they share a commitment to the knowledge and perspective of the researched and to co-construction of data; they share many of the same methods; and they share a concern for making the local, global. So why choose one over the other? Is this ethnography being conceptualised in terms of IE due to the conceptual affordances that it

provides (as described earlier)? Alternatively, does this methodological and conceptual perspective reflect the fact that IE is an academic movement squarely rooted in Canada, which is prominent more specifically in health, medical and social research, and which has been used by prominent authors within the same university faculty that is the subject of inquiry for the HEDE project? Are these multiple paradigms actually needed or even justified? If such paradigmatic movements do indeed have more in common than not, and can be equally used to provide a robust theoretical foundation for HEDE, then what does this say for the study of 'ethnography' more generally?

Defining ethnography and ethnographies

Many now think that ethnography needs to work differently if it is to understand a networked or fluid world. (Law, 2004: 3)

The *Handbook of Ethnography* (Atkinson et al., 2001), includes chapters titled 'Phenomenology and Ethnography', 'Grounded Theory in Ethnography', Feminist Ethnography' and 'Ethnography after Postmodernism', *inter alia*: serious chapters that provide an insight into how the prevailing intellectual and cultural trends of recent years and decades have changed the ways in which researchers work, think and write. It also includes a chapter called 'Computer Applications in Qualitative Research'. The third and fourth editions of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* both include a chapter titled 'The methods, politics and ethics of representation in online ethnography'. But they are written by different people and the content of each is markedly different, the argument of the 2005 edition being already rendered redundant – if not erroneous – by technological change, in a way that the 2001 chapter on feminist ethnography is not and can never be. And at the same time, journal articles proliferate and provide further perspectives on critical ethnography, performance ethnography, post-colonial ethnography, and other variants. The feminist critique of masculinist discourses of knowing is matched by the post-colonial deconstruction of the 'all-knowing' outsider-ethnographer, which in turn echoes the postmodernist rejection of all-encompassing schemata or modes of explanation, turning our attention instead to the local, to the partial and to multiple truths and perspectives.

Whether we talk and write of 'moments' in qualitative research, or stress themes within the scholarship of methods and methodology such as 'the postmodern' turn or the 'postcolonial' turn, or note the various ways in which the methods that make up the building blocks of social research, 'interviews' or 'observations', are increasingly interpreted in diverse ways, it is self-evidently the case that social research is in a state of flux. Some of these flux factors have been at work for relatively long periods of time, the feminist turn being a good example. But other flux factors are within themselves faster moving and more complex. The challenges of and affordances offered by ICTs in themselves move at a

bewildering rate, rendering concerns for method, arguments about theory and revisions to methodology obsolete within ever-shorter periods of time.

So how should ethnography be defined? Is a singular definition achievable, much less desirable? If overarching paradigms are indeed increasingly inadequate (Law, 2004), should we rely on linguistic tricks such as the use of plural nouns (for 'ethnography', read 'ethnographies') or capitalisation ('ethnography' or 'Ethnography') to stake out methodological terrain? Plural nouns seem to work for postmodernist researchers ('truths', 'realities' (Scott and Usher, 1999)); and capitalisation is used in fields as diverse as sociolinguistics (viz. 'discourse' and 'Discourse' (Gee, 1996)) and the politics and sociologies of specific deaf communities ('deaf' and 'Deaf' (Centre for Deaf Studies, 2011)). Might ethnographers follow suit?

Conclusions (i): a brave new technological and methodological world

> *...many of the purported divisions [between research paradigms] are artificial, involving spurious claims to novelty, and are based on cavalier use of philosophical and methodological arguments.*
> (Hammersley, 2005: 142)

Words have different meanings according to the context in which they are used. A word, or a text, does not possess an intrinsic meaning, but is instead subject to multiple reinterpretations as readers make sense of the words that they encounter, bringing their own prior understanding and experiences to the act of reading (Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). In this context, it is unsurprising that 'ethnography' is similarly capable of being read, understood, conceptualised, in different ways. These meanings will shift – within boundaries that are socially established by speech or discourse communities (Gee, 1996; Swales, 1990) – over time, in response to changing societal attitudes, wider cultural and intellectual changes, and technological shifts. In this context, Shumar and Madison's (2013: 263) suggestion that any ethnography is a virtual ethnography can be understood as being a simple reflection of the fact that to make sense of the practice of ethnography in a networked, globalised world (Angrosino, 2007), the ways in which the virtual – mediated through ICTs – permeates the social cannot be compartmentalised or othered. We cannot any longer straightforwardly distinguish between the 'virtual' and the 'real', as our earlier example of the lecturer in the lecture hall demonstrates. The emergence of 'multi-sited ethnography', 'institutional ethnography', 'virtual ethnography' or any other kind of ethnography thus becomes a reflection of an always-shifting discussion about method and methodology that is compelled to change by and in response to the social worlds that such research methods seek to explicate and by the technological affordances (whether virtual or not) offered to us, as ethnographers, by the world that we live in (Love, 2011). The problem – and it is a wicked problem – is the balkanisation of the ethnographic landscape. Different academic tribes mark out their territory through their conceptualisation and

promotion of different research methods or paradigms. And whilst our work as ethnographers is, arguably, enriched through such a critical and reflexive turn, we also risk being placed within categories – perhaps *silos* is a more apt term – that hinder our talk. One the one hand, we find those ethnographers who insist that their work needs to be hands-on and first-hand; on the other, those ethnographers who are distributed or mobile (Gibbs, 2007; Landri, 2013). In fact, 'ethnography' might well be a term that is sufficiently generous to allow for both.

Conclusions (ii): 'use what seems best'

> *We should be less self-conscious about our methods and use what seems best for answering our research questions. There are no right or wrong methods.* (Thomas, 2007: 95)

An alternative approach might simply be to relax and take a breath, to stop spending so much time reading and thinking about different research paradigms and instead get on with the actual work of doing some ethnographic research. Citing Stanley Fish, Thomas has argued that there is, put simply, too much talk about 'theory', to the extent that the word has become an "empty signifier" (2007: 53). There is theory and then there is theory-talk, which is defined by Fish as "any form of talk that has acquired cachet and prestige" (ibid.). The focus of Thomas' critique is theory use in education rather than research methodology per se, although the argument is straightforwardly transferable as ethnographers are engaged in theoretical work throughout the research process. Theory talk, Thomas argues, must not be seen as being more important than the practice that the theory purports to talk about. So how do we explain the presence of so much theory talk in our work, not least when the use of theory within educational research is seen as problematic at best (Tight, 2004)? Is it a necessary element of our research practice in order to make robust our claims, conclusions and findings? Or is it that to do without it "exposes the lack of special knowledge needed to do [ethnography]. It is intense, but its mechanics are fairly simple, and they are things that we and our students are engaged in every day" (Gatson, 2011: 520)?

Conclusions (iii): ICTs and the internet as field and framework

The prominent position of ICTs within HEDE requires us, as researchers, to find ways by which our position and the activities that we encourage and that enfold us can be made sense of. The fact that ICTs are similarly prominent in mediating the work of the research team only adds to the importance of this particular reflexive task. It seems right to say that talking with people online is different to talking with them in real life (when Jonathan and Anna met in the real world for the first time, they were able over the course of a day to cover a lot of ground in their conversations in a manner that would have been difficult

to achieve if they had been talking online), and it also seems right to say that doing research that involves looking at how students and staff work across a curriculum that is delivered through the extensive use of ICTs is different to exploring the exchanges, cultures and practices of a purely physical, as opposed to online, setting. But we need to go further than this. And so we would argue that we do need to have conversations about method that are at times abstruse. We acknowledge that these conversations do not provide straightforward answers: indeed, they raise more questions in turn. Instead, we position our conversations as part of a turn in qualitative research more generally that seeks to promote greater reflexivity amongst educational ethnographers whilst at the same time avoiding overshadowing the empirical work that our ethnography rests on. And we need to be sensitive to the fact that ethnography moves on and will continue to do so. It may well be the case that all ethnography might be virtual ethnography (Shumar and Madison, 2013), in that it needs to take account of the virtual world in the social world. And yet while we are busy subscribing to yet more methodological frameworks that might be accused of resting on only slight epistemological or ontological differences, we argue that these slight –

not cavalier – differences are important in allowing our peers to locate the work that we are doing within

the broader field of institutional ethnography. At the same time, we also argue that these slight differences are just that: slight. Ethnography has always been changing and adapting, and it will continue to do so (Hillyard, 2011). We have much in common with the broad field of ethnography and ethnographic

research more widely, and if we can be less self-conscious in our methods, and 'just do it' when it comes

to our research, we can put methodological debates in their place as part of an ethnography that is not

virtual, multi-sited or institutional, but might instead, in order to avoid "the distractions of increasingly

insular debates as to what is, and is not, ethnography" (Hillyard, 2011: 16) be positioned as *inclusive*.

Note

Higher Education in a Digital Economy is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Over time, the group has come to adopt the 'working title' of *Medical Education in a Digital Age* for the project. The project website contains much open access material, a key element of the ethnography, and can be found at:

https://www.mindmeister.com/198971466/project-snapshot-medical-education-in-a-digital-age-an-institutional-ethnography

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