

The Ethnography of Distributed Collaborative Learning

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SUMMARY

A major challenge for today's researchers studying 'online' learning is how to design their studies. The ostensibly simple question of *what and how* to collect and analyse data becomes a major obstacle. Recent theoretical developments emphasise that learning, communication and knowledge construction are embedded and distributed in the social and cultural context where they 'naturally' occur, and inseparable from these contexts as an object of research (see e.g. Suchman, 1987; Latour, 1987; Cole & Engeström, 1993; Hutchins, 1995). Some 'ground-breaking' studies that have expanded and, to a certain extent, had an impact on the understanding of learning and knowledge construction have been based on detailed ethnographic research (e.g., Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Ethnographic research represents a long tradition for studying various forms of social processes in everyday life situations. Ethnography or, more generally, qualitative methods have been used extensively in educational research, for example when studying classroom culture and interaction, but also when dealing more explicitly with technology. However, 'traditional' ethnographic approaches do not readily suit distributed ICT environments, and there are some inherent methodological issues with which ethnographers have to deal when entering a setting in order to study distributed collaborative learning. In this paper we argue that, by taking these issues into consideration, ethnography becomes an adequate and fruitful approach for studying learning as process, interaction, and practice also in distributed settings.

There is a growing body of literature about ethnographic studies conducted in the fields computer-mediated communication (see e.g. Hine, 2000) and computer supported co-operative work (see e.g. Harper, 2000). These are fields of research closely related to CSCL and the results, findings, and experiences made in these fields are relevant for the discussion of ethnography of distributed collaborative learning.

We focus on studying distributed collaborative learning with the techniques, methods, and analytical perspective of ethnography. Distributed collaborative learning is commonly placed in hybrid settings, where the participants engage in computer-mediated communication as part of some sort of institutionalised education. There are thus some inherent issues, both new and old, that need to be taken into consideration when doing ethnography in distributed learning environments. Addressing these issues, we emphasise the role of technology and information infrastructure and how this might impact the learning situation, but also how it can be used as a resource in ethnographic research. In addition, we discuss how to observe, participate and immerse oneself in these technologically dense environments. This includes presenting and exploring concepts such as *virtual observations* and *technological immersion*, but also discussing more common topics like *access* and *the role of the researcher*. Another important aspect of ethnographic studies is the devotion to an empirical grounding of the research, which again presents methodological challenges when studying students working online and in distributed settings.

In particular, we emphasise the specific circumstances for studying distributed learning environments as hybrid settings, and pay special attention to the role of the mediating artefacts and how to approach these analytically. In the full paper the ideas and methodological issues are illustrated by presenting empirical examples from and experiences made in one of our research projects – DoCTA (Wasson, Guribye & Mørch, 2000). In this way we forefront ethnography as a fruitful approach for studying and describing the complexity and contingencies of distributed learning in an informed and structured way.

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