Ethnographic Sensibility: A Method for Studying Lurking as E-learning

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Abstract: Lurking is currently regarded as a notable e-learning strategy due to its frequency as a member strategy in online communities. Perspectives to lurking in e-learning vary in terms of activity, passivity, participation and contribution in relation to learning efficiency and outcomes. To enhance the notion of lurking as e-learning, a suitable research method is needed to provide conceptual means for shedding light to the specific discrete cultural nature of lurking and facilitate in bridging the relevant concepts and researchers' experiences in a way that fulfils the demands of valid inquiry. Particular methodological focus is then on the subtleties of interplay between researcher and interacting subjects in e-learning settings. In this conceptual-theoretical paper we propose online ethnographic sensibility as a research method for detecting weak ties involved in lurking as an e-learning approach. We conclude by discussing how ethnographic sensibility can facilitate teachers in e-learning environments.

Keywords: Ethnography, e-learning, lurking, social media, weak ties, qualitative research

Introduction

A pertinent recent change in e-learning concerns networked online communities that use several new technologies, such as chat rooms, blogs, wikis and social media applications for collaborative learning. The key idea is to share information and create knowledge together with other users, in line with the view of knowledge sharing as a socially constructed and mediated phenomenon (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Online communities are characterized by feelings of belonging, empathy and support (Rheingold, 1993), and a particular purpose and policies for community life (Preece, Abras and Maloney-Krichmar, 2004). Online communities' designated cultures include social rules, norms and joint understandings, which are developed and learned as becoming and being a member of a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). These practices are the key to online communities' meaning and functions, for example, social rules enact special types of communication (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). A contemporary shift in the practice of online communities is the transformation of users' roles from mere consumers to producers of information: many applications enable content sharing by offering environments that allow the integration of pictures, audio and videos, with written expressions (Iivari, Isomäki and Pekkola, 2010). However, the major part of members in online communities acts as lurkers (Mason, 1999; Takahashi, Fujimoto and Yamasaki, 2002; Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews, 2004).

Lurking is currently regarded as a worthy e-learning strategy due to its frequency as a member strategy in online communities. Perspectives to lurking in the e-learning process vary in terms of activity, passivity, participation and contribution in relation to learning efficiency and outcomes. For instance, lurking is conducted to get to know the community better before participating, and to see if the lurked community would be a non-suitable match (e.g., Preece et al, 2004). Lurkers may also be defined as read-only participants who may harm the community dynamics and complicate learning (e.g., Nagel, Blignaut and Cronjé, 2009). Further, lurking can also be seen as active participation expressed by reading and reflecting on the contribution of all the other members. In brief, in e-learning environments student participation can take different forms that involve lurking as a strategy to create a personal learning approach. However, current research based notion of lurking as an e-learning approach needs to be further enhanced. Because e-learning is more effective when interaction between community members is active and involves explicit knowledge sharing (Beaudieu, 2002; Dennen, 2008; Mo and Coulson, 2010), *we are*

interested in how to study lurking as an e-learning strategy that utilizes weak ties between participants in social media. With this orientation we expect to find cultural processes and behavioral norms in e-learning communities that enable teachers to find ways in encouraging lurkers to become more active learners.

To study lurking and utilization of weak ties in e-learning, a suitable research method should offer conceptual means to shed light to the specific discrete cultural nature of lurking and facilitate in bridging the relevant concepts and researchers' experiences in a way that fulfils the demands of valid inquiry (cf. Weick, 1996). Particular methodological focus is then on the subtleties of interplay between researcher and interacting subjects in e-learning settings. In this conceptual-theoretical paper, we propose online ethnographic sensibility as a research method for detecting weak ties involved in lurking as an e-learning approach. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: first, we present results from a literature review that aims to clarify the central findings of prior research concerning lurking, second we propose a methodological approach for studying lurking, and finally, we conclude by summarizing the central ideas from our proposal.

Lurking as an e-learning strategy

To clarify the state-of-the art notion of lurking, a stand alone literature review (Okoli and Schabram, 2010) was conducted in Spring 2012 in order to find research concerning lurking and lurkers in the context of e-learning. Eight different databases (IEEE Xplorer, EbscoHost, Science Direct, SpringerLink, ACM Digital Library, ERIC, InderScience, and Google Scholar) were searched with keywords lurker/ lurking/ lurkers and e-learning, and also without the term e-learning because so few papers resulted from searches with e-learning as a keyword. These keywords had to occur in the title, as keywords, and/or in the abstract section of the articles in the databases. The search resulted as 59 research papers. The literature review was also enhanced with backward search (Levy and Ellis, 2006).

Definitions of lurking vary in the current literature. Lurking can be generally defined as passive attention over active participation in online environments including regular visits to the community but seldom postings (e.g., Rafaeli et al, 2004). The frequently cited (e.g., Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Lee et al, 2006) Jargon Dictionary defines the term lurker as "*One of the ´silent majority´ in an electronic forum; one who posts occasionally or not at all but is known to read the group´s postings regularly…When a lurker speaks up for the first time, this is called ´delurking´.*" Variation appears regarding the duration of non-posting, Nonnecke (2000) defines lurkers people who have not posted to an online group in the past three months whereas Nonnecke, Andrews and Preece (2006) consider lurkers users who have never posted. Many studies are unanimous in that the major part of members in online communities acts as lurkers (e.g., Mason, 1999; Preece et al, 2004; Du, 2006). Lurking can also be seen as active participation expressed by reading and reflecting on the contribution of all the other members (Ebner and Holzinger, 2005). In the same vein, Preece et al. (2004) highlight that most lurkers are not selfish free-riders. This view is supported by the results of Neelen and Fetter (2010) who conclude that in work organizations lurkers obtain essential knowledge on the job and therefore cannot be considered free-riders. According to Lee et al. (2006) more attention should be paid towards the active participation of lurkers through regular login rather that only studying the amount of postings. Mo and Coulson (2010) assert that empirical evidence from prior research gives reason to believe that lurking is a highly active, methodical and goal-driven process.

Reasons behind lurking disclose the nature of goals that lurkers may have. Nonnecke and Preece (2001) found 79 reasons for lurking. The most common reason for lurking was that participants felt that just reading or browsing is enough – they did not need to post. Need to learn about the group was motivating to many lurkers. This implies that the cultural norms and rituals of online communities need to be observed and learned before joining the community as an active member. Some lurkers do not post because there are deficits in the software's functionality and they also may not like the group. Further, Nonnecke, Preece and Andrews (2004a) found that active

posters are more tolerant towards lurkers than lurkers are towards themselves. Active participants respect sharing information whereas in contrast lurkers do not like if there are too many postings. Rafaeli et al. (2004) identifed reasons which rendered lurkers to delurkers. They found that familiarity with the community and persistent involvement trigger delurking.

Perspectives to lurking in the e-learning process vary in terms of activity, passivity, participation and contribution in relation to learning efficiency and outcomes. In educational settings lurking can be seen as a fruitful form of participation and lead to similar outcomes as in more active and visible participation (e.g., McKendree, 1998; Nonnecke, 2004b). However, lurkers are often seen as not engaging to essential learning behaviors such as dialogue and interaction (Dennen, 2008; Beaudoin, 2002). Palmer et al. (2008) found that lurking did not notably contribute to learning outcomes, while the amount of postings correlated positively to grading. Moreover, Nummenmaa and Nummenmaa (2008) note that in web-based learning non-contributing lurkers had more negative emotional experiences than contributing participants. In case lurkers are defined as read-only participants they may be seen to harm the community dynamics and complicate learning (Nagel, Blignaut and Cronjé, 2009).

In e-learning environments student participation can take different forms and as shortly described above, the ways of participation can be valued differently and enable various ways of interaction. Arnold and Paulus (2010) state that pedagogical lurking as an invisible interaction type may also support community building and thus promote learning. In sum, lurking clearly is a worthy e-learning strategy, the impact of which on learning processes and outcomes is, however, rather unknown. To enhance the notion of lurking as an e-learning strategy, research efforts need to be conducted. We argue that ethnographic sensibility is required in interpreting participation in technology driven and topic related contexts. Also the specific procedures, rituals and norms of some specific e-learning environment silently guide the ways of participation and interaction in the e-learning communities.

When designing and planning learning possibilities or measuring and evaluating learning outcomes in online settings these quite often inattentive and discreet impressions of the e-learning communities' functioning elements can be seen as restrictive or enabling aspects. In order to get understanding of lurking from a pedagogical viewpoint teachers, moderators and practitioners in the field of e-learning need tools to analyze and detect these different ways of participation. Through the understanding of different ways of participation and the reasons behind them the development of better environments can begin. In this paper we propose ethnographic sensibility as a method to discover the strength of weak ties operationalized through lurking in social media between participants.

Ethnographic sensibility

Ethnographic sensibility as a method in understanding social media can be approached from several perspectives. Firstly one must strive to of learn to read social media with critical awareness of one's own cultural framework of presuppositions and stereotypes. In e-learning online communities' designated cultural frameworks include social rules, norms and joint understandings, which are developed and learned as becoming and being a member of a learning community. Secondly, one must make an effort to enmesh oneself in another's world in order to be able to imagine any other worldview as right. Thirdly one must take notes and look for patterns in order to fulfill the requirements of valid inquiry (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Myers, 1999; Harding, 1995). Ethnographic sensibility as a method is here reflected through three different practices that we see essential regarding the study of lurking to facilitate learning in online communities. One is that of cultural encounter, second is that of participant observation and third is that of gift giving.

Ethnographic sensibility as a concept and as a method is closely linked with the concepts of cultural diversity and cross-cultural encounter. *Cultural encounter* is a brief immersion into a

different culture. The experience of being a new user in a new social media environment helps students to understand the challenges of sensibility in a way that no other way can accomplish. The experience of encounter with a strange culture creates discomfort (Pader, 2006). This discomfort is a necessary part of understanding the diversity in social media and its users. Lurking may be a wise strategy of self-protection and defense in a new and strange environment. Such cultural encounters in social media may take place when students or researchers enter as new users in chat rooms, social networking sites or blogs for example.

Ethnographic sensibility facilitates in understanding cultural encounter holistically because one fundamental task of ethnography is describing a culture and explain cultural processes. In order to reach understanding of the cultural other in e-learning context one has to become aware of one's own beliefs and become more culturally sensitive. Becoming a teacher or a researcher applying ethnographic sensibility is no less than a self-transformation (Harding 2005).This transformation occurs over time through series of cultural encounters in e-learning online communities. In this transformation, individuals' ability of sensibility is helpful. Sensibility has been defined as an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural difference that promotes an appropriate effective behavior in communication. Because sensibility is an affective construct, one's understanding and misunderstanding about cultural differences are emotionally charged. Therefore providing a personal encounter that has affective impact is vital for both researchers' and students' development an experience that is meaningful and therefore transformational (Harding 2005.) Due to online communities' characters involving feelings of belonging, empathy and support (Rheingold, 1993), sensibility is essential in the effort of understanding lurking in e-learning.

Using ethnographic sensibility as a method does not have to conflict with lurking as a learning or research strategy. To interpret lurking as adopting an audience position may help to explain complexity of the phenomenon. Lurker as audience may combine the inwardly active role of reflective and emotional subject with the outward passivity of an observer. From this point of view lurkers provide the audience necessary for much of the social media production. In this sense lurking is no less essential part of the social media than those users who actively produce information.

In order to make cultural encounter a positive experience, it is important to socialize new members of the community into a set of certain kind of communication and cooperation practice (Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001). By patient observation of social media the norms and behaviors expected can be learned by new users. In this sense lurking as a learning strategy decreases the possibility of non-communication and misunderstanding.

People as users of social media are often more or less consciously looking for an experience of shared space. It is a question of recognizing points of view and values shared with other users and a wish to be accepted as member in a community. Principles underlying *participant observation* are a way of learning about and interpreting culture. Participant observation is a way of transforming the experience of cultural encounter to a method of valid enquiry (e.g., Geertz, 1973). Practices in use for collecting information include interviews, field notes, and documenting, textual and visual analysis. In e-learning a convergence of both research and teaching methods with digital technology by updating traditional ethnographic methods with digital technology offers new opportunities to conduct participant observation in practice. Remote sensing devices, e.g., cell phones, PDAs, email, Webcams, SMS, GPS and digital cameras, may form a platform for applying traditional ethnography in a novel way (Masten and Plowman, 2003). Ethnographic sensibility in online settings could produce rich insights to the users' lives facilitated by multiple data collection through different technologies that enable the use of written and audio-visual data. Particularly, by putting the power of participant observation in the participants' own hands through the use of technology (e.g., sending pictures with cell phones to researchers or teachers), this approach could convey the real-time richness of users' lives and environments in a holistic way.

Participant observation helps students to see their own role and others' positionality in how they see and think about the world and their place in it. Participant observation understood from interpretative perspective is a way of reaching the observed people's sense of right and proper behavior. Ethnographic sensibility is way of understanding lurking as a form of participant or non-participant observation. Lurking may be perceived as a first step towards active participation in social media. But it can be understood as well as a worthy learning strategy on its own right.

Lurking can be interpreted as a way of detecting and forming weak ties in social media environment. The strength of weak ties lies in their ability to provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circles. In social media participant observation may be a first step towards sociable interaction. Nurturing weak ties is a question of providing a space where relationships have sufficient time to develop. Current interaction with a sense of history will allow participants to predict how other users will react. These are the ingredients of trust and give rise to positive affect. In order to be able to use weak ties to access new information and social contacts an atmosphere of trust is essential to encourage users to ask advice from strangers (Constant, Sproull and Kiesler, 1996). Sharing information in social media can be interpreted as a process of giving and receiving gifts. In social media gift giving can take place between strangers. This can be perceived as a sign of the presence of weak ties.

In ethnography *gift giving* is understood as a way of creating and maintaining relationships of power between groups and individuals. From this point of view gift cultures differ from exchange cultures in that the latter are characterized by scarcity and the former by abundance. Social media settings are characterized by abundance of information to be shared. In social media gift giving transforms relationships between users to interdependencies based on the idea of reputation. In gift culture typical for social media gifts are valued by their quality and uniqueness. As a way earning a reputation everybody wants to be part of giving them (Bergquist and Ljungberg, 2001).

Gifts work as tools for constructing social positions and interdependences. From the perspective of a lurker the question of reciprocity may, however, become problematic. Active participation in the gift culture means producing or sharing texts, pictures, videos, music, code or other material with other users (cf. Iivari et al., 2010). The urge to participate actively in the gift culture may transform a lurker into an active participant in social media. Weather this transformation is motivated for example by a feeling of indebtedness or a wish to attain attention and praise of other users is an open question for future research. Interpreting gift-giving practices in social media also calls for an understanding of the fundamental social principles on the social media as a context for e-learning activities. The questions of reciprocity, of giving and accepting gifts bring also forth an ethical dimension in researching and teaching practices.

There are implications that the social media and the increasing use and importance of e-learning have changed the way social relationships are created and maintained on Internet. We hope that ethnographic sensibility will help both students and teachers to become aware of their own beliefs and become more culturally sensitive. We expect that this expanded understanding of lurking phenomenon and awareness of its significance in creating weak ties will inform work with diverse e-learning settings.

Discussion and Conclusion

As a result, we claim that both online pedagogy and research call for ethnographic sensibility and the inherent systematic skills of observation and reflection. From this point of view both lurking and e-learning are understood as cultural phenomena in a complex and dynamic culture constantly evolving on Internet. In this online culture novel technologies are intertwined with the cultural manifold of human communities going online. From our perspective emphasis is on culture and technologies and their uses are approached from cultural point of view.

Practical methodological and pedagogical e-learning applications of ethnographic sensibility as analyzed above are to be further studied and developed in the near future. Here we propose some practices to be experimented with. These include exploring teacher´s different roles from participant observer to gift giver. This requires systematic reflection on the cultural knowledge of the participants and of the group dynamics including lurking and the presence of weak ties. The teacher must be prepared to go through the process of self-transformation leading from cultural encounter to the adapting the role of participant observer. In this process teacher must first become aware of his or her cultural framework of presuppositions and stereotypes. Positioning oneself is the first step to interpret cultural differences between teachers and students and among students. First pedagogical moderation is needed in order to lay foundations to the e-learning community´s functions. In the e-learning process teachers need to have abilities in flexibly moving between different roles from active pedagogical moderator to average member of the group by the activity rate. Later on in the e-learning process teachers´ role changes from moderator to active encouraging and inspiring students towards de-lurking.

Online gift culture of sharing information with strangers is a useful tool for encouraging students to realize their possible roles in e-learning communities. Participant observation plays big role all the way in the process from gaining cultural knowledge from the members, detecting group dynamics and possible reasons to lurking to finding ways and moments to motivating towards gift giving. Teachers need to be well aware of the critical point when to encourage towards de-lurking. This stage requires sensibility of rewarding towards gift giving. The beginning is what matters most in creating fruitful space for e-learning. The teacher needs to have cultural knowledge of the members through participant observation before leading the students to the e-learning environment. In order to motivate students towards de-lurking teacher has to acknowledge the amount of login by lurkers in relation to the amount on login done by active participants. When the gift giving process foundations are well established it encourages more gift-giving among participants.

At their best, both observation and reflection remind us of a critical awareness of the reciprocity and interdependence that shape relationships between teacher and students as well as between a researcher and her informants. Ethnographic sensibility is also about cultivating sensitivity to connections. It helps us to understand the diversity of experiences and identities constructed and reconstructed within the virtual communities not unlike in the classroom. Ethnographic sensibility lets us see teaching as gift-giving that involves ongoing relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness. To think of social media as a gift relationship, the focus is on both technologies and relationships between users and the quality of these relationships as shaped by technology. Results of our oncoming research will give new insights to teachers, students and researchers interested in the lurking phenomenon in social media supported e-learning.

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