

DIGITAL CULTURE OBSERVATORY: A NEW LINE OF RESEARCH OF SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE / USP

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Abstract: This research report describes the activities undertaken by the Digital Culture Observatory, research line created by School of the Future / USP in 2008 in order to generate innovation in epistemology about networks. Exposes the methodological perspective of virtual ethnography of a qualitative approach that underlies the studies conducted by the Digital Culture Observatory, to explore profiles, investigate behaviors in the network society and research levels of information literacy among users. Scientific publications carried are reported (theses and dissertations, books and articles in national and international scientific journals) as well as agreements with national and international research institutions.

Keywords: ethnography virtual social networks; educommunication

1 - School of The Future/USP Research Projects

The changes undertaken by the Information Technologies and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the knowledge society, especially through social networks on the Internet, require an understanding of the media and forms of learning in a complex and interactive context. The need for new approaches and studies on the impacts of technologies in the areas of Communication, Education and Information emerge in a moment that life in contemporary network society brings many consequences for cultural production and education, characterized by patterns of interaction and the use of communication tools.

In the context of these transformations over the past twenty years, the Research Laboratory of New Communication Technologies Applied to Education School of the Future / USP inaugurated its activities in 1989, under the scientific coordination of Prof. Fredric M. Litto, professor of School of Communication and Arts, University of São Paulo.

Inaugurated as a departmental laboratory at the School of Communications and Arts, its growth and increasingly interdisciplinary nature took it out of that home in 1993 and placed it under the aegis of the Office of the Dean of Research, where it continues to flourish, financially self-sustaining and independent of the University budget, but with strong encouragement and guidance from the central administration. Since its inception, was marked by the development of a model of partnership between universities, society and different agencies and levels of government, all committed to the improvement of education in Brazil.

With their projects and research, the School of the Future / USP longed to explore and implement innovative proposals that, by using resources like the Internet and Multimedia, contributed to the enhancement of teaching and learning. To that end, his performance was driven from principles such as commitment to research, the evaluation of different educational strategies and compatibility of academic research with practice in the classroom through the dissemination of their methodologies.

Since September 2006, the scientific coordination of the Research Laboratory of New Communication Technologies Applied to Education is held by Prof.Dra. Brasilina Passarelli, from the Department of Library and Documentation of the ECA / USP. Since then, the development of studies and research about the knowledge society and its impact in the areas of Communication, Education and Information, to illuminate the contours of the new "network society" is favoured. Currently, with more than one hundred researchers, the "School of The Future" develops intervention projects (action research), as well as theoretical research focused on the following objects of study: information literacy and individual and collective production of knowledge in web environments, the reflection about new forms of authorship invaded by the digital collective and by the

movement of the "actors network" at the intersection of the hybrid borders that compose the "skin of culture", concepts advocated by authors such as De Kerckhove, Castells and Latour. Such studies make use of virtual ethnography as a methodology to investigate the movements of actors engaged in digital culture.

Among the projects of action research developed recently are: AcessaSP, in partnership with the state government of Sao Paulo, with about 595 telecentres in the state, 45.5 million visits and 1.9 million registered users ; Tonomundo, developed by nine years in partnership with the Institute OiFuturo (ex-Telemar), a virtual environment dedicated to the digital inclusion of students and teachers of public schools in communities of low Human Development Index (HDI) of up to 10 000 inhabitants in the north and northeast Brazil; with the support from FAPESP, has developed an ongoing research project on the infrastructure of Brazilian universities in information technology, titled Campus Computing Report.

2 – The Digital Culture Observatory

In this new development stage of the School of the Future /USP and intending to generate innovation in epistemology field about the networks and their cultural context, a line research entitled Digital Culture Observatory was established in 2008, housing dissertations master's, doctoral theses, post-doctoral studies and projects for post-doctoral and the publication of articles in national and international scientific journals, and books and collections on digital culture. In order to make public the knowledge generated collectively, the Digital Culture Observatory intends to enhance the development of research on issues involving the behavior and attitudes in virtual communities and social networks. The studies developed in this context are intended to understand the world of new technologies of communication marked by the interactivity and the collaboration, features that reconfigure the ways of learning and teaching in contemporary times. **Life Network** has brought many consequences for cultural production and education, both characterized by habits of interaction and the use of communication tools, changing the research methods and techniques in the fields of Communication and Education as well. Each year, research from these two fields tend to converge in order to understand the process by which students and teachers experience more autonomous activities while more collaborative through the media, and mainly through social networks on the Internet.

2.1. Virtual Ethnography

Several of the intervention projects developed by School of the Future / USP remain actives for more than nine consecutive years, which entitles to conduct studies with longitudinal particularities and also and qualitative research based

on ethnographic methodology, having the action research projects implemented as objects, helping to illuminate trends for the internet.

Ethnography has been used as a method of study in fields of knowledge which differs from the anthropology and emerges as a tendency of research in social networks in a challenging time for cyberspace studies. Also called digital ethnography and netnography¹, virtual ethnography has become popular in advertising and marketing, providing tools for the study of behaviors and attitudes of actors in the network society. Currently, social networks are increasingly broad, complex and structured, making the virtual ethnography a powerful tool for obtaining information about their users, and capture web browsing profiles.

In its bases, the dual task of ethnography is to discover the conceptual structures in which the acts from individuals observed can be scanned and the construction of an analytical system under which generic elements of these structures differs from other determinants of human behavior (GEERTZ, 1978, p. 7). The act that weaves these two instances of ethnographic work is the interpretation, inscription and specification, uniqueness and generalization. The great challenge for the ethnographer, therefore, is to remain in a critical position in the face of supposedly logical relations between signifiers and meanings. This methodological strategy allows the influence of the observer in the observed situations to be taken into account, thus rejecting the idea of neutrality of the researcher, since his view carries a number of assumptions that influence on their perception.

Anthropological methods are widely used in research seeking to observe, analyze, and interpret the cyber culture, a culture that develops around the participation and the collective. Researches in this area make use of ethnographic methods including different data collection techniques such as participant observation, qualitative interviews, and analysis of cultural artifacts in order to make sense of these cultural practices.

From the mid-twentieth century, the ethnography sets to contribute in the process of designing research methods for objects that do not fit into its original proposal, ie the non-Western cultures. The transposal of the ethnographic method to other areas as, for example, the field of education, takes place. Despite sharing the same method, the focus of interest for ethnographers is the description of these cultures, whereas the concern of researchers in education relates to the educational process.

Although described as "descriptive account of cultural practices, grounded in data attained through ethnographic fieldwork and situated in conversation with

¹ Robert Kozinets, Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online (Sage, 2010)

broader theoretical frameworks " (BOYD, 2008: p 46), expanding the scope of the ethnographic method to study a culture based on the widespread interconnection, eventually causes a revision in the epistemological foundations of ethnography. This reformulation is followed by the adaptation of methods and ethnographic techniques in order to support studies in virtual environments indicating the need for new methodological approaches to investigate the culture produced by Internet users. Initially, the proposals ethnographic cultural life around the computer-mediated experiments addressed identity and body issues, similar to the study by Sherry Turkle from 1995, regarding the influence of computer mediated communication in human relationships. However, the methodological questions that arise ahead researchers tend to shift the focus of ethnographic studies to studies related to the diversity of digital culture, reshaping the concepts on which ethnography is based.

Ethnographic studies have been used in researches about virtual communities since 1995, according to Braga (2007) and Rocha and Montardo (2005). Such methods include analysis of virtual environments, also investigating the movements of actors in cyberspace, recorded by the servers and statistics tools.

The digital hypertext, interactivity, multimedia interface, virtual environments unique properties, require data collection methods and techniques able to capture and record the movement and power of communication relations and actions in networks. Ethnographic studies originated from anthropology have been essential to elucidate this transition, suggesting the adaptation of the ethnographic method for strategic purposes of exploratory research with Internet users, seeking to clarify the interactions between people and as a consequence, the learning process resulted from the habits and practices of social networking tools on the Internet.

The growth of networked interactions put forth the need of field surveys able to capture users' beliefs and desires, while revising the boundaries of researches actions, offering greater engagement for virtual and real interactions. New technologies offer a challenge for the ethnography replacing the concepts of search field or interaction place. It's all about dealing with cultural niches of different groups that occupy different information spaces.

Hine (2001) suggests that knowledge, in the way it is built in the Internet, can be treated as either a space, with its norms and practices that should be studied separately from the unmediated world, as a cultural artifact, in which the Internet exists within a life context in society, artifact intrinsically linked to the application of ethnography as a research methodology. The research developed by the Digital Culture Observatory comprise the Internet both as a place where ciber culture is made up and rebuilt, resulting in a field of study in which the researcher should go under, and as a product of culture.

Virtual ethnography shall observe in detail the experience in the use of technology as well as the meanings constructed around these cultural forms. It consists of the submersion of the researcher into the culture studied for a certain time, taking notes of the connections, activities and meanings created between those who participate in its the social processes. Seeks to understand the uses made from the Internet in everyday life, searching for space and time relations that arise from its use.

2.2. Information Literacy

The Digital Culture Observatory activities follow in a vanguard direction, the history of the Internet in the country. While the first wave of Internet referred to actions seeking to reduce the digital divide and to popularize the access network, the second (current) is the result of the emergence of social networks. If, at first, one of the main objectives of the NAP School of the Future / USP was to intervene on access to technology tools, twenty years after its inception, the research undertaken aims, among other objectives, to understand the relationship between the ludic, the interactive and the ways of teaching and learning through networks to promote the improvement of information literacy.

According to Warschauer (2003: 06), the issue of digital inclusion goes beyond the binary division between having or not regular contact with the technological tools, as it also includes access to other elements. The sense of the term "digital divide" misses, therefore, other resources not less important, as access to content, language, education, literacy, and other social resources. The information literacy is a prerequisite for lifelong learning and is common to all disciplines, all learning environments, and to all levels of education. It allows students to participate of the educational process in a critic way, assuming greater control over their own learning process. "Information literacy encompasses knowledge of one's information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues and problems at hand" (The Prague declaration: "Towards an information literate society", 2003).

3 - Scientific Publications

In the context of scientific production of School of the Future may be quoted theses and dissertations conducted by Brasilina Passarelli, Scientific Coordinator of the School of the Future NAP / USP and Professor at School of Communication and Arts at USP, institutionally linked to the Post- Graduation in Communication Sciences (PPGCOM) of the same university. Such researches

have the intervention projects developed by the School of the Future as objects of study.

From this context may be quoted: "Ethnographic study of profiles in virtual communities: a case study in the Programa ACESSA São Paulo", by Ligia Capobianco, dissertation concluded in 2010, "Criteria of Reputation in Digital Collectives: a case study in the discipline Creating Virtual Communities of Learning and Practice," by Claudia Pontes Freire, dissertation concluded in 2009, "Digital Communication and Technological Innovation: How digital communication from online newsletters stimulates exact sciences virtual communities to participate in innovation processes" by Rui Santo, dissertation concluded in 2009, "Communication, education and digital inclusion: who "tá ligado" in Sao Paulo state school? An analysis of the project TôLigado: O Jornal Interativo de Sua Escola" by Cristina Álvares Beskow dissertation concluded in 2008 and "Social Capital in Virtual Communities" by Anita Vera Bliska, dissertation defended in 2007.

Emphasizing the importance of disseminating knowledge produced by the Digital Culture Observatory, was established a partnership with Editora Senac for publishing theses and dissertations, and compilations on digital culture. In this context, have been published: "'Interfaces Digitais na Educação: @lucin[ações] Consentidas" in 2007 by result of Associate Professor Thesis by Dra. Brasilina Passarelli, "Digital Inclusion and Employability", in 2009, developed from research conducted under the program ACESSA SP, "Education without Distance" in 2010 by Romero Tori, a member of the Board of School of the Future / USP. In 2010 the following publications are in the arrangement: "Linkania: a network theory" and "Web and Participation: Democracy's century", results of the dissertations of Hernani Dimantas and Drica Guzzi, coordinators of the Programa ACESSA SP. In this same year is also to be released a collection between the School of The Future and Cetac.media (Center for Studies in Technology and Communication Sciences), from University of Porto, addressing concepts such as virtual communities and social networks.

In international journals may be cited the following recent publications: "Social Networking the Social and Cultural Reconfiguration: Case Study of ACESSA SP" by Brasilina Passarelli and Juliana Moreno (Proceedings of the 12th IASTED International Conference on Computers and Advanced Technology in Education, 2009. v. 1), "Ethnography in virtual social networks of public schools in the north and northeastern Brazil: the Tonomundo Project" by Brasilina Passarelli and Mariana Tavernari, at PRISMA.com (v. 9, p. 07, 2009);

In national journals, can be mentioned the following articles: "Actors Network: subjectivities and desires to expand" by Brasilina Passarelli and Juliana Moreno to Logos (Rio de Janeiro: v. 16, p. 30, 2009); " The 2.0 Librarian and the

Emergence of New Professional Profiles" by Brasilina Passarelli for DataGramZero, by Brasilina Passarelli (Rio de Janeiro, v. 10, p. 2001, 2009).

4 – Associated Laboratories

Considering the institutional context of School of the Future / USP within one of the most prestigious Brazilian universities, the establishment of partnerships with other Communication and Information Science research groups and laboratories in the country and abroad, as well as the implementation of partnerships that allow publication of research material are considered priorities in the Digital Culture Observatory. Up to 2010 have been established the following national and international agreements: the University of Porto - Instituto CETAC.media, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, ES - Instituto Agustín Millares, University of London - ICT4D Collective, FURB - Universidade Regional de Blumenau and UFAL - Universidade Federal de Alagoas.

5 - Final Remarks

The ethnographic studies developed by the Digital Culture Observatory seek to establish a relationship between new forms of networked learning and behavior of Internet users in Brazil, especially the generation that was born interacting with new tools of communication. The theoretical and methodological questions proposed by the virtual ethnography conduct the research projects developed, encouraging a critical view, facing reconfigurations of cultural and social platforms in cyberspace and encouraging feedback between research and intervention projects.

The Digital Culture Observatory is therefore an important line of research from School of the Future / USP, given the relevance of their action research projects linked to theoretical research carried about digital culture, a fact proven by national and international scientific publications as well as the agreements with partner institutions.

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