

Chapter 5

Educational Research in Virtual Learning Environments: Possibilities for a New Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

The continuous growth of distance education (DE) programs in all levels, powered by the development of new information and communication technologies (ICT), brings new challenges: how can educational research be made in non-presential, asynchronous settings? How can we scientifically approach student bodies formed by people who rarely even share the same hometown and only meet online in virtual learning environments (VLE)? How can we “observe” such groups’ interpersonal, pedagogical relations and their impact on learning? In countries like Brazil, where DE programs have grown vertiginously in few years, many researchers have made significant efforts to answer these questions coherently, efforts that demanded that some principles of traditional educational research be rethought with the help of local and international researches. Interesting methodological approaches to DE groups have resulted from these efforts, and we present and discuss one that has been constantly growing: the virtual ethnographic.

INTRODUCTION

Though not novelties in their own rights, information and communication technologies (ICT) applied to Education have provided plenty of research material and questions as we try to seize

and keep up with all innovative possibilities their combinations bring to our classrooms – either traditional or virtual.

In Education, ICT have broadened the reach and availability of information and of the ways one can process, transform and share knowledge in various forms. More than anything else, ICT

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have been responsible for the recent boost in the development of important, ambitious and not rarely successful distance education (DE) programs for all levels (from basic education in home schooling, to graduate or continuous, on-the-job formation programs). With all technology we have at reach nowadays, it is not a sacrilegious thing to say it is possible for someone to grow from a 7-year-old into a certified teacher, for example, without leaving the comforts of his own home much over the years.

All this potentially positive innovation, though, has not historically been broadly welcomed into formal education settings, let alone the suspicious looks that a significant part of the academia frequently directs at it. Disdain at first and sheer prejudice, as it more frequently surfaces, have been keynotes of the way many scholars behold and discuss the potentials of DE projects, regardless of how solid, well-laid-out they might be. This is surprisingly true in countries like Brazil, that harbors such paradoxes as having access to top-notch ICT applicable to Education, a recent (yet far from incipient) history of research on the field and a previously unheard of growth of enrollments in distance undergraduate programs, from a little over 1,000 students in 2001 to over 760,000 in 2008 while the mainstream scholar discourse about such programs is openly contrary to all that has been and can still be achieved with them – despite the fact that they know this opposition points an awkwardly contradictory finger against all positive student performance assessments in DE programs we have had.

Responding all opposition with positive results, modern, technologically-enhanced DE programs have become an attractive, important and yet underexplored field of research in Education in Brazil.

The quantitative approach is not new to educational research, and numerous such works have been conducted and published, most of which have recently focused on comparing student

performances as mentioned before – an important task, since their results have proved good DE programs owe nothing to traditional, in-school ones in terms of learning results.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, has also been valuable to better understand subjective information regarding the feelings of participants of DE programs while playing their specific roles, more especially those involved in programs whose pedagogical interventions are mostly done in virtual learning environments (VLE), given that the number of students who participate asynchronously from different locations is growing rapidly.

Most of these studies, however, are circumscribed to the traditional possibilities of Content Analysis (Bardin, 1995) which, though enlightening, still face the obstacle of approaching unidimensionally the information as plain text. Considering the speedy expansion of DE programs throughout vast territorial extensions, the unidimensional approach will soon become less informative than it could be, for it will methodologically ignore the fact that the cultures or subcultures of the researched students may significantly vary from the one of the certifying institution, and among each of the participants of the process.

Where does that leave us when we wish to design research projects aimed at deepening our understanding of behavioral, attitudinal or social aspects of the DE experience if we keep attached to traditional anthropological or sociological research rules? How can we propose that DE can be developed collaboratively, with coherent co-authoring of valid scientific papers in the area of Human Sciences, for example, if the involved participants come from – and frequently still live in – varied cultural backgrounds? How could they find a zone comfortable enough to allow shared assertiveness? Can we say that this varied group of students in a DE program, though not territorially bound, shares a common cultural environment?

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