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Imagining online research design:
Is it connective case study or
virtual ethnography?

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IMAGINING ONLINE RESEARCH DESIGN: IS IT CONNECTIVE CASE STUDY OR VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

Grace Pigozzi

Abstract: *Conducting research online that focuses on various writing genres with adolescent authors demands imagination and improvisation as their composition meanders across multiple communities, forums, and expressive modes, while it simultaneously ignores boundaries and creates new spaces. Research of online contexts is crucial as technology plays an increasing role in education policy (CCSSO/NGA, 2010). As unique windows to adolescent online writing, affinity spaces as semiotic spaces are nested between competing cultural entities in which cultural identities across differences of class, gender roles, and values are negotiated (Bhatt, 2008). Affinity spaces have the capacity to create new structures of sociolinguistic and semiotic authority as they redefine approaches to disciplinary learning, and group and individual identity. It is within the discursive spaces of online out-of-school writing that educators can strive to cultivate a similar classroom space for explicit instruction in formal writing. This paper from a study of adolescent writers in an urban Midwestern literacy center compares and contrasts appropriate methods for inquiry as it explores the instructional potential of blogging to engage students more authentically and dialogically than long-established pedagogical practices.*

Keywords: Virtual research methods, ethnography, case study, affinity spaces, adolescent identity

Introduction

Zora and Mina are poets and short story authors who blogged their writings in the context of a larger online creative writing ensemble. Together and with other group members, they discussed, planned, and revised their work. They shared mentor texts, including poetry slam videos and current social media memes. However, Zora, 14, and Mina, 16, were very different types of participants; Zora participated remotely via Smartphone while Mina attended weekly meetings in the literacy center of an urban Midwestern university.

Research focused on adolescent writing is inspired by renewed calls to support writing more comprehensively in schools. Assessment reports indicate that middle and high school students lack solid writing abilities. In 2011, the *Nation's Report Card* revealed a marked decline in the writing ability of eighth graders: roughly 25% of both eighth and twelfth graders performed at the proficient level in writing (NCES, 2012). By contrast, the 2007 *Nation's Report Card* states that 33% of eighth graders were proficient in writing; and 24% of twelfth graders were proficient in writing (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008).

National reports, including *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007) and the *National Commission on Writing* (2003), address the lack of proficiency in adolescent writing and the neglect of the nation's schools to make writing a priority. Additionally, these accounts reference the value of writing for individuals, such as writing to build skills and knowledge, and for society at large, such as writing to benefit the workplace and economy.

Further, the need to foreground adolescent writing in the nation's schools is echoed in analyses of low proficiency scores when the online writing abilities of adolescents is measured. Very low proficiencies are linked to low SES, yet they are also

linked to deficits in literacy skills that students need for successful online reading and writing. Such trends make writing all the more difficult to teach, particularly when *all* students assessed generally do a poor job of communicating in online formats. Studies show that overall adolescent proficiencies in reading to locate effectual online sources, and critically evaluating and synthesizing that information are low to moderate (Castek, Zawilinski, McVerry, O'Byrne, & Leu, 2011; Leu et al., 2015).

However, according to a recent PEW Internet & American Life Project Report, 92% of all middle and high school students in the United States go online daily. Of those users, 24% report going online almost constantly, and 56% of teens go online multiple times per day. Further, 85% of adolescents, ages 12-17 engage at least occasionally in prolonged online writing (Lenhart, 2015; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

Internet use by adolescents is soaring, yet as young people communicate online with more frequency, they do so in less effective ways. Moreover, the literacy tasks that students elect to do beyond school, in out-of-school literacies: the intentional, personal, and everyday uses of literacies that adolescents increasingly practice online, such as social media use and fan fiction writing, go largely understudied and underreported. This occurs despite continued calls for exploring the potential of digital literacies to engage youth in academic literacy tasks, and despite the fact that young people report engagement in intentional literacy tasks at high levels, as statistics indicate (Lenhart, 2015). The fact that young people elect to engage in complex online writing tasks contradicts claims that they have low literacy abilities. Generating and obtaining information through digital media is central to the lives of adolescents, and they are utilizing the Internet in increasing numbers and ways (Alvermann et al., 2007). Reliable research depends on thorough and consistent means of conceptualizing and considering these activities in order to determine implications for classrooms and learning.

Conducting online research that focuses on writing genres with adolescent authors demands imagination and often improvisation as composition meanders across multiple communities, forums, and expressive modes, while it simultaneously ignores boundaries and creates new spaces. Designing such research leaves one puzzling whether it is possible to develop adequate theory when the focal object or phenomenon of study is itself transient, constantly being redefined by fluctuating content. Viewing websites as discursive contexts of social construction, this paper aims to contribute to methodological inquiry rather than discuss the Internet as a communication tool. As online interaction becomes a way of being in the world, where complex aspects of self, other and identity are continually negotiated, texts produced online become transformative, reflecting a social construction (Markham, 2004). In particular, I am interested in understanding how social enactments of identity through creative writing are negotiated, experienced, and theorized in affinity spaces. Briefly defined, affinity spaces are semiotic spaces, or sets of spaces, for individuals to interact with one another, to pursue a common interest and to share and gain knowledge that is dispersed and distributed across its many members, throughout the entire space. A semiotic space is one in which meaning is mutable; texts are rich with potential rather than assigned meanings. The reader as well as the writer is allowed productive agency in meaning making (Gee, 2004, 2005; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Participants published work on the Edublogs site using laptop computers, available in the literacy center. Edublogs.com is a centralized location for students to publish their creations as well as being a secure, closed site to encourage reflection and collaboration (Edublogs, 2013). On a closed site, for the purposes of this study, only participants on that site could view blog postings.

Taking examples from a larger blogging research study, this paper attempts to reconcile the affordances of affinity space and its interactive participants with the constraints of immersion in a culture that continually evolves online in an effort to

determine the most effective design for research. In tracing the development of traditional ethnographic and case study methods into corresponding online methods, several methodological questions arise. Can saturation in affinity space culture with virtual ethnography be accomplished if research—the interview in particular—is conducted only in space and not in physical place? If participants interact both online and offline, that is, in a setting with practices not mediated by the Internet (Leander & McKim, 2003), beyond the boundaries of affinity space, can the ensuing research report possibly meet criteria for high-quality ethnography (Baym, 2009) or must it be recast as case study? Furthermore, how do these issues impact data collection and analysis? Presenting data from both perspectives, I argue that in online research, unless the investigator is able to connect with participants in multiple online spaces, conduct incisive and complete interviews, and then unambiguously bound artifacts as data, virtual ethnography is impossible. In the study of cultural phenomena in which the researcher investigates contemporary events in real-life contexts, connective case study is far better suited as a method to investigate events that occur online, particularly in affinity spaces, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are vague. At best, the researcher can produce reports of experience and to offer evidence that describes a contemporary phenomenon in a real life context (Yin, 2009). Further, supporting this idea, qualitative case study often focuses on experiential knowledge of a certain case, and is closely related to current social and political influences (Stake, 2005).

As the study of culture, ethnography attempts to describe or construct theories of the beliefs, behaviors, and thought processes of people situated in local time and space (Patton, 1990; Purcell-Gates, 2011). With virtual ethnography, an interpretive method for studying online culture, the positionality of the researcher shifts with the dynamics of culture as it evolves online (Greenhow, 2011; Hine, 2004).

A salient issue to the evolution of methods is how virtual ethnography invokes traditional ethnography, and assumes online ethnographic fieldwork is as thorough and robust. However, marked differences between the continual fluctuations of identity, cultural location, and individual investment of participants in online spaces, in contrast to relative stability of such matters in traditional ethnography, reveal one disparity between online and traditional ethnography (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010).

Key concerns involve saturation in the context defined by the role of the researcher in the site, interview quality, and bounding. With a focus on patterns created from threads of artifact and connection as an alternative to interweaving thicker strands from interviews and field notes (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010; Hine, 2004) the synthetic fabric of virtual ethnography is of vastly different quality than that of traditional ethnography. Moreover, in the absence of tangible culture, identities, and social structures, for the purposes of research, the effervescence of traditional ethnographic fieldwork becomes flattened. Authenticity is difficult to pinpoint, as human presence is represented as text and timestamp rather than visible, active beings. Furthermore, explicit *a priori* bounding (Greenhow, 2011), triangulation of artifacts, interviews, and field notes in a manner compatible with case study transfer to an online context more dependably than ethnography.

Literature Review

A blog consists of time-stamped journal entries that are generally comprised of thematic pages with commentaries. Blog authors may update several times daily, weekly, or monthly. Generally, blogs are easily editable and entries are organized in reverse chronological order (Mazur & Kozarian, 2010; Zawilinski, 2009). Content analyses demonstrate that akin to keeping a personal handwritten journal, maintaining a blog is

considered an intentional writing practice, most often accomplished on a personal, as needed, or as-wanted basis. Blogs are both collaborative and individualized. Their format promotes self-expression and singular, as well as joint editing by posting comments in which writers give or receive online feedback. With further coordination and an expansion of themes and topics within an educational setting, blogs can also be interdisciplinary (Huffaker, 2005). While practices such as collaborative movie making or digital storytelling may create affinity among communities taking part in the practice, comparative case studies suggest that blogging creates an affinity space that drives the dynamics of interaction. (Freidus & Hlubinka, 2002).

Identity and Literacy Development

In a single-case study, Kinney (2012) discusses the variety of purposes that online writing has for young writers. With adolescents, blogs and other forms of online writing present a platform for recounting stories, making meaning about topics and events relative to their lives, fostering community and social awareness, and activism. Online writing can also support construction of identity. Involvement in non-mainstream literacy practices provides an opportunity for adolescents to affiliate and connect with a particular social group as well as explore a variety of online personas in conjunction with literacy development (Kinney, 2012). For theory construction or a deeper inquiry into literacy practices outside of school, creative writing on blogs provides an arena for young authors to explore many types of writing for a wide audience, to evaluate and appreciate the writing of others, and to enact and explore personal identity as authors create new meaning in the process. In a context known as an affinity space, blogs become an equalizing function, but that space may be one in which little more is known about each other than user name and choice of writing topics (Gee, 1992).

As they increase their comfort with both wider audiences and technology, authors must read and write as they would on paper. In this sense, blogs represent an ideal medium for literacy development. By means of their widespread popularity and ease of use, content analysis shows that blogs remain equitable for all age groups, interests, and genders, and still provide a medium for learning programmatic skills (Huffaker, 2005). For example, blogging offers access to primary sources of information, often included as hyperlinks on original posts, along with multiple interpretations of complex events. Another case study demonstrates that by reading others' blogs, students benefit from their peers' reflections and have the opportunity to see emerging ideas rather than only final, edited compositions (Lapadat, Brown, Thielmann, & McGregor, 2010).

Students become more active participants as the roles of writer and audience expand. Magnifico (2010) describes participation in online writing spaces as a forum in which readers and writers become conversation partners as well as active listeners, denoting a transformative shift in writing practices. The relationship becomes akin to that of orator and responsive audience instead of writer and passive reader. Further, electronic media has opened a window for clearly viewing the dynamics of how writers consider and interact with their audiences, as a series of case studies suggests. The communicative, interpersonal nature of writing is visible in online spaces than ever before (Lammers, Magnifico, & Curwood, 2014; Lensmire, 1994; Magnifico, 2010).

Blogs are robust spaces for literacy development. The process of blogging provides adolescent writers with tools and affordances for collaboration, storytelling, taking up more active roles relative to writing, and unique paths to making meaning. Methodological approaches used to research young writers on blogs include several content analyses, interview studies, and case studies. While blogs about online research

exist, little connective ethnography has been applied to blogging research (Murthy, 2008), it has been used with affinity space studies.

Theoretical Framework

Reading and writing is first a collective, socially organized practice that utilizes a symbol system and a technology for creating and disseminating it (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Writing incorporates the sharing of knowledge—thought, insight, and even questioning—for particular purposes in a specific context, in this event, discussing creative writing on a blog.

Text comprises a variety of semiotic modes, including written print, visual, oral, and aural material presented online (Alvermann, 2002; Gavelek & Bresnahan, 2008; Kress, 2003). To understand texts is to know how such things as layout and grammar serve to relate online writing to other forms of writing used in similar contexts, to discover how writers are located in position to others within a group, and whether online writing is used to take action in the world. Further, what is deemed text relies upon the social and cultural means in which it is presented and interpreted, and that may change from one domain to another (Moje, Stockdill, Kim, & Kim, 2009; Stone, 2007).

Yet literacy is not only a way of presenting a perspective; it also is a powerful way to create and present oneself. In dialogue and written interaction, we use literacy to shape and to present our identity to others. In my work, I use positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009) to analyze connectivity of literacy events in affinity spaces.

Affinity spaces are open and link to other spaces so that knowledge is shared and transformative. Yet, each affinity space maintains a distinct vision, culture, and set of norms, either in person or online (Gee, 2013) that are negotiated by affinity space members over time. On the Internet, people enter affinity sites, such as a novel writing or blog spaces, and can contribute in many different ways, with different people for different reasons. Depending on the space, members may engage in peripheral participation by reading but not interacting, or more actively, by commenting on others' blog posts, adding a character, or writing a completely new piece (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

With blogging, the acts of writing and reading, as well as interpretation of meaning, varies from one person to another. Blogs are used for a variety of purposes that serve multiple needs and interests. This occurs as part of daily, enacted, lived, deliberate, value-rich social practices. In this sense, voluntary writing on blogs is viewed from a sociocultural angle (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). In order to observe and gain new knowledge from human behavior in sociocultural contexts, adopting an appropriate method that embraces all that is emerging in the online context is crucial.

Methods

Examining new blends of semiotic sources, intersecting sets of purposes by those involved, and perhaps facets of identity that are shaped and reshaped as learning occurs are difficult to conceptualize without virtual ethnography methods that attend to layers of context occurring online and the interrelationships surrounding literacy practices. Systematic observation, multiple participant interviews, repeated rounds of qualitative coding with thematic analysis are means of consolidating and refining participant interactions to describe broader literacy enactments in affinity space ethnography. (Curwood et al., 2013; Gillen, 2009; Greenhow, 2011; Hine, 2000, 2004).

Hine (2004) clearly delineates how to use what she terms virtual ethnography to investigate the ways in which use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful, by viewing online interaction as both culture and cultural artifact. The shifting boundaries between physical place and virtual space should be continually interrogated. Yet, the process of virtual ethnography is not necessarily one of long-term immersion; rather, it is a practice of recurrent engagement. That engagement demands a mediation that adds a reflexive aspect to virtual ethnography. Through the immersion process, the ethnographer visits online spaces, discusses and observes those spaces with participants, and views online spaces in other social settings. Representation can only be partial, with interpretations relevant to research questions rather than depicting faithful reports of objective realities. Finally, virtual ethnography is considered adaptive ethnography, as it mediates itself to the conditions in which it finds itself (Hine, 2004).

In online contexts for research, the concepts of "field" and "participant" become problematized (Greenhow, 2011). An online site is not regarded as a fixed entity, or as a meaningless and functionless space. Participants learn the uses of and give meaning to content within an online space. The meaning of a space emerges through the ways in which individuals use it (Fay, 2007; Hine, 2000).

In expanded ethnography, another online method, the role of researcher is multi-situated, that of simultaneous observer and participant. By learning through practice, and achieving the ability to check interpretations through recursive engagement, the researcher achieves a deep familiarity with the site. In doing so, the researcher becomes close enough to the subject or object of study to understand how it functions at the micro-level of interactions (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

Choosing from the multiple terms of expanded ethnography, virtual ethnography, and affinity space ethnography, I selected an umbrella term, "connective" articulated by Leander (Leander, 2008; Leander & McKim, 2003), because it maintains focus on the interaction rather than location. Connective ethnography offers a framework for systematic inquiry into literacy phenomena that are continuously changing or about which little is known. Like traditional ethnography, connective ethnography presents an accurate reflection of participant perspectives and behaviors (insomuch as is shared with the researcher) and uses inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection and analytic strategies to build local and cultural theories, but the data is comprised of artifacts generated online (Greenhow, 2011; Hine, 2000).

With connective ethnography, bounding occurs by cultural processes, in this event, on a blog. To contrast connective ethnography with traditional ethnography, bounding occurs fluidly in cyberspace as connectivity, rather than by groups in one school, classroom, or a particular collective of students and their artifacts. However, connective boundaries can only be constructed retroactively (Fay, 2007). In traditional ethnography, a central theme is cultural understanding, with potential for new theory creation. The researcher interprets what the culture is, borrowing core elements from anthropology. Drawing on quantitative methods to establish patterns is allowable. To unpack what makes ethnography empirical, trustworthiness is crucial to the method, as it links the tenets of credibility, transferability, and dependability together. Credibility, akin to validity, includes adequate time spent in the field, persistent observation, peer debriefing, inclusion of negative cases and negative examples, member checks. Transferability involves thick, rich description that adequately provides insight and routes to further research. Dependability includes a systematic, reliable approach, clear methods for triangulation, work that builds on past studies or stepwise replication, and an inquiry audit of the processes and products resulting from them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Heath & Street, 2008; Purcell-Gates, 2011).

Ethnography is a case study, but a case study is not always ethnography. A critical characteristic of case study research is that it is a bounded system that defines what is excluded and included in a study. In collective case study, or multiple case studies, researchers investigate numerous cases to study a phenomenon, group, condition, or event. It is the responsibility of the researcher to build a convincing chain of evidence within the study (Barone, 2004; Dyson, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Case studies become complex as they are created around multiple data sources that must be analyzed for themes or patterns—often with huge amounts of data that may be difficult to clearly resolve into subsequent conclusions. Traditional case study methods necessitate holistic description, multiple sources of evidence, and finely-detailed analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. A chain of convincing and converging evidence, constructed as data from across contexts is analyzed (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2009). With virtual case study, bounding can also occur by connectivity, but exactly how is unclear.

The few research reports identified as "online case studies" are frequently case studies of online academic courses (Poole, 2000; Vonderwell, 2003). Extant scholarly literature consistently lacks clear methodology detailing how the connected space impacts issues such as data collection and analysis. How the participants interact with the researcher appears to be decisive.

Researcher positionality is a caveat. My role as participant-observer frequently became that of facilitator as I was called upon to assist bloggers with access to and functionality in the site, at times making me neither participant nor observer. Within the culture of the affinity space, my impact on the group often flowed away from fellow writer to technical support; that is, my direct participation was often forfeited to maintain first-hand observation of the social context at various points throughout the study. In addition to considering the roles of all participants online, as researchers we must also weigh how user mobility, access, and intentional or unintentional representation characterize enactments of identity (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010). Personal, and often illogical online habits influenced how each blogger used the Internet as well as the site itself.

In my affinity space investigation, I considered how to achieve adequate immersion in affinity space culture for connective ethnography if research is conducted only in space and not in physical place, especially if researcher-participant interaction is limited to the reading the artifacts and interviewing a sample of affinity space participants. The mode of data collection became foregrounded. The context of a face-to-face interview is distinctly different from an interview compiled from multiple blog comment threads, and still dissimilar in quality and data format from perhaps Skype interviews, or possibly question-and-answer chains of email messages. I considered whether an affinity space study could permit for interviews conducted beyond the determined affinity space.

However, if participants do meet both online and then offline, that is, in a setting with practices not mediated by the Internet (Leander & McKim, 2003), extending the boundaries of affinity space, is it still a connective ethnography, or is it a case study by default? Again, how do these issues impact data collection and analysis?

The Present Study

Two participants, Zora and Mina (self-selected pseudonyms from favorite authors) participated in the same blogging affinity group. The affinity space, bounded by offline verbal and online written interaction between participants included both girls. Expanding the boundaries of affinity space allowed for multiple data sources to enrich interpretations of how participants enacted their identities, and enabled multiple participant perspectives for consideration. Each writer generated very different data, yet all were remarkably similar in terms of their writing content and themes. Over a ten-week

course of two-hour writing sessions, Mina attended weekly group meetings with eight other authors in the literacy center of an urban Midwestern university. Zora blogged remotely, although she had briefly met other group participants.

Data Sources

Each blog post was considered an individual unit of analysis. Written artifacts were triangulated with observational and interview data. Differing interview procedures exemplify data collection inconsistency (Smagorinsky, 2008).

Field notes were systematically gathered from observations as participants discussed and selected topics, conducted online research for background information, and wrote their blog posts and comments (Baumann & Bason, 2011; Greenhow, 2011; Stake, 1995). Initial data analysis included coding of patterns, events, actions, etc. of the triangulated data (Charmaz, 2003). A detailed observation log was kept with checks of Web browsing histories of each participant. Logs enabled indexing of websites utilized for research, as well as sourcing for selected model texts, images or video, and final blog posts. Observation logs were included to define bounding and enhance description of the participants' use of Internet space in relation to affinity space, and to track where they interacted online. Zora self-reported her observation log.

The core divergence in the data collection process was interview protocol. Face-to-face interviews with Mina were audio recorded, transposed, and coded. More challenging for collection and coding was Zora's open-ended interview, conducted by phone with follow-up questions via email. Her recursive engagement and nuanced responses were often difficult to capture.

Findings

Identifying connections in multiple spaces, completing thorough interviews, and accessing multiple artifacts as data were key tasks. As the findings demonstrate, how affinity space culture was bound as either online, offline, or a combination of both affected triangulation of field notes, interviews, and artifacts in distinctive ways. In the end, several factors indicate methods clearly more consistent with case study, including the interactions within affinity space, data gathered from across contexts, and the constructed identities enacted in the blog space.

As part of a larger study on adolescent identity and writing, positioning theory coding entailed categorizing relational and interactive positionings within writing on the blog, and, in Mina's case, some positioning within the group meetings at the physical site. Despite their differing perspectives and entry points to the blog space, Mina's and Zora's positioning, like their written content and themes, were remarkably similar.

Field Notes

Field notes included detailed transcript notations, memos, and observations from the physical site. Coding matrices using NVivo11 revealed Mina positioning most frequently as author and editor, self creating other. Accounts of Zora, with less time spent in physical place, demonstrated more positioning as self with other writers, less frequently as author or editor. Zora's communications with other participants were more in the role of apprentice blogger, seeking clarification about content rather than the creative process itself. Direct insight to her writing practice was unavailable as she blogged most frequently from home.

Similarly, while Zora reported through phone conversation her online involvements on other sites for research and accessing mentor texts, it was possible to directly check the search log of Mina's laptop at the physical site. While neither participant was reflexively followed in real time, the broad range of sites available from Mina's search history provided information about inspiration for her specific blog posts. The emails, photos, and texts, in addition to the site names shared by Zora provided different information, less about her writing, and more connected to her personal interests.

Analyzing and integrating the various traces that users leave on the Internet are consistent with an ethnographic approach. This technique was utilized for triangulation with other data sources to avoid narrative or textual content analysis, that could bias text over other online interactions (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Soukup, 2000). Overall, field note data yielded details about Mina as a writer, and Zora as Internet navigator.

Interviews

Mina sat for face-to-face, open-ended interviews on three occasions throughout the study. In total, word count for her interview data was 2233 from 62 questions. In contrast, in one phone interview with email follow-up, Zora answered 17 questions, with a total word count of 231. Samples from the same question set follow.

> **Mina:** I don't really download songs. I use Spotify." [Does math on fingers.] Probably two hours/day. Fifteen to twenty hours per week.
> **Facilitator:** Blogging?
> **Mina:** Tumblr…. I always do that whenever I have a free period or I'm bored. [Counts on fingers again.] Cut down to fifteen hours/week from 20 hours/week. That doesn't include writing. Blogging for me is posting pictures. Posting pictures that I find from the Internet.
> **Facilitator:** Vlogging?
> **Mina:** Nope.
> **Facilitator:** Using Fanzine or other creative writing sites?
> **Mina:** Twenty, twenty-ish.
> **Facilitator:** What are your favorite websites?
> **Mina:** Tumblr. Wikipedia. [Pause.] Also, when you asked me what websites I go on, I forgot YouTube, although I don't know why. Cuz I was like, 'Oh yeah, YouTube.' And I go on public sites, not always Tumblr, but YouTube for sure.
> **Facilitator:** Do you use the Internet at school?
> **Mina:** Yes. We all have iPads.
> **Facilitator:** What classes?
> **Mina:** All, except PE. We use apps in PE though.

Zora used a cell phone as she answered the same questions one-on-one on an afternoon when the affinity group was not present in the physical site. She opted to use the phone call format over Facetime, although she reported using Facetime more frequently with friends.

> **Facilitator:** How often do you download songs?
> **Zora:** No. I watch YouTube sometimes. It depends on chores.
> **Facilitator:** Blogging?
> **Zora:** No.
> **Facilitator:** Vlogging? Do you watch video blogs?
> **Zora:** Yes. Less than an hour a day.

Facilitator: How often do you use Fanzine or other creative writing sites?
Zora: I read on those sites. Maybe one hour a day.
Facilitator: What are your favorite websites?
Zora: Wattpad. YouTube. I read books.
Facilitator: Do you use the Internet at school?
Zora: No.

Missing from the interview process with Zora were indications of prosody, gesture, and the opportunity to immediately follow up with more specific questions about her writing. However, for both cases, interviewing provided key contextual information about personality and meaning making online.

Artifacts

Considering poetry, Mina was present with other writers in the affinity space during discussion of mentor texts. Responding to a poetry slam video, Mina made meaning from it, conversing about unrequited love. Positioning as poetry slam specialist among other poets, she noted in discussion how slam poetry has dramatic aspects and described how the author's sentiments shifted in the poem.

01 **Mina:** Yeah, he refocused his feelings on her. He was obsessed
02 with her.
03 **Facilitator:** Obsessed?
04 **Mina:** Yeah. But he transferred from objects to her.

Her own poem shared similar emotions. In a blog post, Mina developed a theme of a loss of love.

ELEGY

As my heart

slowly dies

I have come to know

Of the silences

that fill my nights

and capture your breath

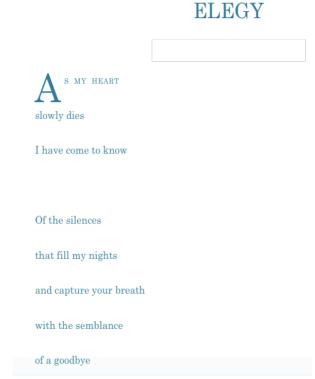with the semblance

of a goodbye

Figure 1: Excerpt, Mina's poem

Without physical participation in the group discussions, analysis of blog posts was dependent upon written discourse with Zora. As she directly addressed the reader in the following poem, she positioned as self with other, but as writer opposed to the theme, which is again of love lost. The reader is also positioned as bystander in Zora's poem.
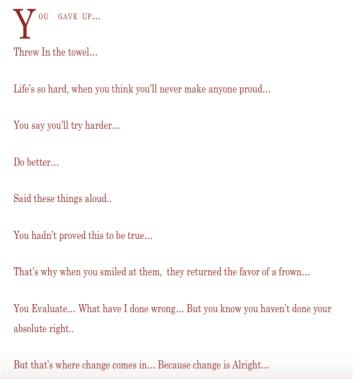
Y OU GAVE UP...

Threw In the towel...

Life's so hard, when you think you'll never make anyone proud...

You say you'll try harder...

Do better...

Said these things aloud..

You hadn't proved this to be true...

That's why when you smiled at them, they returned the favor of a frown...

You Evaluate... What have I done wrong... But you know you haven't done your absolute right..

But that's where change comes in... Because change is Alright...

Figure 2: Zora's poem

At this juncture, Mina and Zora interacted as Mina posted a comment, "This is very nice, and the usage of second-person is great! Nice job." Zora did not respond, and did not write another poem or employ second person voice in her writings.

An overall lack of comments left Mina feeling that others in the blogging affinity space did not understand her work. Indeed, her short story, inspired by a poem, was complex. Mina was able to explain not only her choice of motivating author, but also suggest the emotions upon which she chose to draw for her writing.

> I think Emily Dickinson [wrote like this]. Maybe "I Heard a Fly Buzz"? I think that's what it's called. This lady, she was dying, waiting to see God. That's what it's about. I wanted to write about that feeling right before you fall, or land. Where you just fly. She was dying.

Instead of waiting to see God as Dickinson had, the protagonist in Mina's story reflected upon her recent past experiences and her regrets over them. Mina wrote from the stance of bitter protagonist, one far older than her current 16 years, as she graphically narrated her own death. When she ruminated, "Their intentions are just, I suppose," she aligned herself with the antagonist despite that fact that the character did not jump, instead, "felt calloused palms pressed into the small of my back." In other words, she displayed agreement with the decision of those who pushed her from a fatal height. Emotionlessly, she acknowledged a carefree culpability and the fundamental fact that life would soon end: "I am okay, I promise." Regret soon emerged, along with a second

order position, rejecting her situation, placing her in opposition to the antagonist as the poem ends.

THEY SAY THAT IT TAKES ONLY SECONDS FOR YOUR ENTIRE LIFE TO FLASH BEFORE your eyes.

But I do not see myself scraping my knees at five or sneaking out of the house at fifteen. I don't see places that I once knew or hear the melodies of songs I once played. I do not see my mother's face or yours.

All I know now is the air around my body making my head feel heavy and the pull of the upcoming impact.

I didn't jump; that would require a lack of both cowardice and narcissism, something that I do not have. I simply understood my fate when I felt calloused palms pressed into the small of my back. Their intentions were just I suppose.

My stomach churns. There is someone screaming. They are screaming for me. I want to tell them that there is no need for that, that I am okay. I promise.

My skin itches as if the pavement is already imbedded into it, as if gravel is already mixed into my blood and caked underneath my fingernails. I curl into myself, my cement bones becoming stiff.

Figure 3: Excerpt, Mina's story

Zora reflected on more tangible events in her short story, yet her self-deprecation and sense of loss were also palpable, akin to those expressed by Mina.

I

FAMILY OCCASIONS WERE NEVER REALLY MY THING. NO ONE MY AGE WAS EV around. I was the only child. I had no brothers, sisters, or even a few cousins to run around and play tag with, or hang out with. I guess what I'm basically trying to say is that, I'm lonely. But I fulfill this loneliness with my technology. I've done that since I was first sat in front of a electronic at the age of three. From the then on I'd never Imagined life with out it. Until now. I've realized that this technology has made me miss out on so many opportunities. But not only that, it built me to be the selfish monster I am. They say those who only do things involving themselves and using things like an iPhone, IPad, and selfies, Have an obsession with themselves. That obsession creates selfishness. That selfishness creates loneliness.

Because I was always looking up or down at my phone, I never really saw him. But he says he saw me from day one. He always watched me, but I was too busy updating my profile pictures and statuses of my current moods. Instead of being human, and expressing them to another human being.

Figure 4: Zora's story

Zora expressed herself as a young woman learning about relationships and egocentricity in face of technology. Like Mina's "I should I should," Zora conveyed the realization of how technology "has made me miss out on so many opportunities. But not only that, it built me to be the selfish monster I am." Unlike Mina's tale, this story contains dialogue and some character development. The pivotal "Until now" also suggests change. Acknowledgement of awareness of her selfishness occurred when "a Boy" broke through her loneliness, forcing her to take responsibility for her actions.

Discussion and Summary

Although boundaries continually changed, interrogation of that change was not always prudent or necessary. User access and mobility caused as much fluctuation of boundaries as did connectivity on the blog site. In the absence of physical representation, an abundance of artifacts in the form of captured dialogue from comment spaces and blog posts was necessary to generate thick and rich description of interlocutors. More importantly, bounding was different for Zora and Mina. Zora was seldom in the expanded affinity space. Interviews were vastly different, even if blog artifacts were similar.

Occupying Spaces

In virtual ethnography, repeated rounds of qualitative coding with thematic analysis are means of consolidating and refining participant interactions to describe broader literacy and identity enactments. Yet Zora and Mina occupied Internet space in very different ways. Zora navigated from beyond the bounded affinity space, into the blog from other sites and affinity spaces to read and to post her writings. Mina often worked in reverse, perusing the blog, and then navigating away, or offline altogether to the physical boundaries of affinity space. Because not all interaction online is observable, field notes were expanded to blend the physical with the online site as affinity space, bounded as such to capture additional interaction because what was emerging online was insufficient data for the purposes of an identity study. The "field" was the affinity space comprised of discourse from the literacy clinic and blog writing.

Engaging in virtual ethnography is the complex process of becoming acquainted with an online culture through immersion. However, on Internet sites, immersion is accomplished by visiting field connections rather than field sites, and allowing for the shifting of boundaries. Internet use becomes socially meaningful by viewing online interaction as both culture and cultural artifact in that continual, intermittent engagement. In contrast, my unexpected duties as facilitator precluded me from maximum immersion. Most often, I was less participant than observer. My shifting role provided opportunities for uniquely rich description as I had access to all stages of the writing process for those interacting in physical space, where I could discuss emerging themes or insights. By not overtly participating, missed were my chances to develop predictions or follow sudden hunches about the how Zora or Mina might conceptualize, for example, values or responsibilities in their characters as part of their literate identities.

Invisibility in Interviews

In the case of Zora, the absence of nonverbal cues, facial expression, and the opportunity to extend open-ended questions impeded the interview process, and threatened to muddle interpretation of her intent and meaning-making process.

Conducted outside of the affinity space, the interview data of Zora also complicated direct comparison with that of Mina because typical rules of conversation do not apply in the fragmented structure of online and phone conversation. Sarcasm, irony, and even humor can be difficult to discern in text. Many paratextual elements may be difficult to ignore as non-meaningful data, or to categorize effectively. Because it can constrain, hide, or minimize the visible products of interaction (bodies, clothing, gesture, etc.) the Internet fosters specific focus on the building blocks of culture at the basic level of interaction (Markham, 2004). Moreover, the interview with Mina was conducted within the bounding of the affinity space. As Zora maintained a limited mobility while conversing from home, her interviews and artifacts originated from beyond the bounding of affinity space, contrary to specified terms of connective ethnography.

Regarding the complexity of researcher-participant relationships, Greenhow (2011) concedes that interviews are often not possible in virtual ethnography. Most problematic for the interview process is the acceptance that representation can only be partial, with interpretations relevant to research questions rather than depicting faithful reports of objective realities. As virtual ethnography is considered adaptive ethnography, mediating itself to the conditions in which it finds itself (Hine, 2004), patchwork interviews are considered perfectly acceptable, which raises questions of rigor for systematicity and data triangulation.

Timestamped, Textual Artifacts

With a timestamp and a permanent digital artifact, written connections among contributors remained visible to all affinity space participants. How users perceived the nature of text adds a layer of complexity. While engaging in creative writing in a somewhat casual communication style consistent with blogging, users do not necessarily conceptualize text in a similarly casual manner. Indeed, users frequently conceptualize and responded to the text as a concrete and permanent vessel for truth (Markham, 1998). Mina wrote a positive comment to Zora's blog story. In doing so, she acknowledged having read it, and opened interaction around writing that Zora subsequently ignored, dismissing her interest and possibly, her accountability for it. Moreover, as meaning is unique to the extent that it belongs to linguistic or written interaction of individuals or groups within specific social contexts (Medvedev & Bakhtin, 1985), the opportunity to make and share meaning with the group was lost through Zora's truncated participation.

Mina expressed disappointment when responses to her writing were oral rather than written. She had no record of lasting connection, and, she felt, of meaning making around her blog writing. Without a permanent record in a digital afterlife, even on a closed site, participants privileged text over oral discourse. Intense weight given to artifacts is consistent with Hine's (2004) conception of digital ethnography, yet without interviews and field notes, artifacts depict an incomplete story.

The boundaries of affinity space enabled online interaction, and the production of written artifacts, even as it limited participation by location, time and connectivity. Were both participants equally accessible, other methods, certainly traditional ethnography or an immersive interview study would have been plausible.

Methodological Considerations

While all forms of interaction, not just face-to-face, are ethnographically valid, discerning truth and authenticity of participant contributions, particularly in any online format where identity construction and portrayals are central is problematic (Greenhow, 2011) and threatens dependability. These issues impact data collection and analysis by

increasingly moving researcher focus away from location and boundary to flow and connectivity. Matters of credibility arise when ethnographer and participants have limited interactions. Overlaps or discrepancies in online and offline identities are not apparent, nor are interrelationships among all writers. In the absence of complete browser histories, the importance of artifacts increases. Because connective ethnography relies less on interviews and more on artifacts, this is a salient concern. With a limited number of artifacts, an over-reliance on document analysis brings trustworthiness into question. My perceptions and opportunities to interpret data were constrained by the observability of threads of interaction and the resulting artifacts. But it is the interpretation of those artifacts that are called most into question. As silent perusal is considered authentic participation in affinity space, not all interactions can emerge as artifacts.

Positioning theory represented in microethnography traces dialogic processes in ways that are pertinent to demonstrating how participants establish or maintain relationships, and how they construct knowledge (Baker & Green, 2011). Positioning theory analysis, selected *a priori,* was imposed on the data, instead of later developing axial coding in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008), privileging case study methods over ethnography.

As a researcher, having access to Zora in other online spaces beyond the affinity space provided a deeper immersion in the practices of one blogger, but only a glimpse into the Internet culture she inhabited. Her interests were apparent in her choices of Internet YouTube video blogs, and creative writing on Wattpad. However, as affinity space participant, Zora's absence from the physical place of the blogging sessions limited the quantity of data regarding her meaning making with other bloggers. The data produced by Zora was abundant; yet data from Mina is thicker and more multilayered, as it originated from multiple, verified perspectives. For example, Mina received few comments on her story, yet she did receive feedback form peers on it because they elected to discuss it as a group instead, as the discussion data in field notes demonstrated. The data connected to Zora did not provide similar opportunities. Her navigation through Internet space revealed few direct relationships between visited sites and written artifacts. In both cases, their data provides information about identity, yet individual identity, not that of the group, and definitely not about identity of the culture.

The instability of identity enactments, personal time investments, and cultural location of participants in this study shimmered with novelty in the threads of online written designs, but could not always be woven into data before vanishing, particularly in the case of Zora. Her writing was often curtailed by inaccessibility of devices from home. Her interviews and connections with other writers were constrained by time, place, and space. Likewise, although she completed an observation log, she did not report time spent on the blog reading but not interacting.

Conclusion

Virtual ethnography can be viewed as both a method and a product (Greenhow, 2011). This inquiry uses virtual ethnographic methods for a case study about blogging. The phenomena of study are identity and blog culture. Findings illustrate how individuals enact their identities in writing, arguably more credibly with increased time spent in both online and offline contexts. Thus, with more data generated for triangulation, clearer insight into variations in identity portrayals is possible. A caveat of engagement in virtual ethnography is that the Internet, or even a blog site, is not a closed or autonomous system in any way. It is always dependent upon the world in which it is embedded The separation of online and offline realms is an artificial one, particularly as literacy is practiced across this divide. (Marsh, 2014). In this inquiry, the location and situatedness of participants is crucial. When the study is bounded by connectivity of participants in

the affinity space, all participants should inhabit that same space for consistency in data collection and analysis. In the event of atypical participant involvement, as in the case of Zora, tracking interactivity in a tightly bounded system through connective case study is fundamentally more suitable for individuation as well as comparisons.

This connective case study edges close to ethnography in that it is more descriptive than explanatory in nature. When framed either way, crucial interpretations may be overlooked. In determining this to be case study, what was lost was the opportunity to navigate through other writing spaces with both girls, participating with and observing their sourcing of mentor texts and other research information for their creative writing pieces; to conceptualize culture construction through discourse in a manner mediated by the Internet. What is gained is a context-sensitive, layered analysis and implications of identity enactments originating from data collected as users learned a challenging new online format. Unique portraits of writers approaching their topics and the Internet vary in unusual ways, but are comparable by case study, as this inquiry unquestionably is.

Topical choices made for creative writing, personal background and experiences with shared writing, and the very controlled online representations of self, along with an impulsiveness reinforced by the mode limit how complete a picture of any culture can be, especially in a classroom context (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010). Rather than virtual ethnography, the comprehensiveness of connective case study methods offers a trustworthy and innovative investigative trajectory enabling synthesis of the social fibers of meaning making with emerging culture, along with students' connection to it, for inquiry into online writing.

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