Researching Online Practices

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Summary

- Online social practices
- Connective inquiry that resists a sharp online/offline distinction
- Affinity spaces
- Practice theory
- Key theorists and writers
  - James Gee
  - Michele Knobel
  - Colin Lankshear
  - Kevin Leander

Key concepts

Practice (social practices)

This chapter considers what is entailed in researching activities involving use of the internet from the standpoint of people engaging in social practices like blogging, online shopping, participating in online social networks, and being a fanfiction writer or music video creator. It outlines what we mean by 'practices' as a technical concept, and identifies some key implications for research design and methodology of taking a practice approach to researching social phenomena. We pay particular attention to a concept of 'connective inquiry' that disrupts the online/offline distinction and to the idea of 'affinity spaces' as a

useful construct for understanding how people become proficient in certain kinds of internet-related practices. The chapter privileges attempts to gain 'insider' understandings of internet-related practices, as experienced from the perspective of the actors themselves (emic), rather than imposing observer meanings upon these practices (etic) from the outside or on the basis of generalizations presumed to hold across a range of cultural contexts. We live in a period of massive technological and institutional change, where new things to be done and new ways of doing things – increasingly on a global scale – are emerging apace, mediated to a large extent by the internet. Internet-related practices are the 'nuts and bolts' of a great deal of the culture and history being made in this conjuncture. Understanding these nuts and bolts, then, is crucial to understanding our times – locally and globally.

Practice theory is a form of *cultural* theory of social phenomena, based on the idea that humans share ways of making sense, or ascribing meaning, to the world as the means for 'doing life together' (or 'being social'). As a particular cultural theory of the social, *practice theory* locates this shared knowledge in everyday social practices, with practices comprising the smallest units of social theory. In a formulation consistent with Silvia Scribner and Michael Cole's (1981) classic statement of 'practice' developed from an activity theory perspective, Andreas Reckwitz (2002) describes a practice as a routinized type of behaviour that consists of several interconnected elements:

namely, 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (Reckwitz, 2002: 254). Wherever a practice exists we necessarily find all of these elements present, and connected to one another in specific and distinctive ways. A practice cannot be reduced to one or two of these elements, and differences in the ways they are interconnected constitute variations in the practice or, even, different practices. In short, practices are routinized ways of moving our bodies, handling objects and using things, understanding and describing the world, desiring and conceiving of tasks and purposes, of treating subjects, and so on (Reckwitz, 2002).

Humans are bearers or carriers of practices, through which they do and are and understand. As carriers of practices, through participation in practices, individuals 'perform' their bodies and their minds, their desires and ends, their emotions and values, in particular ways. They thereby achieve identity and membership, roles and relationships, understandings and accountabilities.

It is important to recognize that while practices are *routines* and, to that extent (relatively) stable and recognizable as particular ways of doing things, they are nonetheless dynamic, mutable and not completely monolithic. There are different versions of particular practices, more and less expert versions, and there is room for a degree of innovation and variation. Bloggers, for example, may blog quite differently from one another – thematically, in terms of additional media and applications used, regularity of posting, etc. – while nonetheless being recognizable as bloggers. Their mental, bodily and dispositional performances, use of tools, and so on, may vary significantly while remaining versions of blogging. The sense they respectively make of blogging may differ, as may their understandings of the blogosphere. Yet they are bloggers and engaged in blogging. The details of the 'elements' of blogging and the interconnections between these elements can vary from case to case – within recognizable limits – and it is these nuances that good social research will identify and document and explain, thereby contributing to our knowledge of the social world: of action and order. Furthermore, to contribute to knowledge of social practices it is not necessary to deal with the 'whole' of a practice. It may be sufficient and useful to focus primarily on particular interconnections between elements or, even, particular elements of a practice.

'Connective' inquiry and the online/offline distinction

During the early years of internet research there was a strong tendency to bracket the online world or practice being studied and to distinguish quite sharply between on- and offline social lives, and between real world and online 'communities'. Much discussion about research methods centred on the extent to which conventional research tools and techniques 'might be transferred and adapted for the unique characteristics of online social spaces' (Leander, 2008: 36). In an early collection of essays the editor, Steve Jones (1999: 9), argued that there was a risk of restricting and confining online experience if researchers used old methodological tools for new internet experiences, since '[t]he range of experience is somehow changed online, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and our explanatory abilities must change with it'.

Work in the 'adaptation paradigm' continues, exploring the appropriate range of uses of familiar methods and developing new ones. However, researchers of internet-related practices have increasingly resisted a sharp online/offline distinction and sought to develop 'connective' methodological approaches (Hine, 2000) based on the assumption that 'people routinely build connections to internet-related practices and sites and myriad offline practices and sites' (Leander, 2008: 36). Practices exist in time and space and move, or 'travel' through time and space. What we do online now is usually intimately connected to things we do offline, from the past extending into the future (e.g. what we blog about or bring to our Facebook profiles). Hence, practices like blogging or being a blogger travel seamlessly across and between connected aspects of our lives in physical and virtual spaces. Since practice travels, so must social research approaches, like ethnography and qualitative case study. 'Connective' social research of internet-related practices regards (social) relations and connections as normative social practices and sees online social spaces as complexly related to other social spaces. The distinction between 'online' and 'offline' might indeed best be seen as a 'holding place' or as an 'analytic heuristic' that may serve provisionally until researchers can formulate more grounded means of understanding and discussing

148

human experiences that are mediated by internet technologies.

We would argue that the binaries between online/offline, virtual world/real world, and cyberspace/physical space must be disrupted. In part, they are imperfect, fuzzy distinctions. In addition, however, they provide *a priori* answers to some of the most intriguing questions about internet practices. As Miller and Slater (2000: 5) observe, the extent to which some people seem actually to treat various internet relations as a 'world apart' from the rest of their lives should not be taken as the assumed point of departure for investigation but, rather, be seen as something that needs to be socially explained as *a practical accomplishment* (Leander, 2008: 37).

Internet-related practices

For precisely the kinds of reasons just mentioned, some researchers prefer to speak of 'internet-related practices' rather than 'online practices'. We might think of a continuum along which everyday social practices are mediated to a greater or lesser extent by the internet. Nearer one pole we might find practices like online multi-player gaming, weblogging, and participating in social networking sites where the immediate engagement and activity are conducted almost wholly online, albeit by material bodies and minds situated in the material world, surrounded by and often drawing upon accoutrements of that material context and interacting with anyone else who may be in that space. Of course, gamers, bloggers, and online social networkers draw upon relationships and experiences from their offline worlds and integrate them into their online activities. Nearer the other pole we might find particular instances of practices like music video remixing where much of the activity can occur offline, and participants might go online mainly to collect source video, to post their creations and check out feedback on their work within spaces like YouTube.com.

Allowing for such considerations and variations across on- and offline spaces, some typical examples of widely subscribed online/internet-related practices include:

- Digitally-mediated social networking: Facebooking, for example, can maintain a range of relationships through wall posts, news feeds, status updates, collaborative game playing, and the like. It can be used to network professionally through group memberships, 'friending' known figures in the field, and posting website links and resources. Facebooking can focus on interests, too, through posting interest-focused photos and news, joining Facebook causes, linking to online bookmarking services, and so on.

- Fan fiction practices can involve drafting stories collaboratively using instant messaging, using discussion boards to role-play character development, posting polished stories to Fanfiction.net for review and reviewing others' stories. It can include creating fan art, movie trailers, manga/comics, podcasts and more to accompany these narratives.

- Machinima are short movies made using video games. Machinima practices include video game playing, developing storylines using game characters and sets, storyboarding, video editing, watching machinima for enjoyment and ideas, participating in discussion forums, posting videos to machinima archives for comment and review, attending festivals in person or online, and so on.

As in the case of blogging, we assume from the outset that each of these internet-related practices involves or possibly 'recruits' a broad range of offline practices, relationships, purposes, and materials, and that individual users will locate themselves at particular points along online/offline continua in each case, shaping unique social-digital webs. Other everyday internet-related practices include online shopping, participating in user-generated social news or recommendation sites, instant messaging and real time chatting, contributing to user-generated media sites, collaborative online writing, and so on.

Affinity spaces

James Gee (2004) introduced the idea of 'affinity' spaces as an alternative construct to 'communities of practice' for thinking about how people learn to become proficient in a practice. Affinity spaces may exist online as virtual space, or in the physical world as material and face-to-face space. They are *designed* spaces that have been built in order to resource people who share a particular interest or endeavour (an affinity). They are social spaces where members of an affinity can 'affiliate' to share and gain knowledge, interact, locate resources, and so on. They are not *locations* so much as dispersed 'environments' serving their respective affinities. With respect to websites like

149

Fanfiction.net, which serves authors and readers of fan fiction, Rebecca Black (2008: 36) explains how thinking in terms of a *space* for this affinity 'is a way of focusing attention on the interplay among engagement, active participation, a sense of belonging, and the production of a social space'.

Gee provides an ostensive definition by reference to the popular video game, 'Rise of Nations':

> The many websites and publications devoted to ['Rise of Nations'] create a social space in which people can, to any degree they wish, small or large, affiliate with others to share knowledge and gain knowledge that is distributed and dispersed across many different people, places, Internet sites and modalities (magazines, chat rooms, guides, recordings). (2004: 73)

Affinity spaces, then, are defined in part by content – what people interact around, what the space is about. Any resource that provides access to the content of the affinity and to ways and means of interacting with that content can be seen as a 'portal' (Gee, 2004: 81). Gee refers to the sources of the content that galvanise affinities as 'generators' (2004: 81). These include people, institutions, artefacts, signs, conceptual frameworks, signifying systems, and so on (Black, 2008: 36). Anyone at whatever level of proficiency can participate in the space and, to this extent, can interact with and otherwise contribute to furthering the participation of others, whoever and wherever they may be and regardless of their level of expertise.

As such, affinity spaces constitute crucial 'sites' of online or internet-related practices. They will typically be radically dispersed and will traverse online and offline spaces.

Implications for research design and methods

A *practice* approach to internet-related activities means that *from the outset* research design must be focused on getting at participant experiences and understandings of elements of practice – bodily and mental performances, things and how they are used, purposes, motivations, knowhow, etc. – and how these are connected when participants enact (their particular versions of) the practice. This is compatible with questions and design and methods choices evolving during the early phases of a study, in accordance with

researcher experiences *in situ* and latest knowledge developments. For example, researcher experiences with participants may dictate using fewer or more participants than originally planned, or doing more observation and less interviewing, or shifting from a focus on participant information and paying greater attention to observing how tools are used or on the features and qualities of artefacts – but always on the basis of generating better quality knowledge and understanding of elements of practice and how they are connected in this instance. Whether research objectives are framed as specific questions, and the extent to which these questions are 'in place' from the outset, is less important than the requirement that the data collected and the ways in which it is analysed and discussed be constantly accountable to illuminating elements of practice and their connectedness.

In some cases (e.g. Black, 2008), aspects of practice can be studied in depth without having offline access to participants. Finding appropriate participants will involve getting to know them as well as possible online to establish trust, identify possible points of vulnerability, and to be satisfied that they can provide sufficient good quality data to meet research purposes (see Stories from the Field). This takes time, but is crucial work, sometimes assisted by public markers (e.g. number of reviews, comments or views), peer networks, and through access to affinity spaces, where finding one participant may lead to another. Negotiating participation requires researchers and participants working through ethical issues concerning privacy, consent (and what constitutes data when 'informants' may not be participants), and forms of vulnerability (risk, security) that are exacerbated by online environments and electronic 'searchability' and tracking facilities (Leander, 2008).

In other cases it will be necessary also to have offline access to participants, to see how they use tools, work through processes integral to the practice, or do things in their daily lives that are carried over into their online lives and interests (Jones, 2008; Leander and Lovvorn, 2006). To make informed judgements about the particular version or versions of a practice they are witnessing, in relation to one another and to other versions of the practice – e.g. more/less expert, more/less 'mature', more/less typical or peripheral – researchers will benefit from participatory experience of that practice (or relevant similar practices), and from having access to other people's 'insider' perspectives (see the third story from the field below). This might incline a researcher

150

towards adopting participant observation techniques, or immersing themselves in the practice as they move into the research.

Participant observation (comprehensive fieldnotes), in-depth interviewing, artefact collection, screen capture, *in situ* conversations with a purpose, think alouds, walk-throughs and talk-throughs, written transcript production, textual documentation of technical resources, network mapping, audio and video recording of interactions, use of eliciting devices, and the like are among the staple means of data collection (Lam, 2005; Lewis and Fabos, 2005; Miller and Slater, 2000).

A focus on practice(s) directs researchers' attention towards the constitutive elements of practice and their connections, but does not narrowly circumscribe theoretical perspectives to be adopted for informing data analysis and it does not prescribe analytic codes and categories. Grounded theory approaches to data analysis have often been used to good effect (Lewis and Fabos, 2005) but are not obligatory. Open coding and category development using constant comparative techniques will have wide applicability. At the same time, analytic approaches informed theoretically by narrative theory, activity theory, discourse analysis (Steinkuehler, 2006), rhizomatic analysis (Hagood, 2004), or other frames will often be productive. Some researchers (e.g. Leander and Lovvorn, 2006) find actor network theory useful because it helps map relationships between the material – 'things' – and the semiotic – 'concepts' – for example, between people (e.g. fanfiction writers), their ideas and purposes, and their technologies and other resources; all of which collectively constitute a 'network', and practices themselves involve precisely such networks (Latour, 2005). Finally, qualitative archiving and analytic tools, like Atlas or NVivo, can help with organising, analyzing and searching through data.

Stories from the field

1. Email interviews and depth of data (Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear)

Email-mediated interviews are a popular data collection method for researching online practices. Since they are asynchronous, interviewees can respond in their own time – which is ideal when researchers and participants are in different time zones and otherwise remote. Respondents needn't complete interviews in

one sitting and can spend time reflecting on and crafting responses. The text-based nature of email-mediated interviews obviates transcription, which is often tedious and time-consuming.

In our experience, unfortunately, email-mediated interviews haven't delivered the depth we seek for obtaining 'insider' perspectives and know-how with respect to a practice – especially email interviews with young people. In a recent study we were interested in how a successful young anime music video (AMV) remixer learned to create AMVs (song-length videos created using anime as the visual resource). We had access to his AMVs in online affinity spaces (e.g. AnimeMusicVideos.org) and to commentaries and feedback conversations between the remixer and viewers, and access to other spaces documenting his everyday life as an anime fan. But what we really wanted to know was more process-oriented, for example: how he became involved in creating AMVs and posting them for feedback; what kept him remixing when each polished video required hundreds of hours to complete; what kept him engaged as an active participant in the AMV universe online and offline. Email-mediated interviews seemed most appropriate, given we had never met the remixer in person and considered a telephone or voice-over-internet call too intrusive during the early stages of the study.

Our informant was enthusiastic about participating, and interviewing began, with questions like: 'How did you learn to make AMVs? What resources do you draw on to help you? (e.g. software manuals, Google, discussion boards, friends?)' This question set, for example, yielded two sentences:

> I learned how to make AMVs like I learn everything else, I jump into it head first and have fun with it. After a while I looked up a guide on DVD ripping which would be the only resource I've probably ever used besides feedback from friends.

The problem may lie with how we framed our questions, yet in previous case study interviews conducted face-to-face we have had little difficulty getting interviewees to elaborate at length about some process or how they complete some task. The opportunity to prompt for more information at a specific point in an exchange with a research participant is lost in email-mediated interviews. They are not like in-person interviews, where interesting comments can be followed up immediately, and requests to 'tell

me more' are easily made on the spot. Subsequent emails with the remixer invited elaboration (e.g. what jumping in and having fun with creating AMVs actually looked like). Responses, however, remained stripped back, leaving us feeling we were only skimming surfaces in terms of coming to understand the practice of AMV creation and sharing.

We've found that researching online practices with 'unknown' participants-at-a-distance creates particular challenges for researchers. Writing about processes and insider know-how in email-mediated interviews is to expect a lot from respondents, especially when they are relatively young and perhaps not well-practised in reflecting on how one participates in or creates something. Using specific examples of our informant's work and having him discuss editing decisions concretely helped obtain more detailed email responses, but these remained less satisfying than conducting voice-to-voice interviews.

2. Privacy hazards (Rebecca Black)

Networked, online spaces simultaneously open exciting new research vistas and pose heightened methodological challenges for qualitative researchers. My ethnographic study of adolescent English language learners (ELLs) who were writing online fan fiction was particularly concerned with two aspects of their writing: (1) how they used their online texts to elicit feedback from readers as a means of improving their English skills; and (2) how they used their texts to represent aspects of their identities and work through issues that they were dealing with from their everyday lives, such as sexuality, peer pressure, and school violence. Many of these teens were using screen names to publish their stories, so parents and even friends were often unaware that they were writing these stories, posting them online, or even that they were dealing with these issues.

During recruitment I found a potential research participant who was writing powerful anime-based fan fictions about male characters who were struggling with their sexuality. I contacted him about possibly participating. He was enthusiastic and willing to have a parent/guardian sign the consent forms, which would entail letting them know that he was writing fan fiction. However, as I read more of his public interactions with other fans on the site, it became clear to me that he was struggling with his own sexuality and had not yet discussed any of this with his offline friends or family members. This posed an

ethical dilemma. He was enthusiastic about participating, and having his parent/guardian sign consent forms did not necessarily entail revealing his screen name or the content of his texts. On the other hand, as a researcher, I felt I had an ethical obligation to weigh the benefits of his participation in the study against the risks.

Another complicating factor involved the public nature of online texts. At the time, search engines like Google were not indexing pages from this particular site. Hence, you could enter text from a fan fiction story and it would not yield an accurate result in a search. However, I was worried that this might change at some point. Because participants' online stories are linked to their author profiles, which in turn could contain links to the participants' LiveJournal accounts, their personal web pages, and other potentially identifiable information, there was risk of breach of confidentiality. Ultimately, I decided that there was too much at stake for this young man for me to feel comfortable including him in the study. Moreover, this experience led me to carefully re-examine the sort of information that my other participants were revealing in their texts, their author profiles, and on any linked websites.

This example underscores the difficulty of doing any sort of textual analysis of web documents that are linked to participants' personal or interview data. The 'search-engineable' nature of online text poses a unique challenge for online researchers. It also underscores the need to carefully consider potential ramifications of our research for members of vulnerable populations, like adolescents, who are so accustomed to living life online with their peers that they do not realize or think about the possibility that 'offline' institutions like parents, schools, employers, etc., also may have relatively easy access to their online lives.

3. A participatory research approach (Rodney Jones)

There are two important challenges to studying online literacies: being able to access the lived experiences of people participating in these literacies, and being able to capture the complexity of this participation as it moves across multiple physical and virtual spaces. Our project (Jones, 2008) sought to explore and compare school-based and non-school-based computer-related literacy practices of young people in Hong Kong. We attempted to address these challenges through: (1) a participatory framework in

152

which participants collaborated with researchers in posing the research questions, collecting data, and reporting results; and (2) a multimodal approach to data gathering in which as much attention was paid to how online practices affected what happened 'off-screen' in the physical environments in which computers were used as to what happened on-screen.

The participatory model was extremely effective in helping us obtain an insider's perspective on young people's literacy practices and the social strategies they had built around them. Since participant researchers felt a sense of ownership of the project, they worked hard at soliciting cooperation from their friends and recruiting them into researcher roles. The project began with 15 participant researchers and ended with the active collaboration of more than 100 young people participating in overlapping online social networks and actively reflecting on this participation. Through this process, the questions the research sought to answer were negotiated and refined. While participants were interested in many of the questions that the researchers had posed – about, for example, the ways new literacies were learned and the effects of new literacy practices on old literacy practices – they were also interested in other issues such as the effect of online interaction on their friendships, how they could use online tools more effectively in their social and academic lives, and how they could expand their social networks online. They were also keenly aware of the questions their parents and teachers were concerned about (such as the effect of online language on their English and Chinese proficiency) and included them as well, but not just to ventriloquate them, but to engage with them critically. One of the most interesting aspects of the project was observing the participant researchers report their findings to different audiences through written reports to researchers, a webpage for their peers, and a formal presentation to their parents and teachers. In each of these exercises they highlighted different aspects of their findings and framed them in different ways. This helped to bring home to us the fact that an important aspect of literacy is being able to appropriately represent one's literacy practices to different kinds of people.

Participant researchers collected a wide variety of data in different modes. They kept diaries in which they reflected on their online and offline practices; they saved samples of chats; they took screen movies of their computer use using a program called Spector; they installed webcams to monitor the physical activity occurring around them when they were using their computers, and they video-taped themselves and their friends using computers at home, at school, and in other venues like internet cafes and gaming halls. This combination of data allowed for an understanding not just of the products of new literacies, but the complex online and off-line *processes* and interactions that go into producing these products. One of the major findings of the study, in fact, had to do with the ways computers affect the organization of social situations and the ways attention is managed within those situations.

Researching online literacies poses a host of complex ethical problems, such as obtaining informed consent from participants in virtual networks whose participation is often uncertain, contingent and peripheral. Another challenge it poses is in negotiating the ambiguous boundaries between etic and emic perspectives. More participatory models of research, while not resolving these issues (and, in many ways, complicating them), at least open up avenues of access and create opportunities to re-conceptualise research as an ongoing conversation among interested parties in which all of these parties might be somehow empowered.

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