

Research ethics in emerging forms of online learning: issues arising from a hypothetical study on a MOOC

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with how research ethics is evolving along with emerging online research methods and settings. In particular, it focuses on ethics issues implied in a hypothetical virtual ethnography study aiming to gain insights on participants' experience in an emergent context of networked learning, namely a MOOC – Massive Online Open Course. A MOOC is a popular type of online open course, that provides free content and expertise to anyone in the world who wishes to enroll. The purposes of this article are to briefly outline recent debates on online research ethics approaches and then to explore competing views on ethical decision-making when researching in a globalized, online and open learning setting. Considering the challenges of this new elearning inquiry context, issues as the underlying research ethics models, the roles of researcher and participants and the integrity of the research process are discussed in their interplay with the evolving ethos of the ethnographical methodology being adopted to investigate participants' views. Elements drawn from a hypothetical design of a qualitative study are here utilized to identify an empirical instance that shapes and is being shaped by research ethics decisions. The study aims to answer the following question: what are the affordances (opportunities and challenges) of online open courses as they emerge from the participants' perspectives? This paper considers the potential operationalization of the above research question and discusses both theoretical and methodological issues arising from applying research ethics to this specific case of Internet inquiry. In this sense, ethical approaches in online research contexts as well as main ethical decisions are discussed and justified, envisioning a submission to an institutional ethics review board before undertaking the ethnographical study. Topics such as privacy concerns in a public online setting, choice between overt and covert research, researcher as observer or participant, narrow or loosely defined application of the informed consent and anonymity are outlined, presenting a range of different options. This article intends to show that ethical decisions are an iterative procedure and an integral part of the research design process. Moreover, it endorses the opportunity to produce localized and contextualized ethical decision-making. To this end, it takes into account the guidance available (research ethics literature; narratives of ethics procedures applied to empirical cases); the ethics debates within the ethnographical tradition and the nature of the setting being researched (the specific format of the networked learning instance being examined). The discussion here proposed orientates ethical decision-making towards an overt and participant research approach, an informed consent intended as a 'public notice' and a consideration of participants both as authors in the online setting and as human subjects embedding unexpected privacy sensitiveness. However, such decisions are considered as many starting points to build a research ethics protocol intended to a degree as a work in progress, in a problem-solving approach guided by the practical wisdom of participants emerging over time.

Keywords: internet research ethics, massive online open courses, virtual ethnography, situated ethics

1. Introduction

Research ethics can be intended as a type of applied ethics – between morality and legality - that both strives to provide guidance and support to researchers in their work and constitutes a distinct inquiry field, with its own empirical instances. For two decades the availability of Internet research settings has produced an “ethical destabilization” of researchers' and research participants' expectations (Whiteman 2012) and has often questioned the role and competence of the local ethics institutional review boards in providing effective guidelines to investigators (Buchanan, 2011). In the last years, emerging social networking technologies – being used both as empirical research settings and tools for data gathering and dissemination of findings - have revamped foundational debates of the constitutive principles of research ethics. This is also apparent in controversial ethical decision-making related to e-learning research (Anderson and Kanuka, 2007; Kanuka and Anderson, 2009) that, as a branch of educational inquiry, has intimate ties with ethics.

Evolving forms of e-learning – such as mobile learning and open networked learning – have been enabled by an ecology of Web 2.0 tools that develops along with their users and related societal contexts (Brown and Adler 2008) and provide individuals with new opportunities of self-directing (Kop 2011) and emergent learning (Williams et al. 2011). Such new configurations of technology-mediated learning blur boundaries between formal and informal settings, tend to disrupt traditional ethos, conventions and ethics issues of institution-bounded online learning contexts (Toprak 2010; Demiray and Sharma 2010) and increasingly align ethical dilemmas of e-learning research with those of

Internet-based inquiry. This changing digital landscape therefore adds unexpected ethical challenges both to teaching and research activities (Burge 2007), prompts the exploration of a new vocabulary of online research ethics (Beaulieu and Estalella 2009), and demands a greater effort for “unravelling the intricate tapestry of ethics and method in research design and process” (Markham 2007: 3). It also seems to suggest an ethics decision-making approach that strives to combine general rules of the codes of conduct provided by the institutional review boards – in an increasingly bureaucratized institutional climate (Whiteman, 2012) - with a continuing effort to gain *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’, “which demands understanding of specific situations and reference to prior experience” (Tracy and Carmichael 2010).

This paper firstly proposes a brief review of changing online research ethics approaches and then focuses on in-depth discussing an hypothetical ethical decision-making case applied to a networked learning instance.

2. The changing status of research ethics

Definition and application of ethical issues to specific research contexts has never been straightforward – both in offline and online contexts - because they are made by a complex blend of social norms, values and legal issues, are dependent on national and local traditions, and refer to different ethics philosophical frameworks. Ess (2004) notices that in the EU deontological frameworks are usually applied, while in the US utilitarian approaches are more common, and elsewhere virtue-laden perspectives are considered. Research involving humans has in the Nuremberg Code – shared at the end of the Second World War - its ethics primer, as regards to inescapable principles in protecting individual research participants from any direct or indirect harm that a research intervention might cause. Since then, other factors have affected the evolving status of research ethics over time and have shown how ethical dilemmas are nested in inquiries that at first sight do not involve human beings. Demiray and Sharma (2010) highlight some developments and practices that have strongly increased the importance of ethics in social research, such as the growing role of societal contexts in research evaluation and (mentioning Punch 1998) the transition from naming humans involved in research as ‘participants’ or ‘respondents’ rather than ‘subjects’; moreover, the practice of signing an agreement on ethical standards between researchers and public funding bodies. In the last decades, digital technologies have enabled data-driven kinds of inquiry and have fostered an increasing convergence of methods and infrastructures between hard sciences and soft sciences (Borgman 2007): this has also contributed to re-shape disciplinary differences related to ethical issues. In fact, at a policy level, the growing complexity and sharing of the digital infrastructures being utilized across disciplines and the emerging roles of different stakeholders suggest the need to think of research ethics as a transdisciplinary domain (Adamick, 2010), engaging scholars in responsible conduct research’s practices across scientific fields. However, a distinction is made between ‘e-research’ and ‘Internet research’ in social inquiry (Carusi 2008), whereas the former use digital technologies to collect, archive data on subjects investigated offline, and the latter study online subjects in order to understand their behaviours. Moreover, a view of ‘data as representation’ (ib.) - that is a focus on how subjects are represented in data - opens up new ethical implications of data related to human subjects, beyond traditional issues of anonymity, confidentiality and privacy. Likewise, recent discussions focusing on ‘Big Data’ (Boyd and Crawford 2011) - a data ecosystem peculiarly networked and embedding relationality to other data (e.g. data drawn from social networking sites) – pose key questions on what in this light counts as research and caution against an exacerbated risk of using data for research purposes just because they are available. This phenomenon has its own side in education, in the emerging discipline of ‘learning analytics’, in which similar ethical questions arise (Duval 2012).

Others stress the importance of the current increasing role of institutional constraints - from the spread of the institutional review boards in the 1970s - in approaching research ethics and underline the new responsibilities both to investigators and learners:

“Researchers and students need to be able to demonstrate and assert that what they are doing/have done is legitimate and increasingly have to be able to justify their ethical decision-making to a broader, more public audience than they would in the past” (Whiteman 2012: 6).

This kind of responsibility is also reinforced by the contemporary ethos of science as open science (Nielsen, 2011), that underlies a more extended culture of sharing of inquiry methods, process and

results (see also Kraker et al 2011 about openness in e-learning research). However, sharing data poses unexpected ethical dilemmas in sensitive research domains (Langat et al. 2011) as well as archiving qualitative data raises ethical questions to social scientists, that have to face contrasting positions among funding and academic institutions and law regulations (Carusi and Jirotko, 2009). Under this respect, in e-learning research Anderson and Kanuka (2009) recall the difficulties of utilizing 'secondary data' in online learning forums. Furthermore, current pressures on academia from funding bodies towards a timely disclosure of research settings and findings, may put researchers in danger of not respecting the value of informants' anonymity as so far it has been conceived (Tilley & Woodthorpe 2011).

3. Evolving approaches to Internet research ethics

Ethical issues in e-learning research can be located in the wider domain of Internet-based research, in which ethics mainly refer to a human subject research model, and focuses – as well as in offline contexts - on issues such as public versus private ownership, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (Eysenbach and Till 2001; Mann and Stewart 2000).

At the beginning of the new millenium some scholars questioned the exclusive adoption of human subject model for research in computer-mediated communication settings (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002; Walther, 2002; Buchanan, 2004) and valued a model of Internet research that intends "Internet as production of cultural texts" and online subjects as authors (Basset and O'Riordan 2002). In this view it is envisioned an ethics approach which considers issues such as "appropriation, reproduction and removal of Internet texts from their original context" (ib.).

Indeed, the definition of 'online subject' constitutes the core ethical challenge of online research:

"Some of the ethical difficulties in Internet research arise from not being clear about whether people in the on-line world are the subjects of research, as in, for example, medical research in the off-line world, or authors of works (e-mails, Web sites, etc.) which they have knowingly put into the public domain for information and comment" (Oates 2006: 65).

More recently, a particular "attention to mediation, to the relations between technologies, spaces, texts and people" (O'Riordan, 2010) has developed, in order to gain insights on emerging intricacies advanced by new digitally-mediated research settings. For instance, at least in the developed world, an additional concern is to be considered, since "the concepts of 'being online' and 'being offline' are anachronistic, as we embrace the ultraconnectivity of our present technological existences, and thus blur research boundaries and binaries" (Buchanan, 2011: 89). Such intricacies cannot be merely solved with a neat choice between human subject model, drawing from medical and social science tradition, or textual model, drawing from literary, historical or new media studies.

In fact, the current call for a rethinking of research ethics (Bakardjeva 2008; Kanuka and Anderson 2009; Beaulieu and Estalella 2009; Whiteman 2012) underlies the statement that "a continuum of online research is emerging", whereas on one extreme the inquiry is not human subject based at all and on the other extreme there is a peculiar sensitiveness towards risks and benefits that can affect individual identities of research participants (Buchanan, 2011: 92). For instance, the increasing availability of 'found' Internet data allows for the uptake of unobtrusive methods by social researchers (Hine, 2011) and the exploration of unknown territories of social life, through new quantitative and qualitative approaches. This notwithstanding cautionary notes referring to access inequality, participation biases, technical constraints in data searching as well as "lack of information about the consumption of online interactions" (Hine, 2011: 3), that urge researchers of using such obtrusive methods only as part of a more general ethical decision-making strategy.

Considering how to come to terms with ever changing ethical dilemmas arising from Internet research, Anderson and Kanuka (2009) focus on two main competing philosophical views that so far have underlied research ethics: a deontological or rule-based view, that works well in fairly stable research settings and a teleo-logical or consequentialist view, that just looks both at the immediate and long-term consequences of researchers' actions on research participants' lives. They argue that

the rapid evolution of settings and practices enabled by technological advancement "suggests the need for teleo-logical modification to deontological, rule-based ethical guidelines established for non-networked research" (2009: 120). This position resonates with the distinction between law and sociological approach to research ethics (Bakardjieva, Feenberg and Goldie 2004) whereas the sociological one refers to a dialogical and iterative approach to raise emergent ethical issues and negotiate solutions. This perspective on the one hand seems to fit the dynamic nature of new forms of technology-mediated learning, such as in mobile learning research (Lally et al., 2010), on the other hand it embeds a participatory approach that has to be inflected according to the methodology being applied and the specific situation and participants being researched.

Finally, referring to ethical debates within the ethnographical tradition, Beaulieu and Estalella (2009) have recently led attention to consider *contiguity* of online settings, in which blurring distinctions emerge between research fieldwork, the place where analysis is being carried out and where findings are disseminated and published, and *traceability* of data, that is "the property of inscriptions to be located through search engines and other mechanisms" (ib.). These inherent features are intended as many typical tensions and features of the technology-mediated ethnography settings, that urge a rethinking of the same principles of research ethics, such as anonymization, exposure, authorship and ownership.

4. Approaching ethical implications of an online setting

The second part of this article deals with ethics issues implied in a hypothetical virtual ethnography study, aiming to gain insights on participants' experience in an emergent context of online open education, namely a Massive Online Open Course (MOOC). The general goal is to discuss the main issues to be included in an ethical review to be submitted to an institutional ethics review board, before undertaking a study on this topic. However, in the current evolving landscape of technology-mediated ethnography (Markham 2003; Beaulieu and Estalella 2009; Estalella 2007), there is an increasing awareness that the mandatory rules imposed by the institutional review boards are necessary but not sufficient conditions to illuminate hidden aspects and suggest practical solutions to researchers in online inquiry settings. So, issues such as different approaches to ethical issues in an online research context, privacy concerns in a public online setting, the choice between overt and covert research, the application of the informed consent and issues of anonymity are outlined as many springboards to build a 'doable' research ethics protocol. In this perspective, decision-making on ethical issues is intended here to be a continuing reflexive interrogation of one's method of inquiry to reveal "hidden ethical practices from inside" (Markham 2007: 3). This engagement in the interrogation of one's method is complemented by a recursive work aiming to a "production of localized, contextualized ethical decision-making" (Whiteman 2009: 65), that needs to be adapted over time. In fact, in this hypothetical work constructs of research ethics in online settings are considered as the individual researchers' endeavours to balance discrepancy between 'control' (design of a research ethics plan) and 'contingency' (local and unpredictable ethical issues to be faced) (Whiteman, 2010). Such efforts are considered as aiming to preserve research integrity while taking into account and to a degree challenge well-established rules by institutional ethics review boards, methodological good practices for research validity, features of technology-mediated learning contexts, expectations from the community of stakeholders and changing roles of researcher and research participants. This view is also grounded in a constructivist approach in which a consistent effort is made to identify stakeholders and iteratively solicit their "claims, concerns, and issues" (Guba and Lincoln 1989: 42), aiming to negotiate consensus on the issues about which there is disagreement.

Given that, the initial elaboration of the research ethics strategy takes into account the guidance available (research ethics literature; narratives of ethics procedures applied to empirical cases); the ethics debates grounded in the ethnographical tradition and the nature of the setting being researched (the specific format of networked learning instance being examined).

5. Research ethics in MOOC research: a hypothetical case

I assume as the specific setting of the hypothetical study a MOOC's edition (Cormier and Siemens 2010), carried out in the area of educational technology and addressing lifelong learners all over the world. This kind of informal learning experience is enabled by a network-based pedagogy and enacted in a public, distributed technology-mediated learning environment (e.g. Moodle forums and any social media). Usually a few hundreds of individuals play a role as active learners, against

thousands of 'lurkers' or non active participants. Moreover, a very small number of learners generally choose to pay a fee to gain credits by individually submitting assignments and experimental forms of peer assessment. However, distinctions are not rigid and diverse roles are equally legitimated: some 'lurkers' might be active participants for a while and there is no recognizable *status* difference between for-credit and non-credit learners.

A body of knowledge has started to be constructed around the projects of MOOCs (Kop 2010; Kop and Fournier 2011; Kop et al. 2011; McAuley et al. 2011; Mak et al. 2011) and highlights a thriving core community of researchers, professionals and mere participants that shape the form of a MOOC while they experience it, adding insights to what is perceived as a collective networked learning experiment. Nonetheless, issues concerning the model of contributing learner and the appropriate kinds of support keep on being discussed.

For the purpose of this article, the general research question I would like to focus on is the following one: what are the affordances (opportunities and challenges) of online open courses as they emerge from the participants' perspectives?

The goals of the proposed study entail: 1) to understand participants' experience in an emergent context of online education; 2) to draw recommendations for future course design of online open courses.

The hypothetical study embeds a qualitative approach and a virtual ethnography perspective is being applied as methodology: observations of communication occurring in forums and social media among active participants and an online, open-ended and anonymous questionnaire are considered as main data gathering methods. A constructivist grounded theory method (Charmaz 2006) is intended to be utilized as data analysis procedure, whereas participants will be involved in checking themes and categories arising from an early systematic examination of data.

The ethical approach being adopted takes into account the ethical stances of virtual ethnography (Markham 1998, 2003; Hine 2000), which relies on human subject research model, but also explores new kinds of text-based settings, such as a MOOC mostly is. So, to a degree this ethical approach also values participants as authors; and above all considers ethical expectations by participants in the specific instance being investigated (Eysenbach and Till 2001; Ess and AoIR 2002), as drawn by previous editions of these pilot courses (i.e. PLENK 2010; Siemens 2010; Cormier and Siemens 2010).

The aims relate to balance the need of preserving research integrity with the provision of advantages to participants and the effort to minimize related dangers, and to inflect the ethical decision making along with the exploration of ethnographical approach and the empirical setting being investigated.

6. Public versus private ownership

The public nature of the open learning environment established in a MOOC (Fini 2009; Mak et al. 2010) seems to facilitate the collection of large amounts of observational data, with minor privacy concerns by researchers. Indeed, unlike formal e-learning environments, a MOOC is likely to be assimilated to an open web space, since it takes place in multiple, non reserved areas (for instance, in PLENK 2010 also Moodle forums had full visibility to non-enrolled readers) and it provides loosely defined constraints of 'enrollment' and 'attendance'. In fact, learners can withdraw at any time and participate at whatever level of engagement, and they can mark their own online presence and interact with their facilitators and peers using their preferred social media, while undertaking ordinary social/academic/professional activities. Given that, drawing from recent social research studies with popular technologies, it is worth taking into account that behaviours linked to voluntary choice and use of social media "suggest a mindful aspiration for publicity" (Vieweg 2010) by participants. Thus boundaries between public and private ownership tend to blur in the open learning environment being considered. It is worth recalling that online communication has been defined as neither private or public, but as both and can be inflected as "privately-public, publicly-private or semi-private" (Anderson and Kanuka 2009: 119). Indeed, the problem of ownership of messages' transcripts in Net-based spaces is still controversial (Kanuka and Anderson 2007), especially if access is restricted to enrolled students: my general view follows Mann and Stewart's position that when one posts a message "there is an implied license to read, or even archive, the information it contains" (2000: 46). Moreover, drawing from a recent MOOC (PLENK 2010), the informed consent adopted there declared

a default research use of all posted messages across social media, whether tagged with the course's title: otherwise, authorization was asked. In addition, focusing on other kinds of contribution by learners, any acknowledgement of authorship of more complex artefacts being produced during a MOOC can be hardly framed within IPR issues. In fact, the setting of such online open courses is grounded in a culture of sharing that is at the heart of the knowledge production model suggested by these experimental learning projects. This cultural mood is fed with forms of acknowledgement of the individual original production – such as the mutual acknowledgement among participants - that are different from the mere protection of copyright and have more to do with the construction of one's own digital identity.

Nonetheless, it is also considered that enrolled learners in a MOOC are potentially all over the world and therefore they are likely to have different cultural and personal sensitiveness about privacy issues (Vieweg 2010). Indeed, analysis of some specific threads of discussion (e.g. self-evaluation, learner experiences, etc) might reveal for instance feelings of discomfort by some learners – often accredited professionals - in a complex networked environment such as a MOOC: these learners might feel violated if they saw their posts de-contextualized and highlighted in a publication. In this case the researcher might be at danger to enter learners' private sphere: to mitigate any distress the researcher should contact authors' posts to let them the possibility to choose to be anonymized or credited.

However, it was also noticed that the researcher might occasionally decide to shift from the observation method to interview technique, whereas individual participants were more available to directly express their opinions to researchers rather than accepting that their own written words was analyzed out of the context (Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2001). Furthermore, the sense of ownership of the produced content might vary at individual level, even if sensitive content is not implied: this suggests to researcher a diversified approach in ways to cite posts, when reporting findings (Bakardjieva 2008).

Given that, as a general recommendation a debriefing opportunity – usually planned in the final phase of the study – could be provided as a continuing dialogue between researcher and informants to be carried out in a devoted forum, in order to monitor if any harm is being perceived and to provide timely solutions.

Here also issues related to researcher's sense of ownership and authorship should be considered, recalling the notion of *contiguity* of settings discussed by Beaulieu and Estalella: "While fieldwork is never easy, we felt at time exposed, surveilled and even, on occasions, that actors in the field or colleagues from 'home' were foreclosing on our research" (2009: 8). This challenging perspective questions traditional conventions to manage distinctions between the role as a fieldworker and that as an academic, between participants' and researcher's voice.

7. Overt vs covert research approach

The ethical attitude of an overt research approach is being endorsed to preserve individual informants, seen as 'participants', and social ecology of the community (Cohen et al. 2007: 156-175). The negotiation of access to the fieldwork, an "acclimatization process" (Chen et al. 2004: 172), the long permanence in the field, the acquisition of competence of informants and debriefing procedures are being used as many cautions to mitigate the disrupting character of the researcher's intervention. The disclosure of the researcher's presence is considered among the benchmarks of effective ethnographies (Splinder and Splinder 1992: 65) and has methodological and ethical relevance in virtual ethnography, as a by-product of a negotiation of access and self-presence (Hine 2008: 264). However, others hold that a researcher's behaviour as a "lurker" is acceptable (Paccagnella 1997; Beaulieu 2004:146), just because online ethnographical observation can be considered as less intrusive than in offline contexts.

On the one hand some official guidelines addressing Internet researchers (Ess and AoIR 2002) seem to authorize a covert role by researchers, whether participants have chosen to post publicly. On the other hand, Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2001) warn researchers with respect to 'technically' public research settings and refer to a "non alienation principle", whereby everyone is welcome to join and use online communities but not to 'harvest' or sell information therein.

That said, I think that a covert approach could be even counter-productive for data collection in the setting being researched, in which participants are encouraged to share critical and creative contributions within the community. Moreover, adopting an overt approach can ease the accomplishment of “descriptive ethics” (Bakardjieva 2008), by enabling researcher to become well acquainted with the researched setting, that in this case additionally presents the uncharted characteristics of an emergent phenomenon. Furthermore, the same disclosure of researcher’s work might constitute a meta-reflection in its own right, useful both to community of learners to critically reflect on the collective knowledge building effort and to course authors to enhance understanding of learners’ perceptions of the networked learning experience. In this line, running a blog as a research journal could help to prove “that the researcher is real to the digital space and not just a visitor with no knowledge” (Mortensen and Walzer 2002: 251). Such a practice is aligned with the phenomena being researched and “both helps these ethnographers create the object, and make visible the subjectivity of the researcher” (Beaulieu 2004:151). So, the blogging activity appears to fit both methodological and ethical aims, by enacting reflexivity and facilitating the maintenance of trust and rapport between researcher and informants.

Therefore, the adoption by the researcher of a role as ‘observer as participant’ (Cohen et al. 2003:179) is likely to be tolerated by the community of learners and thus appears to be more functional to the need to gain insights on challenges and opportunities of an online open course. Finally, such a choice seems to be inescapable in the endorsed virtual ethnography perspective:

“lurking online to collect data without participating in culture may not just be less desirable, but perhaps not possible if the goal is to explore sense making practices”
(Markham 2003: 5).

8. Informed consent

Informed consent is generally acknowledged as the key issue to be addressed when building an ethical framework (Christians 2000; Mann and Stewart 2000). The choice of an overt and active approach makes the informed consent an instrument for researcher to demonstrate credibility and accountability. However, there are contrasting views about its mandatory character and its operationalization.

In my view, the informed consent to be submitted to MOOC’s participants of the proposed study could assume the form of a mere ‘public notice’ (Ess and AoIR, 2002: 7), before the observational data collection starts. Therefore, a ‘reverse technique’ is being proposed, whereby participants must inform the researcher if they don’t wish to be investigated as posts’ authors.

Indeed, some scholars (Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2001; Bruckman 2002a) state that obtaining consent (through signed form) from each participant is mandatory, even if it is logistically difficult or potentially disruptive of the online environment. On the other hand, Fahy and Spencer (2004: 33-34) maintain that an ethics institutional board can waive informed consent where minimal risks in research are present, if subjects can be provided with additional information after participation, or there are serious hurdles in getting it. Indeed, to obtain consent through a signed form from individual participants can be fairly easy in a voluntary online questionnaire survey, for instance by including a ‘check box’ in the online form. However, this might be problematic for observations, given the ‘rhizomatic’ environment of a MOOC, as characterized by high numbers of enrolled people, discontinuity in learners’ participation and uncertainty to retrieve reliable contact information in participants’ profiles. Given that, some hold that in a public arena to ask individual participants for signing and sending back a form seems to be inefficient and time consuming, whilst posting a general message to inform the community appears to be intrusive (Eysenbach and Till 2001). Following Moreno et al. (2008), I set out firstly to obtain permission by the course’s coordinators, who can act as many gatekeepers to the research setting, and secondly to widely inform the community of learners as a whole about the study’s details. Furthermore, participants would be involved in an iterative debriefing process (occurring in the same forum area), would be allowed to withdraw consent at any time in questionnaires (through a devoted ‘exit’ button) and would be able to communicate to researcher if they have any objections to be directly quoted in research accounts or if they prefer to withdraw.

In fact, given the non sensitive nature of the topic and the peculiar research-focused attitude of the setting, I think that to set up an informative web space within the course’s forum area could be an

acceptable solution for course participants to become aware of research aim and design, gathering and data protection methods, types of dissemination outputs and planned levels of commitment. In this line, Fahy and Spencer maintain that, under conditions given above, the “rights of the majority to participate in research are protected over the objections of those who may not wish to do so” (2004: 33). Nonetheless, I realize that issues related to informed consent are likely to be a controversial object of negotiation with the local institutional review board that the researcher has to refer to: in fact a perceived loose respect of the standardized guidelines might even cause to the researcher the impossibility of using a set of data, with evident, frustrating consequences for research integrity (Boyd 2007).

On the other hand, beyond the formal fulfilments, a further step could be considered, reflecting on the participatory nature of the learning community being investigated and on the varied cultural and professional backgrounds of research participants. The same informed consent could be developed to a degree as a work in progress, in a problem-solving approach guided by the practical wisdom of participants emerging over time: “the different disciplinary perspectives and varied experience represented offer not only creative solutions to dilemmas but are also a source of critique of the ethical framework itself, that continues to evolve as a result” (Tracy and Carmichael 2010: 254). This perspective is also consistent with the constructivist epistemological approach I endorse, that leads to interpret the informed consent as a situated, dialogic agreement that develops over time between researcher and participants (Allen 1996).

9. Anonymity

One of the risks of naturalistic research is the over-exposure of individuals and groups, which can be just avoided preserving their anonymity or at least, as I set out to do, allowing informants to choose anonymity or disclosure of their personal data.

As regards to observation, taking cue from the adoption of a ‘public notice’ to inform research participants, I opt for a ‘no disguise’ approach (Bruckman 2002b), that is a use of pseudonyms or real names of the posts’ authors. In fact, I consider the low level of risk of the research to be undertaken but also that “Anonymity may not always be preferred as default, especially in a participatory culture, where people want to be attributed to the stories they publicly share” (Liu 2010: 2). Indeed, participants in a MOOC are invited to comment each other and disseminate blog entries and to experience a role as producers of “remixed” content and various digital artefacts. So, to a degree, anonymizing material such as videos, diagrams or blog posts could be even perceived as a harm by active participants in such a context. This is also in line with the idea of the Internet users as “amateur artists” (Bruckman 2002b) to whom it seems appropriate to give credit for their work if they desire it. So, if on the one hand disclosure of participants as authors can appear as a concession (justified by the setting’s features) to an Internet research model focusing on textuality, on the other hand the use of an anonymous online questionnaire can help to give voice to the numerous lurkers – who otherwise would be unreachable and unheeded - without disrupting their privacy and anonymity.

Moreover, once again taking cue from debates on technology-mediated ethnography, a further issue is considered, that sheds a new light on the traditional concept of anonymity as a ‘protection’ bulwark of subjects: “Being traceable could actually mean greater, and more diverse accountability” (Beaulieu and Estalella 2009). Just because the traces of researcher’s activities can be found online and are potentially disclosed to all research participants and stakeholders, a “more subtle and modulated approach to human subject protection” can be envisioned as an object for new discussions and formulation of future solutions.

10. Conclusions

The article intended to lead attention to the evolving tenets of online research ethics, within which it is worth locating an ethical decision making process focusing on emerging forms of e-learning: the complex and dynamic nature of such instances in fact suggest a renewed endeavour to iteratively generate ethics questions and to share tentative solutions with the researched individuals and the research community. In order to explore what this perspective implies, this paper stated and justified main ethical decisions to be undertaken in a hypothetical virtual ethnography study on a networked learning instance. It was used as a basis for the exploration the potential operationalization of a research question focusing on opportunities and challenges of a MOOC. The discussion here

proposed orientates the ethical decision-making towards an overt and participant research approach, an informed consent intended as a 'public notice' and a consideration of participants both as authors in the online setting and as human subjects embedding unexpected privacy sensitiveness. Such choices are highlighted as many issues to be submitted to an institutional ethics review board for further negotiation and approval. However, following Markham's (2007) recommendations for a 'reflexive ethics' that recursively intertwines ethical and methodological decisions, such decisions are intended as many starting points to build a research ethics protocol intended as a work in progress. In fact, an open networked learning environment encourages a participatory research approach and therefore fosters creative suggestions and shared solutions from participants, in an evolving landscape of ethical opportunities and challenges. This entails for the researcher to devise and assume new kinds of responsibility and accountability, to research participants and to the same role as a researcher.

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