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Ethical Issues in Online Educational Research: Protecting Privacy, Establishing Authenticity in Email Interviewing

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Abstract

Educational researchers have a responsibility to ensure that whatever research paradigm, they work in, the research that is conducted is done so within an 'ethic of respect' for those who participate. This implies a number of responsibilities on the part of the researcher that include ensuring trust, dignity, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.. When research uses the Internet as the medium of investigation, these ethical responsibilities become more complex for the educational researcher. This paper discusses such complexities by examining the ethical dilemmas of using the Internet as a site for qualitative research. It will draw on two educational studies that used email interviewing, and will specifically focus on the ethical challenges the researchers faced when using this method. These included protecting participants' privacy and anonymity, and establishing authenticity online environments, including the way in which ownership of online research conversations and identities are experienced and expressed. In discussing such dilemmas, the paper concludes by questioning whether these issues can be addressed in an effort to construct the unattainable but pursue the utopian: fully ethical educational research.

Keywords: Authenticity; ethics; identity; online; privacy; trust

Introduction

Educational researchers have a responsibility to ensure that in whatever research paradigm they work, their research is enacted within a rigorous framework that addresses the epistemological complexities of a study's methodological process and intellectual focus in an ethical manner that allows the recipients of the research to have trust in its outcomes. Flick (2002) argues that qualitative researchers need to be as vigilant as positivist researchers about ensuring the validity and reliability of their studies, even if they choose to use other terms such as credibility and authenticity, to describe the qualities that establish the trustworthiness of their studies. Researchers, therefore, need to be clear about why they want to research a specific topic, what use the findings will be, and to consider what potential moral or ethical issues could arise (Sikes 2006). In positivist research, ethical principles emerge around the relationship of the researchers to the resource-providers; to the data providers (subjects); and to the public who want to know the outcomes (Raffe et al, 1989:16), as well as around statistical processes used to analyse data (Jones, 2000). In qualitative research the researcher-participant relationship is crucial as it generates information highly personal to participants (and on occasions researchers), and thus requires great integrity on the part of the researcher.

At the heart of these considerations lie a set of ethical concepts that imply a number of responsibilities on the part of the researcher including trust, dignity, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. It is these principles that have been adopted by, for example, the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004: 4) to ensure that research is carried out within an 'ethic of respect' using codes of conduct that provide a consistent set of expectations regarding the actions of researchers as well as protecting individual participants from harm when taking part in research intended to benefit research communities and society at large (Delorme et al, 2001, Madge, 2006). This deontological stance to educational research is deliberately chosen to emphasise the rights of participants in research who are likely to be in a less powerful position than researchers to shape the agenda and outcomes of research.

However, as the ESRC (2005:25) admits, 'there is no simple rule for getting right the balance between potential risks to participants and benefits of the research to a wider community.' By pursuing research within explicit publicly recognised codes of ethical conduct, educational researchers are able to defend their research. However the application of these codes in onsite research, for example in educational establishments with teachers and students, may be different from their application in online research when educational researchers are distant from their research co-participants or respondents. Ess (2004:253) argues that in these virtual spaces, researchers face a range of ethical issues 'in their efforts to acquire new knowledge about many of the behaviours and practices that arise in these new venues.'

- (i) This paper explores how our responsibilities as educational researchers to be ethical can become challenged when the Internet is used as a site for qualitative research, and the implications this has for privacy and authenticity. These are key debates for Internet research, and certainly raised ethical considerations in our research work that used email interviewing (see for example James and Busher, 2006, and James, 2007 forthcoming). The aim of this paper then is to critically examine the

challenges the researchers faced in protecting participants' privacy and anonymity, and establishing authenticity online environments, including the way in which ownership of online research conversations and identities are experienced and expressed.

Before we begin our examination of the implications of email interviewing for privacy and authenticity it is important to provide a methodological and ethical context to this discussion. In doing this we outline the two studies that used email interviewing, how we came to choose the method and why. We then proceed to the main discussion about the nature of the ethical dilemmas; the protection of participants' privacy, and the construction of authenticity in online research. In discussing such dilemmas, the conclusions raise some tentative suggestions about how these might be addressed in pursuit of the utopia of fully ethical educational research.

Choosing and using email interviewing in our research studies: Methodological and ethical considerations

Our aim in using email interviews was to explore participants' understandings of their professional experiences and developing professional identities, but in different contexts. Both studies emphasised the experiential (Connelly and Clandinin, 1986) and were intended to explore the developing professional stories that became the basis for their professional identities, as well as exploring their understandings of their experiences as lived and told stories (Busher 2001, James, 2003).

The first study arose out of the perceived difficulties new students have in adapting to the demands of doctoral studies in an English university. The aim of the study was to examine students' processes of making sense of their experiences, and how these were shaped by the tensions between their powerlessness and the power located in the university system as mediated through university tutors, as well as how this affected their agency and their understandings of themselves. This raised questions about how students, especially part-time international students based overseas during the course of their studies, perceived their experiences of becoming successful students, constructed their academic work-related identities and made sense of the cultures of English universities, and the part that tutors played in mediating their experiences of the academy. Street (1994) debated how people's understanding of their identities and communities, their construction of social literacies, was affected by their cultural locations.

The other study arose out of the lack of educational research that examines how self-image can be used to conceptualise professional identity for academics who not only work in higher education but are also members of other communities of practice. The study examined how academics constructed and reflected upon their identities, their values and the knowledge-base of their work (see James 2003 for a detailed methodological account). All the participants were senior lecturers based in psychology departments in post-1992 higher education institutions across the UK and had been based in their institutions for over a period of five years. The reality of the working lives of the academic psychologists formed a central part of the study which focused on how these were constructed and reflected in their identities, their values

and the knowledge-base of their work in the contexts of the main communities in which they worked: higher education and their professional body, for which one of the researchers worked at the time. The study explored how the academics saw themselves within these communities and understood their professional identity; the images used to construct professional identity and practice, and the way in which professional identity was managed within the communities in which they lived and worked.

In both of these studies, the researchers had prior knowledge of the participants; the first researcher was a tutor of a programme of study the students were enrolled on, and the second researcher worked (at that time) for the professional body the academics were members of. In other words, the researchers had interacted face-to-face with their participants in a professional capacity prior to the online research commencing. This became fundamental for the conceptual and methodological development of our research studies, (although we did not realize this at the time) as we shifted our relationships and interactions from offline to online. This was because we had already begun the process of building trust which in turn allowed us, to some extent, to create a comfortable online space for the researchers and participants to share their experiences. This meant that our research relationships went beyond stereotypic roles of question-asking and question-answering in order to ‘...acquire an understanding of the participant’s perspective through open and honest dialogue...’ (Anderson and Kanuka, 2003: 88).

Both researchers shared methodological reasons for using email. For example, both researchers wanted to explore their participants’ individual experiences and perspectives. Hence qualitative face-to-face, semi-structured interviews seemed an appropriate method as our studies were concerned with the meanings that our participants would give to particular topics. However, our participants in both studies were located at a distance from us within and outside the UK, so we had to overcome the practical constraints (for example costs associated with travel, venue, data transcription) of conducting the interviews necessary for our studies in a manner that replicated as closely as possible, given the constraints of distance, the normal processes of qualitative face-to-face interviewing. Telephone interviewing was explored as a possible method of research, but in one of our studies, the different time zones between participants and researcher would have made it difficult to agree a convenient time for conversations. Further, as Arksey and Knight (1999) note, the medium tends to generate short answer responses., A key issue for us was the quality and richness of data that we could collect, so the medium did not seem appropriate for our studies.

Faced with the common problem of the inaccessibility of our research participants we considered email as a medium for interviewing. Further, this choice was aided by the fact that all our participants had ready access to email and were familiar with using it in their professional lives. The medium seemed to offer us methodological possibilities to ‘interview’ participants individually. We wanted our participants’ discrete views and particular stories about how they lived and worked in a variety of different macro-cultures, experiencing a wide diversity of life histories and organisational cultures, in other words, their authentic voice. Duranti (1997) and

Cazden (2000) suggest that people with different social, cultural and organizational experiences, respond differently to questions about their professional life stories. So other types of online interviews such as synchronous discussion groups did not seem a relevant research tool. Further, the possibility of asynchronous written dialogue between us and each of our participants that email allows, provided the 'space' (time) in which, potentially, our participants could reflect on their experiences in response to our questions, as did participants in the study carried out by Henson et al (2000). Use of email, with its technical facility to save the threads of quasi-conversational exchanges if sequential messages are not erased, also allowed participants to explore and revisit their insights into the developing professional identities by moving back and forth through their narratives, thinking about their responses, drafting and redrafting what they wanted to write (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

To ensure our research was carried out ethically involved us in a lengthy and iterative dialogue about how to design and carry out our studies online that was informed by social moral frameworks, whether codified or not, as well as by our own moral predilections and views (Busher 2005). Usher (2000: 162) sees this as an emergent or immanent ethical moment that 'is not purely a function of the application of ethical codes of practice.' Approaches to educational research, such as action research or cooperative inquiry, involve researchers in a constantly reflective process that Hammersley (1998) commends as a safeguard against the risk of unwittingly falling short of the rigorous standards of probity that are required. Using email interviewing raised critical concerns about how we would protect our participants from harm in the virtual setting. As the AoIR (2002:2) have argued, 'online researchers may encounter conflicts between the requirements of research and its possible benefits, on the one hand, and human subjects' rights to and *expectations* of autonomy, privacy, informed consent, etc.' Nonetheless, they also point out that, 'the Internet has opened up a wide range of new ways to examine human inter/actions in new contexts, and from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches' (ibid:2), offering researchers new means of engaging with research agenda which might not be possible or so easy using face-to-face, telephonic or postal means of communications.

Educational researchers need to be sensitive to the socio-political contexts in which individuals' live out their lives, as members of overlapping communities as well as of particular communities or institutions, whether onsite or virtual. In our studies, given the variety of perspectives held by participants in and of different cultures about appropriate interactions between people, let alone the different approaches to ethical research that are held in different areas of knowledge, 'the issues raised by Internet research [were] *ethical* problems precisely because they evoke more than one ethically defensible response to a specific dilemma or problem. *Ambiguity, uncertainty, and disagreement are inevitable (sic)*' (AoIR, 2002:4). As the Internet 'blurs the traditional boundaries between interpersonal and mass communications, ethical concepts like privacy and dignity of participants becomes more difficult to determine' (DeLorme et al, 2001:272).

Protecting Participants' Privacy and Anonymity Online

In telling us their stories, some of our participants revealed concerns about protecting their privacy and anonymity online especially as they were revealing personal (and

sometimes sensitive) information about their professional lives and identities. (James and Busher, 2006). Whilst their prior knowledge of the researchers face-to-face gave them some confidence to continue with the research, we needed to be aware of the cultural and political boundaries of our research participants' lives as well as meeting the requirements of participants' different legal and cultural systems (AoIR, 2002:3). In online research, expectations of privacy become complicated because different sites having differing expectations of the ways in which participants should interact. Secure or private environments pose less of a threat to participants' privacy than more open environments (AoIR, 2002:7). We were also concerned that in our studies, the records of participants' online conversations, even if carefully processed, could make participants' views instantly visible, depriving participants' of confidentiality and anonymity. This was because their email addresses contained part or all of real names, making it possible in public sites to retrieve messages (Eysenbach and Till, 2001).

However, the extent to which participants are likely to be willing to be open and honest with researchers in such constructions is likely to depend heavily on the extent to which the researchers have been able to construct an environment for the research, which allows participants to feel confident that their privacy is adequately protected in their eyes if they self-disclose and the risk of harm to them or their communities is minimised to a level acceptable to them. Our participants needed to be made aware that their conversations with us were not taking place in a private setting (Barnes, 2004), and the risk this posed to their privacy, so that they could make an informed choice about whether or not to participate. Many chose to give us their explicit informed consent but some did not. There are of course some circumstances where it is impossible to completely hide the identities of participants, perhaps because they are one of only a few people in a particular category in a particular field of activity in a state or identifiable organisation. In our studies much depended on the personal relationships we had been or were able to develop with our participants that allowed them to trust us.

Transmitting authentic information involved the recognition that our participants' privacy and anonymity was at risk because they would be engaged in email interviewing, in an open, online environment. To assuage putative participants' fears about protecting their privacy we sent them a framework which outlined how the email interviews would be conducted (see James and Busher, 2006). Nonetheless, some responses to our initial requests for volunteers suggested that such frameworks did not always resolve underlying fears that email records might make participants visible. Whilst not questioning our integrity as researchers and efforts to safeguard confidentiality, some participants expressed concerns about the nature of email as a medium and the ability for communication to be passed on inadvertently. There are also of course some circumstances where it is impossible to completely hide the identities of participants, perhaps because they are one of only a few people in a particular category in a particular field of activity in a state or identifiable organisation. In our studies much depended on the personal relationships we had been or were able to develop with our participants that allowed them to trust us.

At those points where participants wanted confirmation of their part in the purposes and processes of the research, affirmation which in face-to-face research may equally be given through non-verbal as verbal signals, was not available. In response to this shortage of information, participants withheld, even if only temporarily, their consent

to continue to participate because they were not sufficiently informed at that point in time about the privacy of what they were disclosing, and how anonymous their identities would remain in the online environment. For us, this reiterated that:

‘...the virtual and often anonymous nature of Internet communication means that researchers must establish their bona fide status and the boundaries of the study more carefully than in a face-to-face situation’ (Sanders, 2005:78).

In one of our studies the absence of visual cues seemed to make it easier for some participants to start and terminate their interviews as and when it suited them despite text-based cues such as: *‘Haven’t heard from you in a while. I wondered if you still wished to continue the interview?’* While it can be argued that this demonstrates the voluntary nature of participants’ engagement with the research, it might also be interpreted as a means whereby they were withdrawing their consent, albeit temporarily, because of their feeling uncomfortable about telling their stories, despite our commonality of identity which enabled both researchers and participants to be engaged in the email interview process. Along with sometimes slow responses by the researchers in our studies to participants’ queries about the research process or the meaning of some questions, these factors tended to deprive participants of a sense of engagement in a human conversation and of a sense of security of knowing, even if incorrectly, who were the researchers socially.

Although the virtual reality of online research means that participants and researchers are invisible from each other and so less likely to distort their stated views and perspectives in ways that may arise from the social interactions involved in face to face research (Mann and Stewart, 2000), the lack of such social interactions can also lead to distortions. Some of our participants commented adversely on the invisibility inherent during the email interview process (James and Busher, 2006). This points to the need for researchers to identify the existence of ‘...strategies of visibility...which make up for the lack of traditional social cues and which indeed permit the development of a status differentiation...’. (Paccagnella, 1997:online) when exploring more personal stories to build trust and to encourage participants to ‘disclose.’ On the other hand, such strategies do not seem to be as powerful in shaping conversations as the social presence of a researcher with participants.

Authenticity in Online Research

Using the Internet to conduct qualitative research provides educational researchers with the ethical dilemma of ensuring the authenticity and trustfulness of the data collected. Of course, this is an ethical tension which educational researchers are presented with when research is conducted face-to-face. However, the Internet has provided ‘new problems in judging what is authentic’ as well as providing ‘a virtual sphere of existence separate from the real world’ (Hine, 2000:118). In our own research this raised questions about the authenticity of participants’ online research conversations and how their identities were experienced and expressed.

Constructing authenticity through ownership of research conversations

As our studies developed, collaboration and discourses emerged between ourselves and our participants that constituted, we argue, the construction of a particular or small culture (Holliday, 2005) which reflected the developing shared meanings of participating in each research project. In the course of each project these cultures began to replace the dominant discourses of the researchers who had begun the studies. The virtual setting of the email research interview was akin to the third spaces which lie between different institutional practices and are created when participants with different perspectives meet together and begin to construct new communities (Holliday 1994). This allowed our participants' to gain some ownership of it by shaping the direction of narrative construction. The records of our conversations – akin to the tape-recorded records of face-to-face interviews – were not erased as the emails bounced back and forth between the researchers and participants, and were kept intact in the chronological sequence of the discussions. This enabled participants' and researchers to reflect in an iterative manner on their developing conversations and, in due course, addressed one of our concerns about the trustworthiness of the research records by allowing participants to consider the accuracy of the texts of our conversations, establishing the authenticity of them.

However, participants' narrative style, whether playful, superficial, or written in an engaged way makes a considerable difference to the quality of a research project and the trustworthiness of its outcomes (James, 2003). Part of the process of helping to construct authentic voices, we thought, was allowing participants to take greater ownership of the construction and direction of the narratives. When they responded to our questions in unexpected ways and directions, we followed the new directions of their narratives by asking further questions about their texts rather than sticking to the agenda of the original interview schedule, which would have enforced our control of the interview process. Interviews that we had scheduled to take a matter of two to three weeks eventually extended in many cases over several months, because this speed of responses suited participants in the busy press of their daily lives. Some participants initially apologized profusely for being late with their answers. However, gradually researchers and participants alike came to accept these 'delays' as the normal, if unexpected pace of this email based research process. In accepting this greater control, and participants' ownership of the construction of the culture of these research interviews, we established not only their consent to be part of the project but a greater authenticity in their accounts that reflected their careful reflections on their identities, so strengthening the claims of the projects to be trustworthy and, therefore, ethical studies. The consistency of participants in how they presented their identities and self-concepts reinforced this authenticity in one of the studies, as they linked past, present and future events together in an ongoing process that seemed to present an unfolding story (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). These stories then provide the frameworks through which teachers' voices could be heard in educational dialogue and within which new meanings are brought to the activity of being a teacher (James 2007 forthcoming). In this sense their identity formation was '...the product of, and realized in, narrative accounts of individuals' past present and future...' (Williams 2000:81). In the other study participants' online accounts were cross-referenced with their offline (face-to-face) conversations with one of the researchers to help make sense of the stories they had written.

Problems of identity and presentation in constructing authentic interviews

This complexity of self, identity and perspective occurs in face-to-face research as well as online research and affects how participants present themselves in conversations and actions in the conduct of research (Gatson and Zweerink, 2004: 191). This is particularly evident in email interviewing, where it is not always possible for the researcher to verify the identity of the participants. ‘...Disembodiment and anonymity allows users to take on many new identities that may have little connection to their off-line selves’ (Hardey 2004:195). Our online interviews were devoid of the normal social frameworks of face-to-face conversations and encounters, in which both researchers and participants interpret the social characteristics of the other, either verbally or non-verbally. This created the potential for our participants to reconstruct their identities, to and play with their identity in the social space. Hardey (2002) also argues that in presenting the self online, the bodily presence, as well as outward acts of movement, posture and emotional expression that are important elements in determining how individuals see themselves, and how they are perceived by others become invisible. Yet, as Hine (2000) argues, whilst visual anonymity allows individuals to play with their identities and adopt different personas, there is no guarantee that such performances will not occur in off-line environments.

In our email interviews, we realized that the prior knowledge our participants helped to verify their identity, or to cross-reference their views and perspectives through normal processes of triangulation, not least through processes of observation and participating in the social situations which are being explored through other participants. Although some researchers have argued that online environments and identities are valid in themselves and do not need to be verified off-line (Hine, 2000), we believed that the authenticity of our participants’ voices was enhanced by combining both offline and online interactions: ‘by moving off-line to ascertain their *‘visual and ...embodied ways of expression’* (Orgad, 2005:62), as well as online through their textual self-presentation. This reinforced how for both participants and researchers, the construction of their stories, and our understandings of these stories were shaped by the nature of our interactions which included a commonality of identities in the offline world, and self exposure, encouraging processes of reflection on identity online. As James and Busher (2006) argue, these processes do not only happen in interviews and online exchanges but in everyday life too, as individuals review and rewrite their histories and perspectives in the light of their developing experiences. We would argue that in our email interviews, the self-presentations of our participants were ‘authentic expressions of self’ (Hangwoo, 2006:20); inextricably linked with who they were, their commitments and values, and integral and continuous to their sense of selves (Kendal, 1999).

Conclusion

Our studies have sparked a great deal of reflection between us: on the nature of qualitative email-based interviewing, about how to construct ethical practice in this

area, and how we can have some confidence that we have not only protected our participants' privacy, but are reassured about the authenticity of the accounts that we received – or that other researchers might receive if they used a similar approach to non-directive interviews. If we cannot be sure that we have carried out trustworthy research then the research is not worth doing because it is of no benefit in developing a society's knowledge base and wastes the resources of researchers and other participants.

An important contributory element to the success of our research studies then was ensuring that the framework in which it was conducted was underpinned by ethical concepts of trust, dignity, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity for participants in order to construct trustworthy research. Although in our studies, participants' privacy was at risk because we were working in an open environment (AoIR, 2002) we tried to limit the risk by being clear to them about the nature of such risks and how we could minimise them. This was particularly important for encouraging our participants to share openly their views on their professional identities with us. Yet even then, we had to be cognisant of the risks we presented to our participants if their online identities were not fully anonymised in the research reports. Whether research takes place online or face-to-face then, despite their best efforts, researchers' practice is likely to fall short of being fully ethical (Burgess, 1989). This gives educational researchers painful dilemmas when trying to pursue new research processes.

We recognise that the studies we carried out had unusual features to them, most important of which was our prior knowledge of our participants and their prior knowledge of us. We cannot escape from the importance of that 'offline' personal contact and the extent to which it facilitated the email interview. However an implication of that for research design is the need to build in some element of face-to-face interpersonal contact alongside online methods of qualitative data collection. It begs the question whether simulating that contact, for example through the use of webcams, to allow some form of visual and voice recognition between participants and researchers is necessary to help to construct authentic qualitative online interviews, whether in synchronous or asynchronous modes.

The best guarantee of authenticity, we think, is in the way in which participants' stories are constructed and the close linkage of these with the selves and identities of participants. It is the embodied participant who interacts online and individuals can never escape from their lived experiences (Jones 1999). Our solutions for authenticating the voices of our participants evolved as we moved through the research process trying to generate an open and honest dialogue with them. They were founded on an 'ethic of respect' that allowed participants to take greater ownership of the research projects as they reflected on their views, making the accurate presentation of their selves a shared responsibility with the researchers. In developing this complicity, it is argued, participants, too, become responsible for the cultural reproduction of a research project, in which they have a part, and so have a stronger investment in ensuring that the outcomes of that project are credible and authentic.

Notes on Contributors:

Dr Hugh Busher is a senior lecturer in the School of Education, University of Leicester. His research interests are the development of more inclusive education through use of appropriate pedagogy; leadership, cultures, and the micro-politics of learning communities in schools in particular socio-political contexts; and the developing work-focused identities of teachers, other staff and students mainly in schools.

Dr Nalita James is a lecturer in the Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester. Her research interests include work, learning and identity in relation to higher education and academics' understanding of how they see themselves, the impact of informal learning on young adults' school-to-work transitions, and the potential of the arts, particularly drama on disaffected young adults' learning transitions and skills development, and the development of online research methods.

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