Guest Editorial

Ethical Issues in Online Research

Introduction

In the last twenty years researchers have developed their technological skills to construct a variety of online methods and sites to explore experiences and behaviour in the virtual world. Similarly, the emergence of the internet and the development of digital technologies has enabled the creation of sites of social interactions for individuals and communities where practices, meanings and identities are constructed (James & Busher, 2009) crossing physical distances and time zones, and overcoming social and language barriers. These online environments can be viewed as cultural contexts in their own right (Hine, 2000) through the many Social Networking Sites (SNSs) that now exist, such as Facebook, and also through media such as email, Twitter, Bulletin boards, wikis, websites and Blogs (the Blogosphere) on any number of topics, More recently there has been a trend of moving away from the real/ virtual dualism put forth by early Internet-based research in recognition of the real and virtual as a connected and integral part of our contemporary social world with hybrid /online/offline communities and boundaries albeit crossed by inequalities and power relation asymmetries (Murthy 2008; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff & Cui 2009; Beneito-Montagut 2011;James & Busher 2013).

The nature of virtual reality and research in cyberspace has raised the need for developing understandings of what might constitute ethical internet research in technological environments whose architecture and organisation can be quickly altered and reshaped (Whiteman, 2010). There exists an 'ethical pluralism' in the world as well as on the internet in which there is a continuum of legitimate ethical choices available to the online researcher.

The different ethical and philosophical frameworks (deontological, utilitarian, virtue) that exist (Ess, 2004) means that disagreement about ethical research practice in online research settings will be inevitable. The internet has opened new ways to examine human interactions in new contexts/sites in wider social research, and offers educational researchers alternative ways of engaging in educational research agendas which might not be possible face-to-face. Nonetheless they are still faced with the dilemmas of ensuring that their research projects are carried out with professional integrity and an ethical respect for their participants.

The application of explicit publicly recognised codes of ethical conduct used in onsite research, for example in educational establishments with teachers, students and pupils, may become more ambiguous when applied in online research sites or when using online research methods as researchers are distant from their research co-participants or respondents in terms of time and space. Educational researchers face a range of ethical issues in their efforts to acquire new knowledge about many behaviours and practices that arise in these virtual spaces/sites or when using online methods (Ess, 2004, p.25). More specifically, 'the issues raised [are] *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]*'* (Ess & Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), 2002, p.4). This suggests that educational researchers not only require discussion about ethical codes specifically pertaining to the online environment but about the ethical ambiguities and uncertainties that can emerge.

This Special Issue brings together a number of papers that explore the ethical challenges of conducting educational research in a rapidly changing digital age that can be multi-sited and multi-modal, online and offline; the implications for research design, .and how established ethical procedures in educational research need constant reconsideration. The papers in the Special Issue will consider a range of ethical challenges (and possibilities)

that educational researchers need to consider in their research practices when their research work is carried out in virtual sites or by online research methods. These include:

- How researchers give ethical consideration to informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity in educational online research

- The ethical challenges of conducting educational research using social media/social networking sites

- The implications of taking a deontological or utilitarian stance in carrying out online research or using online methods

- How educational researchers deal with the challenges of identity construction and authenticity in the online setting

- The tensions between public and private spaces in educational research settings

- The ethical implications for educational research designs that combine online and face-to-face aspects of data collection, especially when investigating hybrid learning communities

The first paper in this Special Issue, by Roberts and Allen, explores a number of ethical issues that are common in (online) educational research. These include dual teacher/researcher roles; informed voluntary consent; use of incentives; privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality and data quality. However, the focus of this paper is on the use of online surveys which are increasingly being used in educational research. The authors argue that additional consideration of these issues is required when applied to online surveys, and

advocate careful consideration of both procedural and process ethics. In particular, the authors move beyond a procedural ethics approach commonly adopted in quantitative educational research and highlight the adoption of a situated/process ethics approach in response to ethical issues that can arise during the conduct, analysis and reporting phases of online survey research. The authors also argue that these ethical issues are worth exploring because online surveys offer educational researchers efficient and effective ways of collecting data as well as ethical defensible reasons for conducting research that would not always be possible in offline educational research contexts.

Barnes, Pen-Edwards and Sim's paper discusses three key issues crucial to the ethical conduct of online research (i) how online data should be reported in a way that protects both the participant from harm and the authenticity of meaning; (ii) how are participants made aware of what they are consenting to when agreeing to participate in online research; and (iii), who owns the data in terms of the public/private debate. Drawing on a study that used Facebook exchanges to examine the transitional learning experiences of first year university students, the authors found that the uncontrolled online environment presented ethical issues associated with authenticity and the duty of care the researcher had to the participants. The authors argue how phenomenography, as a research approach, can philosophically resolve concerns about authenticity of identity. Furthermore, phenomenographic analytic practice has anonymity embedded into its processes. Anonymity was considered important for the approved ethical clearance for both the university and the participants. This paper highlights how the extent to which participants are likely to be willing engage in online research is likely to depend heavily on the extent to which the researchers have been able to construct an ethical environment for the research which allows participants to feel confident about their participation in it, whatever media is used to host or conduct the research (James & Busher,

2009).

The next paper in the Special Issue considers the ethical implications of using social media. Konstopolou and Fox draw on a study examining the online support of pre-service teachers in the UK. The study's initial aims were to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions and use of social media (Facebook/Twitter) on their school placements to act as platforms for pre-service teachers to interact with their peers and support each other during their placements. The researcher experienced problems in recruiting participants which challenged the direction of the study. In particular, the positionality of the researcher as an 'outsider' to the research context and the potential role for gatekeepers in understanding remote research sites raised ethical concerns. These were addressed by using an ethical framework based on non-maleficence, fairness, veracity, and fidelity which helped the researcher reflect on a broader range of ethical thinking and provided a chance to focus on the consequential potential of the study. A redesign of the study followed with a stronger rationale for the way consequential considerations can help address deontological concerns. The paper highlights how educational researchers need to give careful ethical reflection not only to the context of individuals lives but how they can encourage individuals to disclose about their lives. This can be aided by researchers constructing safe online (and offline) environments for the discussion of participants' views that take into consideration social, cultural and political boundaries of their research participants' lives (Ess & AoIR, 2002).

Blanco-Ramírez and Palu-ay's paper also focuses on the use of social media sites for educational research, but gives particular attention to the challenges of how identities are managed in the online setting, and the potential for the construction of online identities that are loosely connected to physical bodies. They raise the ethical challenges about how participants can edit their identities, in a continuous process of self re-creation. The distance

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between body and performance online means that it can become difficult for researchers to authenticate the claims that participants make about themselves or that others make about them. The paper also examines the ethical implications of conducting educational research on university identities when such identities rely on the online representations of racially minoritised students who may or may not have given their explicit permission for these representations of themselves to be used in this way. The authors point out that universities in the USA adopt such strategies to recruit more students in a competitive higher education market, arguing that this raises ethical questions for both the researchers and universities. The paper highlights that whilst cyberspace engages participants and possibly researchers, too, in the production of new selves, these selves are not detached but incorporate embodied experiences and practices (James & Busher, 2009).

A further ethical challenge in conducting online research is the boundary between public and private communication. Stevens, O'Donnell and Williams's paper discusses such issues through their study that used social media to examine the role of informal learning in the subjective experience of chronic illness, using Facebook discussion forums as well as providing an insight into the interactions between sufferers. This paper examines a number of different ethical issues that emerged in the design and conduct of their research in relation to the public versus private nature of online spaces; issues of informed consent; privacy; confidentiality; and lurking. The paper recognises that understandings between researchers and participants have to be created about what information can be collected online, with the permission of the participants, and what can or cannot be passed on to other people, and in what form it may be passed on. Educational researchers have to recognise that even gaining access to online sites can be problematic since one obvious strategy for researchers to use in deciding which sites they want to get involved is for them to lurk to start with (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2000). However as King (1996) argues, researchers must take seriously the level

of perceived privacy that members of online groups attach to their communications and not lurk in any way, however justifiable the reasons for it when constructing research projects.

Online research does not just happen by online communications/interactions alone. Some educational researchers take the view that communications/interactions are deeply embedded in and shaped by offline situations and relationships (Kivits, 2005), and can occur through computer-mediated and face-to-face communications and multi-modal technologies. This raises questions about the uncertainty and complex relationships between online and offline research experiences. Busher and James's paper examines such issues, highlighting the ethical possibilities and challenges that online and offline spaces offer for researchers in the conduct of their qualitative educational research. They argue that to investigate hybrid worlds researchers need to understand people's online communications, their face-to-face engagement and the interactions of both (James & Busher, 2013). To do so however, requires researchers to think carefully about how they apply understandings of ethical practice to complex social situations. The paper considers what might be an ethical framework for researching activity in these entities, giving examples from several projects that have tried carefully to embed this framework in their practices.

Conclusion

The focus of this Special Issue highlights that conducting and participating in any educational research involves ethical risks to the individuals concerned. What is at issue is how those risks can be minimised by educational researchers, and how participants can be helped to be fully aware of the risks involved so that they can freely choose whether or not they want to take part (James & Busher, 2007). It might be argued that by concentrating on protecting research participants from harm, then ethical, online or hybrid research is no different than when it is conducted onsite (face-to-face). As Jones (2004, p. 179) suggests:

'At present for most internet researchers it is likely that gaining access… is the least difficult aspect of the research process…What has become more difficult is determining how to ensure ethical use is made of texts, sounds and pictures that are accessed for study.'

This Special Issue has also highlighted that educational researchers developing/entering online/offline/hybrid environments for the purposes of research must be able to demonstrate that they have considered the ethics of their practice, their use of data, and their relationship to the research settings, and account for the decisions they make and strategies they have used to manage the ethics of their work (Whiteman, 2012). Individuals' choices to participate and present themselves truthfully in these research environments will be influenced by the extent to which researchers have established a clear ethical framework for a study that helps participants to feel protected from intentional or unintentional harm. Such a framework from the outset should include a respect for the interests and values of the research participants: an 'ethics of care' that at the very least involves a respect for the interests and values of those who participate in online research (Cappuro & Pingel, 2002, p.194). It must involve a constantly reflective process that Hammersley (1998) commends as a safeguard for qualitative researchers against the risk that they might unwittingly fall short of the rigorous standards of probity that is required.

In establishing the trustworthiness of online research and sustaining the informed consent of participants, educational researchers need to ensure that they have due regard for the individuals or cultures/communities that are objects of their research and that the environment in which the discussions are conducted is secure so that the risk to participants' privacy is minimised, and that participants are fully informed of the processes of a project whenever they request information relevant to that. Educational researchers also need to be

able to assure participants of this by the procedures for online data collection and curation. For us this reiterates that '…the virtual and often anonymous nature of the internet means that researchers must establish their bona fida status and the boundaries of their research work more carefully than they might in a face-to-face situation' (Sanders, 2005, p.78). This highlights the need for 'context sensitivity' and continual 'reflexive adaptation' whereby educational researchers must constantly ask difficult questions about their online research practice and its legitimacy (Markham, 2003, p.62).

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