

Interactive comment on “Synthesizing the face-to-face experience: e-learning practices and the constitution of place online” by J. Maintz

J. Maintz

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I thank all three anonymous referees for their very productive comments. I will in the following sections summarize the discussion points raised by the referees and respond to them.

1. Anonymous Referee 1

1.1 Referee 1 questions “whether or not actor network theory (ANT) is the appropriate theory to analyze mechanisms of translation (p. 12)” regarding social practices in physical and online spaces. S/he asks for the intention of applying ANT in my paper “Synthesizing the face-to-face experience: e-learning practices and the constitution of place online”, and further suggests Klüter’s approach as an alternative conceptual framework for the discussion of how “experiences and perceptions of face-to-face envi-

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ronments” can “be suitably translated into textual descriptions, being able to distribute [them; J.M.] in online forums, chats or bulletin boards (p. 12-13)”.

Response: I agree that what Referee 1 describes as Klüter’s approach to spatial abstractions of physical facts and phenomena seems to be a viable conception to address the empirical phenomena observed by myself. As referee 1 unfortunately didn’t indicated any concrete bibliographical information on Klüter’s texts s/he is referring to, I will not elaborate on this alternative approach, but explain my motives for choosing the conceptual framework of actor network theory. Indeed, a justification of the choice of the conceptual framework is not explicitly given in my initial contribution and I am grateful to referee 1 for mentioning this important point. I applied actor network theory, as I considered it as important to choose a conceptual framework, which would allow for an open definition of the concept of space. An open definition of space was possible, in order to refer to both, online and physical spaces, which are clearly characterized by different elements. Understanding physical and online spaces as topologies formed by heterogenous elements allowed me to describe physical and online spaces in the same terms, and to observe which would be the constitutive elements of both spaces. When I analyzed my empirical data, I observed the documented interrelation processes in between these two topological structures. By choosing this conception, it was possible to clearly analyze the role of technical elements in causing translation processes between the two spaces (e.g. by way of providing only scarce sensorial information, which inspired the transfer of compensatory information from physical environments into the online environment).

1.2 Referee 1 writes: “[T]he ANT definition of topological space - as immutable mobile - is assumed to be a suitable representation. Maintz, however, argues for the concept of a fire space to represent ‘alterity of Otherness’. The central question is: whereon is Otherness referred to?” Referee 1 moreover encourages a clarification of the meaning of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ of elements in topological structures (p.12-13).

Response: The concept of the immutable mobile is not identical to the ANT definition

of topological space. Instead, the immutable mobile is defined as a possible topological formation, which is characterized by its immutability (i.e. constancy in element composition) as a topology and its mobility in geometrical (Euclidean) space. Another topological formation in this context is the mutable mobile, which is characterized by changeability not only in geometrical (Euclidean) terms, but also with respect to its very topology. This means that a fluctuation in constituting elements is a defining criterion of this actor-network 'mutable mobile'. A fluid object is an example of a mutable mobile, it is an object that is fluid, i.e. mobile or changeable, in its geometrical (Euclidean) and topological forms (Law and Mol, 2001: 615). The topological form of a mutable mobile can in my reading be enacted in the form of fire spatiality, meaning sporadic element influence (see also section 3.2). Likewise, in a topology of fire elements of the mutable mobile temporally belong to a topological formation, and temporally they don't. This flickering interference of elements in a topological formation constitute the 'presence' and 'absence' of elements in a topological context and moreover leads to the meaning of 'otherness' in this context. When elements sporadically contribute to a topology, they are part of it, 'present' in terms of co-constituting the topological form. When they are temporally 'absent', they don't contribute to the very topological form of the actor-network in question. In this situation of not being part of a topology, elements represent 'otherness'. The topology of fire allows illustrating the integration of 'other' elements. In this paper, 'otherness' refers to the elements of two topologies, physical and online spaces, when not influencing the respective other topology. In the case of translation processes, 'other' elements influenced the topological form that was before not co-constituted by these elements in question. An example of 'other' elements influencing the online space were posts to online forums containing information from interactions in physical space, i.e. elements originally 'other', not characterizing, online space.

1.3 Referee 1 asks for a more detailed description of the motivations for and results of the ethnographic approach chosen in my study.

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Response: I agree with Referee 1 that my comment on the ethnographic procedure was definitely too brief. Let me explain my motivation and results more thoroughly at this point. I chose an ethnographic approach, as the extended exposure to social practices in combination with the application of various methods allows for the accumulation of a rich data source. Moreover, ethnographic research is the standard approach to conduct actor-network studies.

Ethnography was developed as anthropological research attitude to understand cultures distant from the researcher's own social and geographical environment. Explicit methodological openness is claimed.

"In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions - in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995 [1983]: 1)."

The ethnographer intends to grasp the richness and complexity of social life and its production and reproduction processes. Descriptions of the observed interaction processes lead to theory building, without sticking to concepts prior to analysis.

"In its basic form ethnography consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating in those processes. The aim is to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives. The ethnographer inhabits a kind of in-between world, simultaneously native and stranger (Hine, 2000: 4-5)."

The project of realist ethnography to document a social reality external to the researcher's intervention and judgement has been attacked in the realm of constructivist approaches to knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1971 [1966]: 200-201). Ethnographies have been unmasked as co-shaped by disciplinary practices and the ethnogra-

pher's embodied engagement, rather than being records of objectively observed and pre-existing cultural objects. Denzin's 'triple crisis of representation, legitimization, and praxis' formulated for qualitative research unavoidably applies to ethnography (Denzin, 1997:3). A re-examination of ethnography (an 'ethnography of ethnography', van Maanen, 1995) has focused on the relationship between research subjects, ethnographers, and readers (see also Pohl, 1998: 98 on the subject-subject relationship of the interaction partners informant and researcher). This implies first awareness of the reflexivity of ethnographic work. Second, ethnographic studies are understood as narratives, 'textual productions' (see Atkinson, 1990: 57, 61-62). Third, legitimization of ethnographic results through face-to-face encounters at the field site is weakened.

As a consequence, ethnography can be extended to mediated environments. Ethnographic work is then based on synchronous or asynchronous co-presence e.g. in on-line forums, and with that allows for the study of spatially distributed research subjects. Informants as well as ethnographers can be exposed to the interface or overlap of physical and mediated encounters, e.g. generated through the use of mobile devices.

"If events are no longer bounded in particular places, then ethnography can usefully attempt to follow. At the same time it is important to be a part of the settings in which people are discussing the case, making sense of the coverage available to them, and locating themselves in particular places in relation to it (Hine, 2000: 70)."

"Moreover, the role of the face-to-face, the notion of experience, and the concept of interaction (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995[1983]: 2) is redefined with regard to ethnographic practice. Authenticity becomes a function of capturing what informants judge as authentic (Hine, 2000: 41-49). "

Hine (2000) develops a methodology for a virtual ethnography, which allows the researcher to investigate Internet interactions in their connection to offline events. Added to face-to-face interactions at the fieldwork site that serve as legitimization for the authenticity of offline ethnographic accounts, she argues, has to stand the notion of joint

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experience and interaction through Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC): "The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies is the ethnography. This is ethnography in, of and through the virtual (Hine, 2000: 65)."

Hine proposes an ethnomethodologically motivated reflexive ethnographic experience through shared practice, here the use of the same collaborative tools as the informants: "A limited medium like CMC seems to pose problems for ethnography's claims to test knowledge through experience and interaction. The position changes somewhat if we recognize that the ethnographer could instead be construed as needing to have similar experiences to those of informants, however those experiences are mediated. Conducting an ethnographic enquiry through the use of CMC opens up the possibility of gaining a reflexive understanding of what it is to be a part of the Internet (Hine, 2000: 10)."

But still there is the question on frequency, intensity, and synchronous or asynchronous use of the tools or mediated environment: "In an offline setting we might expect an ethnographer to have spent a prolonged period living or working in their field site. We would expect them to have observed, asked questions, interviewed people, drawn maps and taken photographs, learnt techniques and done what they could to find out how life was lived from the point of view of participants. Moving this approach to an online setting poses some interesting problems: how can you live in an online setting? Do you have to be logged on 24 hours a day, or can you visit the setting at periodic intervals? Can you analyse newsgroup archives without participating and call that ethnography (Hine, 2000: 21)?"

A researcher's use of computer-mediated environments in ways that diverge from informants' use implies violation of the ethnographic principles of the researcher's co-presence at the fieldwork site and a holistic sharing of informants' practices as required to gain a reflexive understanding of the studied context. When studying a virtual community, participation in enduring practices most likely influences the ethnographer's perception of why this community becomes meaningful to participants (Hine, 2000: 21;

see Baym, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1998). On the other hand, the ethnographer's decision on how to engage with virtual community interactions becomes problematic when aiming to describe online experiences of lurkers as well as active participants (Hine, 2000: 24). However, the procedure to study informants' use of various tools allows for triangulation of ethnographic data (Hine, 2000: 21).

Data sources for virtual ethnography - online interaction forums like discussion forums or chat rooms - often have either the feature of leaving interaction data displayed for an extended time period and/or include archives that allow for asynchronous access to information. This offers a vast amount of raw material for ethnographic work that might have been generated without being influenced by the ethnographer's presence. Ethnographic work can be time-shifted by asynchronous access to virtual forums, if the ethnographer's aim doesn't comprise the participants' synchronous interaction experience. The latter would require the ethnographer's synchronous exposure to the interaction setting. "Part of following a newsgroup in real time is making sense out of the arrival of messages in the wrong order, waiting for responses to messages, and experiencing periods of high and low activity in the newsgroup. [É] The ethnographer cannot stand in for every user and recreate the circumstances in which they access the newsgroup, but she can at least experience what it is like to be a user (Hine, 2000: 23)."

In order to get to know not only participants' online experience, but also informants as individuals, it is productive for the ethnographer to become a more or less active participant in online interactions of the observed target group. Becoming an accepted member of the group will more likely lead to extensive feedback by side of participants when interviewing participants or asking for comments on research findings. I.e. a basis for a reflexive ethnography can be built (Hine, 2000: 23).

Revealing the researcher's role within an online context is also a question of research ethics that should parallel offline qualitative research standards. The collection of information in online forums for research purposes requires the consent of forum members.

The modality to use information has to take place in a way that doesn't harm participants' privacy (see King, 1996; Waskul and Douglass, 1996; Reid, 1996).

"[O]nline interactions are sufficiently real for participants to feel they have been harmed or their privacy infringed by researchers. [É] In offline settings it is rare for a researcher to reveal the name of an informant, for fear of causing embarrassment or harm. By extrapolation, researchers in online setting have often treated user names as similarly sensitive and changed identifying details to avoid the possibility of adverse consequence (Hine, 2000: 23-24)."

The analysis of texts receives a prominent role in the ethnographic study of online interactivity. Texts allow for asynchronous communication and the mobility of information and exchange. Through texts in form of posts to online forums the oral tradition of ethnography is challenged (Hine, 2000: 50-51). Texts become the key resource of online environments.

In this study, I refer to face-to-face interactions (at the face-to-face workshops), online interactions (during the online phase), and the overlap of face-to-face and online interactions performed by participants when online, but at the same time embedded in their individual face-to-face environments. Studying these interactions implies a blended ethnographic procedure methodologically sensitive to both, physical and online environments. Methodological implications are to understand the concepts of 'ethnographic participation' and 'field site' as defined by shared experience, be it in physical or online environments.

1.3.1 Participation and observation Participation in the research setting is the ethnographic strategy to understand social interaction from the inside. A decisive component of this strategy is the "immersion" in the field setting requiring an extended and intensive participation in the activities of informants. I studied the Blended Learning course through ethnographic course participation as "official" member of the group. I joined the first face-to-face workshop for one day in order to present myself and my research

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idea, ask participants to consent to my presence as researcher in the course and the use of interaction data for research purposes, and to get a first face-to-face impression of the group members. From the beginning of the six-month-online phase until the official closure of the course program (ending on the last day of the second face-to-face workshop), I followed course interactions through co-presence in online and face-to-face settings.

I acted as participant observer in a form that can be described as active participation. I read the course scripts like the other learners, I posted to the online forums, and participated in most chats. I did not develop my own e-learning course, the course target, which would lead to a course certificate on “e-Learning Training and Management”. I communicated with various course participants (learners and tutors) by e-mail relating to course interactions or motivated by personal shared interests, as the other participants did. So I experienced a large part of learners’ activities, except for filling in the checklists (containing questions on the application of learned content) and developing my own e-learning course project.

The attitude of participant observation definitely is more adequate than non-participant observation to conduct ethnographic research, as it “refers to research characterized by a period of intense social interaction between the researcher and the subjects, in the milieu of the latter. During this period, data are unobtrusively and systematically collected (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975: 5)”.

I took notes on observations directly when co-present with participants online. In the case of face-to-face encounters, I wrote down my notes shortly after having left the observation setting. These observation notes have served as background to analyze data collected in the online forums or through questionnaires and interviews and to compare, contrast and enrich these data.

1.3.2 Online interaction data Course participants produced online interaction data during the e-learning course in the diverse communication tools available in their shared

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virtual group workspace. These tools were user pinboard and discussion forum allowing for asynchronous communications, and the chat room as synchronous interaction environment. Participants generated data in these forums in regular course interactions. Often, I was co-present when data were produced in online interactions. Except of the small group chat I moderated in form of a group discussion, no online interaction data were produced in the special context of my research interest. Due to the digital storage facilities, complete online interaction data were digitally available to me (displayed or archived). I analyzed all interaction data that were generated by participants in the e-cooperation tools pinboard and chat in the six-month-online phase by theoretical coding.

1.3.3 Questionnaire and interviews I sent out a questionnaire by e-mail to eLTM participants, and conducted interviews with the participants at the second face-to-face workshop. The “ethnographic” about these two methods consists in the duration and frequency of contact with informants, and the quality of the researcher’s relationship with informants (Heyl, 2001: 369). A reasonable knowledge of informants through contact during an extended period of time thus constitutes the base for ethnographic research.

I sent the questionnaire to participants at the end of the half-year-long online phase, two weeks before the start of the second face-to-face workshop. I had met participants at the first face-to-face workshop for one day in person, and been actively present in the online phase. Judging critically, I would consider myself as having built up a stable relationship with informants at that stage. When looking back, I gained a completely new quality of relationship to eLTM participants through my presence at the second face-to-face workshop compared to when I sent out the questionnaires. Themes treated in the questionnaire were the factors influencing course interactions including space and time-related issues, the modes and frequency of use and usability of the e-cooperation platform tools and features, the course concept and organization, e-learning versus classroom-learning in a physical environment, learning success and contentment with

the course, attachment to other participants, factors for efficient e-learning, elements involved in course interactions, interest in joining a similar course another time, and points to be changed related to the course.

When I met eLTM participants in person at the second face-to-face workshop in Pretoria, South Africa, I developed a strikingly different impression of the individual participants in comparison to the picture I had in mind from online interactions. The intensive face-to-face experience definitely made a difference. This face-to-face situation apparently contributed to the commitment that group members showed in the ethnographic interviews conducted at the second face-to-face workshop.

"[T]he definition of ethnographic interviewing [Ē] will include those projects in which researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds (Heyl, 2001: 369)."

The ethnographic interviewer is interested in social interaction in the informants' environment as perceived by informants. The interviewer should be sensitive to the informant's life circumstances and experiences. Presence in the informants' interaction environment (offline and online) and awareness for this environment, according to ethnographic thinking, potentially enhances the understanding of informants' statements. The role of observation is stressed while interviewing. According to Heyl (2001: 370), ethnographic interviewing implies to listen well and respectfully to the informant and to use collected information according to research ethics standards. The interviewer is conscious of the co-construction of meaning in the interview process. The relationship between informant and interviewer does, in addition to the social context, influence the informants and the interview process. Moreover, the ethnographer judges information as necessarily partial and incomplete knowledge. Part of reflexive ethnography is the discussion of insights with informants, so that the researcher's understanding approximates the informants' view points. Ethnographic interviewing should more resemble a

dialogue than a classic interview situation (see Spradley, 1979; Heyl, 2001). The understanding of the informants' worldviews doesn't restrict the ethnographer's analytical judgement that might be different from the informants' viewpoints.

I conducted ethnographic interviews with 14 out of 16 learners, one tutor, and one InWEnt program manager who were present at the Pretoria workshop. These interviews were semi-structured and treated topics dealt with in the questionnaire (see above). In addition to the questionnaire topics, I asked the interviewed tutor and InWEnt program manager for their perceptions related to the "e-Learning Training and Management" course 2003 in comparison to other e-learning groups. Moreover, I interviewed them on different models of e-learning course design and facilitation, and asked them to compare the available tools to offers on other e-cooperation platforms.

1.3.4 Group discussion as small group chat In addition to questionnaires and interviews, I applied the method of group discussion (see Pollock, 1955) as a means to direct research questions to eLTM learners. The group discussion was conducted in form of a 'small group chat'. The tutoring of a small group chat was part of the learner's tasks within the regular course program in order to learn to perform the role of an online tutor. This was considered an important task for learners in relation to the course target of developing and implementing an e-learning course. Participants had to announce their chat topic in the discussion forum or a regular course chat, invite other learners, and moderate a small group of participants when discussing their proposed topic in a small group chat. I took this chance in the regular program to discuss the topic of "elements influencing e-learning interactions". I introduced this topic as open to debate, and suggested elements like human and non-human course participants, technological objects, time and space-related factors, and all kinds of potential influences on course interactions. I analyzed the resulting discussion data by theoretical coding as the other data collected in online interactions, questionnaires and interviews. Five participants including myself were present at this small group chat.

The method of group discussion aims at stimulating a discussion and observing the

discussion dynamics with respect to individual statements. The concept of group discussion relevant to this study understands a group as regulating individual opinions. Statements are negotiated within the group. Individual opinions not shared by other group members are expected to lead to dissent. The group becomes a means to analyze individual thematic view points (Pollock, 1955: 34).

In the small group chat organized by myself, I tutored the discussion according to the principles described for leading a group discussion: formal, thematic guidance, and the guidance of group dynamics (Dreher and Dreher, 1982: 150-151). Formal guidance means the definition of starting and end points of a discussion. Thematic guidance implies the introduction of conversation topics or the stimulation to concentrate on a particular topic. Guidance of group dynamics is concerned with influencing participation, e.g. through thematic polarization or encouragement of participants to contribute their statement to a group discussion. The person leading the group discussion is supposed to guide and stimulate the discussion in a way that is open to participants' conceptual freedom and spontaneity. These guidelines for a group discussion are equivalent to the instructions for tutoring a small group chat as it was taught in the e-learning course.

– Please find the second half of the author comment in the second post ("final author comment, part 2")–

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 3, 31, 2007.

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