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Using blogs in qualitative educational research: an exploration of method

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Using blogs in qualitative educational research: an exploration of method

Qualitative educational research has been relatively slow to take up online research methods (ORMs). Apart from research that is inherently linked to the internet, for example research on educational technologies or students' online behaviour, ORMs have not achieved wider applicability in educational contexts. This paper demonstrates how ORMs can be useful in qualitative research projects.. It describes how on-going, reflective, qualitative data was collected using a popular, community-based online tool - blogs. The research project that utilised this approach aimed to trace how a group of international students in the United Kingdom (UK) responded to their new environment over six (6) months. Such an approach is unique in qualitative educational research and there has been little research which has explored the use of blogs. This article attempts to provide new understanding on the use of blogs as a tool for data collection

Key words: Qualitative research, online research methods, ORMs, research blogs, social research

Introduction and background

Online Research Methods (ORMs) developed alongside the popular growth of the internet. In the mid-1990s health and social researchers sought to understand how the then developing internet media was shaping human lives and impacting human behaviour both online and off (Finn and Lavitt 1994; Jones, 1995; King 1994; Thomas 1995; Turkle 1995). Studies on online cultures, despite their methodological framing, were grouped into a wide field known as virtual ethnography (Hine 2005).

The field produced important writings on the ways human communities form and operate online and documented a significant period in human social history. ORMs are still gaining momentum in social research, propelled by changes in the nature of the internet and the World Wide Web – particularly by Web 2.0 initiatives to create a more interactive and community-oriented online environment and experience. ORMs are thus modified and developed as a result of changes in the nature of the online context. New voices and techniques are continuously emerging and adding to the diverse conversations that together constitute online research.

Qualitative educational research has, arguably, been slow to take up ORMs. Apart from research that is inherently linked to the internet, for example qualitative research on educational technologies or students' online behaviour, ORMs have not achieved wider applicability in educational contexts. In fact, Joinson and Buchanan's (2001) article on performing educational research on the internet focuses specifically on educational technologies. There are, indeed, some notable exceptions here. As early as 2001, Eichhorn used ethnography to study a community of young people who self-produced and disseminated magazines or pamphlets. Interviews through email (James 2007) and instant messenger software (Hinchcliffe and Gavin 2008) have also been used in educational contexts. Recently, Adams and Thompson (2011) communicated a novel approach to qualitative research which viewed educational technology) as research participants and generated rules to 'interviewing' objects.

This paper describes how on-going, reflective, qualitative data was collected using a popular, community-based online tool - blogs. A blog is an interactive and personalised web page that can be instantly and chronologically updated with text, imagery, audio, video and hyperlinks via any internet connection (Richardson 2006; Newson Houghton and Patten 2009; Warlick 2007). Blog entries are called 'posts' and can be published by anyone registered to post on the site. Posts can be in the form of text, video and/or images. A key feature of a blog is interactivity as readers are able to comment on the content of a post. Blog posts are archived in reverse chronological order.

This research transformed blogs into a research tool for collecting data about everyday behaviours and emotions in the offline world. The world that was being investigated and the data that was being collected were rooted in the offline world but the instrument that collected the data was internet-based. This statement is made broadly, knowing that online and offline contexts cannot be so easily distinguished and that the methods used in any piece of research influences the nature of the data derived from them (Bailey 2001; Baym 1995; Howard 2004; Kendall 1999; Laurel 2001; Sassen 2004; Turkle 2001, 2003). The research thus illustrates the potential of ORMs to research projects that are not connected with the internet.

The paper delivers the story of procedure: how the technique emerged and how it came to take on its specific characteristics. The background, literature, ethics, procedures and results are embedded in the story. The paper is written in this way because the method is best understood in light of the circumstances that gave birth to it and influenced its features at different stages. The blog used in this study was created and maintained by the researcher and the participants for the sole purpose of collecting data for the project, a technique that has not been significantly documented in current sociological research (Fielding, Lee and Blank 2008). As with all methods, continuous consideration and interrogation of the details of the story are necessary if the technique is to advance.

The research

The research project aimed to *trace* Trinidadian students' response to the United Kingdom (UK). The central research question was: how do Trinidadian students in the UK respond to their new environment? Subsidiary questions were:

1. What kinds of experiences do the participants have in the UK?
2. How do the participants (re)construct the meaning of these experiences?
3. What are the effects of these experiences on the participants?

The research sought to add to existing knowledge on international student adjustment in the UK. The study focused on Trinidadian students, a context which distinguishes it from other studies in this area. As it is widely held that difficulties with adjustment are amplified when differences between the cultures involved are more pronounced[1], the literature tends is dominated by studies with students whose cultures and teaching systems are perceived to be significantly different from those of the host country. Investigating adjustment among students from countries that possess important similarities with the host country, particularly historical and linguistic connections and shared academic conventions, provide a complementary perspective on international student adjustment. This material diversifies what we currently know about international students in the UK. Students from a culturally diverse, once colonial country, such as Trinidad, may also come to the UK with intercultural experience and postcolonial 'baggage' that may impact their adjustment process and self-development in different ways. An approach that acknowledges and considers students' postcolonial connections with the UK, as well as their possible intercultural experience, contributes an important perspective on the international students who live and study in the UK.

Participants for this study were accessed through the International Offices at different UK universities. These offices were asked to forward some prepared communication to students from Trinidad and Tobago registered at their university. The prepared communication provided the students with information about the study. Interested persons were asked to contact the researcher. Some offices were unable to help because of their university student data protection policy. Further, because of funding problems, interested persons from the North of England and the Midlands were unable to participate. Ultimately, the research reflected the views of students from the South of England and Wales.

Eight students took part in the research. All the participants were mature-entry students. Five of the participants had been in the UK for between one to four years before the study commenced. The other three participants were new to the UK, having arrived about one month before the study began. The participants ranged between 21 and 27 years of age. The table below provides a full profile of the participants involved in the research.

Table 1 about here

Characteristics of the design: emergence of a blog-diary

The research aimed to *trace* Trinidadian student responses to the United Kingdom (UK) over six months. An important element in this tracing technique was capturing in depth the flux and flow of the participants' experiences, thoughts and emotions during these decisive adjustment months. The design needed to collect data continuously, and be able and available to capture minute changes in the respondents' experiences, emotions, attitudes and perceptions. Reflective diaries, which are continuous and facilitate deep reflection, surfaced as an ideal method to collect continuous data.

Diaries keep the personal records, often chronologically, of the diary holder. Diaries can be written in on a daily or weekly basis, or whenever the diary keeper has something he/she wishes to document. As they are written in over a period of time, diaries "provide a record of an ever-changing present" (Elliott 1997 p.2.4). Participant diaries make what is inside – thoughts, emotions – visible to the researcher and can produce a "wider and/or deeper picture" (Scott and Morrison 2006 p.65) of the phenomena because they encourage respondents — and give them adequate time — to think and reflect on their thoughts and emotions (Alaszewski 2006; Elliott, 1997; Lewis, Sligo and Massey 2005; Scott and Morrison 2006). Further, Alaszewski argues that diaries "provide greater insight into how individuals interpret situations and ascribe meanings to actions and events and therefore how actions that may appear irrational to outsiders are rational to the diariest" (2006, p.37). The reflection permitted by dairies may also heighten interpretation and offer participants the chance to analyse their own behaviour and write about them (Johnson and Bytheway 2001). Diaries also permit maximum respondent control over when, and in what form, they provide data and how much data they wish to provide. Participants also have the power to review and edit their entries which allows each participant to immediately validate his/her own data. Finally, with diaries, researchers are able to collect information over a number of geographical locations simultaneously.

Diaries are thus continuous, they facilitate reflection and can capture the complex and dynamic ways in which the diarists (re)construct meaning over time and how they negotiate their identities under constantly changing circumstances. However, a persistent problem with research diaries is incompletion since they can become monotonous and respondents are likely to forget about them (Corti 1993; Toms and Duff 2002; Alaszewski 2006). With this in mind, it is generally recommended that diaries not be conducted over a long period of time (Elliott 1997; Scott and Morrison 2006; Lewis, Sligo and Massey 2005). Further, since researchers are not present when diarists construct their reflections, they cannot confirm that entries were submitted when the participants indicate (Johnson and Bytheway 2001). These issues significantly impact the validity of a diary study (Meth 2003).

Blogs manifested as the next natural and logical step from the use of diaries. A blog would facilitate the collection of continuous documentary data similar to a diary, but the process would be an interactive one which researchers could participate in and monitor.

The technique was thus conceptualized, designed and originally implemented as a 'replacement' to a traditional data collection tool: as an online reflective diary (Elliott 1997; Suzuki 2004; Herring et al 2005). Once implemented, however, it was clear from the way the participants used the tool, the data that was collected, and the overall form that the 'diary' eventually assumed, that it was not a diary. A blog – since it is, basically, a web page – can be framed to meet its user's purpose. Although the blog was initially developed as a research diary, the space, over time, evolved into the kind of community that the participants wanted it to be – as is natural in internet communities (Chesher 1993; Rheingold 2001; Preece 2000; Mansell 2002; Turkle 2001). The blog emerged as a community of individuals sharing and developing individual and group experiences. For this reason I refer to the method as a blog and not a diary.

Advantages of a research blog

A blog was selected as it facilitated and encouraged rich and deep reflection since the participants had to put their thoughts into writing and they had the time to reflect on what they were really experiencing (Elliott 1997; Suzuki 2004; Herring et al 2005; Lewis, Sligo and Massey 2005; Alaszewski 2006; Scott and Morrison 2006). Blogs, like diaries, are continuous. Once the blog went live, it was available to the participants throughout the six-month data collection period. Blogs can also be considered only minimally intrusive on participant's lives since users can access the blog whenever they wish – just as with traditional diaries (Alaszewski 2006). Blogs also facilitate the collection of data across several geographical locations simultaneously..

Like diaries, blogs are multimodal. They facilitate different kinds of expression. In this way, the blog honours participants' voices and the individual ways in which they may find their voices (Lewis, Sligo and Massey 2005). On blogs, users could express themselves using several forms of text including, but not limited to, narratives, comments and poetry (Preece 2000; Newson, Houghton and Patten 2009). Further, the medium allows users to upload or post links to pictures, art, video and music which are meaningful to the participants in some way (Newson, Houghton and Patten 2009).

Fundamentally, blogs are interactive (Herring et al, 2005; Warlick 2007). While this is a major departure from traditional diaries, it was thought that the interactive nature of the blog would help to hold participant interest and to keep data collection progressing where traditional diaries had shown to become monotonous. In addition, it was felt that the interactive feature of the blog would give the participants something in return for their assistance. It would give them the opportunity to meet and interact with other Trinidadian students in the UK and learn about others' experiences while being able to share their own thoughts, feelings and experiences and receive feedback.

A consistent and significant problem that many researchers face when conducting research online is the anonymity of the participants. This is particularly problematic when acquiring informed consent from people who the researchers do not know or cannot see (King 1996; Eysenbach and Till 2001; Ess 2002; Keller 2003; Parry 2004; Markham 2008, forthcoming). However, for researchers using the internet as a research tool, and not as the site of the study, the anonymity that the internet provides can be perceived as strength rather than a limitation. Mann and Stuart (2000) found that anonymous online reflections have the potential to spur richer and deeper thought than face-to-face conversations. The anonymity provided by the internet has also been shown in some studies to reduce anxieties about feeling judged and can increase self-disclosure motivating deeper introspection and reflection (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002; Joinson 2001; Tidwell and Walther 2002). Over time, a blog can also encourage a community atmosphere among group members, increasing comfort levels and making it easier for participants to self-disclose (Gumbrecht 2004; Hookway 2008).

Blogs were also accessible for the research population and particularly suited to them. As university students, the participants have unlimited access to the internet. Further, computers are a necessary component in students' lives. It is where they conduct research, write papers, access their university email, manage everyday student administrative needs, contact lecturers and get involved in classes. The method seemed both relevant and accessible to the research population. The procedure for using a blog – as a research participant – is similar to logging into any general internet service, creating, and then sending an email, and could be easily taught to interested participants (Boulos and Wheeler 2006; Newson, Houghton and Patten 2009).

Technological advancements also accommodate an added dimension of simultaneity to the data collection process. With internet technology, the researcher has immediate access to any blog entry that the respondent produces. This way, data analysis can start as soon as the data is collected, a process that is supported by many qualitative researchers (Brewer 2000; Flick 2002; LeCompte et al 1993). Also, any additional action the researcher would like to take in response to an entry – for example, encouraging deeper or wider exploration of a significant contribution – can be undertaken immediately rather than after the data has been collected. With blogs, respondents can view and edit their entries any number of times. With permission from the participant to analyse different versions of an entry, a researcher is able to track the smallest significant level of change which a participant undergoes during adjustment, which is a valuable addition to a study. Being able to 'supervise' the data production process in this way allows researchers to be more confident in the authenticity of documentary data[2].

Designing a blog study: a course through murky waters

Face to face interviews were conducted in conjunction with the blogs to facilitate a more personal relationship with the respondents and to acquire a wider and more varied picture of the depth and diversity of meaning through which participants constructed their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). This paper focuses on the blog element of the research and therefore does not go into detail about how the interviews were planned and conducted. However, it is important to note that the blog exists as one segment of a compound method - referred to as *the blog-interview method* in the research[3]. The procedure was approved by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee at the University of Southampton.

As stated before, access to Trinidadian students in the UK was gained by contacting the International Offices of different universities the UK. These offices were asked to share prepared and approved communication about the study with registered students from Trinidad attending the university. Students who were interested in learning more about the research were asked to contact the primary researcher on the project (hereafter referred to only as 'the researcher'). The researcher met students who were interested in taking part in the study at their cities/universities. This provided the opportunity to discuss the research face-to-face with the participants. After meeting all the participants individually the blog went live for six months. Subsequent to the six-month blog collection period, a face-to-face interview was scheduled with each participant to clarify, elaborate, and cross-check the blog data.

No published academic research that uses blogs in this way to collect data was found to guide the study. Blogs have been studied in various ways in the past, but in most cases they are studied as an entity or phenomenon in itself or in relation to how the technology influences or impacts aspects everyday life[4]. As a data collection tool, research blogs have been significantly less influential and transformative. Some researchers have advocated the use of private group blogs as a replacement to traditional research notebooks and field journals since they allow co-researchers in very different locations to share information and collaborate with relative ease (Suzuki 2004; Igor et al 2005; Todoriki, Konishi and Inoue 2006; Bianco and Carr-Chellman 2007; Wakeford and Cohen 2008). Suzuki (2004) and Wakeford and Cohen (2008) observe the potential of public blogs to facilitate interaction with participants, but they do not go into detail on how such uses might practically function. Little has therefore been written on how blogs may be used to collect data that is unrelated to the internet; data that is focused entirely on offline endeavours. As Fielding, Lee and Blank (2008) comment, the use of blogs in research, “remains at this stage speculative . . . the research uses of blogs remain relatively novel. Hopefully, the blogosphere will continue to be the site of further exploration and experimentation” (2008, p.14). This study takes research *using* blogs out of speculation and into ‘exploration and experimentation’. The blog data was analysed qualitatively using a grounded theory approach.

Ethics of online research

In 2002, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) created a set of ethical guidelines that could be used to guide internet researchers through online data collection. Although these guidelines remain in a tentative working document, it remains the most consulted set of guidelines used by many prospective and experienced internet researchers (AoIR 2002; Ess 2002).

In 2004, the British Sociological Association claimed that the ethical issues surrounding internet research were underdeveloped (2004, p.5-6). This may have been because of the change in the tone of internet research at the time. Internet contexts were increasingly being perceived as another dimension of everyday human existence, and many authors acknowledged that existing codes and guidelines could be used when conducting online research (Boehfeld 1996; Capurro and Pingel 2002; Ess 2002; Elgesem 2002; Jones 2003; Walther 2002; Thomas 1995). While the online context does indeed change the dynamics of the interaction (Markham 2004, 2008), the fundamental ethical considerations of research in both offline and online contexts are similar. To illustrate, in both online and offline contexts the central ethical issues surround informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and pseudonymity, risk/benefit assessments of the research to the participant, justice, respect for participants and their persons, issues of non-disclosure, conflicts of interest, identifying and dealing with vulnerable populations, ownership of research material, participant expectations of the research process and accessibility (Ess 2002). In online research ethics, the core issues involved are not new, however, they are modified or adjusted to correspond with online spaces.

With the internet, privacy is an important concern because all the material that respondents provide could be publicly available. This is especially dangerous in online qualitative research. Qualitative research relies on quotes from participants to validate the study and to empower participant voices. However, if someone wanted to know where an online study was carried out, who the research population was or even track down the sender of a particular post, all (s)he would need to do is conduct a search for the published quote (Eysenbach and Till 2001; Markham 2008). If a participant's personal information is not available on the research website, but (s)he uses an internet identity that (s)he has assumed elsewhere on the internet, it is possible that – by following the poster's public 'digital trail' – individuals may gain access to personal information about the participant. It is therefore difficult to maintain 100% anonymity and privacy when internet material is publically available. This may restrict what and how much information the participants are willing to provide. It would also constitute a severe security risk. To facilitate privacy and to protect the participant's identities, it was decided that the data would be collected via a password-protected private group blog. No one outside of the research group would be able to view the blog unless participants shared their passwords or viewed the blog with their friends (which were both discouraged). The private blog also prevented the public from tracing the research back to the community after the data was disseminated.

Informed consent was sought in a private face-to-face meeting with the participants. To protect privacy, participants were asked not to print, scan, copy or distribute blog posts from the online space. They were also asked to keep the blog as private as they practicably could. Each participant selected his/her own pseudonym for the research – which was the name (s)he was known by on the blog. This should have been a pseudonym that the participants did not use elsewhere on the web and one which could not be easily linked to them. As all material posted to the internet is the intellectual property of the individual poster and is copyrighted to them (Ess 2002; Walther 2002; Markham 2002 2008), the data was treated as copyrighted published content and permission to use the participant's contributions in different contexts was acquired.

Privacy and security: deciding on a provider

An important decision regarding security in blog research is deciding on an appropriate provider. Even though the blog was password-protected, the data would be stored on an external server. It was necessary to select a provider (host) whose privacy policy was compatible with the privacy and security concerns of the research. The provider would need to supply two very important services: it should (i) provide 'hosting services' in that it would host the blog on private company servers and (ii) provide 'platform services', that is, it would be able to provide the platform or software necessary to create a blog.

The platform chosen was Blogger which is owned by Google Inc (hereafter referred to as Google). Blogger is a free blogging platform which also offers free hosting services. Blogger is easy to operate since the user only needs to fill in the required fields and the software does the rest of the workThe information contained in Google's Privacy Policy (2008) confirmed that all material hosted on the company's servers were owned and copyrighted by the users and were not held as Google's property. The policy confirmed that all material held on the servers were protected and all personnel coming into contact with servers were bound by the company's policies and by the US Safe Harbour Privacy Principles of Notice, Choice, Onward Transfer, Security, Data Integrity, Access and Enforcement.

Blogger does not require a name to set up an account. To use the software only a Display Name (pseudonym) is required, as well as an email address and a password. This email address – was considered personal information by the company as was not sold or provided to third parties. This provided reliable protection for the participants' identities. The material placed online remains private as long as the user's settings indicated explicitly which information should be restricted and private. Google had no authority to make any private content public or to alter private content in any way.

Developing the blog: feeling our way through blog research

Researchers soliciting diaries from informants need to design the diaries for distribution to the respondents (Corti 1993; Alaszewski 2006). This is equally relevant to research using blogs. The blog needs to fit the context of the research and should allow participants to feel in control of the instrument and how they use it, facilitate freedom of expression and be informal to encourage reflection and participation (Corti 1993; Alaszewski 2006). The literature did not provide more specific suggestions regarding the actual design of such spaces. The design decisions were therefore deeply subjective, based on conditions the researcher believed would engender the kinds of outcomes that the diary literature supported.

Work on planning, building and testing the blog began two weeks before data collection began. These were important stages in the preparation for data collection.

Planning

This phase involved creating the blog and drafting preliminary content. Creating a blog using Blogger's platform is a three-step process:

- Creating an account with Blogger -achieved by filling out a short form
- Naming the blog, which involves filling in the blog name in a text field
- Choosing a template for the blog, which comprises the background, appearance and general organization of the blog

These three steps can be completed relatively quickly, by filling in the appropriate fields and by selecting the preferred template from those provided by Blogger, giving the user a fully-functional public blog in less than fifteen minutes. After building the blog the administrator can personalise the space to meet his/her needs – change the template and layout; make decisions about who is able to view the blog; add gadgets and other applications to increase interactivity and activity on the blog. All these elements of the blog's design and settings should complement each other to achieve the administrator's purpose and to make the blog successful. Therefore a great deal of planning, preparation and decision-making went into the aesthetics, layout, features and privacy settings of the blog.

The blog was called "De Back Porch: a space for Trinidadian students in the UK to talk about their experiences". A porch is a covered area adjacent to the entrance and/or exit of a house. In Trinidad, much small group interaction happens in the back porch of a house. People get together talk, hang out, and enjoy themselves but also have serious interaction. I decided that the symbolism of the back porch made this a perfect name for the blog.

The look and feel of the blog needed to encourage participant reflection and communication. The features on the blog therefore needed to activate and hold interest, create an atmosphere of reflection, and remain professional and linked to internationally-based education so the participants did not forget that, despite the site, they were involved in research. These features also needed to complement each other. A free blog template called 'Charcoal' designed by kranthi at bloggertricks.com seemed most appropriate to encourage the 'feel' the research was seeking.

Blogs also have other features that can encourage, and hinder, the kinds of activity that a researcher seeks. These features have to be selected with care - focused on what the features will add to the research and the research process. Gadgets and applications are useful in this regard as they help contextualise the online space. Further, gadgets add interactive elements to the blog and keep users logged in and interested (Yan 2006). If selected properly, they can also curb monotony on a site which is useful to 'diary' research. As the ethical protocol stated that the blog should remain as private as possible, applications/gadgets created by developers who were not associated with Google or Blogger, and whose applications were hosted on external servers, were not enabled. A photo slideshow of UK and Trinidadian locations, a link list with web links relevant to international students in the UK, a video bar and an archive of past posts were included.

Blogger functions that could potentially affect privacy and security were disabled. The objective was to keep the blog off as many externally-hosted servers as possible and restrict permissions and access down to the smallest possible level. This way, only those covered by the privacy policy the study had accepted would be able to access the blog, and then, only when necessary. Permissions were changed to make the blog a private one – only blog authors with permission were able to view the blog. The following Blogger options were also disabled to maximise privacy:

- Add blog to our listings
- Let search engines find your blog
- Allow Blog Feeds

With all of these functions disabled, 'De Back Porch' became a fully private blog with no external applications having permission to 'read' the blog for summarising or reproduction elsewhere. Disallowing the RSS feeds was primarily a cautionary measure. RSS or Really Simple Syndication[5] feeds did not work with private blogs but the function was disabled as a precaution.

The final element of the planning stage was drafting the first blog post ('Welcome' post). In this post the aims and objectives of the blog were described and the dates during which the blog would be operational were emphasised. Further, the participants were reminded about the rules of the community which are described in the ethical protocol. Participants were advised not to post personal photos or identifying materials on the blog to protect their identity. To further protect the participants this post included a warning about revealing personal information to others in the group, which is standard administrative internet community procedure (Preece 2000). However, if the participants decided to provide personal information to others in the group after considering this advice, they were permitted since they had the right to make these decisions on their own. These decisions reflect a struggle to protect individual rights and free speech on the blog and allow the community to grow as naturally as possible on the one hand while responding to the need to protect the participants from harm on the other.

Respondents were allowed to revisit and edit their posts. The process of editing posts was instrumental in documenting that flux and changeability that characterises adjustment. Where posts were edited, permission was sought to use material that was subsequently edited. The participants were reminded to disable the 'Share my Profile' function on their account so other users would not know who they were, and to change their Display Name to a pseudonym if they had not done so already. Instructions on how to do this were provided in the 'Welcome' post. Participants were asked to keep the researcher informed about their thoughts regarding the blog and to provide suggestions for changes. Incorporating them in these processes was meant to frame the blog as a space that was co-created by the participants and the researcher. With the publishing of the 'Welcome' post the first phase of developing the blog was completed. The appearance of the blog after this phase was completed is shown in Picture 1. The coming week took the blog into its next phase before going live to the participants – the testing phase. Figure 1 about here

Testing

To begin the testing phase of the blog, an invitation to contribute to the blog was sent to a test email account belonging to the researcher. As a test participant the researcher was able to determine whether the features were functioning properly. The coming days also allowed the researcher to ensure that the blog was not being crawled by search engines, the password-protection function was operating properly and De Back Porch was not appearing on public blog lists. On 15th November an invitation was sent to each of the participants to take part in the blog. Data collection lasted from 16 November 2008 to 3 May 2009.

Maintaining the blog: data collection

In the first month, interaction on the blog proceeded well. Students were posting and responding to each other's entries and were supportive of each other. On commencing the project, several posts were received a day which was promising. In this first month, five of the participants posted material on their own thoughts and experiences while the remaining three concentrated on responding to the main posters. Eventually, one of these three became more comfortable with the process and emerged as an avid contributor. The remaining two participants did not contribute significantly. In these early weeks of the blog, the majority of participants seemed comfortable opening up and sharing on the blog. While disclosure was expected because of the anonymous nature of the technique, early self-disclosure was surprising (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002; Joinson, 2001; Mann and Stuart 2000; Tidwell and Walther 2002). A possible reason for this early disclosure may be that each participant knew that the other participants on the blog were 'vetted' by the researcher. The other bloggers were anonymous individuals but they could be trusted because the researcher had met all the participants individually and could validate them.

After the first month of data collection, contributions began dwindling. Participants wrote that they were busy with papers and examinations and were unable to contribute as previously. A reminder email was sent out to all participants. After this, interaction peaked for two weeks. However, during and after Christmas and into the New Year participation dwindled once again.

In January, another reminder email was sent out to the participants. After this, a revealing blog post surfaced. The youngest participant, Chants, had returned to the

UK after spending Christmas in Trinidad and was having a difficult time readjusting to being alone. The post was a call for support from others in the UK who she hoped would be able to relate to her feelings of loneliness and sadness. In face-to-face focus groups speakers receive feedback both verbally and nonverbally. If no one verbally agrees (or disagrees) with the speaker, (s)he could rely on nonverbal cues such as nods or facial expressions to try to understand how others feel about his/her message. Online everything is text-based. Feedback and interaction is rooted in comments from others (Gumbrecht 2004). For a contributor to confirm that (s)he has been heard or acknowledged, comments are necessary. However, no other blog participant commented on this post apart from the researcher.

In order to increase activity, it was decided that participants should receive an email notification when new comments are added to the blog. This would keep the participants up-to-date on new developments on the blog and remind them about the research. An email was sent to the participants advising them about the change in procedures and allowing them to opt out. No participant opted out of the comment notification change. To generate and stimulate further discussion, a regular 'Question Feature' was added. This was a regular weekly post where the researcher would pose questions to the blog participants based on the emerging analysis. In this way, the participants would be informed about what the research findings and would have the opportunity to clarify or add to the data. Question features were scheduled to take place on Wednesdays.

After these changes, the blog gathered momentum once again and this time there were no peaks or troughs in the contributions. Contributions continued, slow but steadily, until the blog was scheduled to end - driven by the Question Feature and the comment notifications that informed the students when there was activity on the blog.

While the enthusiasm of the first month did not surface at any later point, the participants were constantly supportive and continued to contribute until the end of the blogging period despite their other study and work commitments.

Observations about the blog method

The method allows educational researchers to collect data in real time and with an element of interactivity that was previously not possible with traditional diaries. It also facilitates the almost immediate elicitation of participant feedback on preliminary analysis, and allows participants to view this analysis in context. Blogs also allow researchers to trace the development of a theme through the written discussions that happen around it. This research did not make use of labels on posts, which allow participants (bloggers) to categorise their posts. On reflection, allowing post labels would have added another dimension to the data: giving participants the power to analyse their own data and categorise them in some way. These participant categorisations may not emerge as the themes of the research but they may give researchers insight into how participants analyse their own experiences.

The data collection process, however, did not proceed as anticipated. A data collection period of six months requires constant stimulation from the researcher to keep respondents active. Originally the researcher had anticipated that she would only take a significant role in the blog at the beginning, when participation was anticipated to be at its lowest due to participant discomfort with each other and/or the technology. The objective was for the blog facilitator (the researcher) to contribute progressively less as the blog developed and the participants became more comfortable with each other and blogging. However, in practice, activity was too sporadic for the facilitator to pull completely out of the process. In addition, because the group was so small (and with two participants' contributions remaining low) it became difficult for the blog to 'carry itself'. The facilitator had to take a bigger role than anticipated. The researcher continued to perceive her role as that of a facilitator, but she commented on students' posts, and published her own posts to stimulate conversations, far more than expected. This impacted the data as some issues were driven by researcher and not participant perspectives.

Another problem that surfaced from the research was linked to pseudonymising. Because human beings tend to create identities online, one participant took on a previous or preferred online identity that (s)he used in public online spaces elsewhere. This could have caused problems later since that unique identity could be found using a search engine, making personal information about the participant available to the public. The participant was thus given a new unique pseudonym. This is called double pseudonymising (Markham, 2008). I contacted the participant and explained the issue to him/her and sought his/her permission before changing the pseudonym.

An interesting issue which surfaced while maintaining the blog connected to the participant's ability to edit their information. As Markham explains, "the ability to edit affords a higher degree of control over the meaning of the message and the presentation of self" (2004, p.106), which I hoped would help the participant feel more comfortable and confident during the research. While participant control over the communication process is heightened with editing, this power has drawbacks as well. Blog technology allows participants to – in effect – stop time in their communication and re-think their ideas before hitting the 'Publish' button (Markham, 2004, forthcoming). As administrator, I was only able to view changes that were made to a previously published post. I was unable to observe the production process of individual posts, and the editing that occurred there, which was a significant drawback for the study - but arguably positive in terms of the power it yielded to participants.

Further, presentation of the self and presentation management are natural elements in human behaviour and communication (Goffman 1959; Hookway 2008). Understanding how the participants managed and presented their selves online – from their point of view – and how these impacted on their posts, would have contributed fascinating dimensions to this study. There could have been a number of different factors that influenced a participant's self presentation online at different times. While it would have been desirable to capture these deeply personal and changeable decision-making processes, it was difficult to inquire about these issues *on the blog* since drawing attention to these acts might challenge the participants' performances. However, it was possible to inquire about these issues privately and retrospectively during the interviews which followed the blog.

At different times during the blogging process participants were invited to provide feedback on the procedures and how they felt about the research. The online space that was created for the participants was created by the researcher but the participants were encouraged to shape the space (visually and in content) according to their preferences. The researcher struggled about whether or not to moderate posts but eventually determined that, as a responsible researcher, the welfare of the members of the group was paramount.

The knowledge that the researcher would intervene if something went wrong may have encouraged the participants to share their experiences more openly and confidently. It is important to note that the researcher never had occasion to intervene in discussions that were disruptive or offensive. One blog post, for example, was passionately written after a difficult and very personal experience and could potentially have become disruptive if it was interpreted offensively. Instead of censoring the post, I waited to see how the content was interpreted by the group. The group's response was supportive and aimed to help the participant through his ordeal while respectfully acknowledging that the blogger's perspective was not a fair assessment of the situation. This situation exemplifies an important stage in the blog's development. It was important that participants felt empowered to express themselves as they wished but also to manage interactions on their own, and this situation demonstrated that they were embracing deeper and more powerful roles on the blog. Taking on deeper and more defined roles on the blog surfaced as their way of expressing their own power over time.

Conclusion

Technological advances have made it possible to push the possibilities of traditional data collection strategies by using them in new and innovative ways. Taking the traditional conception of the research diary to the internet through a research blog facilitated the use of this traditional data collection technique in new ways, extending the possibilities of the method in this digital age. It allowed the researcher to observe and be involved in the research diary process in ways that were previously not possible. This involvement can be both a strength and a weakness. It is important for future researchers using the method to find ways of maximising the strengths while minimising the weaknesses. Collecting the data from blogs exemplified the changeability and flux of human experience. However, as with traditional diaries, human beings need to be stimulated to contribute data over long periods of time. The method was thus subject to peaks and troughs, a discontinuity that disrupted the data and the collection process at times. Collecting data in this way, however, brought new avenues and dimensions of international student adjustment to the forefront and also shed light on online interaction and relationship development. In the right circumstances, blogs provide educational researchers with a multi-modal, reflective, interactive and real-time approach to data collection. They allow researchers to see and experience the development of research in new ways. Research participants' lives are becoming more technology-centred. The digital world is deeply embedded in contemporary society. Transformative qualitative methods should embrace and reflect this characteristic of the world we live in.

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[1] See Redmond and Bunyi (1993), UKCOSA (2004), Ward (2001) and Yeh and Mayuko (2003).

[2] I am referring to 'authenticity' in terms of when the entry was produced not in terms of the truthfulness of the content.

[3] The term recalls Zimmerman and Wieder's (1977) Diary-Interview method which is still supported by many diary practitioners today.

[4] For some examples of these, see Dickey's (2004) "The Impact of Web-Logs (Blogs) on Student Perceptions of Isolation and Alienation in a Web-Based Distance-Learning Environment"; Huffaker and Calvert (2005) "Gender, Identity, and Language Use in Teenage Blogs"; Boulos, Maramba and Wheeler (2006)'s Wikis, Blogs and Podcasts: A New Generation of Web-Based Tools for Virtual Collaborative Clinical Practice and Education; Chau and Xu's (2007) "Mining Communities and their Relationships in Blogs: A Study of Online Hate Groups"; Arben, Lawrence and Ashvini's (2008) "Sharing Knowledge with Conversational Technologies: Web Logs Versus Discussion Boards"; and Baker and Moore's (2008) "Distress, Coping, and Blogging: Comparing New Myspace Users by Their Intention to Blog".

[5] "RSS feeds are simple XML documents that "package" content for easy distribution and may contain text, images and even media files" (Mighell and Kennedy 2006, para 4).

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Table 1: Profiles of the participants who took part in the research

NAME	AGE	GENDER	PROGRAMME	LENGTH OF TIME IN THE UK	ETHNICITY (SELF DEFINED)	LOCATION
Chants	20	Female	Undergraduate	1 year	Black Caribbean	South England
Naitian	24	Male	Undergraduate	3 years	Indo-Trinidadian	Wales
Liz	27	Female	Masters	1 month	Mixed Caribbean	South England
Val	28	Male	Masters	1 month	Black Caribbean	South England
Ophelia	23	Female	Masters	3 years	Mixed-Race Other	South England
Sabine	23	Female	Masters	1 month	Indo-Trinidadian	South England
Radia	25	Female	PhD	4 years	Caucasian-Trinidadian	South England
Mikey	26	Male	PhD	3 years	Black Caribbean	Wales

Figure 1: Screen shot of the blog immediately after phase two was completed. Captured in the screen shot is the Welcome Note to the participants. The feed 'buttons' seen on the webpage were non-functional.