Reflecting on the Challenges of Conducting Research across National and Linguistic Borders: Lessons from the Field

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Whether a study is qualitative or quantitative, the process of data collection is not as orderly as it may seem when described in published research reports, articles, or books. Data collection may be more challenging when conducting research across national and linguistic borders. In this article, I share and reflect upon the complex and messy experience of conducting an exploratory, "qualitative-oriented" study in Internet Cafes across three South American countries (and two languages): Brazil, Chile, and Argentina. I provide several examples of the challenges I encountered and my attempts to "solve" them. Studies that are transported across national and linguistic borders cannot simply be translated but also must be adapted to the cultural, social and linguistic norms of each particular context. The article also points out how changes in the ways in which data are collected ought to be carefully considered during analysis and interpretation of the findings. Finally, implications for researchers—novices and seasoned—are provided.

Descriptions of data collection processes and procedures in most published research articles are often dry, brief, predictable, and sometimes perfunctory. Readers are seldom provided an in-depth view of the inevitable wrinkles in the messy process of conducting research. The challenges encountered during fieldwork, researchers' attempts to resolve them, and their doubts or critical reflections on the process tend to be omitted from published articles. While editorial page limits contribute to this situation, in fact very few venues provide opportunities for researchers to share these aspects of fieldwork. I contend that it is important for all researchers—from the emergent to the seasoned—to share our experiences in the field, and to learn from one another. This is especially important when conducting research across national, cultural, and linguistic borders, where the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation are likely to be even more challenging.

Thus, while most educational research articles tend to focus on findings and their implications for research, policy, and practice, this article focuses on the challenges I encountered during fieldwork and their potential impact on the interpretation of findings. As I began the process of data analysis, I realized that expanding on my experiences in the field would provide me with an opportunity to critically reflect upon how the context and ways in which data were collected were

likely to impact the analysis and interpretation. In this article, I provide several examples of challenges I encountered during fieldwork and how I went about ―solving‖ them. Moreover, I expand upon the ways in which informal interviews (what I call in-depth conversations) may have not only contextualized the survey data, but also problematized the potential interpretations of particular survey items. Finally, I conclude by exploring potential implications for researchers, especially those who are considering transporting their studies across national and linguistic borders.

A Snapshot of My Study on Youth's Use of the Internet in Public Spaces

Digital forms of communication are reshaping what it means to be literate in the 21st century (Alvermann, 2008); in fact, ―literacy practices associated with the Internet (e.g. blogs, gaming, instant messaging, social networking)‖ (p. 8) have become a major topic of discussion among educational scholars. But much of our current knowledge about youths' Internet use is based on research conducted in developed nations, with mostly English-speaking, and middle- to upper-middle-class youth, even if sometimes socioeconomic status is not explicitly stated. Fewer studies focus on youths' Internet use in developing countries, and often the studies recruit participants from the educated elite. Scholars who conduct studies among low-income youth in developing nations have found that the majority of them access the Internet in public spaces commonly known as Internet Cafés (Borzekowski, Fobil, & Asante, 2006).

Therefore, in August of 2008 I took advantage of my sabbatical, and the fact that my linguistic kit includes (Brazilian) Portuguese and Spanish, to conduct an exploratory study in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. My main objective was to explore Internet use and goals among low-income youth who rely on public spaces where they pay by the hour to access broadband Internet. I am not new to exploring the literacy practices among nondominant youth in a variety of learning settings—formal, informal, and nonformal (McGraw & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2008; Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006, 2007)—but the setting of Internet Cafés was new to me.

Scholarly research of youths' social practices around Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially Internet use, is relatively recent: The field is now entering its second decade. My initial examination of the published research confirmed that we know a great deal more about youths' Internet literacy practices in developed nations than in developing nations. In fact, youth in developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have come to view the Internet as their primary source for information (Gray et al., 2006). Some youth, especially those from middle and higher SES, have been taking advantage of the rapid development in technology to engage in online journaling (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005), critical composition and publication of zines (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004), and the remixing of texts that incorporate sounds and images (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008).

My research plan included recruiting at least 90 participants (ages 14 to 24) from among the patrons of Internet Cafés, conducting a survey, conducting one-to-one interviews with approximately 15 of the participants, and conducting ethnographic observations of the settings in which the data were collected. Ultimately, I collected a total of 109 surveys, mostly face-to-face, held 15 in-depth conversations, and conducted approximately 30 hours of participant observation. Below, I have organized by theme my experiences, observations, and thoughts on the field.

The Importance of Piloting One's "Instruments" in the Settings Where the Study Will Take Place

Regardless of the data collection tools, it is essential to pilot the data collection instruments (e.g., surveys, interview protocols, tests) in the context in which one will be conducting the study. My original survey for this study was almost six pages long and was approved by the Human Subject Office of my institution before I arrived in South America. In addition to items that directly related to participants' Internet use, the survey included several items about their computer literacy practices across school, work, and leisure. However, after piloting the survey with five youth in Brazil it was clear that I had not considered several important issues. First, the youth balked at the number of pages: *"O que que e isso?"* [What is this?] they exclaimed as they turned the stapled pages in exaggerated disbelief. They told me frankly that while they wanted to help me, they did not have ―all day." It became clear to me that the survey would have to be edited down to a maximum of three pages. Moreover, although the survey had been translated into (Brazilian) Portuguese and Spanish, and reviewed by native speakers (Peña, 2007), several items had been misunderstood or had been interpreted very differently from my original intent.

Once I rewrote/adapted some of those items with the help of the pilot participants, the items became more linguistically appropriate for the age group I was targeting. One of the changes I made to the survey was to omit any 5-point Likert-type Scale items. The pilot participants seemed unfamiliar with the practice of quantifying their likes and dislikes, or even the frequency of online use (by selecting a digit between one and five). A typical reaction was: ―Well, I'm crazy about games (five?), but then I live on *Orku*t―5!"―a popular online social networking site in Brazil― ―MSN too―I am totally addicted! Definitely a five! I don't know…Can I just put down five for all of these?" Since the pilot participants only selected ones and fives, I decided not to include Likert-type Scale items in the revised survey.

Thus, after piloting the survey in City of the Divine, Brazil, I pared the original survey down to three pages. As I read through the edited survey for the last time before printing multiple copies, the items seemed as relevant and as straightforward as they could be. Most of the items in the revised version only required a quick check mark. Very few items required participants to produce any writing; among the few that did, I asked for the name of the neighborhood in which the participant resided, a question to help establish social economic status; and two sentence completion items (e.g. I use the Internet mainly for…). Responders were also asked to refer to a list of Internet activities provided and write their three favorite online activities. One item also asked respondents to list any search engines they used to retrieve information.

Participant Observation May Defy What Seems Like "Common Sense"

Even after agreeing to participate in the study, most of the youth still balked at the length of the survey: ―*Nossa! Tudo isso?"* [Wow! All this?]. A couple of respondents returned the survey after completing only the first page. I was genuinely surprised that it took some participants 30 to 35 minutes to complete the three-page survey the first two times I distributed the edited surveys. From the expression on their faces, it seemed as if the task was much more challenging to them than I had intended. At first I assumed that the participants had trouble reading and interpreting the survey items. The local adults (more affluent and educated) with whom I shared these thoughts all seemed to agree.

However, as I observed the youth completing the surveys, paying careful attention to their facial expressions and their queries, it gradually dawned on me that they may have had limited experience with survey completion. For example, the survey clearly provided three options for

participants to identify their sexuality (hetero, bi, and gay) with a check—an item I hoped to later correlate with respondents' online health-related searches. Although participants seemed to have understood what was being asked of them, they were unsure as to how to mark their answers. A common comment was: ―Ma'am, I'm hetero; where do I mark that?" Another survey item asked respondents to review a list of 15 activities (e.g. surfing the net, MSN, email, social networking, searching for health-related information, and blogging) and to place a check mark next to any online activity in which they engaged. Many respondents only checked the first item, but once I asked: ―Is activity X the *only* activity in which you participate online?" a common reaction was: ―Oh no! I do a lot of these!" Thus, although respondents seemed to have interpreted several items as I had intended, they seemed to have trouble expressing their responses on the survey. Moreover, the fact that some survey items required only a single response while other items allowed for multiple responses seemed confusing to many participants.

The Importance of Being Flexible and Thinking Fast on One's Feet

I could not reasonably expect Internet Café patrons to forsake 30 minutes of their time. After all, I was conducting the study in a public—for profit—space; the youth were there to access the Internet. Therefore, I had to ―catch them" (recruit participants) before they ―clocked in" to use the Internet, or after they had ―clocked out." As the study was not funded, I was not offering participating youth any type of compensation for their time. All I had to offer was an individually wrapped chocolate bon-bon. I was hyper aware of the study's potential impact on the setting—the business, the participants, and other patrons. Thus, I had to think of a solution—and fast! Being flexible and thinking fast on one's feet is key when conducting qualitative-oriented research.

Consequently, the next time I went to the site I offered to function as their scribe. That meant that I would read the items as well as the possible responses aloud to the participants; they would provide their responses verbally as I marked them on the survey. This solution did not require respondents to read the items themselves, or to try to figure out where to mark their responses. Some respondents—the multitaskers, seemingly younger, were even able to get started with their online activities while still responding to the survey items orally. In doing so, I could claim that the completion of the survey would take approximately 10 minutes. This solution to the time problem seemed plausible. Consequently, survey completion took about 10 to 12 minutes in its entirety, and the respondents seemed a great deal happier. Reading the survey aloud also enabled me to provide a quick explanation of certain items as needed and to make sure that all items were completed.

What Happens When a Written (Private) Survey Goes Oral (and Public)?

Although acting as scribe turned out to be a successful solution for the systematic and timely completion of the survey, there were several issues to consider. First, reading the survey items out loud, often over loud music and chatter, turned out to be excruciatingly tiresome, especially after conducting at least an hour of participant observation at the site. The research was even more challenging on the rare occasions when I was acting as a scribe to two or three participants simultaneously (because they entered the establishment together and planned to leave together). Consequently, the survey, which was originally conceived as an individual data collection tool, and thus private, had been turned into a rather public affair. Participants' responses were not only shared with me—their scribe—but they were also shared with whomever happened to be within earshot. Although the item inquiring about participants' sexuality did not prove particularly problematic in Brazil, it caused havoc among the youth in Argentina and Chile. The youth in Argentina and Chile cajoled each other to no end, accusing each other—mostly in jest—of being gay.

Moreover, when a survey is conducted orally, and thus becomes ―public,‖ one would expect the respondents to become more self-conscious about disclosing unpopular, or socially undesirable or unacceptable responses. In Cidade do Divino, Brazil, and to a lesser extent in *Los Lomos*, Argentina, for example, publicly identifying one‗s neighborhood of residence seemed fraught with tension. Neighborhoods in these major cities are strong social class markers. In Brazil, more than in Argentina and Chile, peers mocked several respondents who reported living in one of the poorer suburbs, located at the outer northern edge of the city. I had the feeling that participants tended to name the more exclusive middle class neighborhoods (where the Internet Cafés were located) as their place of residence to avoid being mocked. Although attending public versus private school is also a clear social class marker across South America, participants‗ disclosure of public school attendance did not seem to elicit the ―shaming‖ practices that neighborhood of residence did. In fact, most of the respondents who were still students claimed to be enrolled in public schools (middle, high school, or remedial ―catch-up‖ programs, especially if they were 17 or older.)

Fluency in Participants' Language Is Never Enough: Beyond Linguistic Equivalence

After my stay in Brazil, I arrived in Argentina. I had already translated the survey into Spanish, of course, and had asked a couple of local native speakers to review it (Peña, 2007). But the translation was only a first step. Transporting a survey across national and linguistic borders means more than translating items accurately from one language to another. Translation does not ensure that the survey will convey the same pragmatic meaning; thus the survey and interview protocol requires adaptation as well (Peña, 2007). Several changes and adaptations to my survey were in order. For example, while the word ―slang‖ had been easy to translate into Portuguese, the translation in Argentina and Chile did not seem that straightforward. People (of different ages) would suggest different words, and those were not always clear to the respondents. Also, some items had to be tweaked after I crossed national borders. For example, while in Brazil the most popular online social networking was *Orkut* (a Google product), but in Argentina and in Chile *Orkut* was virtually unknown. On the other hand, Fotolog was all the rage among young people in both of these countries. Also, while piloting the survey in El Encanto, a large metropolitan city in Argentina, I came to realize that GOOGLE MAP, one of the items in the online activity list, was not yet available in Argentina (in September of 2008). Had I kept GOOGLE MAP as an online activity in the list, I would have wrongfully surmised that youth in Argentina were not making use of that resource.

Respondents‗ racial/ethnic conceptualization across these three countries was also a challenge. Because the three nations have different histories regarding slavery, genocide of indigenous people, and immigration, the race/ethnicity identifiers in Brazil would not have made sense in Argentina or Chile. The percentage of people of African descent in Argentina and Chile is minimal, especially in the areas in which I conducted the study. Race awareness across these three countries is worlds apart. Very few participants in Brazil seemed confused by the race/ethnicity items. In *Cidade do Divino*, Brazil, an extremely racially diverse metropolis, participants were given the following options to identify themselves ethnically/racially: *Branco* [White], *Negro* [Black], *Moreno/Mulato* [the official category in the Brazilian census is *Pardo,* but youth did not use this label to represent themselves], and *Outro* [Other]___. Some of the participants who checked other claimed to be ―multiracial‖; several said, with more than a hint of pride, that they were ―*Brasileiro autentico"* [authentically Brazilian]—―*um pouco de tudo*‖—[a little of everything], Indian, Black, and White.

Unlike in Brazil, in Argentina and Chile the population is considerably less diverse, especially where the study was conducted. The majority of the participants were of European

descent (mainly Italian, Spanish, and German). A few youth may have had Amerindian ancestors, but most of the participants looked at me blankly when asked to identify themselves ethnically or racially. It seemed as if they had never been asked to identify themselves in such a way. While the social construction of race and ethnicity has become part of the cultural and political discourse in Brazil for several decades, consciousness around race/ethnicity in Argentina and in Chile is still in its early stages, at least for the youths in my study.

In fact, while piloting the survey in Argentina, I was warned not to be surprised if none of the respondents checked the ―Indigena‖ [Indigenous] option. One young man explained: ―Here (in Argentina) when you want to call someone stupid, we say ‗Vos sos un Indio!‗ [You are an Indian!]. So, even if someone is [Indigenous] they are probably not going to admit to it.‖ The young man‗s prediction was correct. The few respondents, who may have been perceived as ―people of color‖ in that context, self-identified as *Blanco* (while shrugging their shoulders); only one respondent checked *Other* but left the identifying space blank. Although this respondent may have been well aware that he was not perceived as being European in Argentina, perhaps as a result of the stigma he would not (or could not) provide an ethnic identifier.

The Role of Interviews/In-Depth Conversations in Survey Studies

The Internet Cafés were busy and the music tended to be loud. Thus, although I planned to conduct (tape recorded) interviews, I settled with holding in-depth conversations, taking notes of our conversations as we spoke, and at times recording verbatim only key words and untranslatable phrases (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2004). While I had several prepared questions, I let the conversations flow as they ought to in the natural setting. The 30- to 60-minute conversations with a total of 15 participants not only helped contextualize the surveys, but they also raised potential ―red flags‖ about particular survey items.

For example, one survey item asked participants whether they owned a computer at home. In hindsight, the item should have been reworded; it should have inquired about participants‗ access to the Internet from home. Although some respondents checked that they did have a computer at home, the conversations revealed that the computers were likely to be outdated, broken (turned into a decorative piece, with social capital overlays), or in operation, but not connected to the Internet. A handful of Brazilian youth revealed that electricity and other connections in their neighborhoods were unofficial and rather fickle, not conducive to using the Internet. Thus, in South America a check on a survey indicating the ownership of a home computer ought to be interpreted very carefully. Similarly, while respondents would check that they sometimes used English to communicate online, when asked to provide examples, the respondents were likely to say: ―Oh, I don‗t know… *bye-bye, baby; I love you* … that‗s all I know [in English].‖

Another potentially erroneous inference was in regards to respondents‗ motivation for online searches of health-related topics. The survey had a list of 15 health-related topics, and although many respondents indicated that they had searched several topics online (e.g., nutrition, impact of drugs, and birth control), the one-on-one conversations revealed that the searches were often motivated by a school assignment, and they were not necessarily prompted by their own intrinsic interest or life experiences (which seems to be largely the assumptions in public health survey studies). Thus, the conversations with participants allowed some of the respondents to expand upon their survey responses by relating their personal experiences and also raised important issues and problematized many survey items, which I am considering carefully as I continue to analyze and interpret the data.

What Should Researchers Consider When Transporting Studies across National and Linguistic Borders?

Transporting a study across national and linguistic borders can present unforeseen challenges. It is important to be aware of the ways in which particular concepts are viewed and interpreted across contexts. In my study, for example, the social constructions of race/ethnicity had to be carefully contextualized. It was essential to understand not only the social construction of race/ethnicity, and the (often hidden) social construction of racism in each particular context, but it was also important to understand the social construction of ethnicity/race relation in those contexts versus those in the United States where our primary audiences reside. For example, the label *Hispanic/Latino* would not have made sense to respondents in South America. In the United States, individuals with last names such as Gonzales or Avila are likely to identify themselves, and be identified by others, as Latino/a or Hispanic. However, such individuals in Brazil, Argentina or Chile are likely to identify themselves, and be identified by others in the context, as White of European descent (Portugal and Spain).

Although racism in South America is as structurally embedded in society, as it is anywhere else, impacting where one lives and the quality of education to which one has access, most South Americans are likely to view the social stratification in their own countries as based purely on social economics (i.e., ‚color-blind'). This deep lack of racial/ethnic awareness largely impedes people from acknowledging a strong correlation between being light-skinned (of European descent) and being a member of the upper-middle and affluent social classes, or vice versa—being darker skinned and poor (Viladrich, 2005). Thus, while speaking the participants' language is very important for conducting studies across linguistic borders, there are additional nuances that need to be carefully considered.

Regardless of a researcher's experience, while in the field—especially across national and linguistic borders—one is inevitably confronted with the unknown and the unexpected. Thus, the following key recommendations ought to be considered: (a) Pilot all data collection instruments such as surveys, interview protocols, tests, and read-alouds before data collection begins. (b) Consider what your study needs to accomplish, but also consider its feasibility in particular contexts. (c) Be flexible; be willing to make changes to the instruments used in data collection; be willing to adjust the ways in which data is collected. (d) Consider carefully not only what questions to pose, but also how to pose them. Consider how changes to the data collection plan might impact the data collected as well as the interpretation of the findings. (e) Be aware that accurate translation of surveys and other instruments, while very important, is not enough. Surveys, interview schedules, and tests are likely to need adaptations.

By sharing our research experiences, we can learn much from one another. The key to collecting ethical, relevant, and useful data is to be flexible, culturally and socially aware, and to always remain critical of oneself and of the research process. As researchers, we ought to be vigilant about not jumping to conclusions, especially when collecting data in contexts wherein we are not intimately familiar with the many nuances of linguistic variations and lived culture. As Blackman (2007) has stated, the advancement of ―more ‚reflexive' approaches" to research will require that researchers become more cognizant of and forthright about the challenges and the opportunities presented in the field.

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