Article

Using Netnography to Explore the Culture of Online Language Teaching Communities
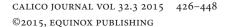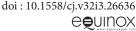
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Abstract

Netnography (Kozinets, 2010) is an ethnographic approach to study communities that exist primarily online. Engaging in online participant observation, the netnographer connects to the online community through a computer screen, and the field is located inside the screen. Although it has been used in marketing research extensively, netnography is a relatively new methodology in educational research. In this paper, I give an overview of netnography and its applicability in studying online language teaching communities. Drawing upon a netnography of a globally-distributed online community of practice of English language teachers, Webheads in Action, I provide detailed accounts of my experiences during data collection and particular methodological considerations in netnography in order to shed light on the often untold aspects of an ethnographic design in online research that involves participant observation. I conclude with a discussion of possible benefits of a participant observer approach in netnography in understanding the culture of online language teaching communities, and invite CALL researchers to consider netnography and online participant observation in their future studies.

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Introduction

With the advances in web-based technologies and online social networking environments, engaging in online communities and communicating through Web 2.0 environments and social media have become a common practice for individuals in the twenty-first century. Preece (2000) states that an *online community* consists of: (a) *people,* engaging in some forms of social interaction 'to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating' (p. 10); (b) a shared *purpose*, which can be 'an interest, need, information exchange, or service' (p. 10); (c) *policies* that govern or organize people's interaction, and may or may not be explicitly stated; and (d) *computer systems*, in order to mediate the communication and interactions among the participants. Educators, and learners alike, also build online communities for educational purposes (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Hur & Hara, 2007; Karagiorgi & Lymbouridou, 2009). Since the potential of web-based communication technologies was realized in the late 1990s, the twenty-first century has also witnessed an increasing motivation for utilizing such technologies to build communities for language learning and teaching purposes (Hanson-Smith, 2006; Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). One example of these early adopters can be found in 1998. When Web 2.0 technologies were in their infancy and social networking sites had not been introduced yet, a group of English language teachers and learners from around the world created *Writing for Webheads* in order to teach, interact in, and practice English (Simpson, 2005). Today, there is a growing number of commercial platforms specifically designed for language learning and teaching and advertised as online language learning communities, such as Livemocha, and Bussuu.com.

Such growing interest in learning languages at a distance, through online means and web-based platforms, has attracted the attention of many scholars in the field of second language learning (Vorobel & Kim, 2012). Since members in these language learning and teaching communities interact at a distance, and are often globally-distributed, these researchers conduct their research using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools to study the interactions and learning that occur in these communities. However, having a deeper and richer understanding of such communities necessitates more than an ability to manipulate these tools, and it requires a different set of skills. Because of the nature of computer-mediated platforms with a culture created and shaped by not only its users but also the CMC technologies that are utilized (Herring, 2001), as well as the vast amount of data available in such spaces, Kozinets *et al.* (2014) argue that the researcher faces challenges around various decisions. These include entering the field, choosing the field sites, specifying which data to collect, deciding on the best technology that fits the

type of data to be elicited, selecting which data to archive, and balancing active participation as well as visibility.

A possible approach that can guide researchers in these decisions around conducting ethnographic studies with online communities is netnography. In this paper, I illustrate how netnography, which originally was a method for online consumer and marketing research (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2010), can be applied to study the culture of online language learning and teaching communities. After describing netnography and giving an overview of its procedures, I draw on my specific experiences in conducting a netnography of an online community of practice of English language teachers (Kulavuz-Onal, 2013). With this, I aim to provide detailed accounts of the methodological challenges, decisions, and considerations that are distinct to netnography and that may benefit future netnographic studies with online language learning and teaching communities. I conclude with a discussion of the possible benefits of netnography that other approaches, such as case study, would not offer. I invite researchers to consider using netnography in order to better understand the culture of online language learning and teaching communities.

Netnography

The term netnography was coined by Kozinets (1998) to refer to an ethnographic approach to study online communities – an approach, which was also referred to as 'online ethnography' (Markham, 2005) or virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000). While the latter two terms appear to allow for a combination of online and offline ethnographic approaches to come to an understanding of online phenomena, netnography is an approach that is conducted through completely online means (Kozinets, 2010).

An ethnographic approach, in its essence, focuses on a culture-sharing group in order to find shared patterns of beliefs, values, and behaviors among the members of this group (Creswell, 2007). The assumption that guides ethnographic inquiry is that 'any human group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve a culture' (Patton, 2002: 81). The ethnographic researcher immerses him/herself in the daily lives of this group, and the primary method of data collection is participant observation – the researcher becomes a member of the group as s/he participates in the day-to-day activities of the group and observes the group extensively. To do this, the ethnographer goes to the place where the group works and lives, and conducts fieldwork (Wolcott, 1999), collecting a wide variety of materials about this group (including fieldnotes, and archival data), conducting observations, and interviewing people formally and informally. At the end, the ethnographer attempts to 'understand and convey their [the group's] reality through "thick", detailed, nuanced, historically-curious and culturally-grounded interpretation and deep

description of a social world that is familiar to its participants but strange to others' (Kozinets, 2010: 60). The ethnographer actively participates in the community's daily life and activities, and cannot be 'a fly on the wall' (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The ethnographer's task is 'not to determine "the truth" but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives' (Emerson *et al.*, 1995: 3).

According to Patton (2002), there are several advantages of participant observation. First of all, participant observation allows observing a particular group of people directly in their natural interactive context. Also, such firsthand experience enables the researcher to be more oriented toward being open and avoiding performed judgments about the group. Third, since the researcher holds both an outsider and an insider position, s/he is able to see things that regular group members may not be aware of. A fourth advantage is the chance that the researcher captures things that people would not be willing to talk about in an interview. This allows the researcher to have a more comprehensive understanding than relying only on interviews. Finally, in collecting data through participant observation, the researcher has an opportunity to reflect on his/her own experiences in the community studied; accordingly, these interpretations and reflections of the culture of this community can better inform the final analysis of the data collected.

Compared to ethnography, which has a long history, online ethnographic research has only recently been adopted by researchers (Baym, 2000; Hine, 2000; Kendall, 2002; Kozinets, 1998; Markham, 1998). It 'uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon' (Kozinets, 2010: 60). As would occur in any ethnographic study, netnography makes use of participant observation, interviews, archival data, elicited data, and other forms of data available to the researcher. What essentially differentiates netnography from ethnography is the fact that in the former the researcher collects data through online interactions, whereas in the latter, the researcher collects data through in-person, face-to-face interactions (Kozinets, 2010).

Due to the advances in technology and the differences in the affordances of available technologies, netnographic field-sites can be diverse. While online field-sites such as bulletin boards or forums, list-servs, and linked web-pages provide asynchronous communication data, chat-rooms, online networked video game playspaces (such as *World of Warcraft*), and virtual worlds (such as *Second Life*) provide synchronous communication data. Moreover, current social media including blogs, video blogs (i.e. vlogs), microblogs (such as *Twitter*), wikis (such as *Wikipedia*), social content aggregators (such as *del.ici.ous*), and social networking sites (such as *MySpace* and *Facebook*) provide spaces where a netnographer can collect data (Kozinets, 2010).

Sources of data in Netnography

Similar to ethnography, in a netnographic study, data come primarily from four sources: archival data, elicited data, interviews, and fieldnotes (Kozinets, 2010). Archival data, which allows the data 'to be unaffected by the actions of the netnographer' (Kozinets, 2010: 104) can present itself in the form of webpages and wikis, or textual communication archived before the researcher enters the community. Such archival data provide easy-to-obtain observational data to the netnographer. It can also include audiovisual, graphical, and photographic data. However, the large amount of archival data available online presents a challenge to the netnographer with respect to the selection, sorting, limitation, and analysis of the data.

In addition to archival data, netnography also makes use of elicited data (Kozinets, 2010). This can be in the form of asynchronous communication between the researcher and the participants (e.g. postings to a research forum created by the researcher, email communication between the researcher and the participants, and comments to a blog entry created by the researcher), or in the form of interviews, for which the netnographer can use synchronous CMC tools (e.g. Skype). Such technology enables the researcher to make greater use of social cues available in the interview context, and to get a sense of the participant's identity (ethnicity, gender, age, etc.).

A final source of data that informs netnography are fieldnotes (Kozinets, 2010). In netnography, the nature of the fieldsite and the researcher's participation are different from those usually associated with ethnography, making netnographic fieldnotes a unique form of data. While studying a publicly accessible online community, one may argue against the necessity of taking fieldnotes as all the data is available in textual form publicly. However, the contribution of netnography lies in the fact that it adds 'valuable interpretive insight, by building, through careful focus and analysis, what is available publicly on the Internet into a known and respected body of codified knowledge' (Kozinets, 2010: 113) through *reflective observational fieldnotes*. Although anyone can access a publicly available site or a community and the interactions of the members (e.g. in an online forum), the researcher's interpretation that is available in the fieldnotes is the paramount contribution in netnography. While the researcher takes notes of what is seen on the screen, s/he also interprets it and takes notes of what s/he experiences her/himself. Kozinets (2010) indicates that 'although many of the on-screen manifestations of the "events" that transpire through online interaction can be captured through screen captures and data downloads, what [a netnographer's] fieldnotes should strive to capture are [the netnographer's] own impressions as a culture and community member, the subjective meanings of interactions and events as they unfold over time' (p. 115). Therefore, the netnographer should record his/her own

experiences alongside his/her observations while participating in the online community events and activities, in order to uncover the lived experience of a regular member in this community.

The *field* in netnography

Ethnography and netnography have the same fundamental orientations. However, the online nature of the fieldsite in the latter changes the research approach, data collection methods, and representation of the data. Thus, while netnography offers advantages in terms of the amount and availability of data, it presents challenges and issues that the netnographer should be aware of. For instance, Markham (2005) argues that in online ethnography, how the researcher defines the boundaries of the field presents challenges for the researcher. While the field in ethnography is where the researcher is co-present in a physical space with the community, in online ethnography the field is determined in line with the discursive interactions that occur among members; thus, the online ethnographer has to decide what interaction to include and what not to include while determining the field. Therefore, in the context of a multi-site online community, for example, determining the boundaries of the field may sometimes translate into determining which activities, sites, or interactions of the community the netnographer wants to include (Kulavuz-Onal & Vasquez, 2013).

Overview of research using netnography or online ethnography

Online ethnography has been a research approach that has predominantly been applied in sociology, communication, and anthropology (Baym, 2000; Boellstorff, 2008; Correll, 1995; Kendall, 2002; Markham, 1998). Research that specifically names netnography as the methodology has extensively occurred in the field of marketing (Hamilton & Hewer, 2009; Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998; Negra, Mzoughi, & Bouhlel, 2008; Nelson & Otnes, 2005; Sindhwani & Ahuja, 2014; Thomas & Peters, 2011). What is common across these studies seems to be the fact that they investigated either a single site as an online community, or a phenomenon across multiple online sites/communities – mainly through analyzing textual data. One particular study that uses multiple sites to investigate particular phenomena came from boyd (2008). In her study, which spread over two and a half years, she investigated American teen sociality studying teenagers' behaviors across two social networking sites: *MySpace* and *Facebook.* Users of these two sites constituted the community she explored. She collected both online and offline data, conducting online and offline observations, as well as in-person interviews with users.

Although an increasingly popular research method in other fields, netnography does not seem to be as popular yet in the field of education, applied linguistics, or computer-assisted language learning (CALL). For example, O'Reilly, Rahinel, Foster and Patterson (2007) suggested that netnography be used as a way of connecting megaclasses in marketing education programs at large universities. Janta, Lugosi and Brown (2012) studied the postings in an online forum designed for doctoral students, investigating the students' coping strategies with loneliness and isolation. Some studies in CALL research over the last decade have named online ethnography as the research methodology, however, most of them did not use participant observation where the researcher immerses him/herself in the community and participates in the community as a member. Rather, these studies relied on non-participant observation and case studies in understanding the participants' experiences in an online community. Although ethnography has been utilized as an interpretive analytical perspective, participant observation as part of the ethnographic methodology for collecting data has been rare. For example, through a multiple case study approach, Ryu (2013) studied the online gaming culture that involved not only the gaming platform, but also the cultural spaces where gamers 'hang out' online outside the gaming platform. Although he conducted observations, these had a non-participant nature, without the benefit of reflective observational fieldnotes that would potentially reveal the researcher's own experiences. In another study, Harrison (2013) studied the online language learning community, *Livemocha,* through a multiple case study approach again, for which he conducted semi-structured interviews with his students on their experiences with this site. In her work on English language learners' literacy practices on fanfiction.net, Black (2005) conducted participant observation, but how much she immersed herself in the community as a participant was not revealed because of the lack of detailed accounts of her experiences. Similarly, while outlining his approach, discourse-centered online ethnography, Androutsopoulos (2008) acknowledges that this 'does not claim to represent a full-fledged ethnography, i.e., an in-depth, long-term study of a specific "virtual community" [as in Baym 2000]. Rather, it adopts an ethnographic perspective, and uses elements of ethnographic method in various settings' (p. 19).

Considering the growing number of online platforms, digital technologies, and social media that have been created for language teaching or learning purposes and/or that provide opportunities for people to practice languages through interacting with others in the world, netnography through online participant observation might prove to be a relevant and effective methodology to be employed in the field of CALL. However, what online participant observation looks like, and how it is conducted by becoming a participant member

of the community, remains unclear because of the lack of detailed accounts of these experiences. Taking this as my departure point, I will illustrate in the next section an example of a netnography where I implemented the key feature of online participant observation, during the study of an online community of practice of English language teachers, who call themselves *Webheads in Action* (Kulavuz-Onal, 2013). In the next section, I describe the community and provide a detailed account of the considerations and challenges in my decision-making process while conducting this netnography.

Webheads in Action: A netnography of an online community of practice

Webheads in Action (WiA) is an online community of practice that originally started as a six-week online workshop as part of the Electronic Village Online (EVO) workshops sponsored by the TESOL Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section (CALL-IS) in 2002. This group of English language teachers and teacher educators did not disband after the workshop, but gradually emerged as an online community of practice (Johnson, 2006), with members regularly interacting with one another for shared purposes, building a shared history of activities and resources, and communicating primarily online over multiple venues. The goal of the community is described in the community's Yahoo! Group site as 'to help each other learn about forming and maintaining robust online communities through hands-on practice with synchronous and non-synchronous text and multimedia CMC tools'. With this goal in mind, these English language teaching professionals – who are located in a variety of countries spread over the seven continents – collaboratively share, exchange, and explore the uses of web-based communication tools in their language classrooms (d'Eça & Gonzalez, 2006). The uniqueness of this community lies in the facts that it is distributed over multiple sites instead of functioning over a single site, that it has been around since 2002, and that it shows a bottom-up emergence process from a group to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Members in this community communicate through various CMC tools (miscellaneous wikis, Yahoo Groups, Twitter, Google Hangout, Skype, Facebook, etc.), which change with the emergence of new technologies.

The Webheads in Action online community has been growing since 2002. As of January, 2013, in their evonline2002 Yahoo! Group site, there were 1,012 members, who since November 2001 had exchanged around 30,000 emails through the Yahoo Group list. As part of their regular collaborative activities, they continue to offer an annual five-week online workshop entitled *Becoming a Webhead* (BaW) for language teachers around the world who are new to language teaching with CALL technologies. These workshops are held as part of the free EVO sessions sponsored by the TESOL CALL Interest Section. The BaW workshops introduce new members to the Webheads community and to

a range of digital technologies, and offer a platform to exchange ideas on how to use these in language teaching (http://baw2011.pbworks.com).[2]

As newer technologies emerge, the CMC technologies and virtual spaces that Webheads use in order to interact and collaborate with each other expand. Whereas in the 2002 workshop the community solely relied on Yahoo groups, Yahoo Messenger, and TappedIn (Schlager, Fusco, & Schank, 2002) for communicating, they currently make use of social networks such as Facebook, Ning, and Twitter; web-conferencing platforms such as WIZIQ, Blackboard, Adobe Connect, Google Hangouts; and virtual worlds, such as Second Life, as well as other miscellaneous Web 2.0 technologies.

Attracted by these features of this community, in my study I focused on understanding its culture of learning that facilitates technology integration practice, characteristics of its main activities, as well as the ways members mediate each other's learning and development as regards to integrating technology and CMC tools into language teaching. More specifically, framing my study around the notions of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and technological pedagogical content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), I attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main activities (and the artifacts and resources related to these activities) carried out by Webheads that help develop their shared practice? How are these activities organized? What are the characteristics of these artifacts, activities, and resources?
2. Through what forms of engagement do members of WiA develop their shared practice? In what ways does their membership status (newcomer vs. long-term member) play a role in the ways they engage in the community and its shared practice?
3. How are new members introduced to WiA and its practice? How do they become part of this online community of practice? How do they move from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation?
4. How does participation in WiA help members develop their understanding of pedagogically-sound integration of technology into language teaching, as perceived by five selected members? What do their learning journeys within this community consist of?

By focusing on these questions, I hoped to achieve a deeper understanding of the emerging and established cultural practices of a successfully sustained online community that contribute to the mediation of members' continued learning – in this case, learning to teach languages through technology. Such practices might eventually be transferred to other learning communities such as online language learning communities, and inform those who establish such communities to make informed design decisions to help a learning

culture within the community to emerge. Participant observation allowed for a nuanced understanding to describe and interpret these cultural practices.

Online participant observation

My main method of data collection in this study was participant observation conducted entirely online – my *online fieldwork*. Practically, my engagement in the field lasted around a year, beginning in January 2011 with my registration for the BaW2011 workshop, and ending at the end of December 2011 with my interview with the community founder. I visited the online spaces of the community, observing and participating in selected synchronous and asynchronous activities, interviewing key members of the community (such as the founder, and coordinators of key events), and archiving relevant documents to support my interviews and fieldnotes. Throughout my online fieldwork, I took reflective observational fieldnotes of my experiences as a participant in the main activities, as well as my observations of participants' interactions, their experiences of these activities, and some of the community's artifacts available on the internet (such as wikis, blogs, community logos, articles, etc.). Upon realizing that my previously developed observation sheet was too limiting, I continued with an open note-taking method by taking notes on my observations as they occurred.

The process of collecting data and making decisions not only before entering the field, but also while in the field and when exiting the field brought challenges in a netnography of such a distributed multi-site community with a long, shared history. Initially I had wanted to look at the history of this community as well. However, it turned out that a 10-year online community was a very old community in the information technology age and their practice had evolved considerably due to technological advances. Many links to their previous activities were now broken, some of the technologies they used in the past no longer existed, and the community had grown to become much larger and distributed over the cyberspace. Therefore, I limited my engagement in the field mostly to the main activities happening concurrently during my fieldwork with reference to and analysis of previous activities when necessary.

Entering the field

Before beginning my fieldwork, I prepared a website to share my research with the community and to disclose myself as a researcher, as suggested by Kozinets (2010) (https://sites.google.com/site/wianetnography/) in order to observe ethical procedures. I included information about myself, my background, and specifics about my study on this site. It served as a source of information that community members could refer to at their convenience.

I entered the field by visiting the BaW2011 wiki on Wednesday 12 January 2011, to participate BaW2011 online workshop. This was also the first time I began taking fieldnotes about my observations and experiences. What denoted my entry was not only the time that I logged into a particular website, but also the time that I started engaging in one of the community activities as a participant, and actively starting to take fieldnotes of my observations and experiences. Engaging in the community activities, in that sense, becomes a crucial aspect of field entrance in online fieldwork when conducting netnography.

Setting the boundaries of the field

Determining an online fieldsite in a distributed multi-site global online community was challenging, in the sense that it was not associated with the physical boundaries of a website, as Webheads could not claim one. Likewise, as boyd (2009) observed, 'the boundaries of a project emerge when the ethnographer decides which questions to focus on based on patterns and observations' (p. 30). That being the case, on the basis of my research questions, I decided to restrict the boundaries of this study by focusing only on the main activities of this community. I chose to observe and participate in the *BaW2011* workshop first, because it only happened annually for a limited time during my fieldwork. After the workshop had ended, I switched my focus to the evonline2002 email list (evonline2002_webheads), which played a central role for communication within this community. I not only archived those emails, but also, on a regular basis, took reflective observational fieldnotes on the interactions in these emails, and what I learned from reading the information shared or visiting the links provided. As I engaged in emails, I discovered a new weekly activity organized by this community every Sunday: the *Learning2gether* events (http://learning2gether.pbworks.com). Eventually, these three activities, and events related to them, determined the boundaries of my field site, rather than a specific website or a forum.

Balancing active participation

Kozinets (2010) suggested that the netnographer should not be in a dominating role in online participation. For example, in a community that functions around a discussion forum, dominating the discussion would conflict with the researcher's attempts to balance an insider and outsider view, and may result in *going native*. Moreover, Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, and Yan Cui (2009) suggest that the researcher conducting an online ethnography 'should experience the online site the same way that the actual participants *routinely* experience it' (p. 60). However, in my study, it became apparent that it was difficult to pinpoint how a *routine* experience of *actual* participants would display itself in this online community.

Because it was a long-standing, multi-site community, participants as well as their participation patterns varied depending on the activity. Participants, for example, were selective in which activity they wanted to be more involved. Some participants were not as active in the email list as they would be in EVO sessions, or in telecollaborations. Also, while some participants were more visibly active in the past, they had been lurking for a while for various reasons (e.g. working on a dissertation, starting a family, etc.). Likewise, while some were engaged in one activity, they gradually shifted focus and became active in another. These examples show that there is not a predictable way of participation that could be expected from every member, but rather the ways that members routinely experienced this community exhibited a variety, as would be expected from such a community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). So, routine participation in this community was not necessarily associated with a person contributing to every discussion or activity enthusiastically and equally. Rather, in a more inclusive sense, it referred to a participation pattern of someone who selectively decides which activities to join, as s/he sees relevant, applicable to his/her context, or congruent with his/her schedule.

In addition, as a researcher I wanted to avoid becoming an insider, who has 'strong social ties to the online community as well as deep identification with, aptitude in, and understanding of the core consumption activity' (Kozinets, 2010: 34), and wanted to keep an outsider perspective. Based on all these observations of and negotiations with myself, I decided to display a variety of participation and engagement patterns in order to better understand the experiences of various participants, from both an insider and an outsider perspective. For example, during my BaW participation, I tried to be a moderate level participant. Sometimes I lurked by only reading the emails, or doing the readings, etc., and not interacting with the other participants; sometimes I connected to the live sessions synchronously, while at other times I watched the recordings. This allowed me to experience these workshops from the perspective of both an asynchronous and a synchronous participant.

I followed a similar approach for the Learning2gether events, which were also held synchronously but recorded and archived on a public wiki. Although these live sessions regularly occurred in Elluminate (now known as Blackboard Collaborate), coordinators would also hold them on other web-conferencing platforms (such as BigMarker) in order to explore the affordances of these platforms. My level of familiarity, or lack thereof, with these platforms enabled me to experience these sessions from the perspective of both experienced and new Webheads, who were not only new to the community but also to the technology used for these synchronous meetings.

Also, my initial strategy to balance my active participation during the live sessions was to contribute to the discussion through the chat instead of

speaking through the microphone, because the latter increases the visibility of the participant, who is likely to dominate more in the discussion. Members seemed to use the chat for shorter comments, greeting each other, or answering the questions posed during the session. Because the Learning2gether sessions attracted those who were genuinely interested in joining the discussion for the topic of the day, and because there was usually a smaller group of participants with more expertise and history in the community, the chat was not utilized as often. Instead, participants were regularly invited and expected to take the microphone, and contribute to the discussion orally. During these sessions, the community expectations from a synchronous participant urged me to contribute to the discussion and participate more actively through the microphone. As any other ethnographer or a participant observer in a fieldwork would do, I *followed the custom* of these sessions in this community. This enabled me to experience the sessions from an active participant's perspective.

As far as the evonline2002 email list is concerned, it appeared that those who initiated a discussion over the email list tended to contribute more because of follow-up emails to the responders. Therefore, initiating a discussion could trigger more active participation and visibility among the members. In order to balance my participation as the researcher, I avoided initiating a discussion in the email list for the most part of my fieldwork. I briefly responded to a few emails, paying attention to not initiating a new discussion. In the only instance when I initiated and dominated a discussion in the email list, I assumed the role of a researcher rather than a regular active participant, using the email list as an asynchronous focus group discussion space to elicit data from the members for my study. At other times, I simply read the emails regularly, visited links or accessed shared resources, observed and took fieldnotes of the interactions occurring in the emails at least once a week, and reflected on my own learning experiences through such participation pattern in this main email communication. Overall, I kept my visibility in the community through the email list at a minimum, using the option of the technology to avoid exposure.

Leaving the field

In conducting a netnography of an online community *leaving the field* becomes a blurry concept. For example, in the middle of my fieldwork, I had to travel for two months, during which I did not have a reliable internet connection, which disabled me to participate in live sessions synchronously, or watch the recordings because of the slow download speeds. Therefore, I ended up *leaving the field* for a month in the middle of my fieldwork, and then *returned to the field* after that. This indicates that conducting a netnography is determined by having access to the relevant technology that the online community uses. While it is theoretically possible to conduct online fieldwork wherever

the researcher is physically located, the logistics (e.g. technology and the local time) of that physical location should be considered. Depending on this, there might be several instances when a netnographer has to leave and re-enter the field because the nature of online fieldwork is shaped around internet access, which eventually may lead to the extension of the duration of the fieldwork.

In practice, my engagement with the community, its activities and its members spread over one year. However, because of the above reasons and my ongoing relationship with some of the community members (through Facebook and Twitter), it was not easy to determine an exact end date for my research. This has also been experienced by other researchers (Kendall, 2009). Although I took my last fieldnotes around the middle of October, I only conducted my interview with the community founder about two months after that. After this final interview, I stopped my engagement in the community activities. For example, I purposefully did not read or respond to any emails from the evonline2002 email list although I continued to receive them. Additionally, I did not take part in the following year's BaW workshop, nor did I participate in the other Learning2gether sessions synchronously or asynchronously. I also stopped taking fieldnotes of my reflections or experiences at that point, which is an important aspect of leaving the field in an online ethnography. My purposeful disengagement with the community thus denoted my official exit from the field. While leaving the fieldsite in literal terms is blurry when doing online fieldwork, disengagement with the community activities is what determines the exit.

Taking fieldnotes

During my fieldwork, I took fieldnotes of both textual data (e.g. email) and non-textual data (e.g. live sessions, design of the wikis), describing my observations, my own experiences, and my reflections. I took handwritten fieldnotes in a notebook while I was engaging in community activities through the computer screen, and I typed them up afterwards, elaborating on my observations and experiences at a deeper reflective level. Because most of the community resources, activities, and interactions were already archived and publicly accessible over the internet, my reflections and descriptions of my experiences, while learning and interacting with the community members and community spaces, constituted the most important part of my fieldnotes giving deeper access to outsiders into the experiences in this community (Kulavuz-Onal & Vasquez, 2013).

Online interviews

In addition to online participant observation, I also interviewed nine webheads to find out about the background and organization of the BaW workshops

and Learning2gether events, and individual members' learning journeys and experiences in this community, from their own perspectives. In other words, these webheads were my *cultural informants*.

Deciding on the informants

Identifying the key informants, such as Vance Stevens,[1] the founder of the community in 2002, and Teresa Almeida d'Eça, the coordinator of all BaW workshops, was relatively easy as they were quite visible across the community spaces and activities. In addition, previous attendees of BaW workshops, who continued their active involvement, would be invited to moderate particular weeks during these workshops. To learn more about the experiences of moderators, I reached out to them through the moderators' list in the workshop, and two of them, located in different parts of the world, volunteered to participate in an interview with me. Finally, in order to gain an insider's perspective through the stories of participants' experiences, I conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews with five webheads about their stories and histories with this community. I purposefully selected members who had a range of experiences in the community and were active members and visible to others during my fieldwork. I had developed specific criteria for the selection of informants before beginning the study, but the diverse participation patterns compelled me to revisit my initial criteria. Therefore, I selected informants that had a variety of background and experiences in the community and with whom I had established some type of connection during my engagement in the community. (See Table 1 below for relevant information about my informants.)

Table 1. Overview of the informants

Participant	Gender	Reasons for Selection & Points of Contact
Vance Stevens	M	Co-founder of the community; coordinator of the Learning2gether events
Teresa Almeida d'Eça	F	One of the first workshop members; co-coordinator of the BaW workshops
Mohammed	M	BaW2011 moderator; never met before
Heather	F	BaW2011 moderator; never met before
Nancy	F	Long-term member; active member; has certain emergent duties/roles in the community; active in the emails & TESOL Electronic Village (EV); we met online in BaW2007 and then face-to-face in TESOL 2010
Megan	F	Long-term member; not active in the emails, but collaborating with others in presentations and offering other EVO sessions; we met online in BaW2007 and then face-to-face in TESOL 2010

Amal	F	First-time Webhead during my fieldwork; active in the all main activities I participated; we met at BaW2011 during my fieldwork
Hessa	F	Long-term member since 2005; originally from a limited-technology environment (Sudan); PhD and a new career as a CALL specialist because of Webheads; lurked during PhD, came back in 2011; we met online in BaW2007 but did not interact after that
Beren	F	Recent Webhead; active in other EVO sessions; telecollaborations with others in short time; doing research with Webheads; we met during my fieldwork, through an email she sent to the evonline2002 email list

As can be seen from the table above, although some level of active participation was an essential criterion for my selection of these members, as well as my ability to identify and reach them, not every participant was actively involved in every single activity organized by the community. Each had a distinct profile in the community that enabled me to capture both similarities and differences between their experiences and histories with the community, as well as learn about the background of a different activity. Such purposeful sampling is necessary in choosing the interviewees (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Patton, 1990, 2002) in online ethnography, and establishing connections during online participant observation in community activities is an important consideration before approaching individuals for online interviews. This increases the credibility of the netnographer within the online community.

Conducting the interviews

I conducted eight of the interviews through Skype, and one of them (with Vance Stevens) on Elluminate, which was turned into an open community event that allowed participation of others. The medium that I used during the interviews influenced my interviewing practices in different ways. For example, during the Skype interviews, only two informants enabled the webcam, and we were able to see each other. This compelled me to not take notes but engage in a more natural conversation with these participants. In the other interviews, we did not use video and I was able to take notes. At the same time, I had to pay closer attention to what my informant was saying since we could not utilize non-verbal clues that would have facilitated the communication. Additionally, I had to give more backchannel cues to my informants such as 'hmm', 'okay', 'uh-huh', to indicate that I was there listening to them and following the conversation closely.

For the interview with the community founder we used a different technology, with different affordances. At the time, Elluminate allowed multiple participants, but it did not allow overlapping conversation. In order to talk, one

had to wait for the session moderator to enable the microphone. This meant that the interview comprised of more linear talk. Additionally, because Elluminate has multimodal affordances, such as the chat window and the whiteboard on the screen, we were engaged in a more multimodal conversation: I asked my questions both orally and through a slideshow on the whiteboard, and some participants made quick comments to my questions in the chat, which I had to follow at the same time and respond to. Taking notes during this interview was inevitably more difficult because of the multimodality and the multitasking it required of the researcher/interviewer.

Overall, the interviews ranged from 36 minutes to 86 minutes, with a total of 10 hours. I recorded and transcribed all the interviews verbatim, which yielded 177 typed pages.

Archiving data

Throughout my fieldwork, it was difficult to determine what data to archive and what not to archive, because everything was already accessible online and because all the activities that I engaged in as a participant observer were being archived. In that sense, what I archived for myself were screenshots from my observations, in order to capture what a wiki or another site that I observed looked like at the time of my observation. In the age of information and communication technologies, interfaces change rapidly and taking screenshots helps the researcher to recall the community spaces and activities at the time of the observation. Additionally, for further coding and content analysis, I copied all the evonline2002 email interactions that happened during my 10-month engagement in the community activities into MS Word. I used a social bookmarking account, Diigo, to bookmark the links to Webheads sites and activities, in order to have access to them from one place when necessary. Archiving data in this netnography was selective, and had multiple layers. I saved the artifacts and activities that could be archived and that needed further analysis on my personal computer.

Discussion and conclusion

Netnography and online participant observation had several benefits for my understanding the culture of this community. For this reason, I invite other researchers to consider using a netnographic approach through online participant observation into the cultures that emerge in online language learning and teaching communities, and to find out how these cultures mediate the learning and development of teachers. I believe such participant observation helps to capture the members' lived experiences and thinking from an insider's perspective, which would not be accessible to the researcher using other methods.

Netnography allowed me to experience the community and its multiple sites and activities from a participant's perspective. When online research is carried out with a non-participant observational approach using a case study design, the researcher does not gain this first-hand experience, nor utilize the benefit of fieldnotes. Only through such participation and fieldnotes is a true ethnographic approach accomplished. It helps the researcher uncover experiences of others that are not visible or easily identifiable. In online communities, it is particularly difficult to understand lurkers' experiences as they are not visible to other members in the community. Through a netnographic approach based on online participant observation and field-note taking, on the other hand, the researcher might gain insights into a lurker's perspective, by purposefully acting like one. For example, my non-dominating approach to the email communication in this community, and asynchronously attending the activities of the community, as I illustrated above, enabled me to experience this. I discovered that teachers in this community can continue to learn about technology integration into language teaching even when on the periphery – through reading emails, following the conversations in these messages, and exploring links and other resources provided by the community members. In one particular instance, for example, while I was purposefully acting like a lurker in the community by reading emails and clicking on links, I developed a project idea using wikis and digital videos to use in my own class that I was teaching at the time, and this later developed into a research project. Getting involved in a community is what distinguishes an ethnographer who is a participant observer from a merely observing ethnographer.

Additionally, netnographic participant observation has the potential to give deeper and more nuanced insights to the researcher as regards the cultural practices of the community shaped around the technological media that the community interacts through, and the possible effects of these on teachers' learning as well as their role and participation in the community. For example, in my case, during my synchronous participation in a variety of live sessions organized by the community, I had to constantly negotiate my role as a researcher and as a participant. During these sessions, while I was taking notes as a researcher, I would also analyze the cultural practices of these sessions shaped by the technology medium, and act accordingly, in order to be able to participate in an appropriate way expected from the participants. This experience gave me a nuanced understanding of the reflective process that is involved in teacher learning as well as of the socialization in online community participation, at the micro level.

Netnography through participant observation also allows the researcher to establish connections in the community, and follow the events and activities at the time they occur. Establishing personal connections in this way helps the

researcher identify the key persons and approach them for interviews in more ethical and non-intruding ways. Also, rather than requesting outsiders to participate in the community in order to be able to collect data, the researcher is able to identify and approach members who already belong to the community. While this increases the credibility of the research, it also enables the researcher to capture the natural experiences of the participants. Furthermore, becoming a participant observer in the community helps the researcher witness the process of learning and development that a participant goes through in real time. For example, in one such case, I was able to follow and witness a new participant's movement from legitimate peripheral participation to becoming a full participant in this community throughout her first year in the community. This enabled me to identify her as a cultural informant who would bring the perspective of a new participant to my research. As I had already participated in the activities she was involved in, my interview questions were guided by this experience, and I was able to make sense of her story in a more holistic way.

Finally, being more familiar with and better informed about the community culture through netnographic participant observation enables the researcher to understand how a community functions when distributed over multiple sites and venues on the internet, and how all these sites, activities, and technologies are connected to one another. Particularly in distributed online communities with long shared history and resources, such as *Webheads in Action,* it can be difficult for the non-participant researcher to understand the broader sociocultural characteristics of the community and how this mediates the learning process of individual members. With increased familiarity with the community culture gained through an emic perspective, the researcher is able to make informed decisions as to how to set the boundaries of the field, how and from whom to collect data, and what to archive.

Conducting a netnographic fieldwork of an online community requires not only an ability to manipulate the tools and access the community, but also to assume a participant observer role. The process of participant observation undoubtedly has its own challenges because of the nature of online fieldwork, but these challenges eventually allow for deeper, more nuanced understandings of the naturally emerging and evolving culture of an online community, and the behaviors and experiences of its participants that are influenced by this culture.

Notes

1.   In order to give credit to these key individuals in the formation and sustainment of this community, and maintaining some of the sites the community uses, as well as organising the BaW workshops and Learning2gether events, I used these individuals' real names throughout my study, with their permission.

2.   Becoming a Webhead workshops were reorganized and renamed as ICT4ELT (Information Communication Technologies for English Language Teachers) in 2014, and have continued to be offered with this name every year during EVO workshops since then.

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