

USING GUIDED TOURS AS AN ONLINE DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY: A RESEARCH NOTE

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ABSTRACT

This research note discusses the benefits of guided tours as an online data collection strategy. These benefits include an opportunity to follow-up on questions and seek detailed responses from participants, clarify certain misconceptions about the participants and/or phenomena under study, mitigate bias in data, get an updated record of participants' online practices, and create a relationship of trust and rapport with the participants. Guided tours can also be useful for participants as it gives them a chance to use the online space regularly, and also provides them with an opportunity to reflect on their online practices frequently. Keeping in view the benefits of guided tours, qualitative researchers are encouraged to employ this data collection strategy in their online research for securing in-depth and additional information regarding participants' use of a particular online site. Further, this short paper recommends that online qualitative researchers utilize guided tours to seek additional and detailed information about their participants' practices and/or experiences in any online space.

Keywords: online data collection strategy, qualitative research, online spaces, benefits of online guided tours

INTRODUCTION

As Internet use becomes more ubiquitous and qualitative researchers seek to understand phenomena that take place in online spaces, they face questions about how best to capture participants' online experiences and practices. Many researchers have used methods such as observations and interviews (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Hur & Brush, 2009), online surveys (Barton, 2012; Oloffson, 2010), literacy logs, video recordings, and Internet monitoring software (Hoff, 2014), and back-end chat data (Black, 2007; Fields & Kafai, 2007). While such data collection strategies do a great deal to capture some elements of online participation, they do not help researchers understand a participant's own experiences of navigating an online space in real time. This article introduces the data collection strategy of *guided tours* as a method for allowing researchers to capture participants' online practices in their own words. Also, employing the guided tours strategy keeps researchers connected to their participants regularly, providing a window into participants' online practices throughout a qualitative research project. To demonstrate the potential of this qualitative data collection strategy for research in online spaces, illustrative examples will be drawn from the first author's own study of university teachers'

practices in an online community for English teachers. The basic aim of this research note is to highlight the benefits of employing an online data collection strategy i.e. Guided tours for qualitative researchers in their qualitative/online ethnographies.

WHY GUIDED TOURS?

Qualitative researchers have made use of different online data collection tools in their studies. Hur and Hara (2007) investigated an online teacher community in Korea to find out the different factors responsible in nurturing a sustainable online community for K-12 teachers. They collected data through participant observations in the online community, conducted detailed telephone interviews with participant teachers, and also examined archived postings on the site. Black (2007) used fanfiction texts written by English language learners, reader feedback or reviews on these texts, interviews, email exchanges, and field notes to develop an understanding about fan authors' literacy and social practices on fanfiction.net. Duncan-Howell (2010) employed an online survey to explore the experiences, skills, and attitudes of her participants in three Australian online communities of teachers. Barton (2012) carried out a study of the photo-sharing website Flickr to observe how Web 2.0 tools serve as new spaces for writing and how people use these sites deliberately for learning. The researcher gathered data through observation of Flickr site, an online survey, interviews, and email exchanges. By interviewing teachers and analyzing archived web posts, Hur and Brush (2009) investigated different factors that motivated K-12 teachers to participate in self-generated online communities. In order to better understand the impact of mobile technology on students' literacy practices, Hoff (2014) examined the participants' literacy practices through observations, interviews, literacy logs, but also made use of remote monitoring software to capture great detail about her participants' mobile phone use. Sari (2012) collected data from interviews, questionnaires, and several discussion postings to investigate how an online learning community was helpful in addressing the issues related to conventional teacher professional development practices in Indonesia. Also, Seo and Han (2013) gathered data from interviews and discussion postings to examine the nature of collaboration among teachers in one of Korea's largest online community. Though utilization of these different research methods provided these researchers with rich data sources from which to build thick description of their participants' experiences and helped strengthen their studies through triangulation, these methods did not always provide the researchers with on-going access to participants' perspectives about their activities in different online spaces. Also, conducting online observations, surveys, questionnaires, and/or interviews may not have provided these researchers with an opportunity to clarify misinterpretations about the participants' online practices.

In her own work, Khan (2014) used virtual interviews and online observations in her initial investigation of the motivating factors and barriers faced by teachers in an online community, English Companion Ning (ECN). Though she gathered significant amount of data via interviews and observations, she felt a need to ask the participants some more details about their use of the ECN site. For instance, as a result of an interview with one of the ECN members, Ali from Iraq, Author1 came to know that he was using the ECN site more to gain ideas without making any significant contribution. Ali stated,

To be honest with you, I take more than to give from the ECN members, basically because most of the academic topics are not being taught in my country and I haven't got enough information about most of the questions concerning them. So I use ECN to gain more knowledge about those topics. (Interview 2, April 10, 2014)

However, because he gained so much from the ECN site and its members, he was willing to pay back, 'However, whenever anyone would text me asking for advice or help I would never say NO' (Interview 2, emphasis in original, April 10, 2014). Though Ali was interviewed twice via the private messaging system in the ECN, Author1 could not access details about what he gained from ECN specifically, what particular academic topics he was curious to know about, and most important, how he paid back to the community by helping other members. Neither interviews nor her observations of Ali's posts on ECN provided answers to these queries. Author1 also found that though she conducted regular observations on the ECN site and took detailed field notes, she sometimes missed important data. For example, she captured field notes about how one ECN member was helping another by answering her questions. Later, when Author1 wanted more information about those participants and their discussion post, she could not locate that specific thread on the ECN despite searching for it a number of times. It had disappeared, illustrating a problem many online researchers face owing to the impermanence of web-based data. Author1 wondered whether there was another way to gain access to participants' online practices and to improve her research.

In her follow up study, Author1 developed a data collection technique that we call a guided tour, which helped her to gain an in-depth understanding of her participants' practices in the ECN community from their perspective. As she explored the role of this online community in the professional learning of university teachers in Pakistan, she found guided tours a useful data collection strategy. Each week, she sat next to her participants and asked them to give her a detailed tour of their ECN activities in the previous week. The purpose of using this strategy in addition to the in-depth interviews and ECN observations was to gain more information and knowledge about the participants' ECN practices from their points of view. During the entire phase of data collection, the participants provided Author1 with weekly walk-throughs of their activities in the ECN community during the previous week. Though the guided tours lasted only 10-20 minutes each, they were audiotaped with the participants' permission, later transcribed, and also documented through field notes, resulting in a rich data collection strategy on which Author1 could draw to triangulate findings from other sources and deepen her understanding of her participants' use of the online site.

BENEFITS OF THE GUIDED TOUR

We now turn our attention to detailing some benefits of the guided tour as an additional source of online data collection for qualitative researchers. Guided tours can allow researchers to follow-up on questions, clarify misconceptions, mitigate bias in data, get an updated record of participants' online practices, establish trust and rapport with participants, and also provide some advantages to the participants. Throughout, examples from Author1's study of university teachers' use of ECN will be used to illustrate these benefits.

FOLLOW-UP ON QUESTIONS

Guided tours can allow qualitative researchers to follow-up on questions and get responses in detail about any point that may arise in other data sources. Using guided tours, Author1 was able to seek concrete responses from her participants, tied directly to their participation in ECN, when questions emerged during interviews, her ECN observations, or while writing field notes and memos. For instance, one of the participants, Rani, discussed in her initial interview that she downloaded teaching activities from the ECN for her students. In the week after Rani's first interview, Author1 used the weekly guided tour to ask Rani the following questions: 'What type of activities did you download? Did you use any of the activities with your students?'

What was the students' reaction? Did you modify activities for your students or use them as they were?' (Guided tour, Rani, April 12, 2015). Rani not only provided verbal answers to these questions, she showed Author1 where on the website she found the activities in question.

To make the most of guided tours in this way, Author1 prepared a list of all the queries that stood out to her during other aspects of data collection, and then put forth those queries to the participants in the guided tours each week. By asking such detailed questions from the participants, Author1 developed a deeper understanding about their online practices in the ECN community.

CLARIFICATION OF MISCONCEPTIONS

Use of guided tours can help researchers in refining any misconceptions about their participants' use of an online space. Author1 noticed during her ECN observations that Maha, another participant, did not post any questions or responses in the ECN discussions in the beginning of her study, which she interpreted as Maha not participating on the site. This concerned Author1 because Maha had stated in her initial interview that, 'I am afraid of being discriminated on this site for being a Pakistani. I mean people might not want to interact with me because I am from Pakistan' (Interview 1, Maha, April 11, 2015). When Author1 did not see any contributions from Maha on the ECN for nearly two weeks, she thought that Maha might have faced some sort of bias/discrimination on this site that discouraged her from contributing anything. To clarify, Author1 asked Maha in the Week 2 guided tour, 'Did you experience any bias from any ECN member on this site? Is this the reason for not contributing anything?' (Guided tour, Maha, April 18, 2015). Maha smiled at this question and said,

There's nothing like that. I have seen my other colleagues from Pakistan posting and getting responses from ECN members. It's just that I'm spending some time in reading some discussion posts and gaining ideas and activities from the site. I will start commenting soon. (Guided tour, Maha, April 18, 2015)

Thus, the guided tour with Maha helped Author1 correct her wrong interpretation about Maha's ECN experiences and gave her a new perspective on how Maha was in fact participating.

MITIGATION OF BIAS IN DATA

Guided tours can help qualitative researchers mitigate bias in data by providing them an accurate explanation of the participants' experiences and practices in their own words. Since the participants shared about their ECN experiences in the guided tours in their own words, such explanation helped Author1 gain more accurate data and lessen the impact that her own subjectivity had on her qualitative research. Qualitative studies are criticized mostly because the descriptions and findings can be 'susceptible to manipulation' as they can be 'shaped' by the investigator, and thus can create a bias in the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981: 378). The guided tours gave Author1 the chance to discuss her interpretations and analyses with the participants every week as they connected their responses directly with their practices in the ECN website, showing her what they meant as they told her. Author1 modified analysis of her data based on these discussions with participants, as pointed out in the example above.

UPDATED RECORDING OF PARTICIPANTS' PRACTICES

Qualitative researchers can stay updated about their participants' activities and practices by employing periodically scheduled guided tours in their research. The frequency and regularity of

guided tours add strength to this data collection strategy. Besides clarifying her misconceptions, the guided tours helped Author1 keep an updated record of her participants' practices and activities every week. By visiting the participants every week for the guided tours, she knew what activities, ideas, or resources the participants gained from the ECN, and learned when and how they planned to implement a certain ECN idea or activity in their classrooms. This strategy was especially helpful in maintaining an updated record of the participant in case anything was missed while taking field notes during the ECN observations. During the guided tours, the participants would explain why they read and/or commented on a certain post, and what advantage it would give them and their students. Conducting guided tours was particularly beneficial in the case of those two participants who spent most of their time in just exploring the ECN and reading the discussion posts without commenting or participating in any discussion post. Thus, employing this data collection strategy may help online researchers gain insights into the experiences of 'lurkers' (Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews, 2004), whose practices are invisible when relying on what can be seen through online observations or examining website log files. Guided tours helped Author1 know more about how these participants learned in their own way by gaining ideas from what they read in the ECN community.

ESTABLISHMENT OF TRUST AND RAPPORT

Conducting guided tours in person can help qualitative researchers establish trust and rapport with their participants as Seitz (2016: 229) observes, 'sitting down with someone face-to-face can create a personal connection and allow the researcher to read important nonverbal cues.' Author1 noticed that the participants' responses were quite brief when she conducted interviews with them in the beginning of the study. However, sitting down with participants and talking to them every week as they showed her different posts and pages that they had visited on ECN made them feel more comfortable in sharing about their practices in detail. This also helped in creating a 'good research partnership' between her and her participants (Seitz, 2016: 229). As an example, in the initial interviews, a couple participants seemed reluctant to share openly about their experiences with traditional face-to-face professional development programs in Pakistan - a topic of interest to Author1's research. After conducting two guided tours, Author1 noticed that those participants more candidly shared their feelings and thoughts about traditional professional development in Pakistan as they compared the situation again and again with their experiences in the ECN community. Incorporating a tour of their activities on the website gave participants something concrete to contrast with their face-to-face professional learning, offering Author1 rich insights into these contrasts.

ADVANTAGES TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Guided tours can also be beneficial to the participants in a qualitative study. Author1's participants noted a few different ways they appreciated this data collection strategy. Aiza stated, 'It helped me to explore the ECN properly and encouraged me to use that site regularly' (Personal communication, April 18, 2016). While the guided tours motivated Aiza to use the website on a regular basis, Rani found guided tours an opportunity to reflect on her ECN practices. According to Rani,

Whenever I gave you a guided tour about my activities in the ECN, I felt like it was a kind of reflection for me. I liked answering your questions as it gave me a chance to look back at my practices in this site and reflect on what I gained from the numerous resources, discussion posts, and group chats available there. It would refresh my memory about how and when to use a certain idea or activity with my students in the class. (Personal communication, April 20, 2016)

Thus, these participants demonstrate that guided tours are not only beneficial for the researchers, but they can also be advantageous to the participants in different ways.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, guided tours are found to be a useful data collection strategy for capturing participants' ECN practices from their perspectives every week. Moreover, the guided tours can help in keeping an updated record of what the participants do online each week. Also, the guided tours are of special help while taking field notes during the online observations. This tool can also be used to follow up on any query about a participant's particular practice in any online space.

Hence, this research note discusses different benefits of guided tours for an online qualitative researcher. While our examples illustrate that this data collection strategy was useful for Author1's research in many ways, guided tours also present some challenges. For instance, guided tours require an increased time commitment from the participants, and scheduling time for conducting guided tours can be a challenge. Researchers will need to remain flexible to accommodate participants' schedules and consider whether the potential benefits from this data collection strategy outweigh the additional time needed.

Another consideration for qualitative researchers looking to gain additional and detailed information about the participants' use of any online space is how to facilitate guided tours. While Author1 conducted this strategy face-to-face with her participants every week, this may not be possible for researchers working with participants not within reasonable geographic proximity. In these cases, researchers can still make use of this data collection strategy via computer-mediated communications, like Skype or Google+ Hangout. Using the online screen-sharing feature of these tools while conducting guided tours, participants can similarly show the researcher their activities in any social networking site or online community. Making use of these technologies could help mitigate the challenge of scheduling time with participants in a physical space while also bridging any distance between them and the researcher. So, while these challenges exist, we encourage all qualitative researchers interested in studying participants' experiences in online spaces to consider incorporating guided tours into their data collection repertoire to capture rich, contextual data from the participants' perspectives.

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