Engaging with 21st Century Methodologies in Contemporary Education Research: Developing a Multi-sited, Distance, Online Ethnography

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Abstract

Twenty-first century telecommunications have spawned new developments in anthropological research. Researchers now utilize online tools and investigate virtual social phenomena. A research project at the University of Tasmania required the development of a tailored methodology to investigate real-world activities across multiple education institutions and associated online communities. The study employed a blend of traditional and contemporary approaches assembled from established methodologies. Considerations influencing the development of the methodology are presented with the intention of informing future researchers of valid methodological design. Ontological and epistemological concerns are addressed to establish a framework for 21st century ethnographical methodologies.

Keywords: ethnography, online ethnography, distance ethnography, multi-sited ethnography, education research

Introduction

The birth of the internet along with developments in global sociocultural phenomena have spawned progresses in social science research methodologies designed to utilise, and also to investigate and understand, these new phenomena (Murthy, 2008; Varis, 2014). A study conducted by researchers at the University of Tasmania, Australia, required the development of a bespoke methodology in order to investigate the activities of a combination of online and real-world education communities across multiple sites. The methodology blended aspects of existing online, distance, and multi-sited ethnographies to create a process designed to investigate educational practices across an entire continent. These include both online and real-world practices and the resulting cultural implications across a similar range of domains. Figure 1 shows how aspects of online, distance and multi-sited approaches to ethnography were employed in the study.
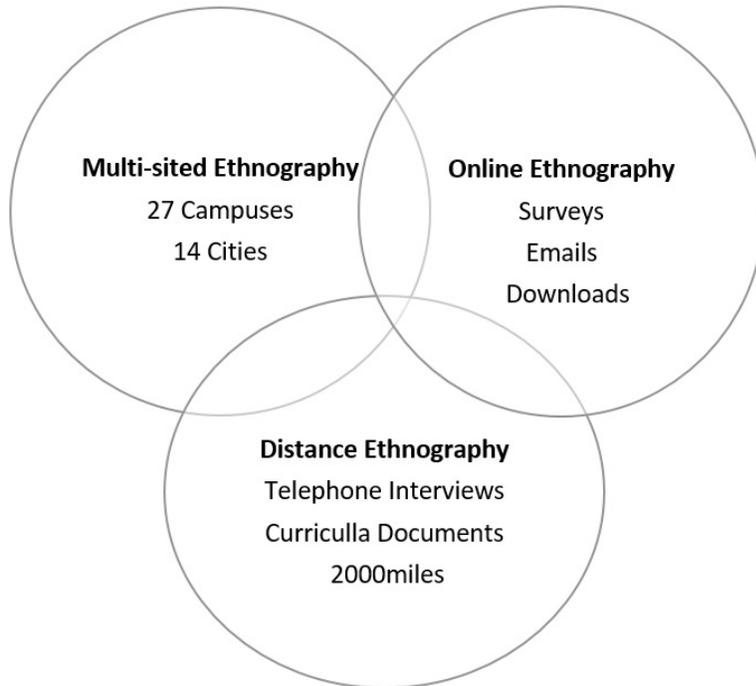
Figure 1. Aspects of online, distance, and multi-sited ethnographies

This paper will outline the considerations influencing the development of the methodological approaches. The purpose of this paper is to inform ethnographic design considerations of future researchers in similar studies. These similar studies may be investigating the field of education, or other ethnographic or anthropological interests.

The Study

The study discussed in this paper was a research project using inductive thematic analysis to investigate cultural and community practice outcomes of music pedagogies employed by higher education institutions in Australia. The scope of the study included bachelor's degree-level courses in contemporary popular music (CPM) in which a student could choose to major in performance with the guitar as their primary instrument. Twenty-five courses fitting the scope of the study were found being delivered at 27 campuses located across the continent, separated by vast distances.

Figure 2 shows the locations of the institutions and demonstrates the concentration in the eastern states of Australia. There is also a notable concentration of institutions located in the greater metropolitan areas of state capital cities. Furthermore, three cities feature multiple institutions delivering CPM courses with seven in Melbourne, five in Sydney, and three in Brisbane.

Figure 2. Location of institutions offering bachelor degree level CPM courses in Australia

New South Wales has the largest number of regional institutions offering bachelor's degree-level CPM courses outside capital cities with courses available in Lithgow, Armidale, Newcastle, and Cooranbong. The only other state with regional institutions offering these courses is Queensland with Central Queensland University offering courses at their Noosa and Mackay campuses, and Griffith University offering a course at their Gold Coast campus. This geographic dispersion prohibited a traditional ethnographic immersive process, thus other forms of ethnographies were investigated to inform the methodological design of the study.

Data for the study were collected via an online survey of current students and alumni, as well as current and past educators affiliated with the courses under investigation ($n = 86$). This was followed by interviews ($n = 32$) conducted via telephone, which were recorded and transcribed. For a third data set, and to improve the immersive experience, a collection of relevant documents ($n = 364$), in the form of course outlines and unit descriptors, was also accessed from the institutions' websites, or in some cases by email exchange with a relevant representative from the institution. To further engage with ethnographic immersion, the primary researcher also subscribed to relevant institution or faculty newsletters and social media pages.

Data analysis was conducted using the processes of inductive thematic analysis informed by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2014, 2018), Sarantakos (2013), and Bryman (2016). The research questions addressed curriculum design and pedagogical approaches of the courses under examination, and how these influenced the culture, aesthetics, and performance styles of local, glocal, and global communities of musicians inhabited by affiliates with the courses. Glocal communities exhibit local cultural idioms while remaining within the identity parameters of the larger global community. A purely qualitative analysis of the textual data was conducted via coding data extracts to form themes. The major finding of the study was Australian, 21st century CPM guitar pedagogical practices embrace the eclectic nature of modern guitar and incorporate influence from a wide range of musical and cultural stimuli. This was seen to have a broad range of cultural implications on the future of the identity of Australian guitarists. A similar study

conducted in Florida (Barjolin-Smith, 2018) on the ethno-aesthetic musical choices of members of surf communities also found local, glocal and global factors in community identity.

Little research was found encompassing all three aspects of online, distance, and multi-sited ethnographies, hence the impetus for this paper. Bengtsson (2014) states: "The increasing digitization of everyday life has led to an expanding field of studies of online cultures and communities" (p. 862). She discusses the relationship between online experience and real-world proximity, something the study examined closely, and she concludes with a call for further discourse: "… open doors to a new discussion about what it means to conduct ethnographic research in online environments" (p. 875). Marcus (2011) states: "Multi-sitedness [*sic*] displaces the anthropologist" (p. 22) and calls for examining "the alternative way in which the multi-sited field materializes in research" (p. 22). Ardevol (2012) states: "virtual methods add to the available array of ethnographic methodologies" (p. 86); however, she also observes these "also challenge our epistemic practices" (p. 86). She calls for reflection by ethnographers on their experiences using virtual ethnography. Postill and Pink (2012) invite us to "reflexively interrogate the concepts we use" (p. 132). This paper is a response to those calls for further research, reflection, and discussion.

Paradigmatic Considerations

Social science studies are grounded on a variety of considerations that contribute to the research process including theory, strategy, epistemology, and ontology (Bryman, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Understanding of theory, and the relationship between theory and the execution of research, is important as it provides a rationale for the methods employed and a framework within which the findings can be interpreted. Categorization of research within these theoretical spaces is important as it informs the reader where the study fits in the current body of research and from what perspectives the findings may be viewed, providing a framework for the knowledge being examined and how we know it is relevant.

Ontology and Epistemology

Philosophical ontology is the branch of meta-physics that studies the concepts of existence (Jacquette, 2014). A branch of applied ontology, social ontology, concerns the nature of social entities (Bryman, 2016). Social entities are real things that are not necessarily physical in nature. They can be meta-physical entities that exist as a result of social activity. These entities may be personal and internal, or may be social constructs. The study is grounded in a meta-physical constructionist ontological framework as it is built upon the perspective that social organization is supposed rather than imposed, and culture is "an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction" (Bryman, 2016, p. 20). The meta-physical aspect of online communities imposes new understandings of what a community is, and therefore how they should be studied. Contemporary ontologies concerning online communities must also address the possibilities of influence from algorithms employed by service providers as an influential factor. The primary researcher in this study used multiple platforms for aspects of the research including sourcing participants, data collection, and immersion, to ensure influence from service provider algorithms was minimized.

Contemporary advances in ethnography using digital technologies, and studying virtual social phenomena have challenged epistemological assumptions regarding ethnographic knowledge (Postill, 2016). This study acknowledged these advances and embraced recent developments in what is considered relevant types of knowledge. Reflexive approaches with reference to established literature on contemporary ethnographic epistemology were maintained throughout the study to ensure reliability and validity. The key principle utilized in this study was ensuring all data were sourced externally from the researcher's experience. The researcher adopted two

bracketing methods advised by Tufford and Newman (2012): a bracketing interview and a reflexive journal to ensure minimal personal influence on the data analysis. However, McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans (2019) implore the importance of acknowledging that the researcher, in fact, cannot be truly detached from the research, but is an integral part of it. They remind us that researchers are humans, embedded in their own sociocultural experiences. Meaning is therefore unavoidably interpreted through the researcher's own socioeconomic lens. In the case of this study, the sociocultural lens is one and the same with the one being researched.

The study utilized a holistic embodiment of the epistemological perspective offered by Gray (2016) and affirmed by Postill (2016) where "ethnographers experience and remember online […] encounters just as they do offline encounters, that is, 'in the body'" (p. 3, parenthesis original). The researcher experienced moments of 'being there' when immersed in the data and can recall virtual incidents as memories formed in the body in the same manner as real-world incidents.

Ethnographic Research

The study was regarded as ethnographic as it primarily investigated questions concerning cultural significance of educational practices. Originally, ethnography was the domain of anthropologists studying remote cultures via participant observation in the field. Typical ethnographic data collection methods include field notes, surveys, interviews, and discussion groups, as well as collection of documents and artefacts (Bryman, 2016; Sarantakos, 2013). As technology progressed, recordings of interviews and discussion groups, as well as artistic performances, began to be included. Recordings made in the field are re-playable permanent records and not subject to observational constrictions while in the field. They can also be observed by third parties for review. The interviews in this study were conducted via telephone and recorded for transcription. The transcriptions were, prior to analysis, emailed to the participant for verification. In two cases, the interviewees added more data during this process.

Originally, ethnography was developed to study cultures other than the researchers' own (Griffin & Bengry-Howell, 2007; Rubies, 2000). However, in the latter decades of the twentieth century ethnography was adopted by researchers studying local cultures and sub-cultural movements, notably feminism (Davis & Craven, 2016; Perez, 2007; Sarantakos, 2013) and racism (Hurston, 1990). The study was conducted in Australia, by an Australian, however, the sub-culture being examined was not one the researcher was personally familiar with, having had no prior connection with CPM higher education or the affiliated communities.

Since the introduction of the internet, online communities have been a subject of interest for ethnographers, and processes specific to 'netnography' have been developed (Kozinets, 2010). These are typically, however not exclusively nor necessarily, examined by researchers of the same ethnocultural background as the online community members. This study was primarily concerned with real-world activities and although it adopted some aspects of a netnographic approach, including data collection techniques and immersive processes in online activities, it cannot be considered a true netnography.

The objectives of ethnography are to understand social meanings and activities (Brewer, 2000) and to portray the experiences of the subjects (Creswell, 2014). Sarantakos (2013) states: "ethnographic research aims to emancipate, empower and liberate people" (p. 219). By giving a voice to previously unheard cultures or sub-cultures, either distant remote people groups, or local activists, these people are empowered to improve their sociocultural positioning. In the study these people groups were local communities of music students and graduates. The study intended to ensure these individuals, and the community more broadly, were allowed a voice. The methodology was carefully developed to ensure this voice was given maximal agency.

Distance Ethnography

What does the term 'distance' refer to in ethnography? Historically, 'distance' in ethnographic research has inferred removing the researcher from their home culture and physical immersion in distant environs (Agar, 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Malinowski, 1932; Van Maanen, 2011). In such cases the term 'distance' refers to the distance the researcher travels between their home environ and the one being studied. However, the term 'distance' in ethnography can now refer to the distance between the researcher and the environ under investigation. With continued development of online delivery of education, processes of distance ethnography are increasingly appropriate to research in education. In the case of this study there were various 'distances' involved due to the multi-sited nature of the study. Some of these distances were small and some cross-continental. It was deemed impractical for the primary researcher to visit all 27 sites under examination to collect data. Therefore, processes employed in distance ethnographies were adopted. For the purpose of maintaining equivalent data formats, the same processes of data collection were used for participants that were both distant and local.

Distance ethnographic practices have evolved since their inception, and particularly since the introduction of the internet. Distance ethnographies were employed by the U.S. Office of Naval Research during World War II as a tool for understanding the culture of Eastern European and Asian societies (Mead & Métraux, 2000). Data in these studies were collected in the form of "a variety of cultural products" (p. xvi) and interviews of immigrants. Data in more modern distance ethnographies, including this study, also include cultural products (Gray, 2016; Pink, 2013) and interviews with appropriate participants (Bengtsson, 2014; Forsey, Breidenstein, Krüger, & Roch, 2015). Postill (2016) discusses advances in distance ethnography and influences of modern telecommunications concluding "the overlooked practice of remote ethnography is likely to gain more visibility and methodological sophistication in the coming years" (p. 8).

Any new developments in research methods which challenge established valid traditions will attract concern regarding legitimacy. Postill (2016) argues there is nothing inherently inferior or illegitimate in conducting ethnographic studies remotely. He addresses concerns about distance ethnography stating:

> Yes: it is indeed legitimate to conduct anthropological fieldwork from afar. For one thing, anthropological research is a technologically plural, open endeavor – we use whatever technical means will help us gain insights into the lives and deeds of our research participants. (p. 8)

Distance ethnographic approaches using digital technologies do not aim to replace long-term immersion in a society, as they do not aim to produce traditional ethnographic knowledge. New forms of immersion and a new epistemology have emerged.

Traditional ethnographic data collection includes observation, collection of artefacts, interviews of participants, and group discussions. External data collection methods used by distance ethnographers also include collecting artefacts and collecting data from human participants in the form of online surveys and interviews via telecommunication. These methods were successfully employed in the study. Group sessions with multiple participants in various locations can also be conducted using these technologies and can bring together distant persons to form a community experience. Observation of the research subject was conducted via immersion in the online communities by the primary researcher, and via visiting the institutions' websites to collect documentary data. The primary researcher found this to be a much more immersive experience than expected, especially through following hyperlinks to related social media including YouTube disseminations of students' products.

It has been noted that distance ethnographies are not new. However, an advantage of distance ethnography, conducted using 21st century communications technology, is that studies can be conducted in real time using up-to-date data (Postill, 2016). Live-streamed events of student performances and current online curriculum content were accessed during the study, keeping the researcher arguably more up to date than field ethnography could accomplish across the multiple sites.

Online Ethnography

Bengtsson (2014) states: "Space has been restructured by digital media" (p. 862) and argues for a revision of distance in the discussion surrounding ethnographic methods. Postill and Pink (2012) state that traditional concepts of community, culture, and networks have become 'messy' with contemporary digital practices (p. 132). They claim in the context of the ethnographic study of social media, new approaches are needed, particularly when the activities are interwoven with offline activities. The online/offline boundaries of 21st century education communities are ambiguous as they often include both virtual and real-world activities. The continual development and morphing of digital technologies, and how they are being used, has impacted these communities (Boellstorff, 2015; Calefato, Iaffaldano, & Lanubile, 2017; Calefato, Iaffaldano, Lanubile, & Maiorano, 2018; Postill & Pink, 2012; Waldron, 2013).

Online ethnographies have also been the employ of researchers examining their own culture (Bengtsson, 2014). Postil (2008) states: "As the numbers of internet users worldwide continue to grow, the internet is becoming more local" (p. 413). This phenomenon brings with it its own ontological and epistemological challenges particularly around the definition of 'local'. Communities and their associated practices are increasingly no longer geographically bound. Thus, it can now be a requirement in the 21st century to use telecommunications to research a single sociocultural phenomenon, if that phenomenon has online elements. As educational practices are increasingly employing online technologies, it can also now be a requirement to engage with telecommunication-based research methods to conduct research investigating education.

The phenomena being investigated in this study included real-world communities located across a continent, as well as online communities located in virtual spaces, and the influence of pedagogical practices on these communities. Furthermore, the primary researcher was located approximately 650 miles from the host university campus, operating from a home office in Adelaide, South Australia. It was therefore deemed essential that online ethnographic practices were used, firstly in order to gain an immersive experience in the communities, and secondly, as modes of data collection due to the prohibitive distances involved. Other studies in education either across large distances or investigating online education practices, or even the influences of real-world educational practices upon online communities, will also, similarly, need to engage with digital ethnographic practices. Without engaging in online immersion, there is a risk of developing a skewed perception of the phenomena being examined.

Ethnographic Immersion

Traditional ethnographic approaches study patterns of behavior (Creswell, 2014) and interpret life meaning (Sarantakos, 2013) through immersive observation (Bryman, 2016) in the natural field (Sarantakos, 2013: Creswell, 2014) with the researcher participating directly in the setting (Brewer, 2000). The study embraced the objectives of ethnography, however, it did not employ the physically immersive approaches of these traditional definitions of ethnography. Its approach was external, embracing practices of non-participatory inquiry. The 'field' under examination was both a physical field, albeit a multi-sited one separated by vast distances, as well as a virtual field that exists in online communities of Australian musicians. The geographic dispersion of the institutions being studied presented a problem regarding traditional ethnographic immersion.

However, the need for an immersive experience during the research was met via participation in, and observation of, online communities and activities of the subject.

Concurrent with the progressive adoption of ethnographies via communication technologies, there has been criticism of the concepts and practices involved. This criticism typically concentrates on the lack of traditional immersive experience in the process. Genzuk (2003) describes traditional ethnographic immersion as experiencing the environment:

> [T]he researcher shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the people in the observed setting. The purpose of such participation is to develop an insider's view of what is happening. This means that the researcher not only sees what is happening but "feels" what it is like to be part of the group. (p. 2)

Immersive experience at a distance can be gained through methods designed and employed by ethnographers unable to reach their fields due to political conflict or natural disasters (Brauchler, 2013; Gray, 2016, Skinner, 2007). This can now be further enhanced by progress in telecommunications. Using digital methodologies to investigate digital sociocultural activities and online communities is self-evidently contextually appropriate, and a growing body of literature has been developed in recent times to address this phenomenon (Ardévol, 2012; Beaulieu, 2004; Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006; Boellstorff, 2015; Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2000, 2009; Kozinets, 2010; Postill, 2008, 2009, 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012). Postill (2016) claims it is now rare for ethnographers not to use telematic media as a resource.

Gray (2016), working from her home in Dublin, used social media to conduct ethnographic research on socio-political movements in Russia. Through the use of online technologies, she was able to stay in touch with events in real time and observe activities in various locations. She describes her experience as a temporal immersion. Her immersion included physically experiencing tension while observing protests unfolding on her screen. She discusses some ontological foundations of experience and memory-making:

> Social media is experienced—and remembered—*in the body* in ways that challenge the distinctions we might otherwise make between virtual and physical encounters. Such online research experiences will become increasingly inescapable, and anthropologists must find ways to incorporate them into their repertoires. (p. 502, emphasis in original)

She describes following the street demonstrations online as 'experiencing' them and states "I remember the demonstrations *as if* I had experienced them firsthand, as if I *had been* there in body" (p. 506, emphasis in original). She states her body has created experiences she recalls as 'memories' of the events built from the data. She cautions ethnographers to avoid making false claims to physical presence. However, using Gray's experience as an example it can be argued this immersion in the data can be regarded as an equally immersive experience as being present in the field.

In the study, the primary researcher encountered similar immersive experiences, most notably while conducting interviews, reading education institutions' documents, and visiting associated social media sites. However, it is worth noting the immersive experience was found to be greater when researching institutions the researcher had visited personally. This included eight of the 27 campuses. This observation supports Postill's (2016) suggestion that "previous local experience" (p. 1) is beneficial to distance ethnography.

By engaging with the available social media platforms affiliated with each institution, the primary researcher found he was able to establish a 'feel' for the individual ethno-aesthetic voice of each institution and its associated community. This would not have been possible via immersion in the data alone. A prime example of this is alumni from the institutions where the popular music curricula contained a high level of jazz content were observed to typically produce music in

which the researcher could hear a jazz influence. This kind of immersive experience would not occur through reading survey responses, transcriptions of interviews, or curricula documents.

Multi-sited Ethnography

Examining cultural phenomena embedded in larger social or geographical orders, multi-sited research uses traditional and contemporary methodologies to gain insight on local and trans-local social constructs. The use of multi-sited research began to develop more attention in the latter half of the twentieth century (Marcus, 1995) and has continued to gain status as a social anthropological strategy, with further impetus due to the introduction of the internet (Marcus, 2011). In his monograph on multi-sited ethnography, Falzon (2016) states: "The incorporation of the internet both as a field and a method of data collection, for example, opens up a whole new range of imaginative opportunities while creating a host of new challenges" (p. 129).

Social factors present in the 21st century influencing the need for multi-sited ethnographies include improved, and reduced costs of, transport and communications technologies. These factors have also increasingly influenced the education industry. The study investigated a common topic across multiple institutions, thereby necessitating a multi-sited approach. In discussing multi-sited ethnography, Marcus (2011) claims anthropologists have been trying to do something quite different with ethnography in recent decades: "There is something about the way traditional units or objects of study present themselves nowadays, e.g. culture, cultures, community, subjects, and the near revolution in theory, that has immensely complicated the way these classic terms are understood" (p. 16–17).

The study examined courses offered at multiple campuses, making it ipso facto a multi-sited ethnography. However, it also investigated communities that exist in online 'sites' which inhabit virtual spaces, thus incorporating a contemporary ontological orientation to 'site'. Therefore, the study was not only multi-sited but also included multiple site formats. As well as real-world sites, the contemporary site formats involved in the study included websites, forums, blogs, and social media, all of which incorporate various levels of local, glocal and global content.

Reliability, Authenticity, and Validity

One concern in conducting research that employs contemporary design is ensuring reliability and validity. Reliability is concerned with consistency of measures, and validity is concerned with applicability of measures (Bryman, 2016). Reliability and validity markers for traditional ethnographies still apply to contemporary methodologies using online, distance, and multi-sited practices.

External reliability is the extent to which a study could be replicated to produce the same results (Bryman, 2016). Replicability is a necessary factor in hard sciences where universality across time and space is assumed. However, in social sciences the assumptions are to the contrary. Two studies of the same culture separated by time or distance are expected to return different results. Longitudinal research is often undertaken for the purpose of identifying and measuring social change (Bryman, 2016). It is the aim of social science research to understand contextualized phenomena. Thus, reliability and validity are not measured by similarity of results, but similarity of methods. The study did not attempt to introduce any new methods, rather it blended existing methods into a fresh model, thus ensuring validity.

A further method of reliability that exists in online ethnographies is routine (Postill & Pink, 2012). This involves the researcher regularly updating themselves with current activities of online communities being examined. Subscribing to online communities' social media pages, community newsletters and blogs, are methods researchers can use to remain up to date and informed of current activities. It can also help in the immersion aspects of conducting online research with content in the form of photographs, and videos of events and activities. Routine in

distance and online ethnographic research correlates to factors of reliability listed by existing literature on traditional ethnography including stability, consistency (Sarantakos, 2013), and prolonged field time (Creswell, 2014). The researcher found subscribing to newsletters, alumni social media pages, and affiliated blog sites, prompted routine re-visiting of online sites. A prime example was notification of updated curricula for one of the courses under investigation, which prompted a re-examination of the associated material.

Qualitative empirical research, particularly in the social sciences, has been subject to criticism and skeptical views on the objective validity of the findings (Diefenbach, 2009). During his defense of qualitative practices and their validity, Patton (2014) gives direction to researchers stating there are no rules except the researcher must do their very best, employing their full intellect to fairly represent the data and to communicate what the data reveal. This still applies to ethnographic practices using communications technologies and investigating socio-cultural phenomena across multiple sites, both virtual and real-world.

Conclusion

An ethnographic study on education communities in Australia found no pre-existing methodologies were entirely suitable. A methodology was designed by blending aspects of proven methods of distance, online, and multi-sited ethnographies into a new appropriate formula. By adopting proven aspects of common practice, reliability, authenticity, and validity were ensured. Figure 3 illustrates these ethnographic principles across the geographic dispersion of the subject. The employment of distance ethnography practices allowed data collection from multiple sites using 21st century technologies.

Paradigmatic issues concerning theory, ontology and epistemology were discussed as well as contemporary research designs including multi-sited, distance, and online ethnographies. The purpose of this paper is to disseminate the contemporary research design in order to inform future researchers in similar studies of established valid methodological practice. It is expected these practices will be further developed by future researchers investigating similar areas and incorporating new methodological practices as communication technologies continue to develop and influence social science ontological and epistemological frameworks.
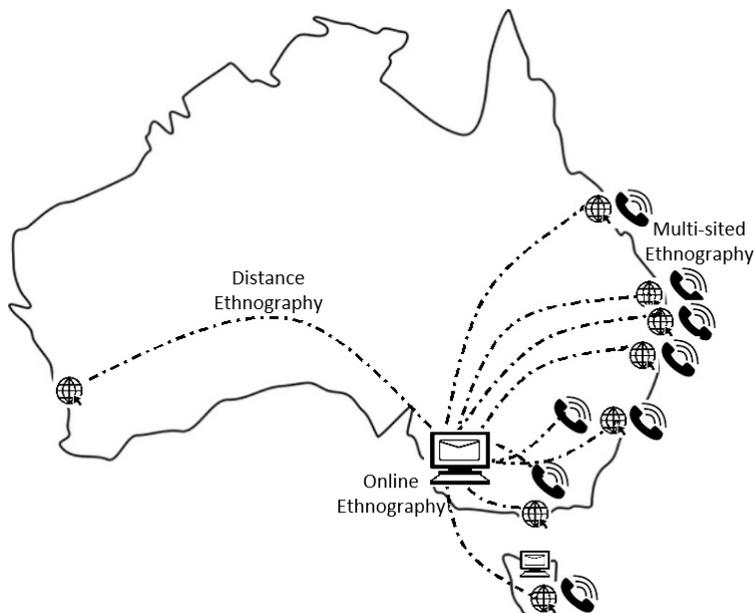

Figure 3. A multi-sited, distance, and online ethnography in Australia

By engaging with 21st century methodological practices, as outlined above, the researchers were able to investigate the topic at a more meaningful level than without them. Although no primary data were collected from social media affiliated with the institutions, the immersive experience gained via interaction with relevant social media was deemed as a valuable foundation for qualitative analysis of the data and discussion of the findings.

The topic of globalisation became one of the themes developed via the process of inductive thematic analysis employed in the study. Concerns about an internet-driven global musical mono-culture were raised by a few participants. However, no such threat was deemed imminent as the observations tended toward the positive exposure afforded to local and glocal micro-cultures via the internet. One of the institutions examined in the study has a cultural exchange program with another institution in India. The researcher was able to, via social media, examine the products of this exchange and witness the cultural transaction.

Although the courses under examination, being music performance studies, are primarily offered in face-to-face mode, there were many, and various, units offered in online delivery mode. These tended to be primarily theory, history, and cultural studies units. Two of the courses were offered in fully online delivery, one of which was only offered online, with no face-to-face option. Two other institutions have, in the past, experimented with online delivery of performance subjects but have reverted to face-to-face delivery for practical reasons, and after consultation with the student body. The use of online ethnographic practices allowed for a closer examination of content of the online courses and units, including student performances, which would have otherwise been impractical if only available by visiting distant campuses.

The development of an ethnographic methodology which blended existing elements of online, distance, and multi-sited ethnographies afforded the study a mode of investigation otherwise impossible. It also offered the researcher an immersive experience, similar to that expected of a traditional ethnography, allowing for an appropriate analysis of the data. Other 21st century researchers in education, and many other topics of ethnography, may also benefit by engaging with contemporary ethnographic methodologies. Continued discussion of their experiences, grounded in ontological and epistemological frameworks, will help develop an ongoing evolution of valid methodological practice.

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