Chapter 27

Virtual Ethnography and Discourse Analysis

Bruce L. Mann
Memorial University, Canada

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the identifying characteristics of Web-based critical ethnography.
2. Describe the procedure for conducting a critical ethnography on the Web.
3. Explain the limitations of critical ethnography.
4. State a typical question in Web-based ethnography.
5. Define “critical ethnography.”
6. Summarize the recent research about learning communities on the Web.
7. Explain “discourse analysis” as a critical ethnography.
8. Describe the identifying characteristics of mobile phone communications research.
9. Summarize the dissertation research conducted on mobile phones.
10. Describe the identifying characteristics of online conferences with real-time audio voice-over and text messaging during slide presentations.
11. Summarize the recent research on bulletin board discourse analysis.
12. Summarize the recent research on discourse analysis with Henri’s Content Analysis Model.
13. Summarize the recent research on discourse analysis with Gunawardena’s Interactional Analysis Model.

14. Summarize the recent dissertation research with Gunawardena’s Model.

15. Describe the pitfalls of Web-based discourse analysis.

16. Describe the identifying characteristics of online conferences with real-time audio voice-over and text messaging during slide presentations.

Abstract

This chapter will discuss “virtual ethnography” and how it is supported and shaped by Internet technology.

Ethnography: What It Is

Ethnography is a field-based social science wherein the researcher participates, records, and narrates social events and opinions as they happen. Over years of refining its practices, ethnography has evolved, adding ideology to its research agenda, and revising its name to “critical ethnography”. Critical ethnography is a blend of ethnographic skills and ideology influenced and informed by Marxist, Freudian, and feminist thought, by critical race theory, post-colonial ideology or other contemporary theories. See Shank (2006) for details on these and other influences on critical ethnography.

The critical ethnographer’s study of human events experience and ideology can be compared to the natural scientist’s study of icebergs. Like the iceberg only a small proportion of human experience can be explicitly stated, and therefore can be observed and recorded. The largest proportion of the iceberg by far, resides beneath the surface of the water. Like iceberg research, the much larger (and more interesting) proportion of human events, experience and ideology resides deep within the lived events of the human subconscious. For the critical ethnographer most of the human condition is lived ideology that resides beneath the surface of an observable recordable “reality.”

Virtual Ethnography

Virtual critical ethnography or simply “virtual ethnography” is critical ethnography supported and shaped by an Internet technology. Internet technology has been around since the 1960s. The Internet is the connection of most computer networks around the world. A lot of people use the terms “Internet” and “Web” interchangeably. But the Web is just one part of the larger entity called the Internet. Anytime you connect more than one