

Ibrar Bhatt

Lancaster University, UK

Abstract

Research into the 'Digital University' necessitates decidedly digital methodologies. However, much of the recent discussion surrounding digital methods in education, including Higher Education, places more emphasis on quantitative approaches and the affordances of learning analytics (e.g. Sclater et al., 2016). There therefore remains a need to theorise and problematise the use and usability of new and digital methods to augment qualitative and ethnographic approaches to research. I argue that this is particularly pertinent for research on writing activities.

In this paper I discuss how my research team approached the study of the writing and knowledge producing work of academics. I reflect upon how we conducted in situ observations of the writing practices of our participants as part of a broader ethnographic and multi-method study. I argue that our theoretical and methodological ideas have the potential to open up new possibilities and opportunities for writing research in the contemporary university environment.

Context

This paper reports on the second phase of an ESRC-funded research project entitled *The Dynamics of Knowledge Creation: Academics' writing practices in the contemporary university workplace*¹. In the research we examine the writing and knowledge producing practices of academics in three different disciplines and institutions. Through working closely with individual academics, we explore how knowledge is produced and distributed through writing practices, and how these are shaped by recent changes in Higher Education including marketisation, research evaluation, and the introduction of managerialist approaches. We also explore the diverse teaching, service, and admin-related writing which are also an established part of academic professional life.

Here I report on the second phase of our research, in which we conducted detailed and close-up recordings of writing events. The methods build on previous work which problematises how literacy research is carried out in digital environments (e.g. Bhatt, in press), and augment more

¹ See <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/acadswriting/about> for more information.

established ethnographic approaches in Literacy Studies (e.g. Heath & Street, 2008). I outline some of the challenges (including ethical and practical) that we faced as we sought to capture how academics write. Capturing their writing activities during this phase of the project was far from straightforward, and fraught with ethical and practical hurdles that were not easily anticipated.

Perspective to Literacy

The project is framed within a social practice perspective to literacy. This approach is one which sensitises us to the writing of academics as developed and maintained through networks of practices, and shaped by aspects of material environment, cultural histories, and institutional positionings (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Barton, 2007). Academics' writing practices are therefore understood in their diversity, are socially and institutionally situated, and shape (and are shaped by) the orderings of power and social structure.

This leads us to examine the writing and literacy practices of academics as emerging through networks of actors encompassing cultural, institutional, political, and disciplinary influences. Understanding how these actors shape writing activities and knowledge production in the day-to-day work of academics then becomes a methodological challenge. This challenge builds on the ethnographic commitment of prior research in Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton & Hamilton 1998) and requires us to attain an 'under the hood' account of the practices of academics' writing.

In the second phase of our research project we have attempted to address this challenge by capturing writing activities unfolding in real time, along with the surrounding interactions and keystroke logging. This combination of data collection methods, despite their immense utility, was fraught with ethical and practical challenges, some of which I summarise below.

Data collection method

Videography & keystroke logging

This first step in collecting our videographic data was to achieve a 'screen-in-screen'² recording of some writing unfolding. This involved the attachment of an external webcam to achieve an angled view of the academic as they were writing, and thereby more coverage of their movements. This also effectively captured audio interactions around their writing.

² See Bhatt (in press) for a detailed discussion.

The software chosen for this multidimensional type of recording was Camtasia³ recorder (see Figure 1). These recordings were then transcribed into accessible video logs which aimed to chronicle, at short intervals, activities and interactions during academics' writing. We were then able to draw out and analyse salient moments during the recordings for analytic purposes.

Alongside the screen-in-screen recording, we used a keystroke logging software called Inputlog⁴ to record the detailed processes of computer-based writing (Leijten & Van Waes, 2013). This provided us with a log of all the keys typed with a time stamp, alongside fine-grained pause and revision indicators, and how time is managed in a writing event.

Ethical & practical challenges

The general questions posed by the institutional process of ethical review were not specific enough on their own to address all the complex ethical challenges we faced. This is because specific dilemmas arose with our participants in individual moments during the data collection process. In this vein, some have argued that challenges about research ethics cannot be resolved by referring to generic principles and codes (e.g. Simons & Usher, 2000), and that video-based methods in particular require researchers to adopt a particular range of sensibilities to help them manage specific and impromptu challenges whilst data collection is taking place (Wiles et al., 2008).

We found that the institutional ethics guidelines were fairly ambiguous when applied to the kind of research we were doing and the type of data we were intending to gather. When it came to the issue of informed consent, for example, permission from a participant immediate to the research was required, but this did not take into account other people brought into the particular writing acts being recorded. Examples include such people as co-writers, email correspondence, and diary entries, all of which implicate other people who could not be written into an ethics application in any straightforward way.

This brings me to the issue of incidental data in an ongoing screen recording of a person's work. This kind of data was vital for us to understand the multiple forms of practices converging in moments of writing, including how academics manage such things as incoming emails, Web searching, editing documents. Yet this very data posed ethical challenges. We overcame this by giving participants the option to pause and restart their recording using a pause/restart icon in the taskbar

3 See <https://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.html>

4 See www.inputlog.net

menu. Participants were also able to inform us if there were any sections of the recording that they wanted to delete (e.g. password entries and sensitive emails).

Practical challenges included gaining permissions to install software on institutional machines for a given period, scheduling writing events around participants' other commitments, and deciding where the researcher should put themselves (inside or outside of the room), and finally the challenge that some academics did most of their writing at home.

Learning points

For the sake of brevity, I have outlined only some of the many ethical and practical challenges that we faced using this kind of videography to capture academics' writing. These challenges have alerted us to the need for a more detailed explication of what qualitative digital methods entail in literacy research and a more robust theorisation of their implications. These implications include the opportunities to inform and enhance ethical review processes, researcher training, and a better understanding of the kinds of research question that these methods can help answer. If it is accepted that writing itself is transformed in digital environments, then doubtless our methods to investigate writing must also reflect this.

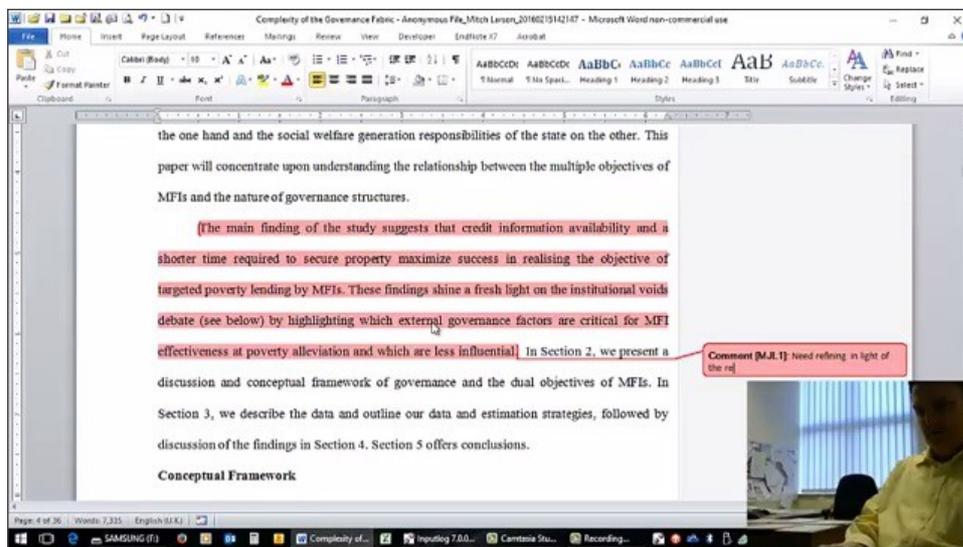


Figure 1: A screen shot of an academic working at his desk, taken from the screen-in-screen recording of his writing session.

References

- Barton, D. (2007). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (2000) Literacy practices. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanič (Eds.), *Situated literacies* (pp. 7–15). London and New York: Routledge.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (2012) *Local literacies: reading and writing in one community*, London: Routledge.
- Bhatt, I. (in press) *Classroom digital literacies as interactional accomplishments*, In 'Researching New Literacies: Design, Theory, and Data in Sociocultural Investigation', Knobel, M. & Lankshear, C. (eds.), New York: Peter Lang.
- Heath, S. B., & Street, B. (2008) *On ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Heath, C., Hindmarsh, J. & Luff, P. (2010) *Video in Qualitative Research: Analysing Social Interaction in Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Leijten, M., & Van Waes, L. (2013) Keystroke logging in writing research: Using Inputlog to analyze and visualize writing processes. *Written Communication*, 30(3), 358-392.
- Slater, N., Peasgood, A., & Mullen, J. (2016) *Learning Analytics in Higher Education: A review of UK and international practice*, Jisc, London. Available at:
https://www.jisc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/learning-analytics-in-he-v2_0.pdf
- Simons, H. & Usher, R. (2000) *Situated Ethics in Educational Research*, London: Routledge Falmer.
- Wiles, R., Prosser, J., Bagnoli, A., Clark, A., Davies, K., Holland, S., & Renold, E. (2008) 'Visual ethics: Ethical issues in visual research', NCRM Review Paper, October (NCRM/011),

<http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/421/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-011.pdf>