



Non-standard Methodologies in the Evaluation of Online Interaction

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This article presents the methods used in the research among “Added Social Value and Social Cohesion” (in collaboration with CESVOT Centre for Voluntary Services Tuscany and Iad E-learning Instruction School of Università di Roma Tor Vergata). This proposes to evaluate the quality of the added social value, but in this seat we will only report the research methods used for the activity which was developed towards the use of the web in relationship to the perception of its learning potentials.

The present research is conducted with a non-standard methodology, an approach which allows to widen the meaning of the concepts and the relationships that should be analysed through the reconstruction of the expected semantic maps (belonging to the research team) as well as the ones that apply during (with the people involved in the investigation) and after the research (of the team). The construction and re-construction of the maps is a process that goes hand in hand with the development of the entire

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activity of research, helping to define the conceptual frames spotted at the origins. In this paper we propose a methodological reflection of which at this stage is it not possible to diffuse the results.

1 Introduction

The larger research objective is the realization of a model for the evaluation of the added social value (Volterrani *et al.*, 2009) shared by the voluntary work associations of the region of Tuscany that can contribute to the renovation and the reinforcement of the role of voluntary work in the construction of socially-cohesive communities. The minor objective, as presented in this seat, is an exploration research for the spotting and analysis of the present connections among social capital, learning, possible changes and quality of the relationships inside the online contexts adopted spontaneously by the voluntary associations, both open (public, like blogs) or closed (as e-learning platforms).

The research grounds was not planned, not even inside the didactic platforms, therefore the research was presented as unique both from a pedagogical point of view (no docimologic research), and a social point of view (we did not use a representative sample, rather one with a “snowball” effect). The starting cognitive question (Tusini, 2006:78) even if rotating around learning processes in virtual contexts, did not expand on the analysis of the learning paths in relationship to the found results, rather on the inquiry in the relationship among path of learning and individual perception of the value and the sense of the paths itself. The purpose is that of inquiring into a ‘private’ moment during online interactions: that which is thoughtful, that even if unaware, pushes the users to pursue the path or not. The inquiry was addressed around the concept of social capital in its relationship with the possibility of learning, as in its wider sense of change. As a matter of fact normally, inside the e-learning contexts one presumes that an elevated relational density (more so if it owns community-like characteristics) will favour also individual learning. This position was already shared in the field of the studies on social capital (Field, 2004) when some researches were putting in relation positive results of the learning in schools with the “quantity of social capital” possessed by the pupils. But the community is not always synonym with social capital because at the centre of the relationships the individual stands in its singularity, rather than the community, that on the contrary can create the conditions for closure, bonding and conformism. This concept will influence the conceptual knots in the interest of the research, that in the interview will be connoted in the concept of “learning”.

2 Research methods in comparison: standard vs quality?

The relationship among standard terms and quality is curious: in the common use the term “standard” is synonym of quality; on the contrary in the scientific literature the qualitative approach is, by definition, non-standard. The sense of this opposition in to be sought, probably, in a deeper epistemological conflict revolving around “representationability” – or not – of the object of inquiry: can the observed reality fit a model? Can it be known “as such”? Can it be “measured”? We are not capable – obviously – to answer in this office similar questions that have shaped the history of the scientific thought, but rather inside the present research the difficulties that were met trying to answer positively to such questions were numerous. Moreover, since the beginning the research team was confronted with the volubility and the instability of the meaningful concepts such as learning, relationships, identity, community, value, etc. Every effort to define the concepts was resulting in a reduction of the complexity of the real to the point of convincing oneself that no static definition was possible, if not with the cost of refining excessively the meaning of the research: the clearer the definition, the less it revealed to be representative; content and container were not proportionate to one another. For example, in the concept of “learning”, we were facing different definitions present in psychology, pedagogy, sociology, and it was therefore decided to connote it with a very large meaning as individual change and/or collective of knowledge, competence and knowing in answer to formal and/or informal external stimuli. This, in the interest of the research, will influence on the knots

Strangely the non-standard approach does not contrast the previous objective methods, rather it enriches and integrates them, by shifting its focus on certain aspects considered fragile by the “hard” sciences and therefore not possible to enquire about, or they turn out as not quantifiably representatives. Moreover, this method includes totally the subjectivity of the researcher, which is not lived as a problem but as a relevant cognitive resource for the comprehension and the interpretation of the empiric reality; the construction shared among researcher and inquired subjects in the filed of meanings to explore. These are only two of the heterodox aspects, extraneous to the traditional empiric research – but if pursued with method, rigour and transparency – can widen the prospectives of the research also in e-learning contexts. The implication moreover, is that it is impossible to inquire into the research from the subjective influences and by particularistic conditions and therefore it is best to consider them fully – quite frankly and with intellectual honesty – among the variables that influence the conclusions of the complex inquiries.

In the e-learning contexts, as intended in the wider area of the internet studies, the non-standard method is source of a dense knowledge that answers

to the density of the objects of study, although it is free of the objective characteristics of the research methods closest to the epistemological technical-mechanical model, behind which hides a reductive vision of the concepts of the relationships to research, aimed at deducting the impediments on matter (Galilei, 1632), or their inescapable complexity.

The narrations that are fruit of the non-standard interviews, on the other hand, are included in these impediments that in the research we have tried to consider in order not to fall in temptation of banishing the literary disciplines according to a vision that sees the scientific language as opposed to other forms of description and construction of reality that, fatally, would fall in the cauldron called “literature” (Finkelkraut, 2006).

On the other hand the non-standard research methods requires a certain data analysis that does not press on these categories of amplitude (sample), objectivity of the experimental situation, reliability and fullness of the questions. To eliminate the experience of the subjects that are involved in the research, or considering it only from the representational point of view, does not only result in being rationally reductive but also conceptually wrong, also in consideration of the theories on social and contextual construction of knowledge.

3 Research design and tools of inquiry

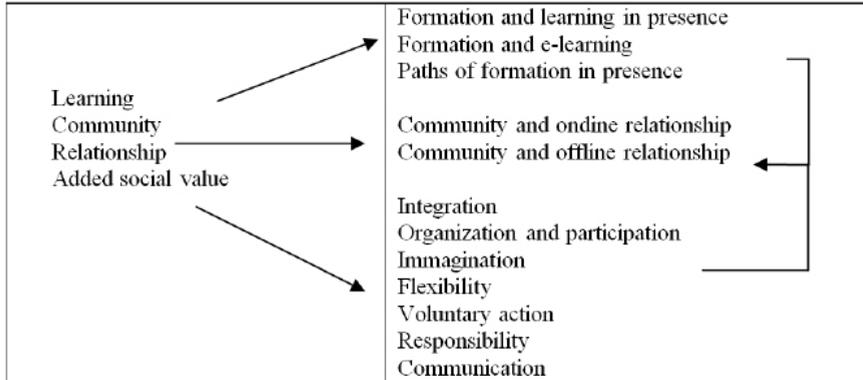
The research has not started, as it is the norm, from the construction and project of a formative environment. We have operated in previously-existent contexts and which initially we did not know, in order to follow the inquiry into the process (the creation/perception of sense and stories) rather than on the product (achievement or not of the formative objectives in the pre-existent FAD contexts). The need to inquire into these aspects of the online experience has influenced the choice of an approach of quality research, realized through non-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) capable of counting the formative experience the way it is perceived and lived by the actors (Cecconi, 2002). The qualitative research activity was integrated partly by the use of a standard questionnaire, diffused online and submitted to voluntary work associations, also excluded from the interviews. The questionnaire was elaborated on the basis of the indicators for the evaluation of the social value as mapped by macro-areas as follows (Volterrani *et al.*, 2009): listening; communication; flexibility; imagination; professionalism and formation; organization and participation; ethics and responsibility; voluntary aspect of the service; integration; diffused relationships reproduction.

The aim of the questionnaire is to inquiry inside the “reaction” of a wide number of voluntary associations in these further simplified sectors of added social value.

The trace of the interview, instead, is made of low guidelines and low standardisation (Bichi, 2002) and was thought of in order to inquire into the various aspects of the on/offline life of associations, turning the attention on two polarities: a) the subject, b) the voluntary work association that it is part of. The areas of inquiry are very open and allow the interviewer to be malleable in the communication and relational interaction with the interviewee. The layout of the interview needs a much more complex and articulated preparatory work in respect to the situations of greater directivity and standardisation, typical of the questionnaires or of the standard interviews. The preparation work was divided into three moments: 1) the construction of semantic maps, 2) a type of operation aimed at obtaining the saturation of the semantic space of the concepts that are considered meaningful (decomposed more and used as sensitizing concepts) and 3) the development of the interview layout.

As inspired from the original cognitive questions, the research team has selected the key concepts (learning, relationships, communities) as were positioned on top of the scale of generality, and therefore with an elevated grade of abstraction. For each concept a wide definition was elaborated and other concepts were connected to a lower level of abstraction (Marradi, 2007) with the aim of saturating the semantic space. In this phase it is fundamental to identify, through an imaginative process, the relationships between concepts and the indicators of the concepts that belong to different semantic spaces. A non-standard interview layout can therefore be very wide since it is the result of a work of saturation of the world of thoughts as imagined by the researchers. During the dialogue with the interviewee this trace will be modified, it will acquire new semantic spaces, new attributed and attributable meanings to the same concepts from the world of thoughts of the interviewees. This process (probing) is the characteristic which differentiates mainly the conduction of a non-standard interview by a directive one, since it takes on the subjectivity of the interviewer and the interviewee as integral part of the field of inquiry, rather than spurious elements to be eliminated. Moreover the map that will result at the end of the inquiry work will be different, and generally more complex than the starting one, since it will be enriched by the meanings individuated directly on field. If we are interested in understanding how the personal biography (and the social and network relationships of the individual) will interact with an e-learning process and, mainly, as the individual perceives this process, the non-standard approach will help us reconstruct the semantic maps of our interlocutor made of pre-judgements, perceptions and convictions, experiences and value judgements. We will not have therefore an exact and objective evaluation of the learning process. But of a web of personal history, perception and the evaluation of the perception of the learning process and the characteristics of the online learning set-up. The design of the research is shaped on three main

activities: in first instance a map of conceptual categories was constructed, which were referred to the initial cognitive question.



This is the most dense and creative phase of the research planning stage, especially if the team, as in our case, is made of subjects that are carriers of different methodological-disciplinary demands. At the conclusion of this first theoretic moment the interviews will bring about more concepts and meanings that will enrich the concepts that are individuated by the researchers with those defined by the interviewees. The last phase sees the revision of the initial map on the basis of the developed inquiry. The model can be defined as a spiral in which “the basic idea revolves around the possibility of building a fair relationship between the empiric knowledge and theoretic elaboration [...], the grounded theory approach sees a continuous comparison between conceptual categories and information which come from the research setting, with the aim of enriching and modifying the former in relation to the latter, and vice-versa.” (Tusini, 2006: 65).

The texts that result from the processes of inquiry are narrative-types, they are “stories” that bring back to a subjective experience where certain aspects come together that would otherwise normally be expelled from the standard researches. It follows an extremely long work of interpretation as it forecasts the comprehension of the narration obtained through the interview and the following individuation of common traits to all interviews (meta-analysis). The interpretation of the interviews is developed partly through software (N-VIVO, Atlas and others) but for the most part it is given to the hermeneutic capacities of the research’s team and the ability to spot the negotiated meanings produced in the interview-phase, in order to bring to the level of conscience and transferability of the probing activity conducted by the interviewer and treated – during the analysis – according to the ethnomethodology approach. At the end of this phase it is possible to reconstruct the levels of generality of the concepts, star-

ting from a narrative textual structure and at a low level of abstraction. Once reconstructed, the concepts can be placed inside a later semantic map that can be confronted with those maps constructed prior and during in order to include the meanings discovered through the interviews.

The competence and the subjectivity of the researchers play a role in the evaluation of the aspects that of the interview need a reconstruction of more levels of generality and that which, instead, “speaks for itself” also at a low level of generality. Also in this instance it is fundamental that all the choices made are justified and explained in detail: which parts of the narrative interview to analyse, which to discard in the moment where the thought flew on other themes and other concepts, which to leave unedited. It is just as important to make available to all researchers the integral texts of the interviews both for an evaluation on the choices made by the team, both to develop other analysis and other reconstructions of semantic maps.

It is only in this phase that the “cognitive question”, as tested on field, can be transformed in a model of interpretation more similar to an hypothesis (research question) from which normally the quantitative researches take place.

In order to practice this methodological spiral the application of an Aristotelian binary logic is not sufficient. The principle of non-contradiction, moreover, does not allow to manage shaded concepts, of which meanings look more like clouds (Kosko, 2002) and are often ambiguous, rather the analysis is practised through a fuzzy approach (Kosko, 2002) that allows putting together the contradictions, without allowing that one affirmation excludes the other, rather taking in account fully the carriage of a direct experience in its subjectivity.

The process of reconstruction, from an epistemological point of view, appears very complex, as escaping from the stimulation-answer model of inquiry, it risks to be self-referential of the most reflective kind (Campelli, in Tusini 2006: 9-11). The only possible escape appears to be the more transparent sharing of the starting assumption and the methods used, that allows to see the critical points, the doubts, the uncertainties, underlining them as such and clarifying which is the interpretative work done on the original text. Certainly this does not protect from the risk of making mistakes, but it adopts a strategy of transparency which is useful for the individuation of the errors that were committed; it allows to include in the research activity the assumptions *a priori* (of the subject of inquiry, but also of the subject which enquires) that normally are – only ideally – purged; finally, it openly declares that the inquires of the human sciences do not reproduce reality, neither do they represent it, rather they re-interpret it and construct it in a incessant negotiation activity.

3.1 The choice of the subjects to interview

During the planning stage, prior to starting the interviews, the associations to be inquired were individuated on the basis of the territorial dislocation and the activities done on the territory and online. With the beginning of the interviews it became clear that the hypnotized model did not answer to the characteristics of the research and that, in actuality, there was no need for a model to saturate the meanings of the inquired concepts inside the associations that were object of our study. Therefore it was decided to proceed with a “snowball effect” living to the information gathered during the interview the choice of the people to interview, most meaningful for themes/fields and specific areas of interest. The result showed a “sample” that we had put together from the information that were supplied to us from the first interviewees in order to spot new ones on the basis of their meaningfulness in respect to our fields of inquiry. The interviewees were listened to as privileged informer in order to find other relevant people in specific contexts, as for example, inside the FAD platforms and the social networks, among which – first of all – Facebook. The original idea of the model was therefore modified in progress and, in this case as well, we gave great relevance to the quality of the information rather to the quantity.

4 The ethnographic field of the web

The present research methodology can be ascribed inside the area of ethnographic research, the challenge lies in comprehending whether such approach can be meaningful also for the investigation in/on the media. In our research we chose to develop an ethnographic inquisitive approach “capable of constructing its own subject of study on field and therefore capable to verify its scientific relevance” (Sorice, 2007: 114), that as it is described by Schroder, Drotner, Kline e Murray (2003), starting from some starting cognitive questions, one can pass to un-expressed questions, in order to finally formulate new research questions. Another assumption that has shaped the reflection is the outdated opposition between the real and the virtual (Granieri, 2009): not only the online contexts are not viewed as “other” in real life, but the online social forms can also be an interpretative model for community practices of post-modern societies. The on/offline opposition is not lived as such anymore, neither is it anymore useful to comprehend the contexts of inquiry. “Today the social organization is structured in a way that it is less and less decided around groups or defined communities, but around personal networks of the subjects, fragmented and multilayered. [...] There does not seem to be a fracture or discontinuity between on and offline experience (Comunello, 2010: 104-105). The field becomes the “space” of relational fluxes and therefore it is a fluid

environment, as rightly underlined in the multi-sites ethnography approach. On the web the notion of field changes considerably including the following as an objet of study: the ability of borders, constantly modelled and negotiated by the users; the quantity of the interactions and the knots that individuate them; their depth in terms of relational approaches. Moreover, seen the specificity of the research project (individuation of the added social value of the voluntary work associations) the necessity to distinguish between interaction and relationship has immediately emerged clearly. Only as an example of the complexity of the concept of community we will report the following interview extract:

“community is a concept made of relationships, proximity, affections, on the basis of a culture of reference, in any case one that is not heavy (...) it is not a culture that supplies with content from the ideological point of view – a membership number – or religious, for example; it is something in which many people can feel part of, without necessarily renouncing to a series of aspects related to single identities. The community is open, in the sense that although it works on a theme such as that of the gender of sex difference, does not see difference as a divided among feelings of belonging”.

Conclusions

Up to now the research has been conducted according to this vision which is reciprocally extensive of the two action plans, confronted from the possibility of applying the same method and an outline of a similar interview to e-learning activities and ones in presence. This does not eliminate the question of the individualization of the research field, as a matter of fact if in the classic ethnographic model the field is the village, or another situation which is physically circumscribed, in the internal research to the web this delimitation is not longer effective: moreover, also inside “closed” situations the field is made of offline dimensions that will integrate the ones online and that will polarize relationships, activities, construction of individual and social identity, integration of different symbolic and cultural horizons.

Given the characteristics and the complexity of these analysis probably our notion of field, in the next few years, will be modified in a borderline optic capable of including more requests (objective and subjective, on and offline, relationships and learning) all at the same time.

The suggestion lies, in the next years, in including in online research a cross-field basis to be explored it its complexity.

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