

Dr Nalita James, Vaughan Centre for Life Long Learning, 128 Regent Road, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK. T: 07821722432, E: nrj7@le.ac.uk

Author's brief biography

Nalita James is a senior lecturer in the Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Leicester. Her research interests lie in the sociology of education and include: higher education; transitions from school to university and from education to work; changing patterns of education, work and identity. Her methodological interests include the use online research methods in qualitative educational research and virtual ethnography.

You've got mail...! Using email interviews to gather academic narratives

Abstract

The paper explores how computer mediated communication offers space for academics to think and make sense of their experiences in the qualitative research encounter. It draws on a research study that used email interviewing to generate online narratives to understand academic lives and identities through research encounters in virtual space. The paper discusses how email can provide a site where the self can be viewed reflexively and re-negotiated through a process of interaction. The paper demonstrates that the asynchronous nature of email helps to facilitate this, by allowing participants to contribute to research in their space and according to their own preference in time. However, it also argues for the construction of more collaborative approaches to research that acknowledge the right of participants to use the temporal nature of space and time that email offers to construct, reflect upon and learn from their stories of experience in their own manner, and not merely to the researcher's agenda. It concludes by recognising the importance of email as a research tool for capturing the complexity of social interaction online.

Keywords: academics, collaborative, email, narratives, online, space, time

Introduction

The use of online qualitative research methods has become more prevalent over the last decade, and has included virtual ethnographies (Beneito-Montagut 2011) online asynchronous (non-real-time) interviews (Ison 2009) and synchronous (real-time) online interviews (Bowker and Tuffin 2004). Research using such methods has sought to examine interaction and communication online and has been interested in both *what* people say and the *way* they say it (Bryman 2004 321). In the social sciences, email is a widely used computer mediated communication (CMC) method for qualitative interviews to date, providing a site for online research (James and Busher 2009). Much has been written about the exciting possibilities email holds as an asynchronous site to conduct in depth qualitative interviews; obtain rich, descriptive data online and understand human experience (James and Busher 2006; Kazmer and Xie 2008; Ison 2009).

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In higher education, the Internet, and more specifically email, is an integral element of academics' lives, underpinning the way in which they teach and engage with students, as well as with the wider academic population more generally (Hinchcliff and Gavin 2008; Adams and Thompson 2011). In research terms, particularly in the social sciences, the Internet has become a site where the social interactions of individuals and communities can be researched and where the construction of practices, meanings and identities can be

investigated, including the relationships between researchers and participants, in ways that may not be possible in the physical world (Busher and James 2012). It has rich and complex connections with face-to-face contexts and situations and can involve researchers becoming immersed in a virtual culture or community, adapting conventional research methods of data collection, such as interviewing or observation, to collect data in online settings possibly over a sustained period of time (Mann and Stewart 2000). Given its importance as a medium of communication in higher education, discussion of the use of the Internet, and email as a research tool in academic lives, is sparse. The purpose of this paper is to bridge the research gap by discussing critically how the Internet can open up different ways for researchers to examine academic inter/actions, identities and experiences in their working lives. It does this by drawing on a research study that examined how academics understood and negotiated their careers and identities (James 2003; James and Busher 2006). Using this study, the paper will discuss how the temporal dimensions of email allows academics to construct, share and understand personal meanings online when it is not always possible to meet face-to-face or be onsite for research purposes because of the constraints of time and space. The paper will also show how email can provide a site to conduct academic interviews that are enriched by participants' critical reflections of their experiences and iterative engagement with their stories and perspectives.

The paper will outline the reasons for choosing email as a method to interview academics. It will then discuss the benefits and challenges of email interviewing that result from the fact that participants are able to contribute to research in their own time and space. These include the following: how email as an asynchronous virtual 'space'

can provide a powerful medium of communication and reflection within the research encounter; how the research encounter and the virtual space as the context of communication provides a site where ‘time’ to talk and *not* to talk (Illingworth 2006 online); the importance of the construction of online collaborative approaches to research that both empower and acknowledge the right of participants to use this space in their own manner, and not merely to the researcher’s agenda. Finally, the paper concludes by arguing that email not only offers time and space for research participants to construct, reflect upon and learn from their stories of experience, but it is an important tool for capturing the complexity of online social interaction.

Research design: Using email to construct academic narratives

The research discussed in this paper draws on data from an ethnographic study that sought to examine and understand how 20 senior psychology academics, all in post1992 higher education institutions across the UK, constructed their careers and identities, both institutionally and individually, and the discourses this gave rise to. More specifically, the focus was on the academics recalling and reliving experience and involved them (re)constructing their academic lives. Adopting this approach needed a research design and medium of data collection that would allow the academics to tell and reflect on their stories of experience, and for the researchers to explore the participants’ understandings of their stories (Clandinin and Connelly 2000 xxvi). The research design also called for a site for narrative production that could adequately capture and reflect academics’ accounts of how they saw themselves, with a view to revealing some of the fundamental structures of their experience (James 2003; 2007a). As noted by Taylor (1989, 52):

the philosophic concern with life as narrative involves an emphasis on dialogue,

conversation, story and the processes of inquiry and reflection on experience that allow the individual to identify what has personal significance and meaning for him or her personally.

Using narrative then is much more than "...look for and hear story... Narrative inquiry in the field is a form of living, a way of life..." (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 78). Following these principles, a number of different narrative methods have been developed that focus on the particularities of experience. These include autobiographical and biographical writing, journal records and field notes of the shared experience through participant observation, as well as interviewing. The literature has clearly documented how face-to-face qualitative interviews can produce rich and in-depth stories of experience, become a site for narrative production and provide a way of understanding and representing experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2000); Czarnaskia 2004; Hardey 2004). The researcher was interested to explore whether email interviewing could be recognised as a legitimate methodology in the study of academic lives, how it could be used to generate narratives of their experience in their voice, as well as meet their needs as research participants and become a central place to document how they, "...live out their lives, find and maintain connections and seek to represent themselves to others" (Hardey 2004, 12).

The practical advantages of using online research methods, such as accessing hard-to-reach groups due to lack of money, time travel; disability; language or communication differences have been well documented (Kivits 2005; Meho 2006; Ison 2009; Busher and James 2012). The researcher was also interested in the way in which the compression of space and time online meant that geographically dispersed groups, such as academics in

this study, were no longer isolated from the context and traditions in which they belong, providing a “bounded space” within which it is possible to explore how people live and work (Henkel 2000). This also speaks to the social space within which email as a contemporary communication form creates opportunities for research (Burns 2010, online). This placed email interviewing within a ‘virtual’ ethnographic approach in which the researchers attempted to “gain a better understanding of the meaning that community members generate through conversation” (LeBesco 2004, 63).

As part of the study, the researcher was also keen to explore “the scope of interpersonal interaction... while also taking into account the lack of face-to-face interaction and the lack of a traditional notion of place in which to ground fieldwork” (Beneito-Montagut 2011, 718). While some researchers have argued that communicating in the virtual world breaks the links between action and site that is thought to be fundamental to ethnographic research (Burrell and Anderson 2008), others suggest that ethnography of virtual sites starts from the premise that Internet dialogue involves social interaction (Hine 2000). It involves the researchers becoming ‘immersed in the online culture, gaining access to the thoughts and experiences of those being studied’ (Browne 2003, 249), and emphasises how researchers actively engage and interact with their participants in online spaces in order to write the story of their situated context. This added to the methodologically interesting possibilities for the creation of an alternative and new space for the academics to write their narratives, to question and construct their identities, and consider how these constructions changed over time as they engaged socially in their world (Henson et al. 2000).

Conducting the interviews via email offered a form of ethnography where the researcher could share experiences over an extended period of time while addressing the issue of physical distance that existed between the researcher and participants; In addition, it meant that the researcher could use existing online and offline relationships to recruit academic participants to the study. As I already had access to the academics' email addresses I used them to gain their consent to take part in the study. Consequently, they were invited via email to take part in the research study and to share how they saw themselves within the communities in which they lived and worked. However, the success of the email study depended heavily on how the researcher constructed the virtual research environment in order to engage the academics in the interviews. Implicit in this was ensuring that they trusted us and felt safe enough to be able to discuss freely their experiences and feelings. As Kivits (2005, 38) notes:

As with face-to-face interviews, where the success of the interaction is a matter of personal affinities, online and email interview relationships will be differently experienced, and hence valued, according to the individual subjectivities involved.

It was critical that my participants felt confident that their privacy would be adequately protected 'in their eyes' if they self-disclosed, and the risk of harm to them or their communities minimised to a level acceptable to them (James and Busher 2006). To achieve this, the academics were made to feel safe in disclosing their views by emphasizing their anonymity, for example by assuring them that all implicit and explicit links between their names and the data they provided would be removed. I also ensured the participants fully understood how the email interviews would be conducted.

Guidelines were therefore sent to the academics telling them how the study would be carried out online (see also Meho 2006), and more specifically, how they would receive the interview questions (one-by-one embedded in the email message) so that they could focus on that question, rather than be distracted by others, as well as deadlines for responses - initially 2-3 days which, as discussed later in the paper, was unrealistic. The questions I designed were sent out one at a time and formed a platform from which each academic could start to write their online narratives about how they saw themselves. There were approximately ten questions that sought to explore the participants' experiences of working in higher education, asking them to reflect on their career decisions and trajectories; their understandings of what an academic identity is, how they established it and the self-images used to describe their academic identities; and their engagement in the practice of higher education as a community of practice, and the nature of academic work (James 2003). These questions sometimes shifted based on the participants' responses as the researcher probed further to encourage the academics to reflect on their experiences, and to allow new research directions to emerge.

The paper goes on to discuss the findings from the study and draws on the email narratives *as written* by the academics. This includes typographical errors, responses written in capital letters, and the use of emoticons, all of which are included to reinforce the significance of their words.

'Space' in email interviews? Reflecting on the self

One major benefit of email is that it allows both the researcher and the researched to participate in their own space. Bowker and Tuffin (2004, 320) suggest that “[s]ituating discourse within a familiar physical location may enhance participants’ disclosure, and, hence, the richness of the data gathered.” For the academics in this study, email was often viewed as disrupting notions of what constitutes academic work and what it means (or what it should mean) to be an academic. However, it was also perceived as advantageous in creating space for thinking. As one academic commented:

There are always loads of emails flying around but by ignoreing your email for a bit I could reflect on the questions in a way that would not happen with the spoken word. There is so much going on...there is not much time to reflect otherwise!!! Doing this online gives me a chance to think. (AC1)

As this academic reflected: *there is so much going on*. Very often the various responsibilities and relationships of their ‘meatspace’ sometimes affected whatever was going on through email with the researchers, which made their responses slower than anticipated as discussed later in the paper. Yet, despite the pressures of their working lives, email also offered a new space (site) as a sense-making medium within the qualitative research encounter, to reflect about their academic identities and work experiences in the midst of their experiences, as illustrated above. In this sense, email offered the academics ‘a mode of being and communication that “*diluted* the tensions,

restrictions and expectations of the offline world” (Illingworth 2006 online, author’s emphasis). Some academics took the opportunity email offered to reflect upon those aspects of their experiences and identities that might otherwise have remained invisible and unspoken, as well as provoke new questions about academic identity:

Interesting to reflect on my professional identity- in many ways I think I deal with the contradictions and sense of being an outsider by not thinking about it! Particularly of interest at the moment because I put in for Voluntary Retirement/ Redundancy. Wonder how I would cope with not being a psychologist- what would I call myself etc etc. Waiting to hear so in limbo and so anxious in case it doesn't come through, that no space for thinking about identity, and coping with its loss :-
(AC8).

Such email narratives identified how the virtual research encounter offered a “performative” space (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000 412), in which the academics generated narratives about the subjective self, “a self accessed in what may be experienced as an almost transparent process of relating to one’s own consciousness” (Mann and Stewart 2000, 95). The emerging narratives held a lot of residual attachments to the academics’ embodied experiences and lived practices of their working lives. Rather than using the virtual realm as a means of “escaping” the embodied self (Hardey 2002, 570), they

embraced it both as a practical information resource and as a medium of communication to explore and perform multiple identities. Researchers have argued that in the ‘presentation of self’, text makes invisible the bodily presence as well as outward acts of movement, posture, verbal and emotional expression that are important elements in determining how individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by others (Hardey 2002; Ison 2009; Busher and James 2012). Online, the research interviews were devoid of the normal social frameworks of face-to-face encounters between the researchers and participants, in which both interpret the social characteristics of the other, either verbally or non-verbally through gesture, tone of voice and facial expressions (Joinson 2001; James and Busher 2007). Yet while the “lived body” may be invisible, during virtual interactions, mannered behaviours, pre-interpreted meanings and unstated assumptions are clearly visible during online conversations, influencing the nature of discourses and types of social interactions (Madge and O’Connor 2005). Indeed, the academics’ virtual interactions were shaped by, and grounded in the social, bodily and cultural experiences of those taking part (Hardey2002).

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‘Time’ for email, space to talk?

One limitation of the virtual encounter is its “incapacity to give a full and rich detail of lived human experience in a combination of online and offline modes...” (Beneito-Montagut 2011, 726). By interviewing the academics online, at times when that could not be done face-to-face, the study ‘went to the source’ meeting the academics in their own workplace and space rather than remotely. However, the researcher was connected both online and offline as I also had prior face-to-face knowledge of the academic participants

in this study, as a consequence of knowing them in other professional arenas. For example, following the email conversation with the participant about losing her academic identity (see above), I met-up offline (face-to-face) with the participant and talked further with her about her experiences over a coffee. Later, when the email interview resumed, I referred back to the discussion and probed some more by linking to issues that the participant had raised in the face-to-face chat. As Orgad (2005) observes, the transition from a disembodied, anonymous and written interaction to an embodied and oral interaction with the participants can introduce both challenges and opportunities for the research encounter.

In this example, meeting face-to-face gave the researcher and participant the opportunity to develop both rapport and a level of background knowledge which could be later used to authenticate the email interview data (Ison 2009; James and Busher 2007). As noted by Sade-Beck (2004), “in these circumstances the virtual world and the “real world” merge, creating a broader definition of reality.” The move between online and offline interaction was also useful in allowing the academics to elaborate on their experiences, adding further threads to the email interviews. Further, the nature of the email interview, as disembodied and asynchronous, allowed a degree of control over the interaction as both researchers and participants were able to reflect on what they wanted to write, and rewrite in their own space and time. However, this is not just something that occurs online. While virtual space engages participants in the production of new selves, these selves are not detached but incorporate embodied experiences and practices (James and Busher 2009).

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The ‘temporal dimension’ of email communication, reinforced by the asynchronous nature of email (Kivits 2005, 43), created a social context in time and space in which the academics explored their changing self-perceptions and allowed for a thoughtful and personal form of conversation. A consequence of this temporality was that the email interviews took a long time to complete – interviews scheduled to take a matter of two or three weeks eventually extended in many cases over several months as the researchers provoked (and engaged in) greater reflexivity. Despite requests for the participants to respond to the interviews questions within a few days, the asynchronous nature of the email interviews meant that the academics were not committed to reply promptly; they answered at a time convenient to them.

I liked the fact I did not have to reply to you straightaway, sometimes it was because I was busy, but when I came back to the email I could sit and think about your question, even if this meant the response was really late, I did think about it often I was thinkign back to the early days and why I became an academic (AC5)

While such approaches were initially very disquieting to the researcher as, naively, I had not expected it when the study was designed, the approach became a critical element of the email interviews for several reasons. First, the academics’ responses kept

us alert with regard to how much we depended on the persistence and interest of participants who needed to reply to multiple emails and follow a continuous flow of questions. Second, the displacement of time enabled the academics to become engaged in the research process, to consider the issues and explore aspects of their identities and experiences, at their own pace until they were ready to deal with them. This approach allowed them to reflect deeper about their professional lives in a way which they might not have done and also helped them to develop a greater understanding of their identity construction in ways that were meaningful to them.

The email interviews then often involved periods of silence or absence, often for days or weeks. Such silences were at times disconcerting for the researchers because we were keen to maintain rapport, interaction and contact. However, these 'silences' 'absences' or 'lack of communication' were as much part of the research encounter as the construction of the narrative itself. The researcher therefore had to resist exploiting the virtual medium by overly prompting participants to respond to the questions while at the same time achieving a balance between keeping the participants interested in the research and asking questions that were pertinent to their experiences. Emailing the academics to see if they were okay or whether they wanted to continue with the study would usually break the absence and confirm that they were still interested in participating. The academic narratives often indicated that these periods of silences/absences were being used to reflect on their academic identities:

Sorry I have not replied for a little while... been thinking a bit more about the issue of my academic identity as a psychologist a bit more, I think that

it's bound up with> professional relationships, the ups and downs, disappointments and successes in everyday life much more than memberships and things like that. Maybe we all tend to over-reach ourselves and we assume that we have greater insights into things by virtue of being psychologists. (AC3)

By 'ignoring' the email questions, the Internet provided a space for the academics to talk as well as offer "both a space to reflect and a space *not* to talk" (Illingworth 2006, online). Carefully pondering their answers lead to lengthy delays between communications, yet enabled the academics to recall and better understand how they came to see themselves in their past and present careers as they picked up on issues that slipped temporarily out of view through the course of the interviews, and as they returned to earlier aspects of the narrative at their convenience (James 2007b). I encouraged the academics to review previous events through considering texts of earlier parts of their conversations with us in order take forward their thinking on their professional practice and identity. This was done by returning participants' texts to them as part of the normal process of email exchange, and by not erasing messages from the exchange. It gave participants and researchers the opportunity to interrogate their texts as the email dialogues developed creating a "narrative collage" (Denzin 2001, 29).

Building collaborative relationships online

Bowker and Tuffin (2004) suggest that email interviewing is potentially empowering for research participants because it allows them to control when, where and how to respond. This may be considered a frustrating experience for researchers conducting email interviews because of a sense of a lack of control over the temporal course of the interview. As the email interviews progressed, the academics began to take greater ownership of the processes of narrative construction by responding to the questions in unexpected ways and directions. In return, the researcher also was able to respond to the new directions of the participants' narratives by asking further questions about their texts rather than sticking to the original interview schedule (James and Busher 2006). We followed the participants' dialogue, prompting them from time to time to help the constructions of their narratives, but also intervening at some points with our own experiences to create a more open dialogue. In adopting this approach, the research setting and the contribution of the participants became more equal as they were in control of time and pace, fitting the interviews into their everyday routines (Meho 2006). This allowed them to extend particular topics, qualify points and clarify their responses over time. They, as much as the researcher, revisited data, controlled where the direction of discussion went, and influenced the nature of research processes.

Maybe we were sometimes coming from different directions. And maybe in email communication clarification is not always easy??? Also sometimes you said 'in your email you said' and then I had to think back to what I had said ... I found it more demanding in some ways because of this, but it gave me the

opportunity to reflect on how I see myself sometimes for days ... I doubt I would have hand written my responses. Sometimes I wanted to ask 'do you mean this or that exactly' but not doing so allowed me to interpret the question in my own terms in a way that would not happen with the spoken word (AC2).

However, some participants did struggle with the email interviews in the sense that the asynchronous nature of email interviewing meant that they not only forgot to reply due to work pressures but they also got lost in the email thread, as this participant reflected:

I WASN'T ALWAYS SURE THAT I KNEW WHAT YOU WERE GETTING AT. SOME OF THE QUESTIONS SEEMED TO OVERLAP AND I WAS CONCERNED ABOUT TIME I HAD SO MANY EMAILS SO-OFTEN GAVE SUPERFICIAL ANSWERS. SOMETIMES MY RESPONSES WERE SQUEEZED BETWEEN A HOST OF OTHER JOBS...MAYBE MY EARLIER REPLIES WERE INCLUDED IN YOUR MESSAGES BUT I DON'T THINK SO. BETTER TO SAY "YOU INDICATED IN YOUR LAST ANSWER THAT.....AND THEREFORE I WOULD NOW LIKE TO ASK..."
(AC6)

Such comments reiterate the precariousness nature of the email relationship (Kivits 2005) and how researchers have to work hard to manage the long-time interview, as well as ensure that the exchanges relevant to the research topic are progressive, rather than fragmented. Such expressions of frustration by one or two participants highlighted that on

occasions email interviewing was neither an attractive or creative alternative to a face-to-face interview.

When the academics did raise concerns, issues or opinions, the researchers asked more questions to help our participants “reflect on a deeper level and get to the heart of the matter” (Russell and Bullock 1999, 138). For example, in the research study, one participant repeated his concerns throughout our discussions, often returning to and clarifying earlier points made: *Am I on the right track? Does that make sense?* This approach also gave the researcher a “second chance” - to clarify information and gather more detail (McCoyd and Kerson 2009). Within this process, participants’ feelings and experiences were explored in-depth, and comments clarified to ensure that an accurate understanding of the academics’ perspectives was developed. Further, the researcher incorporated their experiences and standpoints into the email interviews, by offering narratives about themselves. For example, one researcher found that following the narrative account of a specific email interview encouraged her to also self-disclose about her professional and personal experiences and identity construction (James 2007b):

AC3: My experiences as an academic psychologist have shaped my professional identity in that I am acutely aware of the rigour with which research is carried out and so feel able to lend some authority to observations/judgements based on the robustness of empirical inquiry.

R: I think that's interesting. In considering the issue myself I have found that my professional identity is linked not only to the working context and the culture within which I work but other identities, which are important to me ... These identities merge with each other and are influenced by each other in terms of how I live my life as a whole.

AC3: I absolutely agree with you. For instance, I teach gender and psychology and regard myself as a feminist, so this has a bearing on how I deliver psychological material and how I am perceived. Similarly I am a parent so when talking about socialisation I feel I can lend some credibility from my own experience. My professional identity is completely bound up with my personality.

In this email conversation such disclosure, and the researcher's contribution and participation in the construction of the academics' narratives, shifted the position of the research relationship to one that was more democratic and dialectical (Seymour 2001). Both the researcher and participant were reflecting during a specific research encounter, legitimating both their roles as co-producers of the narratives within the research (Illingworth 2006, online). They were engaged interactionally and interpretatively

irrespective of the power relationships between participants and researchers (Holstein and Gubrium 2004), as all parties were interested in the processes and outcomes of the research. This process temporarily helped to minimize the structural power hierarchies which at times were inherent, for example, through the researcher setting the research agenda, and asking the questions. It also involved the researcher in her own reflections, as well as the participants' ongoing reflections throughout the research encounter.

However participants are neither "passive" nor "powerless" (Illingworth 2006, online). As the academics described how they saw themselves and made sense of their experiences, they made choices as to what to include in their narratives. In these reflexive moments, the participants took control of time and space to reflect on their discourses at a speed appropriate to their work-related contexts. The researcher found that the participants carefully considered their responses before they were 'uttered' giving them the feeling that they had control over their presentation of self as well as 'control over the other's perceptions of the self' (Markham 1998, 124-125). Such responses were just as credible as spontaneous ones, and for us, provided a more sophisticated understanding of academic identities constructed by the participants. In this sense the academics were not deprived of a sense of engagement in a human conversation, nor of a sense of power to present their own voice.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that email allows both the researcher and the researched to participate in their own space, at their own pace and at the time of their choosing. In the study, the freedom offered by virtual communication in terms of time and space aided

this process as the academics engaged in critical dialogue about their identities, in turn generating narratives that represented their constructed lives, thinking and reflections of their experiences, as well as “give meaning to their lives and capture these meanings in written, narrative ... forms” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 10). In this sense, the study illustrates the use of email “as a powerful medium of communication and reflection within the qualitative research encounter” (Illingworth 2006, online). It shows how email can provide an additional space that takes into account the way in which research participants’ lives continue to take place, and in which they can reflect about their experiences in the midst of their experiences at a deeper level (Russell and Bullock 1999). Responding to research questions as and when they choose, helps participants to engage in critical dialogue about their identities and develop narrative texts that are shaped more closely to their perspectives, and the meanings they construct for their lives.

Further, by allowing equal participation in one’s own space and at one’s own pace and time, email interviewing affords a more equal research relationship, in which participants are empowered to respond to the researcher’s agenda in a considered way. In the study, this was achieved by responding to the varying directions the academics’ narratives took by asking further questions about their texts rather than sticking to the structures of our original interview scripts. This approach diminishes the impact of the asymmetrical power relationships between participants and researchers that so often pervade qualitative research interviews, and gives participants the space to develop complex reflexive narratives about their professional selves. Yet, the potential for diffused power relations between researcher and participant online, emphasizing the

potentially egalitarian nature of email and the genuineness of self- presentation, cannot be presumed (Kendall 1999). In the study, essential to this process was the way in which the academics spent time in reflective discourse in the narrative space, in which they had a degree of control and could respond when they liked, empowering them to take ownership of their narratives at a time and space convenient to them.

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The research study has also shown the benefit of interrelating online and offline interactions when carrying out research recognising that “cyberspace” may at times operate as a place to “be” (Markham 1998), but communication within remains intimately connected to the offline social world and, within this study, was a critical component of the qualitative research encounter. The offline encounters with the academics allowed the researchers to refer to issues that sometimes remained undeveloped in our online interactions. In the press of their busy lives this proved to be a useful process, highlighting how it is no longer useful to differentiate between the real and the virtual in everyday-life social interactions (Benito-Montagut 2011). As Markham (2004, 147) notes, “methodologically we should not ignore this feature because as interaction constructs and reflects the shape of the phenomena being studied, interaction also delineates the being doing the research in the field.” Sometimes the academics performed vulnerable identities, as they were thinking critically about who they were, which sometimes led to “identity struggles” (Lebesco 2004, 73) as they grappled with the tensions and negotiations that existed in shaping their identities. This also reiterated how “the spaces of interaction might be differently configured and differently experienced, but they do not lose all reference to offline realities” (Hine 2000, 144). Sometimes the academics performed vulnerable identities, as they were thinking critically about who

they were, which sometimes led to “identity struggles” (Lebesco 2004, 73) as they grappled with the tensions and negotiations that existed in shaping their identities.

To sum up, email is a useful site for rich and sustained interactions and a useful tool to capture the complexity of social interaction online. As this research study on academic identity demonstrates, using email for interviewing provides a means by which individuals can take part in research that is important to their lives which they might not have been able to do had the researchers had to rely on face-to-face interviews. It is not about creating a research design that is most convenient for the researcher. In the study, the very purpose of using email interviews was that the “absence of a proper locus [provided] the academics with a space to explore the aspects of their experiences and identities that otherwise remained initerable” (Eichorn 2001, 572). In this sense, the research encounter and the virtual space as the context of communication can be used as a site for participants and researchers to interact online and to reflect on experience, and for researchers to study and better understand their lives.

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