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Educational research in (post-)digital spaces

Christine Demmer & Juliane Engel

Abstract: Based on approaches of digital ethnography and using the work of Sofia da Silva as an example, we pose reflections on future shifts and innovations in the context of qualitative educational and biographical research: What methodological questions arise when current educational science objects are viewed from a (post-)digital perspective? We assume, among other things, that due to the interweaving of analogue and digital worlds new forms of biographization emerge, which require a theory-generating exploration of hybrid modes of experience as well as of the embedded interrelation of, for example, ‘body’, ‘education’, and ‘biography’. This could be achieved, for example, by a stronger mediation of ethnographic and biographical research approaches, or through an investigation of the connection between digital everyday practices, digitally mediated prefigurations and biographizations.

Keywords: education, digital research, ethnography, biographical research

Biografie- und Bildungsforschung im Zeichen (post)digitaler Welten

Zusammenfassung: Auf der Grundlage von Ansätzen der digitalen Ethnografie am Beispiel von Arbeiten von Sofia da Silva stellen wir Überlegungen zu zukünftigen Verschiebungen und Neuerungen im Kontext qualitativer Bildungs- und Biografieforschung an: Welche methodologischen und methodischen Fragen stellen sich, wenn (post-)digitale Perspektiven auf aktuelle erziehungswissenschaftliche Gegenstände eingenommen werden? Wir gehen u.a. davon aus, dass aufgrund des Ineinanderverwobenseins von analogen und digitalen Welten neue Formen der Biografisierung entstehen, die eine theoriegenerierende Erforschung hybrider Erfahrungsweisen und der darin angelegten Relationierung beispielsweise von ‚Leib/Körper‘, ‚Bildung‘ oder ‚Biografie‘ bedarf. Dies könnte beispielsweise über eine stärkere Vermittlung von ethnografischen und biografischen Forschungszugängen sowie durch Untersuchung des Zusammenhangs von digitalen Alltagspraktiken, digital vermittelten Präfigurationen und Biografisierungen fokussiert werden.

Schlagwörter: Bildung, Digitale Forschung, Ethnografie, Biografieforschung

Introduction

This contribution examines how qualitative educational and biographical research changes when it approaches current objects of educational research from (post-)digital perspectives. Sofia da Silva’s work towards a digital ethnography¹ offers a point of connection that gene-

1 This special issue is rooted in the symposium ‚Höher, schneller, weiter‘ – und doch nicht besser? Entwicklungen qualitativer Bildungsforschung in der Selbstkritik“ [“Higher, faster, farther’ – but not better? Developments in qualitative educational research in self-criticism”] that was prepared for the 27th

rates impulses for discussing new lines of research (section 1), for example, for educational research sensitised by biographical analysis, since changing forms of biographisation call for new understandings of educational processes (section 2). Both perspectives feed into the discussion about how current methodologies of qualitative research in educational science and biographical studies (section 3) need to change.

1 (Post-)digital ethnography: impulses

Based on the thesis of post-digital educational processes, which analyses the demarcation between analogue and virtual worlds, Sofia da Silva asks what this means for developing new ethnographies. Taking a critical perspective on societal dynamics, she notes that relations of inequality are (re)produced in the interweaving of analogue and digital, or virtual worlds. Shifted or dissolved borders “are still crossed by inequalities and power relation asymmetries“ (James/Busher 2013), when they became post-digital. So, how does this new reality influence how we conduct ethnography? She and her colleagues conclude in line with a methodological critique of the logic of optimisation that “not only is the Internet a Place, it is also a tool and a way of being, and each of the aspects poses different methodological choices” (Markham 1998, quoted in Parker-Webster/Silva 2013, P. 123). Consequently, da Silva’s theory of digitalisation establishes the internet not only as a site of ethnography, but also as a tool and a way of being, while fundamentally challenging the boundaries previously drawn between analogue and digital worlds. Clearly, this shift also impacts ethnographic research: Da Silva calls on ethnographers collecting data to move also fluidly between the analogue and digital worlds, to explore the interplay between these worlds. “[W]hat does it mean to ‘enter the field’ in an ethnography conducted in online contexts”? (Parker-Webster/Silva 2013, P. 125), she asks, emphasising, on the one hand, the importance of a critical perspective on virtually permeated lifeworlds that pays close attention to dynamics of power in society, while raising important questions about which methodological reflections and methodological approaches are adequate. What do the questions of a (post-)digital ethnography, that this new perspective raises, mean for qualitative educational research and biographical research in the context of digitalisation processes?

Ethnography has developed a productive epistemological principle: The notion of “going native” describes research processes employed by researchers doing fieldwork, allowing them to experience and explore things that are new and unfamiliar to them. The often quoted question “What the hell is going on here?” (Geertz 1987) can also be applied to expeditions into online worlds, as discussed by da Silva. The subjectivising relationality of the internet encompassing spaces, virtual worlds, and ways of being challenges scholars, working on qualitative educational and biographical research, to think outside the box and to dare try new methodologies.

Turning to social practices in digitalised worlds sparks a particular moment of alienation in the face of the emergence of entirely new settings of digital practices, as we have seen in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is important to be aware of a risk that accompanies the institutionalisation of research methods, namely, that they could become so established that they become calcified as a type of pillar of optimisation, and become canonised in a way that no longer allows critical discussion. Ethnography – in a

DGfE Congress and to which Sofia Marques da Silva was invited as one of the main representatives of the approach.

general and in an online context – seems to display more and more resistance, to standardisation of research methodology processes. Despite being in the process of becoming established, ethnography still considers itself more a research strategy than a method. Georg Breidenstein, for example, cautions against a “‘going’ method” (2017, P. 18). It is precisely in maintaining a critical distance to methodologies, that are too rigid, that ethnography has proven to offer valuable insights for empirical and educational research, into the dynamics of cultural transformation, such as processes of digitalisation. Schmidt-Lux and Wohlrab-Sahr, for example, note that ethnographic methods and approaches are often employed in the field of qualitative online research (Schmidt-Lux/Wohlrab-Sahr 2020, P. 5). How can we apply these impulses of online ethnographic research to the challenge of developing new research methods, in qualitative educational and biographical research, especially as it engages with digitalisation and does not merely (re)produce established and standardised procedures, but actively takes risks and dares to experiment with new approaches?

2 New medial forms of biographisation

To this end, it seems important to ask to what extent online worlds offer possibilities to design specific constructions of the self. Or, to put it less provocatively: How do biographical constructions of the self and processes of identity formation in virtual and analogue worlds relate to one another?

Research in the fields of psychology of education and education anthropology, for example, has shown that avatars are designed not only to integrate characteristics associated with winning, but also to encourage player identification with the avatars (Trepte/Reinecke 2010; Jörissen 2012). The US-American psychologist John Suler (2007) remarks that players “project their personality into it – who they are, who they wish to be, what they fear, what moves them”.

However, the fluid transitions between analogue and virtual worlds, that Sofia Marques da Silva describes in her texts about social practices (Silva/Parker-Webster 2018), challenge the typical juxtaposition of online worlds and real worlds: “Our transitions from one activity or communicative interaction to the next seem to occur in a seamless fluid manner [...]. The online and offline boundaries become blurred [...].” (James/Busher 2013, quoted in Parker-Webster/Silva 2013, P. 123). This indicates that it might be worthwhile to depart from the linear conception of biographical context formation, that is usually presupposed in surveys of biographical narratives. It is important to ask how and to what extent digital practices and self-constructions in digital spaces evoke forms of new spatio-temporal biographisations and biographicity? On TikTok, the predominant forms of self-presentation are very excerptive and situational, while on Facebook, conventional information about one’s life, such as one’s birthday or place of residence is (also) presented. This shows how digital places and the addressees in those places generate cultural representations of biographical contexts. We must consider that anthropocentric methods of data collection, such as biographical interviews, might be only one of several possible analytical perspectives for future biographical research. Studies on identity models in youth culture indicate that biographical knowledge is not only located within a human being but also in the intermedial and aesthetic relationalities of virtual spaces (Jörissen/Engel 2019; Engel 2020). According to Hine (2015, P. 41), who speaks from an ethnographic perspective, virtual identities should not be thought of as disembodied, but as an “extension of other ways of embodied ways of being”. This raises the question how these extensions manifest in biographies. Benjamin Jörissen has shown just how

much the body is at play in virtual activities (Jörrissen 2008, 2012). This calls for further consideration, how to understand the “incorporation of the social world”, by means of the body as a “carrier of biographical experience” (Alheit/Nittel 2014, P. 27), in the context of digitalised social worlds. Two related perspectives of inquiry are, on the one hand, what this means for digitally mediated biographies as a research object, and, on the other hand, whether research and knowledge production can be understood as an embodied practice, and whether the researcher’s body can be considered an organ of knowledge (Demmer 2016).

3 Perspectives for further development of qualitative methodologies and methods of (post)digital educational research

An important challenge, facing qualitative biographical research in education, is how to be forward-thinking and to dare try new, explorative research approaches to digitally mediated educational and biographical processes, while remaining very sharp in terms of methodology (Böhme 2016). We have identified at least three perspectives to be developed:

1. Working on defining, dissecting, and elaborating concepts, such as the terms “biography”, “experience”, “body”, “learning”, “education”, and how they interrelate. This conceptual work should systematically follow the specifics of digital modes of experience and digitally produced spaces of appropriation, which can no longer be examined solely based on an anthropocentric logic of knowledge. We can ask, for example: Where is knowledge? How can it be found *between* the subject and the digital world? Positions, that assume neither that the social is dematerialised and disembodied by digital modes of experience, nor that these are merely an expansion of already existing forms of the social, can provide a starting point for these considerations. The “bodily-digital hybridisation of everyday life” (Aktaş et al. 2018, P. 181) points to the necessity of research, focussing both on ways of engaging with hybrid experiential spaces in everyday practice and on the material and symbolic prefigurations inscribed in them (Aktaş et al. 2018, P. 179). The combination of (online) ethnographic approaches and biography-analytical approaches, which needs to be fleshed out more in terms of methodology. Dausien/Kelle (2005) (also: Bahl/Worms 2018), for example, could provide impulses, for further developing this combination of ethnography and biographical research, which seems very promising, with regard to researching digital lifeworlds in particular. If we approach the internet as both a “place” and a “way of being”, as Marques da Silva does, we can assume that in the space of the internet, practices and (biographical) being-in-the-world are intertwined. Theories that follow the “material turn” and focus on the “medial and material entanglements of the biographical” (Bettinger 2021, P. 11) have demonstrated the necessity for biographical research and biographical educational processes, to go beyond analyses conceived in individualistic terms, and that they must really factor in the relations between different entities (Bettinger 2021).
2. Exploring how digitalisation affects research processes, how it shapes not only our findings, but our epistemological interests. Here, for example, questions of the digitalisation of research instruments need to be critically engaged with, as discussed by Burkhardt Schäffer (in this volume) or André Epp (2017). Marques da Silva’s work is also very relevant for research on datafication, and provides important impulses, such as the fact

that the internet should not be considered as a “tool”, for example as a research tool to generate data. Following Marques da Silva, we recognise that the social meaning of digitally generated data can not fully be grasped, based on only the data alone, but that it is crucial, to consider the social contextualisation. Data plays an increasingly important role in educational institutions, for example in apps, learning platforms, and school information systems. For qualitative educational and biographical research, this poses significant new methodological challenges, for instance, the issue, how to analyse large data volumes, is one of many. How do datafied learning environments and an “automated construction of social reality by algorithms” (Breiter/Hepp 2018, P. 28) impact pedagogical actions or learning and educational processes? What exactly are these changes, that, however, are largely opaque to the people involved? Here, a perspective that pays close attention to dynamics of power, like Marques da Silva provides in her work, proves to be particularly valuable, in identifying, how datafication produces shifts, in asymmetrical configurations of power in education. The importance of engaging with research ethics and questions of data archiving, as it is currently happening in many discourses we are involved in, and also in the Kommission Qualitative Bildungs- und Biografiefor- schung (QBBF) (e.g. Demmer/Engel/Fuchs 2020), is certainly emphasised once again, when it comes to research in digital contexts, especially, when it comes to how big data is “contextualised” by triangulating datafied and qualitative data (cf. Breiter/Hepp 2018).

Transformations in the field of education, such as constellations of upbringing and education and generational constellations in cultures of the digital, and transformations in research methods are intertwined, as we described above. What new concepts need to be developed, in order to rethink not only this fundamental cultural transformation and the changes in sociality, the relations between the self, and the world that it produces, but also how they become institutionalised in education?

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