Ethical constraints in the valid interpretation of transcribed communication in online study

Ieda Santos a,⁎, John LeBaron b,1

a University of Warwick Institute of Education, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom
b Myron L. Coulter Faculty Center, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC 28723, USA

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ethical issues associated with analysis of computer conference transcripts and the value of validating the interpretations of such transcripts with other data sources. Based on the study of a graduate level online course recently taught at a major American public university, this paper attempts to demonstrate how failures of human subject consent can limit the analysis of conference transcripts. While discussing the difficulties and solutions for this ethical dilemma, the paper also addresses the value of triangulating the analysis of transcripts. The paper concludes with a general discussion of the difficulties encountered, examining the value of the transcripts as a triangulated data source in research. It also raises issues to advance the discussion in this new area of inquiry. Finally, based on the lessons learned from the study, the paper recommends strategies for further research. © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Much has been written about the benefits of computer conferencing in online scholarship. In earlier studies, analysis of the educational benefits of computer conferencing was mainly restricted to an aggregation of quantitative data, automatically stored by the conferencing software (Mason, 1991). While this kind of information provides a useful framework to analyze both student and instructor levels of participation and interaction in online activities, it does not assess the quality of interactions (Harasim, 2002; Mason, 1991). In the early 1990s, Mason (1991) observed that conference transcripts were the most obvious data sources available to researchers to ascertain the quality of discourse but such sources were the least used. She urged researchers to focus on qualitative measures instead of simply counting the number of messages and logons. Henri (1991) joins Mason (1991) by suggesting the use of qualitative methods to analyze the interactions of computer mediated communication in order to derive insights into the weaknesses and strengths of the exchanges in the learning process.

⁎ Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 2476523891 (Office).
E-mail addresses: I.M.N.Santos@warwick.ac.uk (I. Santos), jlebaron@email.wcu.edu (J. LeBaron).
1 Tel.: +1 828 227 2454 (Office).

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Nearly 15 years have passed since Mason and Henri urged researchers to focus on the content of conference transcripts. A review of the literature reveals that a growing number of studies focusing on the quality of interactions taking place in computer conferencing are now available (e.g., De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Gerbic & Stacey, 2005; Heckman & Annabi, 2005; Henri, 1991). The reasons for analyzing the transcripts vary widely, ranging from investigating social construction of knowledge (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997), social presence (Rourke, Anderson, & Garrison, 1999) to critical thinking (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, a number of analytical instruments (e.g., Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Henri, 1991) have been developed for studying the content of the transcripts although the attributes of these instruments have been criticized by many (De Wever et al., 2006; Gunawardena et al., 1997). These studies, nonetheless, illustrate researchers’ efforts in analyzing the content of conference transcripts and offer a significant contribution to this new area of inquiry (Naidu & Järvelä, 2006).

In addition to the challenges involved in developing coherent, empirically valid analytical instruments (De Wever et al., 2006), researchers are also faced with other practical and methodological challenges associated with analysis of conference transcripts (Gerbic & Stacey, 2005). For example, researchers are challenged by enormous quantities of information and by the inordinate time requirements involved in meaningful analysis (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000). In addition, analysis of conference transcripts may be hampered by ethical issues (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). There is no guarantee that all potential participants will give consent to be included in the research project (King, 1996). Negative responses or lack of response to requests for consent create problems by limiting solutions for researchers (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). Moreover, conference transcripts alone do not give a complete record of the learning, reactions, thoughts and beliefs taking place during the activities (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). It has been suggested that internal analysis of transcripts needs to be validated with direct evidence from students’ perceptions of the educational value of the conference or from other data sources (Hammond & Wiriyapinit, 2005; Hara et al., 2000).

The aim of this paper is to present a case study of the ethical issues associated with analysis of conference transcripts. It also discusses the challenge of validating the interpretations of the transcripts with other data sources. This paper is based on the study of a postgraduate online course recently taught at a major American public university. The study sought to answer the following research question: what instructional design and strategies contribute to promote and sustain a learning community in higher education online courses? Various data collection methods were used to investigate how the course design and the instructional strategies were applied to promote a sense of learning community in an online course setting. Following an overview of the research project and a review of relevant literature, the paper describes the problems encountered while analyzing conference transcripts and the solutions implemented. While discussing the solutions for the difficulties encountered, this paper also addresses the value of triangulating the study findings.

1.1. Overview of research project

This study was conducted in a 13-week online postgraduate course co-taught by two instructors at an American university during the fall semester 2004. The course was offered as a core requirement in one of the University’s online degree programs. The course goals were to prepare teachers, administrators and other educational practitioners; to identify a problem for inquiry, to design, and to conduct an investigation using qualitative methods; and to evaluate and develop recommendations based on their inquiries. A commercial online learning management system supported the teaching and learning environment. Learning activities were organized weekly. Students worked in whole-class discussion and in privately grouped team spaces. For their group activity, students were assigned to five teams of four to five members each. Most draft assignments were first reviewed by team members before submitting for grading. Students’ contributions to the whole-class discussion were based on readings from the required book, weekly summaries posted by each team and issues related to assignments. Two chat sessions were also scheduled for the course involving all participants.

Students and the primary instructor and the co-instructor were all invited to participate in the study. Initially, there were 26 students in the course. After three occurrences of attrition at the beginning of the course, 23 students remained enrolled in the class. Sixteen students agreed to participate in the study. Four students did not agree to participate and three did not respond to the researcher’s invitation confirming their willingness to participate. The sample comprised of 16 students (14 females and 2 males). The sample group’s age spread was 20 to 51 and above. Students within the sample were currently employed as school administrators (27%), primary (33%), secondary (13%) and postsecondary...
2. Literature review

Conferencing transcripts from online courses constitute a valuable data source because they provide an extensive record of the dialogue and interaction taking place in the computer conference environments (Garrison et al., 2001). The automatic storage of the messages provides rich source of data for researching and understanding teaching and learning in online learning settings (Gerbic & Stacey, 2005). In addition, most of the conference systems provide automatic storage of user statistics such as number and time of access to the course and number of messages written, read and responded by students and instructors (Campos, 2004; Mason, 1991). Based on this information, a variety of quantitative results may be produced including patterns of interaction among students, and number of messages posted by all participants. Harasim (2002) suggests that quantitative analysis of transcripts is an important indicator of level of participation and engagement. Mason (1991) believes, however, that the use of quantitative information should not be used as a single data source because it is inadequate and may be misleading.

Despite the wealth of information available to researchers, there are unique and unresolved ethical issues associated with analysis of conference transcripts (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Researchers, for instance, may encounter students who decline to sign the consent form or do not respond to the researcher’s invitation to confirm participation in the study (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). Rourke et al. (2001) observe that the issue of informed consent appears to be the most challenging ethical concern researchers need to confront. King (1996) suggests that if participants in online communities discover that their information has been used without their permission, psychological harm to these individuals might be alleged. He further adds that a possible solution for the non-agreeing participants’ dilemma is to exclude any kind of information from the analysis without prior permission from the subjects studied.

Similarly, Anderson and Kanuka (2003) propose that researchers might (1) contact non-participants and ask for their permission to analyze their messages; (2) exclude messages from those who explicitly refused to participate in the study and include those who did not answer the invitation; and (3) delete messages posted by those who refused to participate, did not answer the invitation or dropped out the course. The authors defend that eliminating messages (third option) is the safest choice because it best respects non-participants’ privacy. Mazur (2004) wonders whether eliminating the messages would affect the overall understanding of the dialogue in the conference. Rourke et al. (2001) believe that the removal of non-participants’ postings may make understanding of the dialogue difficult since it decontextualizes subsequent postings.

Discussion of the ethics related to the analysis of online conference transcripts is still emerging (King, 1996). Anderson and Kanuka (2003) suggest that time and experience are required before it is possible to infer appropriate ethics standards for online research. Nevertheless, Browne (2003) strongly argues that appropriate permission from study participants must be granted prior analysis of conference transcripts. Some researchers (e.g. Browne, 2003; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998) explicitly declare whether permission was obtained for analysis of the transcripts and whether it was granted by all involved in the study. On one extreme, Brook (2004), for instance, explicitly states in his study that participants were invited to complete an informed consent form. At the other extreme, the lack of acknowledgement or reference whether permission to analysis the transcripts was granted is notorious in several studies (e.g. Campos, 2004; Fung, 2004; Gabriel, 2004; Heckman & Annabi, 2005; Jeong, 2003; Lee, 2004; Misanchuk & Dueber, 2001).

In addition to the ethical implications associated with negative or lack of response among study participants, the literature suggests that conference transcripts offer an incomplete record of the learning, reactions, thoughts and beliefs taking place during the activities (Garrison et al., 2001). In other words, the researcher can only observe through the transcripts the information that participants choose to make apparent in the text they produce (Garrison et al., 2001). Certain participant ideas may be explored individually which are not shared with other participants in the conference. Alternatively, students may choose to discuss relevant academic ideas outside the conference with colleagues and friends (Garrison et al., 2001; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). Naidu and Järvelä (2006) indicate that “it is never possible to find full evidence of learning from “traces”, such as computer notes of discussion threads...” (p.6). While acknowledging the value of conference transcripts, Hammond and Wiriyapinit (2005) argue that direct evidence of students’ accounts of the educational value of the interactions can only be assessed using survey or interview data. Hammond and Wiriyapinit also observe that one of the most striking features of past research investigating online interaction was the exclusive reliance on analysis of transcripts. In view of this limitation, many researchers strongly
recommend triangulating the interpretations of the transcripts with other data source (Garrison et al., 2001; Hara et al., 2000; Naidu and Järvelä, 2006). Hara et al. (2000), for instance, who relied only on the analysis of messages, acknowledged a need to employ interviews and other data sources to validate their interpretations.

3. Method

This research adopted a single in-depth case study approach (Merriam, 1998) to investigate both the design and instructional strategies used to promote and sustain an online learning community in the course. The study collected data using a variety of methods. As Burns (1994) notes, exclusive reliance on one method may give an incomplete or distorted picture of the topic under investigation. Different methods of data collection can produce mutually reinforcing results, enhancing the researcher’s confidence about the conclusions of a study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). In order to achieve triangulation, surveys, interviews, and content analysis were used.

At the beginning of course activities, an online student and instructor profile form was administered followed by a semi-structured email interview undertaken by both instructors. The aim of the interview was to understand how the course was designed, its objectives, the instructional strategies used and instructors’ perceptions on collaborative learning and community in general. To complement the interview, the online course syllabus was also used as a data source. Near the end of course completion, a Web-based survey was distributed to students and the instructors. The aims of the survey were to assess students’ perceptions of their online learning experience and to understand the instructors’ reflections on course implementation and student participation. A semi-structured email interview was also conducted with ten students near the end of the course. Messages and other documents posted by all course participants to whole-class discussion, team areas and chat were also collected. Quantitative data generated by the conferencing software were collected, which provided measurable levels of participation and engagement in the course.

3.1. Making sense of conference transcripts within ethical constraints

The authors submitted an application form to the human subjects review board at the instructor’s university seeking permission to conduct the study in the online course. After obtaining approval from the committee to carry out the study, one of the authors posted an individual email invitation to the students enrolled in the course inviting them to participate in the research. A consent form was attached to the invitation, which explained the study’s purpose, students’ rights, and how they would be protected from any harm. As previously mentioned, four students explicitly did not agree to participate in the research project. Three other students failed to respond to the researcher’s invitation. Three invitations were sent to these students who did not respond. In addition, four students dropped out the course (including a participant in the study). Among these four, two posted messages in the discussion groups at the beginning of the course.

4. Results

The following discussion of the problems associated with the ethical dilemma of this study is based on data generated in the whole-class discussion across the 13-week activities. Table 1 illustrates quantitative information of the whole-class discussion throughout the semester, which includes all course participants (two instructors, students participating in the study, and those who did not participate or dropped out the course). The results suggest a student centred approach with students posting a substantial number of messages across the semester. Most of the students participated in the discussions between week 6 and 12 while the lowest level of participation was observed in weeks 3–4.

As shown in Table 1, the highest number of messages exchanged by participants was in week 1 followed by week 8. During these 2 weeks, students who did not participate in the study posted the highest number of messages. A possible explanation could be that all students were invited to post their self-introductions in week 1. Activities organized for week 8 involved whole-class discussions only, with no team activities running in parallel. Non-participating students also posted substantial number of messages in week 7. According to analysis of week 7 discussions, though students were working in teams they discussed many issues during the whole-class such as the content of team reports, chat activity taken place early in the week, and issues raised by the main instructor. In contrast, between week 2 and 5, non-participants in the study posted fewer messages. The same results were observed in weeks 12 and 13.

The whole-class discussion generated a substantial number of postings (N=1017). Rather than attempting to analyze the 13 weeks, analysis of a small, carefully chosen sample is believed to produce as valid results as the analysis of the
whole course setting (Berelson, 1952). In order to keep the analysis within reasonable limits and following procedures by Pena-Shaff and Nicholls (2004), a few carefully selected weeks representing three different stages of the semester, early, middle and late stages of the whole-class activities were selected. The weeks representing early stages were weeks 1 and 2. Weeks 7 and 8 were chosen as representing middle of activities and weeks 12 and 13 as later stages.

Among the selected weeks, weeks 1, 7 and 8 had the highest number of non-participant postings (Table 1). These 3 weeks were considered to be important to include in the analysis since they involved 3 different types of activities: self-introduction in week 1, whole-class discussion in parallel to the team activities in week 7 and whole-class discussion without team activity in week 8. Based on the work of Anderson and Kanuka (2003), who suggest that eliminating the messages is the safest option as it respects non-participants’ privacy and after considering the main course instructor’s opinion, it was decided to eliminate the non-participants’ messages from the transcripts of the selected weeks mentioned above. Assignments and attachments posted by these students were also not included in the analysis. A participant in the study, who dropped out of the course, nonetheless allowed her messages to be analyzed. Table 2 illustrates a thread of discussion showing the unidentified non-participants’ messages that were not included in the analysis.

In practice, eliminating the messages created another difficulty. Understanding the progression of some of the threads of discussion where the number of non-participants was significant turned out to be difficult at times. In weeks 12 and 13 where most of the messages were posted by students taking part in the study (Table 1), it was much easier to follow the conversation. The following is a piece of dialogue initiated by a non-participant, which exemplifies the difficulties in understanding some of the discussions.

**Author:** Non-participant A — initial posting.
Message was deleted.

**Author:** Instructor — replies to non-participant A.

[Name]: Thanks for this example of...you jumped up a level in generalization. I think a number of our...are sticking with a highly descriptive level...and you moved up just a bit in the hierarchy toward interpretation. It

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Table 1
Whole-class activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Total messages</th>
<th>Number of contributors</th>
<th>Instructors’ messages</th>
<th>Students’ messages</th>
<th>Non-participant messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>24&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>13&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>74</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Number of students initially enrolled (N=26).

<sup>b</sup> 22 students remained in the course.

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Table 2
Thread of discussion

... - my thoughts (Anne) Oct. 30, 2004 10:52 PM
Re:... - my thoughts (John) Oct. 31, 2004 9:08 AM
Re: Re:... - my thoughts (Anne) Oct. 31, 2004 11:38 AM
Re: Re: Re:... - my thoughts (non-participant) Oct. 31, 2004 3:06 PM
Re: Re: Re: Re:... - my thoughts (Anne) Oct. 31, 2004 6:26 PM
Re: Re: Re: Re: Re:... - my thoughts (non-participant) Oct. 31, 2004 9:21 PM
works well for me...It sounds like the...brought group members a new perspective on the question that had been explored with...it added another dimension that couldn’t be seen in the other forms...

**Author:** Maria — replies to non-participant A.

[Name]: I truly liked the way you wrote the week’s...I felt you captured and included the most important points from the week, thanks.

**Author:** Non-participant B — replies to Maria.

Message deleted.

**Author:** Anne — replies to non-participant A.

[Name]: I have two thoughts after reading your...(which was quite reflective I thought)...  

1. Why do you think you (and your team to some extent) found the...to be the most valuable...so far?  
2. I appreciated your comments regarding the importance of providing context/explanation for....Thanks...

**Author:** Non-participant A — replies to Anne.

Message was deleted.

Despite the non-participant limitation, valuable information could be examined in the transcripts. Strijbos, Marten, Prins, and Jochems (2006) and Anderson and Kanuka (2003) suggest two different approaches for analyzing the content of conference transcripts: quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Researchers using a quantitative content analysis approach create an a priori set of categories and then count the number of instances that falls into each category (Silverman, 2001). In the qualitative approach, the analysis focuses on the meaning within the text and is associated with many forms of qualitative research (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Preece, 2000). Some researchers, for instance, use ground theory to analyze the transcripts where themes are inductively extracted as they emerge from the analysis (e.g. Gunawardena et al., 1997; Lee, 2004). Others analyze the transcripts by reading and re-reading the text and eventually categories emerge (e.g. Fung, 2004; Mason, 1989). A more structured approach involves creating a provisional set of codes prior to analysis which can be based on existing theory originating from another context, on research questions, or on key variables the researcher brings to the investigation (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The methodological approach taken in this study followed suggestion by Miles and Huberman (1994) in which the researcher develops a set of codes prior to analysis. A list of codes may be created from the literature, research questions, interviews (Berg, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994) or from previous analysis of conference transcripts (Jeong, 2003). For the purpose of this research, a list of codes was derived from other data sources used in the study: namely interviews, surveys and the online course material. Since the study referred to evidence from two data sources: students’ and instructors’ perspectives; two lists of codes were created to reflect both sources. A sample of the codes is shown in Table 3. This procedure allowed a focus on specific information revealed in the messages (Henri, 1991). It can be argued that this procedure prevents the researcher from adopting a more inductive analysis (Silverman, 2001). Due to the above limitations, the transcripts were used with a specific purpose of supporting findings from other data sources used in the study.

Table 3
Sample of instructor and student codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes from instructors’ data</th>
<th>Codes from students’ data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team work</td>
<td>Team work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Team building</td>
<td>- Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Work in group</td>
<td>- Get to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Feedback</td>
<td>- Small team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor intervention</td>
<td>- Student feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Facilitate the discussion</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teaching schedule</td>
<td>- Instructor style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Technical concerns</td>
<td>- Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Team teaching</td>
<td>- Facilitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The following is an excerpt from the primary instructor’s interview explaining how she planned to facilitate the whole-class discussion. It then demonstrates how the information from the transcripts complemented the instructor’s interview:

**Data from the primary instructor’s interview:** “I know this field well enough that I am comfortable looking for ‘teachable moments’ in the threads and not worrying that I am not touching on every possible subject.”

Analysis of whole-class discussion in week 8 shows how the primary instructor’s “teachable moments” were implemented in the threads of discussion: “Dear group...I wanted to raise up out of the threads a couple of things I didn’t want to lose. There is a discussion lower down about...and how you found that question construction really plays a huge role in whether you open up space for discussion... Clearly, several of you would revise...”

4.1. Triangulating for validity

The above example illustrates in practice the value of triangulating the interpretations of the transcripts with other data sources used in the study. In addition, due to the non-participant limitation, validating the interpretations of the transcripts became even more critical in this study. Students’ and instructors’ accounts of their participation and interactions in the course activities were heard through the interviews and questionnaires. Moreover, information about the instructors’ plan and strategies was also accessed using interviews, questionnaires and course material. Through the conference transcripts, the authors of this paper examined participants’ actions and behaviours within their own contexts of teaching and learning as they engaged in community development (Brook, 2004; LeBaron & Santos, 2005; Swan & Shea, 2005). The various data sources complemented each other allowing the authors to gain a deeper understanding of community development and at the same time strengthened the study findings. To complement the above illustration by the primary instructor, an extract from a student’s interview (Maria) follows where she talks about her experience of working in teams:

**Maria:** “I feel as if the team experience is the best part of this course...”

In week 13, Maria wrote the following in the whole-class discussion: “…I feel fortunate to have worked with such a great team this semester. I’m sure the other teams probably feel the same way about their teams. I know that I could ask any one of them for help...and they’d do whatever they could for me...”

5. Conclusions

Contrary to other researchers who secured consent from all participants to analyze conference transcripts (e.g. Browne, 2003), this study was faced with the dilemma of students who did not take part in the research project or who withdrew from the course. This has created a methodological limitation which, according to Anderson and Kanuka (2003), remains unresolved. The solution proposed by the authors to solve such a limitation was to delete from the conference transcripts the messages and other documents posted by non-participants.

Whether the procedure to eliminate the messages was the correct approach, however, is open to debate. Would it have been unethical for the authors to have eliminated the non-participants’ names yet still to have quoted their messages in the report? Although referring to publicly available discussion, King (1996) insists that when subjects do not consent to be included in the study, the report should not include quotes that would offer any reader a clue that they are the individuals being investigated. To what extent this applies to password-protected online course also remains debatable. As suggested by Anderson and Kanuka (2003), to behave ethically, the researcher needs to negotiate mutual understanding with instructors and students about the ethical context of the investigation. Accordingly, different contexts may require different codes of conduct (e.g. students enrolled in required online courses versus voluntary public discussions carried out in chat mode or forums).

Why did the authors of this paper not contact the non-participants or use their messages in the analysis? In line with Anderson and Kanuka’s (2003) observations, within the context of online learning courses, it is important to consider that the course instructor welcomes the researcher into her course with the assurance that students’ privacy and rights would be fully protected. One of the authors believes that, if there are non-participants in the study, the researcher should then consult the course instructor about follow-up contact with non-participants before ruling out exclusion from the study. A concern about being too intrusive persuaded the other author not to pursue a discussion with the course instructor about the possibility of contacting these students. In retrospect, further discussion with the course
instructor should have been pursued by the main author of this paper. This may have resulted in having all or some of the non-participants agreeing in consenting to analyze their messages.

The strategy of eliminating messages, in turn, has created difficulties in understanding certain aspects of the progression of communication among participants. The results corroborate Rourke et al.’s (2001) observation that the removal of one or more student’s postings may render understanding of the conference transcripts difficult. This study also addresses Mazur’s (2004) inquiry about whether the overall understanding of the dialogue would be affected when removing the messages. Mazur had observed that this matter remained an open question. By employing a prior list of codes derived from other data sources used in the study, it allowed the authors to carry out a more purposeful analysis where the main goal was to strengthen the findings. In addition, the use of various data gathering tools became critical for validating the interpretations of the transcripts, which was hindered by the non-participant issue.

Based on the difficulties described in this paper, the authors believe that one possible solution to avoid deleting messages from the transcripts is to contact those students who explicitly refused participation and those who dropped out of the course at early stages of the research. In this particular study, perhaps those students who did not consent to participate were not aware that the authors had access to their written dialogue. As such, it might be worthwhile contacting these students to explain the anonymity and confidentiality of the analysis procedure and ask for their permission. Whether or not to do this, however, should be a joint decision taken between the course instructor and researcher. Another possible solution is to include the following three choices in the consent form that students are asked to approve:

1. I read the information and I agree to participate in the study;
2. I do not agree to participate in the study. However, I grant permission to analyze my messages in the discussion groups based on the understanding that my information will remain anonymous, confidential and used in aggregate with information from my classmates;
3. I do not agree to participate in the study. Nor do I grant permission to analyze my messages in the discussion groups.

The results of this study contribute to advance a little further the discussion on the ethical issues associated with analysis of conference transcripts in online courses. However, the characteristics of the sample limit the potential for generalizing the findings. For example, students who took part in the study posted a substantial number of messages thus enabling the authors to extract valuable information from the transcripts. Because of the small sample size, however, caution is needed when attempting to compare results with other research or to draw more general conclusions. Additional research is needed to justify such generalization. It would be interesting to explore, for instance, whether follow-up contact with students who do not wish to participate in the study, would encourage them to consent to analysis of their postings. Alternatively, other strategies could be applied to seek permission from non-participants. The course instructor might be helpful in suggesting ways to contact the students as their contacts may not be available to the researcher. Such assistance, however, should in no way influence the trust and confidence held by the students in their instructors since instructors must remain neutral, and be perceived to be neutral, for purposes of teaching and research. Furthermore, future research could investigate more deeply the reasons for those students not responding to the invitation to participate in the investigation. Lack of student response might be attributable to a technical problem or a simple failure to check email messages.

Despite the limitations found in this study, the content of conference transcripts offers an important data source for studying the dynamics of an online community and for analyzing the ethical implications of these dynamics. The authors feel that the information introduced by participants in the online discussions contributed much to the understanding of community development in this course.

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