

Ethnography in a virtual mobility context: the use of clinical interviews

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ABSTRACT

In a context of globalization, some universities have chosen to promote virtual mobility programs in order to enhance students' soft skills and their employability on a worldwide labor market. Those programs are described as the use of ICT to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility (Gea, Montes, 2011), and are a way to face economic issues for students who cannot afford to travel. To measure virtual mobility efficiency in the development of such particular aspects as soft skills and evaluate students' cosmopolitan open-mindedness (Cicchelli, 2012), researchers in educational sciences have to adopt qualitative approach and long time observation, most of the time by doing ethnography. If effects of physical mobility in higher-education are often questioned by local researchers interviewing foreign or back-home students, virtual mobility leads ethnographer to go abroad while its subjects cannot. By the way, he or she may crystallize envy or critics, especially as a young researcher, and become a kind of bias in his/her own study. Moreover, he or she can develop some skills that might be interesting to figure out. To take into account those elements, the use of clinical interviews (Yelnik, 2005) in ethnography seems to be helpful, as a way to evaluate not only virtual mobility consequences but also unsaid processes and opinions dealing with the ethnographer position. As a graduate student, I have conducted a research among French and Canadian students taking part to a virtual mobility program, by using an ethnographic approach completed with clinical interviews. It has led to deal with some cultural problems like differences in talking about oneself, and helped me to center off. As ethnographers tend to be more reflexive about their grounds, this research insists on a double range of mobility, both physical and virtual.