Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment
Using the Web as an Object of Study

Steven M. Schneider
SUNY Institute of Technology
steve@sunyit.edu

SUNY TLT 2006
Syracuse
As the Web has emerged as a distinct media form in the past ten years, it has increasingly been viewed as an object of study by social researchers.

Poses challenges for scholars as they seek to develop methodological approaches permitting robust examination of Web phenomena.

One approach has been labeled “virtual ethnography”
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

Virtual Ethnography

- Structured observation of phenomena enacted by individuals or organizations
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

Teaching through virtual ethnography

- Subject matter objectives
  - Examine Web campaigning during 2006 election
- Methodological objectives
  - Introduce research methods, observation techniques, grounded theory construction
- Experiential objectives
  - Register for and use new Web services
  - Obtain, install and use new software
Identify Web sites produced by Senate and House campaigns in 2006
Identify features provided by campaign Web sites
Observe techniques associated with features
Associate practices of campaign organizations with specific techniques
Analyze factors associated with tendency of campaigns to engage in certain practices
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

Example

- Actor: Campaign
- Feature: Contribute online
- Technique: Transaction
- Practice: Involving
Doing Virtual Ethnography

- Observing
- Focusing
- Archiving
- Sharing
- Tagging
- Reporting

**Practices**
- the things we do

**Techniques**
- the way we do things
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

Observing

- Practice
  - identify and observe relevant Web objects

- Technique
  - Firefox browser
  - Google search
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

Archiving

- **Practice**
  - make a local copy of the object in context

- **Technique**
  - Scrapbook Firefox Extension
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

Focusing

- **Practice**
  - zoom in on specific aspects of object
  - create “Webshot”

- **Technique**
  - Webshot with snapzpro (mac) or snag-it (pc) or other jpg maker
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

Sharing

- **Practice**
  - make Web bookmarks viewable and accessible on Web
  - make Webshots viewable and accessible on Web

- **Technique**
  - del.icio.us
  - flickr
Tagging

- **Practice**
  - associate relevant metadata with observed sites and with specific observations

- **Technique**
  - del.icio.us tags
  - flickr tags
Virtual Ethnography in an Online Learning Environment

**Reporting**

- **Practice**
  - Write illustrated notes on observations in tagged environment

- **Techniques**
  - Categorized Wordpress blog entries powered by flickr Webshots
Live Web Examples

– Observing: Firefox, Google
– Archiving: Scrapbook
– Focusing: Webshot
– Sharing, Tagging: del.icio.us, Flickr
– Reporting: Wordpress