

How do university staff and students use mobile technology within face-to-face social interaction in a café environment?

Method

Research population: Staff and students of the University of Warwick

Sample: 2 groups

Group 1: 1 teaching fellow
1 administrator
1 postgraduate

Group 2: 2 postgraduates

1 observation session per group

1 session ≈ 45 mins

Data collection methods:

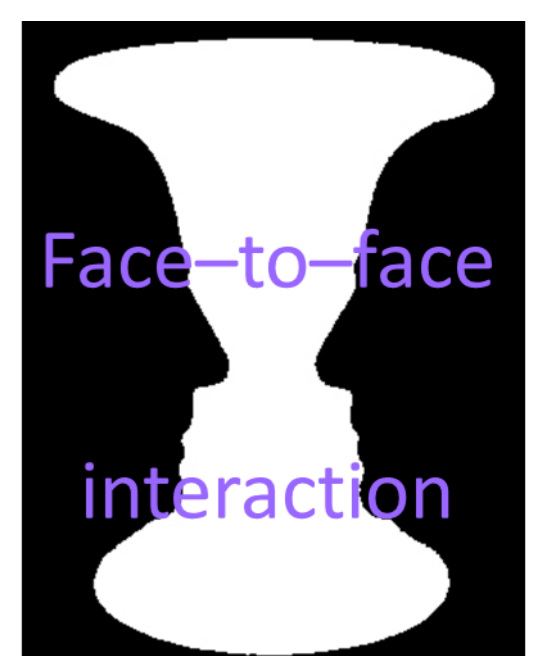
Field notes

Audio-visual recordings

Group 1 recordings ≈ 15 mins

Group 2 recordings ≈ 10 mins

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Abstract

Mobile technology use is embedded in all areas of human activity. However, despite the numerous uses and advantages, its use is often considered an obstruction in face-to-face interaction. Improving our understanding of how everyday mobile devices are used outside the classroom will aid us in identifying opportunities to utilize them within formal learning contexts. Identifying learning activities that pupils find engaging is a significant challenge, as identified

by experts such as Brendan Bartram (Bartram, 2010). Creating innovative activities involving the use of mobile devices could provide a means of addressing this challenge.

I conducted an ethnography exploring how university staff and students use mobile devices within social interaction, specifically their face-to-face interactions, rather than computer-mediated interactions between parties. I explored how mobile device use influenced participants' communication behaviour.

Analysis

I first categorised participants' device use into five activities;

Contributes directly to face-to-face interaction;

1. Accessing objects of reference for the interaction (photographs and social media messages)

2. Gaming

Contributes indirectly to face-to-face interaction;

3. Checking the time

4. Taking photographs (of the interactants)

Does not contribute to face-to-face interaction;

5. Communicating with absent persons via text-, image- and speech-based media

I then examined how each activity influenced participants' communication behaviour and the dynamics of the interaction;

1. Device users employed communication behaviour appropriate to their position in the turn-taking pattern. Does not disrupt the dynamics of the interaction.
2. Device user behaved as for 5 before introducing the game as the new topic of conversation. Initially disrupts, then does not disrupt the dynamics of the interaction.
3. Device users stated what they were doing and what they discovered. Does not disrupt the dynamics of the interaction.
4. All interactants;
 - Changed the topic of conversation to the taking of the photograph
 - Directed their gaze towards the camera lens
 - Simulated a facial affect
 - Changed their proximity to each otherDisrupts the dynamics of the interaction.
5. Device users;
 - Tended not to speak
 - Minimised supportive feedback;
 - No gesture
 - No verbal feedback
 - Gaze directed at device when using visual media and into space when using auditory mediaInterlocutors responded in different ways;
 - By directing their gaze at another interactant
 - By continuing to direct their gaze at the device userDisrupts the dynamics of the interaction.

Conclusion

Participants used mobile devices to perform activities that contributed directly or indirectly to the face-to-face interactions, as well as for communicating with absent persons, which did not contribute to such interactions. Whether mobile device use within a face-to-face interaction disrupts the dynamics of the interaction appears to be influenced by the nature of the activity being performed using the device.

References

Bartram, B. (2010). *Attitudes to modern foreign language learning: Insights from comparative education*. London: Continuum Press.

*S looks at R and shows Twitter feed on phone to R. Ca looks at X
S; she says
S turns phone to look at it
S; question
S turns phone back to R and looks at R
S; should I cut myself a fringe
Ca; no
S resumes scrolling through her Twitter feed. Ca looks at S's screen
S; right 9:30
X: there was nothing wrong with it
S; so we sent
S looks at Ca, who looks into space and pulls exaggeratedly negative expression to mimic image on phone screen
Ca; no*

Extract from transcript shows use of mobile device to access an object of reference for the interaction

Keywords;

Communication

Education

Ethnography

Mobile technology

