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Who benefits from synchronous online communication?: A comparison of face-to-face and synchronous online interviews with children

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Abstract

This paper is based on experiences from three different research projects in which both face-to-face (f2f) and synchronous online (IM) interviews were used, and it discusses what different media can mean to different respondents. The interviewees were between 10 and 16 years old. The analyses were made from transcripts of 25 f2f interviews and 23 IM interviews. The flow of the dialogue and the amount of words used has been analysed. The answers were longer in f2f interviews, but in f2f interviews the boys had the longest answers, and in the IM interviews the girls wrote the longest answers.

1. Introduction

In Sweden 90% of children between 10 and 20 have an Internet connection at home. Sweden is one of the most connected countries in the world, and many countries in Europe are not far behind. A majority of young Internet users in Sweden are members of at least one net community and use instant messaging on a daily basis (Findahl, 2010). Information like this makes it easy to draw the conclusion that all young people in western society are experienced Internet users who easily communicate online. This is also what is communicated both in the media and in research, using concepts like “digital native” (Prensky, 2001), “homo zappiens” (Veen, 2003, Veen & Vrakking, 2006) “N-geners” (Tapscott, 2008) “new millennium learners” (Pedró, 2008) etc.

Multi-faceted approaches when studying online behaviour are quite common. Online interviewing can well be part of this multi-faceted approach, it even seems to be a perfect option since it is in the young people’s own arena. However, physical access does not necessarily mean unlimited access in other ways. Cultural values limit access in different ways. Parents often have restrictions for use for a lot of different reasons (Dunkels, 2007; Enochsson, 2005b). This means that the prerequisites for “the digital generation” look very different depending on the environment, and there is reason to suspect that access to technology is partly dependent on gender, social, ethnic and cultural factors. This paper compares face-to-face (f2f) interviews and synchronous online interviews from three different studies where children participated. It discusses what different media can mean to the respondents and to
research. All the online interviews have been conducted by using the instant messaging (IM) applications MSN Messenger and Yahoo Messenger and are therefore referred to as IM interviews.

2. Background

2.1. Interviewing

Validity in qualitative research has been discussed from many angles. Kvale (1996) prefers talking about quality, and lists six criteria which he thinks give good quality to a research interview if they are fulfilled. The first two criteria he mentions concern the amount of words and the flow of the dialogue. The first is that in an interview with good quality there are many spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers. The second is that the longer the answers and the shorter the questions, the better the interview. Because of the power imbalance when interviewing children, fulfilling these two criteria is difficult. My interviews have also been initiated in school settings where pupils are taught to come up with the “right” answer, which is obstructive when conducting qualitative research (Wood, 1992), and it can sometimes be difficult to get children to talk freely in interviews like this.

2.2. Writing online

Chatting online is often connected to a certain writing style including special acronyms and emoticons. This style has been developed because of the limited amount of signs being used and also because communication has to be quick. According to Hård af Segerstad (2002), this is a creative development and a different style. It also requires special skills from the writer which have to be learnt (Hård af Segerstad & Sofkova Hashemi, 2005). Being a different style has nothing to do with being better or worse and should not be compared in this respect (Hernwall, 2001; Hård af Segerstad, 2002).

It is said that boys/men and girls/women have different ways of expressing themselves and use different words. Herring and Paolillo (2006) examined men’s and women’s web-logs from two different genres. In their rich statistical material they found that the difference between the genders was less than between the genres in ways of using language. Also in older linguistic research it has been found that genre is the most important influencing factor to account for the variations between speech and writing (Biber, 1988). Hård af Segerstad is not totally convinced by Biber’s conclusion. To her this is still an open question, even though in her material, where she compares different modes of communication such as web chat, speech, instant messaging, sms, e-mail and traditional letters, she found that web chat and speech are the modes where the contributions were shortest, and consequently closest to each other in this respect (Hård af Segerstad, 2002).

In a report where BRIS (Children’s Rights Society, Sweden) evaluated the BRIS e-mail, which at the beginning of this century was a new complement to the Children’s Helpline on telephone, they stated that it was more common for children and young people to write about inner problems and feelings in an e-mail, while they preferred talking about physical abuse and assaults on the telephone (BRIS, 2001). The conclusion was that a variation in forms of communication is necessary. Some children prefer written media. They claim that it is easier to write than to speak because they are shy or it is more private (Dunkels & Enochsson, 2007; Enochsson, 2005b; Hernwall, 2001).

2.3. Interviewing online

Using online interviews as a research method with children and teenagers has been found to have a lot of advantages (Dunkels & Enochsson, 2007). It can create a more equal power balance in interview situations between the adult researcher and the young person being interviewed. For example, the child can turn off the device blaming technology if the situation becomes uncomfortable. Not least important are issues of money and time. The fact that it is possible to conduct interviews without a lot of travelling is not unimportant (ibid.).

In an online interview the informant writes her or his own text with punctuation marks, emoticons etc., which reduces the interpretation process one step. This is of course dependent on the informant’s ability to use the written language. But it also saves time, since the researcher does not have to transcribe the interview (Dunkels &
Enochsson, 2007). Sundén (1998) claims that the similarity between the computer-mediated written conversation and the traditional text is an illusion, and that the fact that the process of saving the conversation is so simple from a technical point of view misleads us to believe that they are the same, and this has to be considered in analyses.

There are specific ethical considerations both for research involving children and for using the online medium. The difference between online and face-to-face interviews with regard to ethics is partly a matter of security. The ease with which digital text is spread can cause a sense of insecurity. Even though most face-to-face interviews are also transcribed digitally, that process is further away and thus easier to ignore.

2.4. Interviewing children

All researchers conducting interviews know that some informants talk easily and others do not. Thus, using other methods as a complement to talking can be very useful. Observing in addition to interviewing is a common way of grasping what the informants cannot express in words. Using drawings when conducting interviews with children is another common combination of methods, but it has to be considered that just being a child does not make you interested in this method of communication (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). A range of methods, both traditional and innovative, can help strike a balance and prevent biases (Punch, 2002), for example biases which can occur due to a method not preferred by the informant.

Interviewing children requires a certain sensitivity on the part of the researcher, since there is a double power imbalance compared to interviewing adults. In all interview situations there is a power imbalance in that the interviewer sets the agenda and takes control, and when interviewing children the power imbalance between adult and child also has to be taken into consideration. The atmosphere and setting are important factors for the outcome of the interviews, both with regard to the amount of data and to the validity (e.g. Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). The online environment is often seen as children’s and young people’s arena. This made it easy to ask the young informants in my study if they wanted to be interviewed online. Yet adults should not assume that children and teenagers necessarily prefer their own environment; they may actually prefer an adult researcher not to invade their space (Punch, 2002). The implications of the research setting need to be considered with particular care, awareness and sensitivity in research with children and young people, because of the double power imbalance.

2.5. Gender online

It is well known that boys and girls have different approaches to online as well as offline activities (e.g. Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004; Nordli, 2003; Thorne, 1993). It can be seen in statistics that girls use e-mail and chat more online than boys do (e.g. Larsson, 2005). This does not mean that boys do not communicate online, they only use other forms of communication, like playing games in communities for example, where chatting is often required (Enochsson, 2007a). Also in information-seeking studies online, differences have been found in the amount of search words and the way of writing them (Large, Beheshti, & Rahman, 2002). Among Swedish, young online community users it has been found that girls write more and longer messages (Enochsson, 2007b). This means that girls’ writing and communicating online is more visible. In comparison it has been documented that boys talk more than girls in classrooms and public arenas (Öhrn, 2002).

2.6. Research questions

The aim of this paper is to compare f2f interviews and IM interviews. It discusses what different media can mean to different respondents and to research. It is based on experiences from three different research projects in which both f2f and IM interviews were used. The main question is if there is a difference in the amount of words and in the flow of the dialogue between the two media, between boys.

3. Method

Interviews from three studies in school settings have been used as data sources. The contents of the interviews were partly information seeking on the Internet, partly participation in online communities. The interviewees were
between 10 and 16 years old, and some of them could choose the interview setting (i.e. f2f or IM). In total, 26 girls and 22 boys participated in the study.

The interviewer knew all the interviewees, in the respect that they had all participated in research studies face-to-face. The choice of IM interviews was from the beginning a convenience choice; all the respondents could not be reached in one of the studies and the remaining were asked if they could consider participating online using MSN Messenger. Experiences from this first study led to IM interviews as an eligible option in my Internet studies. Both MSN and Yahoo messenger were used. In the third study, which was about information seeking on the Internet, there were follow-up interviews in a different media from the first interview with the aim of comparing the outcome. Only eight pupils’ interviews could be used in this respect.

The analyses were made from transcripts of 25 f2f interviews and 23 IM interviews. The f2f transcripts were transcribed from recordings by the researcher, while no transcription was necessary for the IM interviews since they were written down directly during the interviews. The flow of the dialogue and the amount of words used have been analyzed. The interviews were analyzed to discover any patterns concerning boys and girls, ages, and types of question. In the analyses words have been counted and also words per answer; what is written as a paragraph in the transcripts is regarded as one answer. For the IM interviews, the respondents decided themselves how to divide the text into paragraphs. For the f2f interviews I decided upon the paragraphs when transcribing; a pause in the spoken answer is seen as a new paragraph in the written text.

Although the numbers are quite small and the sample consists of available interviews, statistical analyses have been made. Effect size has been used, and where the effect size according to Cohen’s standard is considered as medium (≥0.5), a difference is reported. A small difference is reported when the effect size is a bit below medium (0.3-0.5). Some differences are statistically significant also when using other calculations. Since the aim of this article is to point at an issue to be aware of and to investigate further, the effect sizes and significances are not specified further.

4. Result

Among those who could choose, the boys seemed to prefer f2f interviews and the girls IM interviews. This is not based on the numbers of participants used in this study, but on the fact that in interviews where there was no option, there were more girls among the drop-outs in f2f interviews, and for IM interviews the drop-outs were mostly boys, even if the numbers are small.

4.1. Comparing media

There was a difference in how many words the interviewees used in different media. Overall, the answers were longer in f2f interviews. There was an average ranging from 2.3 to 42.1 words per given answer in the f2f interviews (mean: 16.0), compared with the range 2.3 – 22.0 for the written interviews (mean: 8.3). Since it usually takes longer to write than to speak, this was not very surprising, rather an expected outcome. However, this is not connected to the number of questions posed or the length of the interviews. When the analyses were made only with those who claim they use the Internet and instant messaging almost every day (everyday users) – 31 pupils, the average use of words per given answer is the same in the IM interviews, but falls from 16.0 to 13.9 among the f2f interviews. Eight pupils were interviewed both f2f and through IM. Only answers from similar questions were compared. These comparisons only showed small differences.

4.2. Comparing boys and girls

In f2f interviews the boys had the longest answers with an average of 19.1 words per answer. The boys covered a range from 3.7 to 42.1 words per answer (mean: 19.1). The average for the girls was 12.7, and the girls’ range was 2.3 – 35.3 (mean 12.7). In the IM interviews the girls wrote the longest answers. The average words per answer for the boys had a range of 2.8 – 10.8 (mean 5.3). For the girls the range was 2.3 – 22.0 (mean 10.3) (Table 2).
In this material there is a difference between the genders when comparing the two media. Among the everyday users, there is no difference between the f2f interviews (mean: 14.1 for boys and 13.8 for girls). The IM interviews, on the contrary, show the same difference (5.7 and 10.7 respectively).

Table 2. Means of words per answer for the genders and different media

| Mode | Girls | Boys | total |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| f2f  | 12.7  | 19.1 | 16.0  |
| IM   | 10.3  | 5.3  | 8.3   |
| Total| 11.4  | 13.5 | 12.4  |

4.3. Comparing age

There is also a difference between the two age groups. The younger pupils (grades 4-6) talk or write much less than the older pupils (grades 7-9). The average words per answer for the younger group is 7.1 and for the older group 19.1 (Table 3).

Table 3. Means of words per answer for different ages and different media

| Mode | Primary | Secondary | Total |
|------|---------|-----------|-------|
| f2f  | 8.7     | 22.8      | 16.0  |
| IM   | 5.79    | 13.12     | 8.3   |
| Total| 7.1     | 19.1      | 12.4  |

There is no difference between girls and boys in this respect, but when analyzing f2f and IM interviews respectively, it can be seen that the differences between different media increases with age. Older girls express more online (mean 16.6 and 7.3), while older boys talk more (mean 24.5 and 20.1) (Table 4).

Table 4. Means of words per answer for different ages and different media for girls and boys respectively.

| Age            | f2f | IM |
|----------------|-----|----|
|                | Girls | Boys | Total | Girls | Boys | Total |
| Primary        | 7.5   | 10.4 | 8.7   | 6.9   | 4.4  | 5.8   |
| Secondary      | 20.1  | 24.5 | 2.8   | 16.6  | 7.3  | 13.1  |
| Total          | 12.7  | 19.1 | 33.46 | 10.3  | 5.3  | 15.6  |

4.4. Comparing types of questions

As mentioned above, the interviewees that were interviewed in both media had a pattern of expression with the same amount of words in f2f interviews as in IM interviews. The questions in this specific study, which concerned information seeking, were mostly about practical use (e.g. “How often do you use the Internet?”). Some questions were hypothetical (e.g. “What would you do if…”). In addition to this there were questions about the pupils’ special interests. When they mentioned that they searched for information about dogs, the interviewer could ask if they had their own dog and so. These personal questions were taken away from this comparing analysis, and it could be seen that it was mainly in these personal questions that the amount of words differed.

4.5. The interviewer

There is no difference in the amount of words in different media for the interviewer, as there is no difference in the amount of words directed to boys and girls respectively. However, a difference in the intensity of questions from the researcher could be noted.
The researcher sometimes posed several questions after each other: 59 times in the f2f interviews, but only 24 times in the IM interviews. This seemed to interplay to some extent with how many words the respondent used, even if the connection was not total.

The interviewer’s behavior also changed. In ten of the f2f interviews the interviewer had to clarify some of the questions several times, but in only two of the IM interviews. This analysis was done after taking away the clarifying of questions due to using the interviewee’s second language. In seven of the f2f interviews there were interruptions in one way or another. In the IM interviews there were a few moments of double conversations. These double conversations only occurred in interviews with pupils who were experienced in using IM, and all the questions were answered. The interruptions in the f2f interviews could result in answers not being expressed. It was not possible to see any patterns in the interviewer’s behavior regarding the respondents’ different ages. The group was not mixed enough with regard to ethnicity or socio-economic status to look at these aspects.

5. Discussion

This study compares interviews conducted in different media. It is based on experiences from three different research projects in which both f2f and IM interviews were used and it discusses what different media can mean to the respondents. Since it has been found earlier that boys talk more in public spaces (e.g. Öhrn, 2002) and that girls are more active than boys in writing online (e.g. Enochsson, 2007b), there is reason for looking more closely at these aspects in the interview situation.

What does it mean, for example, that questions about personal matters lead to longer answers from especially teenage girls? If the aim of the study where interviews are conducted is to get rich background material, for example when using a socio-cultural perspective, it can be important to use a medium in which the respondent feels the most comfortable. In studies concerning young people’s use of virtual communities, the young respondents say that it is easier to write about difficult matters because it is more private and there is time to think, and also possibly to erase and change things, before pushing the button (Dunkels, 2007; Enochsson, 2005b). Groups that have difficulty making their voices heard seem to be able to develop their communication skills online (Dahan & Sheffer, 2001; Hall, 2000; Leonardi, 2000; Tapscott, 1997). This can mean that other groups do not have this need and do not develop the same skills. It is also worth mentioning in this regard that the amount of words used in f2f interviews is smaller among the everyday users of the Internet. This can mean that those who prefer using the Internet as a communication tool a lot do not have the same time - or interest - to develop f2f communication. Another reason can be that they feel shy in f2f contacts and talk less.

The sample in this study was not randomly chosen, but consists of the researcher’s total amount of IM interviews and corresponding f2f interviews. As noted above, the researcher also acts differently online and offline, which is also something to consider. Do I, as a researcher, feel comfortable with the media I am using, i.e. am I trained enough? This is an important issue to be aware of (Hård af Segerstad & Sofkova Hashemi, 2005). It has also been stated earlier that some media training is required (Dunkels & Enochsson, 2007). Furthermore, it has to be considered that different research questions may require different modes of communication.

From this material it seems that IM interviews are more suitable for girls and f2f interviews for boys, and also that the girls become more and more skillful with age. In this particular study only the amount of words and the flow of the dialogue have been investigated. The content has not been scrutinized in combination with this since the material is quite small. The results from the studies from which the interviews are taken show differences concerning gender, but also unexpected similarities (Enochsson, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a). To what extent these are connected to the methods used when interviewing has to be investigated further. In order to be able to study similarities and differences between the genders or other categories more clearly, this has to be built into the design of the study, which was not the case here. Important to remember is also that it is dependent on the questions; the more neutral questions, the less differences.

There are reasons to believe that the different cultures of boys and girls respectively lead to different prerequisites for expressing themselves. Could it be that boys generally are more used to spoken language and feel more
comfortable in an interview situation where they can express themselves orally? Could it be that girls are more used to being quiet and have adopted the possibility to express themselves in written text? It also seems like the younger the children, the less difference in this respect, but young children are also more difficult to interview because of their limited ability to express themselves, which can partly be due to the power imbalance partly to development. It is important to remember that if there are general differences between genders or age groups, this is not valid for all individuals. The individual interviewee always has to be respected for what he or she prefers. The main finding in this study is a question rather than an answer: Is there a bias in the way we choose to interview? Can we find ways of exploiting this?

As mentioned in the introduction, multi-faceted approaches are advocated. The result from the present study supports this. To be able to get as rich information as possible, it is important not only to combine observations, questionnaires, logs, interviews etc., but also, for example, to vary ways of interviewing.

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