



Engaging in Reflexive Practice and Making Ethical Choices

In: Digital Tools for Qualitative Research

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Pub. Date: 2015

Access Date: May 23, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: London

Print ISBN: 9781446256077

Online ISBN: 9781473957671

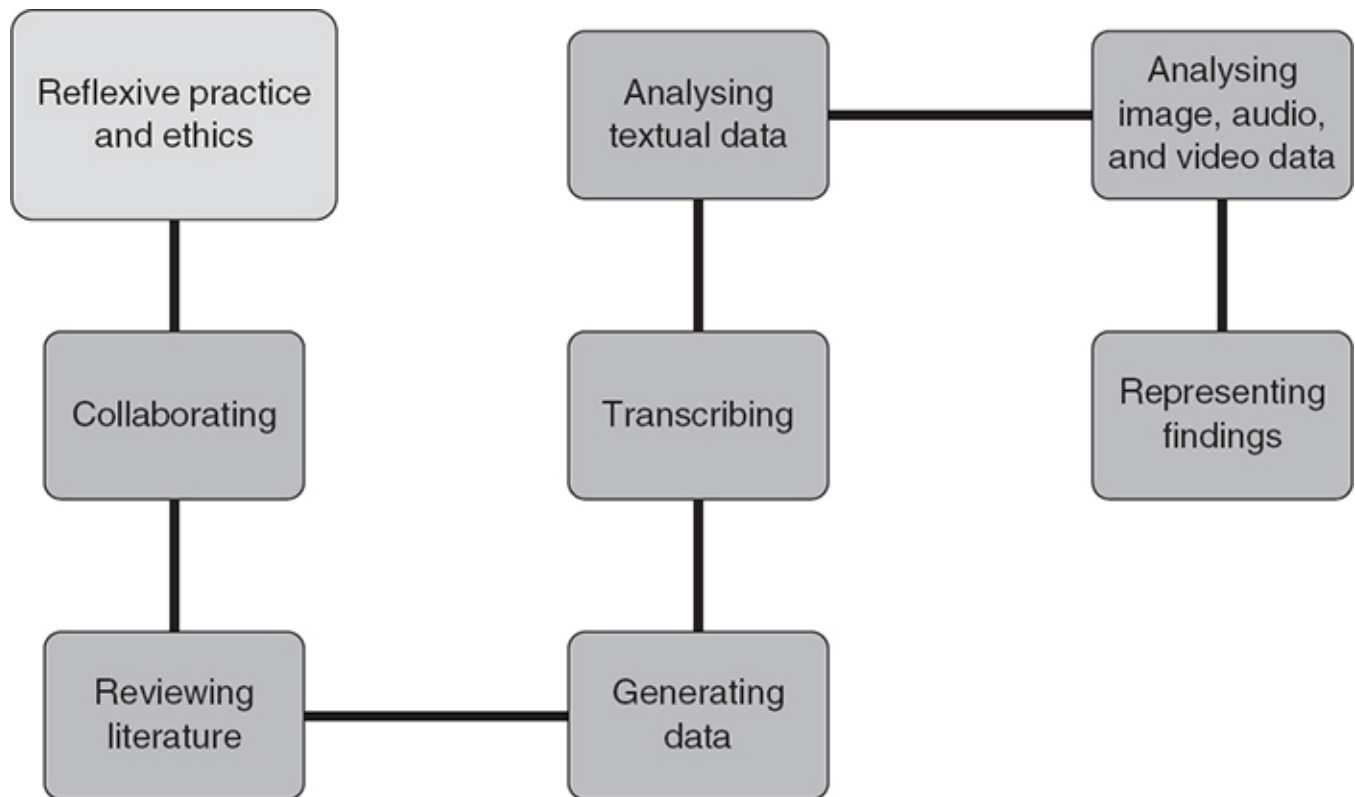
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473957671>

Print pages: 12-27

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Engaging in Reflexive Practice and Making Ethical Choices



Learning Objectives

- Identify the benefits of engaging in reflexive practice.
- Examine how blogs, audio and video recorders, and cloud-based note-taking systems might be used to support reflexive practice.
- Examine the relationship between reflexive practice and ethical dilemmas.

Introduction

In [Chapter 1](#), we presented the phases of the research process that are common across most approaches to qualitative inquiry. We discussed the ways in which the use of technology to support qualitative research has frequently been limited to data collection, transcription and data analysis. We also suggested that new tools, particularly social media and Web 2.0 tools, can enable greater researcher reflexivity, transparency of research decisions and collaboration among researchers, participants and the community. By the end of [Chapter 1](#), we asked you to identify a hypothetical or actual research topic as a context for the activities included through the remainder of this book.

In this chapter, we first define reflexive practice. We then illustrate the use of blogs, audio and video recorders, and cloud-based note-taking and archiving systems to support reflexive practice. We conclude by introducing some of the ethical issues raised by the various digital tools that will be discussed throughout the book. By the end of this chapter, you will have set up your own reflexive practice blog and have made several posts.

What Is Reflexivity?

Whether it is labelled reflexivity (Hertz, 1997; Pillow, 2003), bracketing (Dowling, 2005; Giorgi, 1985), positionality (Glesne, 2011) or some other related concept, understanding the relationship between the researcher, context and participants is central to nearly all qualitative traditions (Watt, 2007). A fundamental assumption is that the researcher is the instrument of the study. As such, a researcher's choices, assumptions and biases impact all aspects of the study. Reflexivity is the process of intentionally attending to the perspectives, attitudes and beliefs that shape how you design a research study and make sense of your data. As a reflexive researcher, you should continually examine your choices, while taking note of how your positionality limits and privileges what you come to know and understand. See [Case Study 2.1](#) to explore these ideas further.

Case Study 2.1 Who I Am Matters

Estella conducted an ethnographic study examining the everyday experiences of Latina/o youth who recently immigrated to a new country. She was particularly interested in the ways in which her participants navigated and made sense of their schooling experiences. Throughout her four-year project, she reflected often upon her own identity as a Chicana scholar, former schoolteacher and immigrant. As she collected and analysed data, she wrote frequently about the ways in which her own experiences learning English and resettling in a new country shaped how she made sense of the participants' interview data. Throughout the project, she remained aware of her tendency to see what she already knew. At the same time, she recognized that who she was allowed her to make sense of and align with the experiences of the participants in unique and meaningful ways.

Engaging in reflexive practice adds transparency to the research process, allowing outside readers to better evaluate how interpretations were made. As we practise reflexivity, we seek to acknowledge and work through the realities of *always* being a part of the research process. As Atkinson and Delamont (2005) stated, 'the process of analysis stretches far beyond the mere manipulation of data ... All scholars recognize that this process is not innocent' (p. 834). We must always be asking how we participate in the making and remaking of social science. How, though, do we go about practising reflexivity in an ongoing fashion?

Engaging in Reflexive Practice

By maintaining a research journal, you can keep track of your 'experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during fieldwork' (Spradley, 1980, p. 71). This then becomes a key location for you to openly reflect on what transpires during the research process, while leaving an audit trail for outsiders to become familiar with your decision-making process (Creswell and Miller, 2000). [Case Study 2.2](#) illustrates how Paul made explicit how he shaped his research project.

Case Study 2.2 Paul's Reflexivity Statement

When I was considering a PhD, I was exploring topics around death and dying. It did not make sense completely (to others) why I would gravitate toward this field of research. Along with natural curiosity, a couple of moments in my history influenced the decision. One of these was when I worked as an undertaker. The second was when I was profoundly influenced by the death of a person whom I had looked after for two years. One day she simply vanished. I came in for my shift to find another elderly resident in her room. No one had said anything about her death to me. Years later, those experiences helped shape my curiosity about what to study for my PhD. I wondered whether there were other caregivers with similar experiences. Were there other males, working in a predominately female environment, that had experienced death in these settings? How did they deal with it? How about cooks and cleaners; what was their experience? It became clear that I needed to write some of this down, work out what influences were energizing my thinking. Also, was there anything that I was avoiding? This is the reflexive self.

Visit Web Resource 2.1 to read a reflexivity statement written by Kathy Evans while engaged in her thesis work focused on the experiences of youth sent to in-school suspension.

Keeping an ongoing record of experiences, reactions and emerging awareness during a study does not need to be done in isolation. In fact, it is often quite useful to share your reflections with others. In this way, alternative perspectives and understandings can emerge. Turn now to [Reflexive Practice 2.1](#).

Reflexive Practice 2.1

Before we go on to look at blogs, think about the ways in which various identities (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, etc.) shape how you make sense of the

world? How might your previous experiences influence how you enter the context of your proposed study?

There are a variety of tools you can use to maintain a research journal. Web logs, or blogs, provide a space in which being reflexive does not have to be a solitary process (LaBanca, 2011), but can instead allow you to share your reflections with your mentors and/or collaborators. You might also decide to use an audio or video recorder to chronicle your experiences. Finally, cloud-based note-taking and archiving systems can be accessed from multiple locations.

Visit Web Resource 2.2 to view a video about the meaning, purpose and function of ‘the cloud’ and ‘cloud computing’.

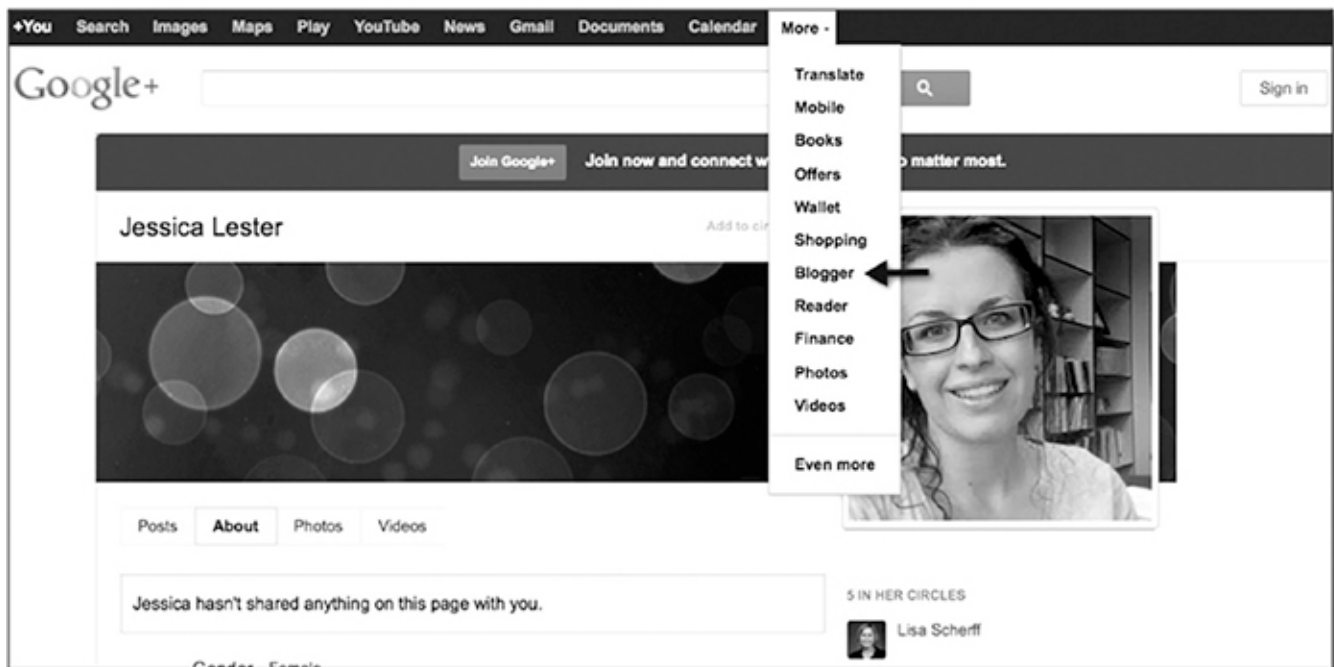
Blogs as a Tool for Reflexive Practice

Blogs are defined as ‘easy-to-update websites characterized by dated entries displayed in reverse chronological order’ (Stefanac, 2006, p. 230) and have become increasingly popular since the late 1990s. Blogs can be used as an online journal to chronologically record your thoughts and ideas, while providing a place for others to respond. Though the privacy settings can be changed, by default the blog space is open for anyone to read. Posts can include text, links to websites or even audio or video clips. Once a post is made, readers can respond to the post and to one another's comments. Compared to traditional forms of journalling, the commenting feature of blogs supports reflection in relationship to others. LaBanca (2011) shared the ways in which he used blogging as a tool for reflexivity in his own research practice, suggesting that it functioned to increase trustworthiness. This, he argued, is particularly true because outsiders can audit the researcher's unfolding process by reading the blog. The asynchronous nature of blogs makes it possible for people to participate in a conversation at their convenience. Further, creating a blog requires relatively little technological expertise.

Visit Web Resource 2.3 to view a video introduction to the purpose and function of a blog.

Blogs are examples of ‘persistent conversations’ and can be referenced months or years later. They can be updated remotely via mobile phones, making it possible for researchers in the field to be consistently engaged in reflexive practice.

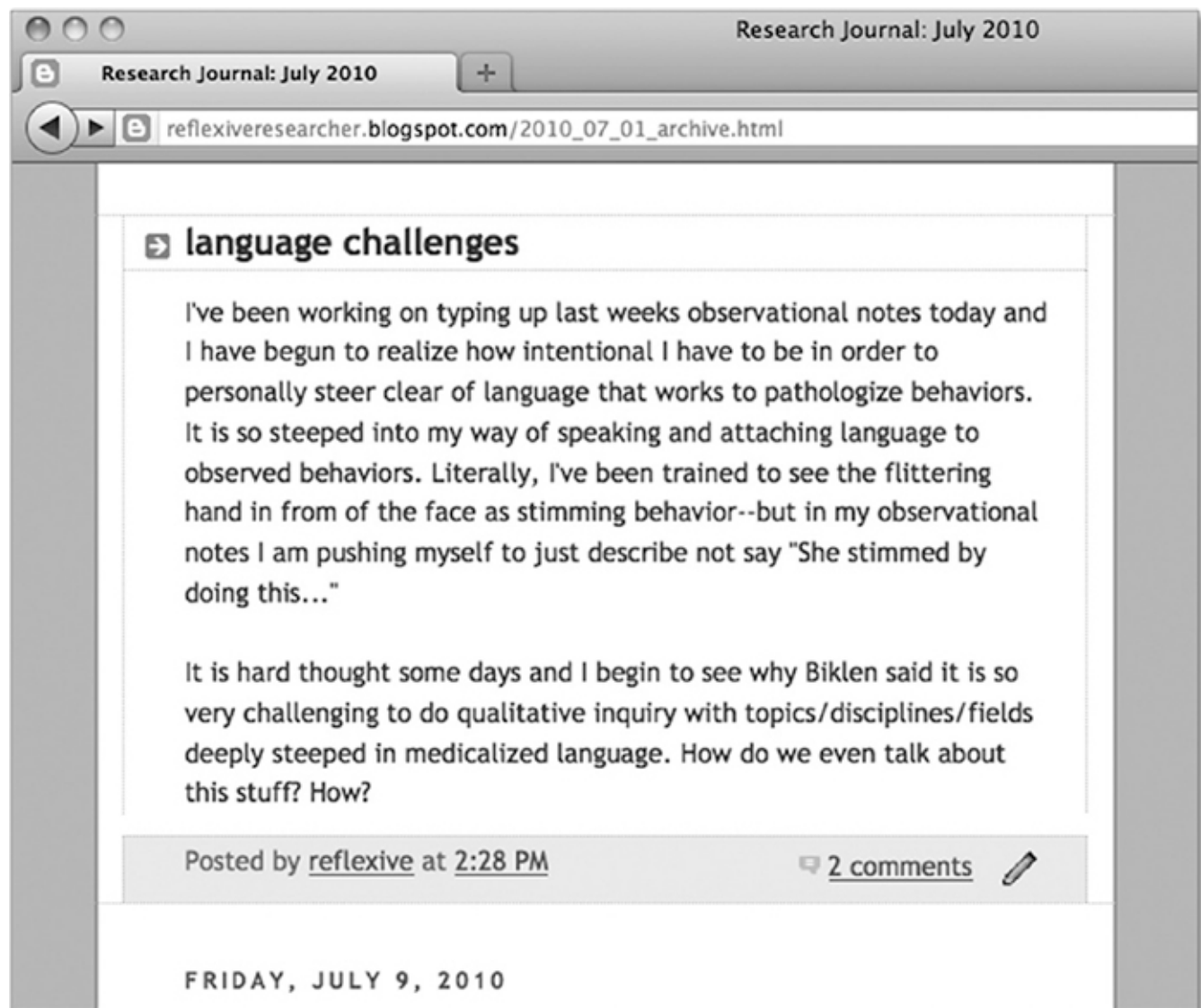
Blogger is one of many free platforms that support private and/or multi-user blogs, with each entry (posts and comments) being time stamped. Blogger is integrated with Google's email service, Gmail, and can be easily accessed while using other Google tools (see [Figure 2.1](#)).

Figure 2.1 Blogger and Google tools

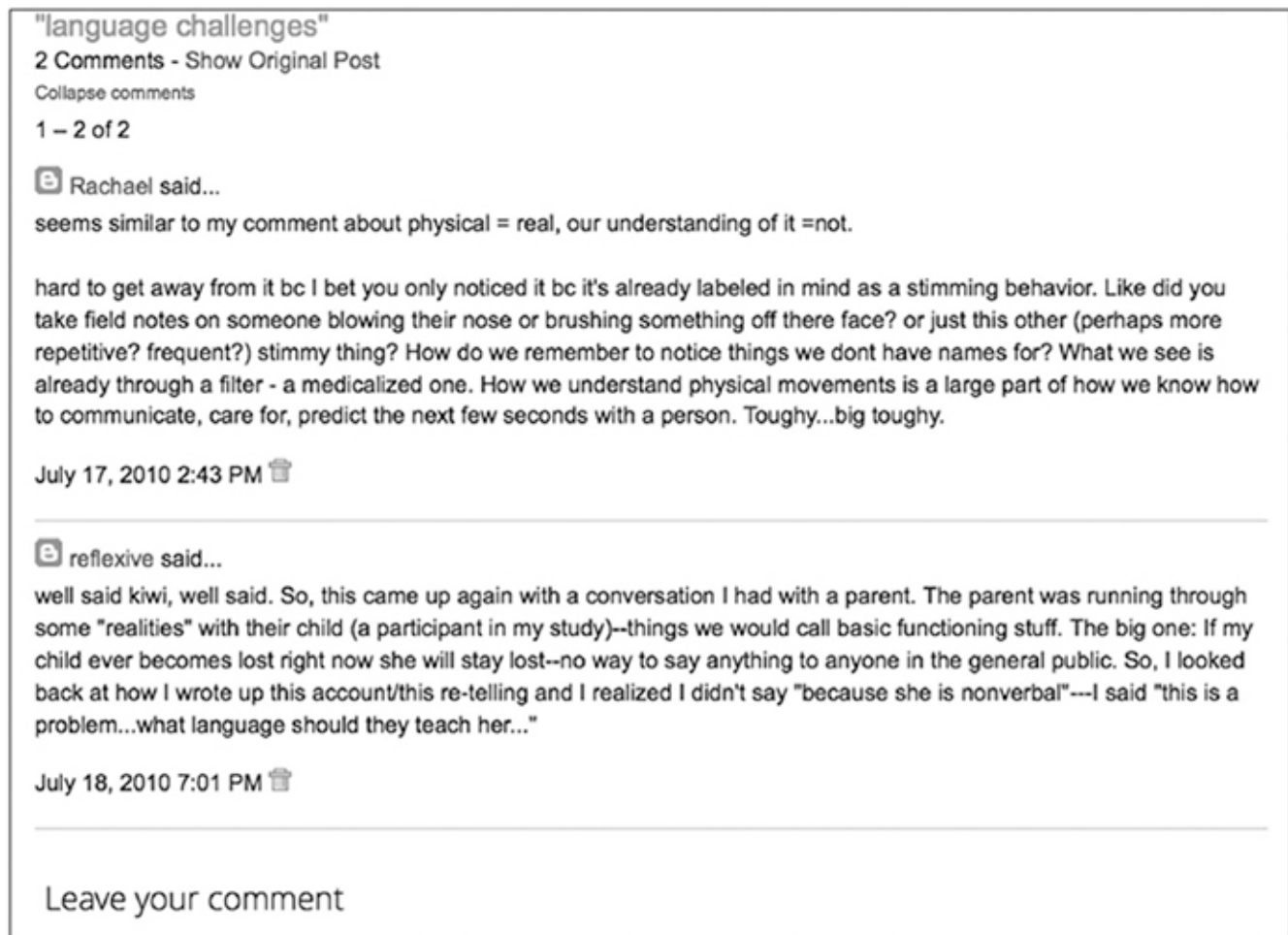
After you set up your account, you must choose a name and web address for your blog. It is often useful to give the blog a title related to a given project, or more generically refer to it as your 'Reflexivity Journal'. There are also several template options for personalizing the layout of your blog.

Figure 2.2 displays a post that Jessica made during her study of the discursive construction of autism. Notice that the post was made by 'reflexive', a blog identity Jessica chose to use rather than her real name.

Figure 2.2 A post in Blogger



During the course of this particular study, Jessica invited only two people to read her blog – a mentor and a colleague. They commented often on her posts, resulting in a conversation that pushed her thinking and ultimately shaped how she engaged in the data collection and analysis. [Figure 2.3](#) illustrates how the commenting features make reflexivity a dialogical process.

Figure 2.3 Comments in Blogger

Using a pseudonym and password-protecting access to your blog adds a layer of protection for your research site and participants. [Figure 2.4](#) shows the various access levels Blogger provides: making the blog open to the public at large, adding other authors with full administrator rights, or inviting only a select few to read the blog.

Figure 2.4 Selecting a blog's level of privacy

Permissions

Blog Authors

Jessica Nina Lester jessica.lester@tricity.wsu.edu Admin

+ Add authors

Blog Readers

☒ **Anybody**
Your blog is open to all readers by default.

☐ **Only blog authors**
Your blog is restricted so that only blog authors can read it. Other visitors to this blog will not be able to read any posts; instead they will get a message stating that this is a private blog.

☐ **Only these readers**
You can restrict your blog to only readers you choose. However, these readers will need to log in before reading your blog, adding an extra step. We'll save your readers list for you, so you can switch back at any time.

No readers

+ Add readers

Save changes Choose from Contacts Cancel

Password-protecting your blog and only inviting select readers may be the best choice when keeping a research journal in this way. Next, turn to [Reflexive Practice 2.2](#).

Reflexive Practice 2.2

Engaging in reflexivity is a major part of being a qualitative researcher. We suggest that you take some time now to create your own blog. Your first entries can be your notes from [Reflexive Practice 1.1](#) and [2.1](#). Within each of the upcoming chapters, we will pose reflexive practice questions that you can respond to on your blog. If you are reading this textbook as part of a class, consider commenting on each other's posts throughout the semester.

Audio and Video Recording Devices as Tools for Reflexive Practice

Using an audio or video recorder to engage in reflexive practice might be particularly appealing for those researchers who are already using such a device for data collection. [Chapter 5](#) provides detailed guidance in selecting audio and video recording devices. In [Vignette 2.1](#), Kathy Evans describes the way in which she

used her audio recorder in this way.

Vignette 2.1 Recording for Reflexivity

Kathy Evans, Eastern Mennonite University

I would love to say that I began using my digital recorder out of a commitment to researcher reflexivity; but honestly, it started out as a convenient tool for remembering my 'to-do' list. While I was driving, I could remind myself to send in a student assent letter or to contact the principal of a school where I hoped to interview a student. I knew others who kept online reflexivity journals and I had been encouraged by my professor to do so as well; but typing my thoughts didn't always work and sometimes I couldn't wait until I returned to my computer to begin reflecting on my research. The digital recorder was great as a tool for more immediate reflection – a digital journal of sorts.

For my thesis research, I conducted interviews with students about their experiences with in-school suspension. My initial plan was to meet with the student, explain the study, have them sign the letter of assent, and then schedule another meeting for the interview. After the first meeting with a student, I sat in the car, recording my reflections on how complicated the process seemed to be. Later, I was able to listen to that self-reflection and devise a much more fluid way of meeting and interviewing the students. A couple of days later, after conducting the first interview, I went immediately to my car and recorded the following: 'I think I must be doing something wrong; how do you get middle school students to open up and talk to a complete stranger?' That first interview had lasted just under seven minutes and, as I sat in the parking lot of the middle school, I thought out loud with my recorder about what my expectations had been. I was able to immediately record pertinent information about the interview, context, disposition of the student and other details that would not necessarily have shown up in the interview recording.

There are things that I have learned since then that I would do differently. For example, had I transcribed these recorded reflections I might have been able to more thoroughly see and analyse my own positionality and incorporated those reflections into the data analysis. I still carry my digital recorder around with me, using it to reflect in the moment on all sorts of things – including future research projects.

Researchers engaged in some forms of phenomenology might already be engaged in audio-recording their reflexive practice. For example, prior to conducting interviews, phenomenological researchers typically complete a bracketing interview in which another researcher asks the primary researcher to talk about the phenomenon of focus (Valle, King and Halling, 1989). The interview is often audio-recorded and transcribed

and can be positioned as part of the data set. [Case Study 2.3](#) provides an example.

Case Study 2.3 A Bracketing Interview

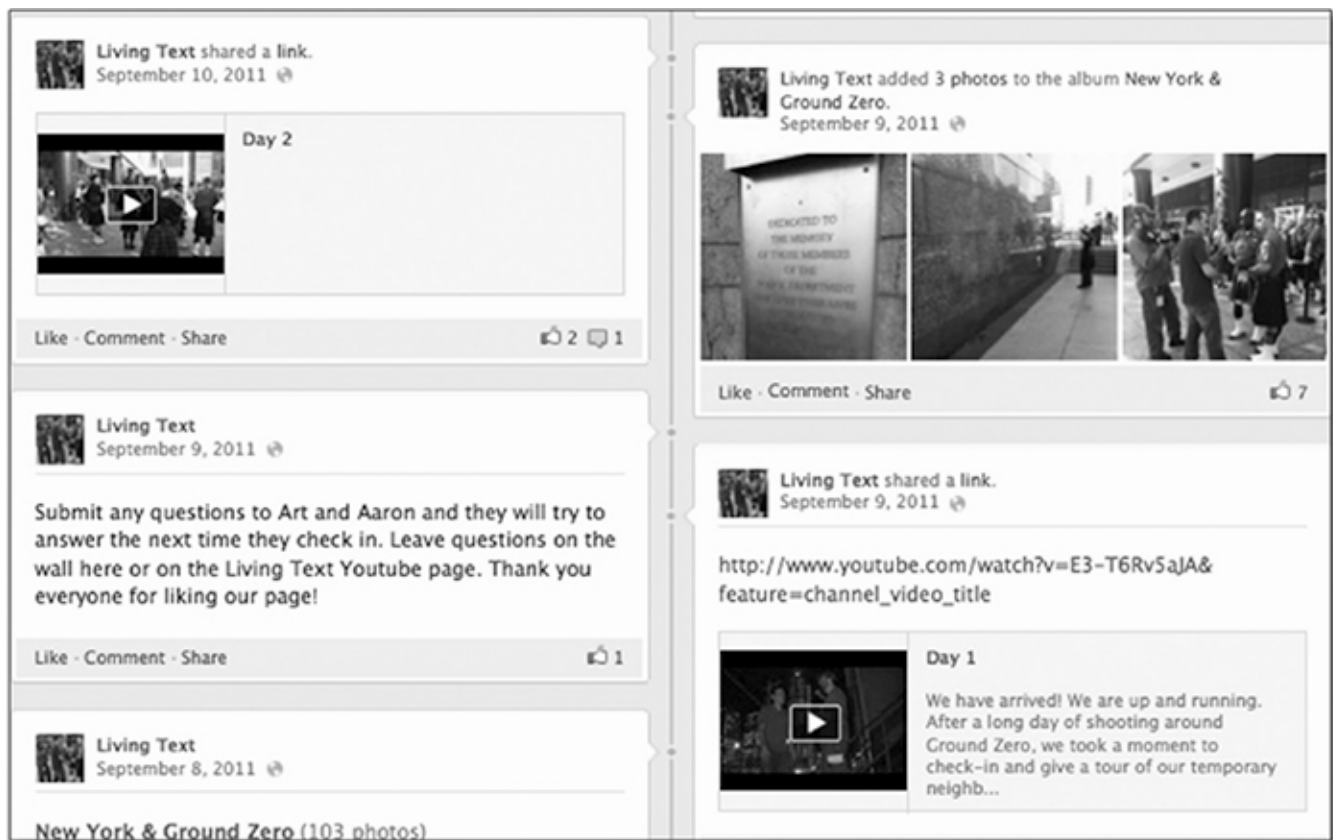
Amy was planning to conduct a phenomenological study of primary school teachers using a scripted reading programme in which teachers are told exactly what to say and do throughout a reading lesson. She had strong feelings about scripted curricula, and knew it would be important to be reflexive about her own biases. Amy asked another researcher, Jenny, to conduct a bracketing interview prior to data collection. The following excerpt illustrates how the interview began.

Jenny: Amy, tell me about your experiences with reading instruction like the scripted programme.

Amy: I have never taught using a scripted programme. I was able to teach using whatever methods I wanted to. So my original thoughts on the scripted programme were that I disagree with it because I don't think a scripted programme can provide the kinds of experiences necessary for kids to use it. But what I've read about it, it has had some limited success, typically short term.

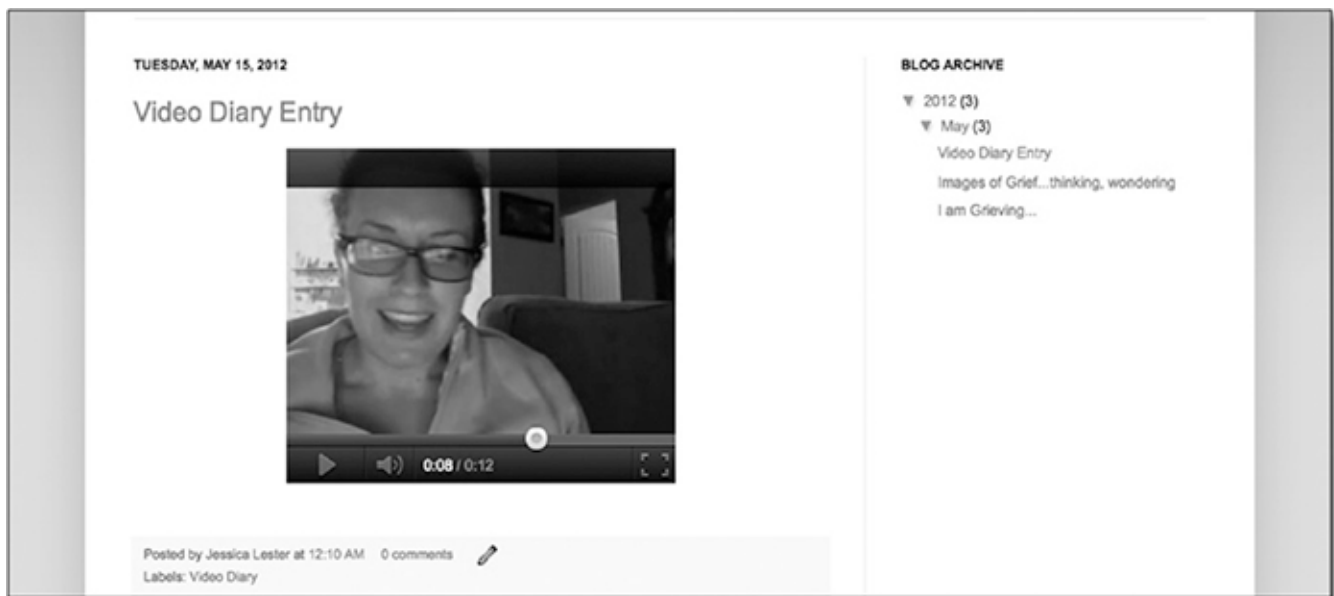
Within this short excerpt, Amy's own experiences and biases against the scripted programme are displayed. As the interview continued, Jenny encouraged Amy to expand upon her perspectives. Amy audio-recorded her bracketing interview and eventually transcribed it, including it in her overall data set, helping her to consider her assumptions as she analysed the data.

Video recording devices can also be used to support reflexive practice. For instance, in the 'Living Text' project, media scholars Art Herbig and Aaron Hess chronicled their experiences (via the social media sites Twitter, YouTube and Facebook), collecting images, interviews and various events commemorating the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. Through videos, they documented their experience of data collection, opening up their process to public response and critique. Displayed in [Figure 2.5](#) are some of the images, videos, and reflexive musings posted on their publically available Facebook page.

Figure 2.5 Art Herbig's and Aaron Hess' audio and video posts

Visit **Web Resource 2.4** to see the Herbig and Hess *Living Text* project.

Today's mobile phones and web cameras can support the use of video for reflexive practice. Jessica recently began recording video reflections every time she transcribed an interview from a study focused on graduate students' experiences of grief. After transcribing an interview, Jessica often felt the need to talk through her own emotions. She would turn on her computer's video camera and talk through her reactions to the data collection event. She then uploaded the videos to a password-protected blog that she shared with her collaborators (see [Figure 2.6](#)).

Figure 2.6 Reflexivity video journal

Other researchers involved in the project uploaded their own video diary entries. These recordings were useful when they began analysing the interview data, reminding them of the raw emotions they felt after conducting and transcribing interviews. The videos, then, served to capture aspects of the research experience that were part of and shaped their understanding of the data. Now consider [Reflexive Practice 2.3](#).

Reflexive Practice 2.3

How might you use audio or video recorders to engage in reflexive practice? If you post your reflections for others to listen to or watch, what are some of the ethical concerns you should consider? Make a post in your reflexivity blog.

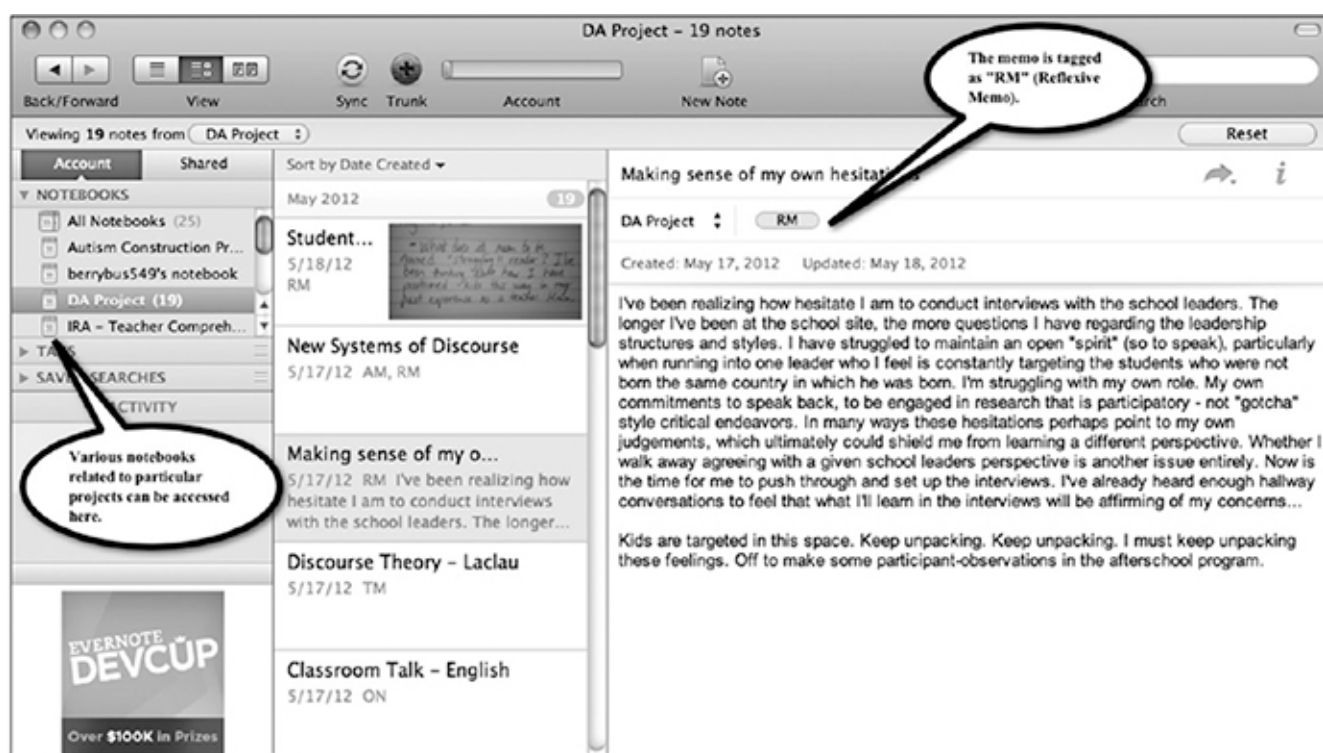
Cloud-Based Note-Taking and Archiving Systems as Tools for Reflexive Practice

A third way to engage in reflexive practice is through a cloud-based note-taking system, such as Evernote. Many of us have different computing devices and/or notebooks that we may use throughout the day and it can be easy to lose track of notes, journal entries or other research documentation. Cloud-based note-taking tools enable you to engage in multiple tasks that can be synchronized across computing devices. For instance, perhaps you want to be able to write field notes, record audio files, make to-do lists and archive emails while in the field but not have to transfer them to your home computer later. Evernote uses the cloud to

synchronize these items across all of your computing devices immediately. Even when working in a location with no Internet access, you can create a new 'note' that will later be synchronized once you are back online.

Your notes can be organized into 'notebooks' and tagged with descriptors to help organize them. For instance, Jennifer, a PhD student, created a notebook for a discourse analysis project entitled 'DA Project'. Within this one notebook, she wrote and tagged her notes as observational notes (ON), theoretical memos (TM), analytical memos (AM) and reflexive memos (RM) (see [Figure 2.7](#)). When she had overlap within her notes, she would simply tag the note more than once, for example, AM and RM. She developed other tags that were specific to her unfolding interpretations. As she engaged in deeper levels of data analysis, she was able to easily retrieve these tags using Evernote's filter feature. If she wanted to only review those notes that were 'reflexive memos', she simply searched for 'RM'. This helped her create an audit trail, increasing the transparency of her research.

Figure 2.7 Evernote's notebooks and tags



Evernote's notebooks can be shared with others. Just as with blog posts, you need to be sure to protect any confidential information. Indeed, whether typed and saved on a personal computer or archived on a cloud-based system, it is important to consider all potential risks in relation to information being unintentionally disclosed.

Visit Web Resource 2.5 to learn about Moleskine's 'smart notebook', that integrates with Evernote.

Take a moment to reflect upon the ethical dilemmas inherent in using cloud-based computing in [Reflexive Practice 2.4](#).

Reflexive Practice 2.4

Cloud computing takes electronic files out of your direct control. What ethical considerations does cloud computing raise? What might be the risks of storing a reflexive journal in the cloud? What can you do to limit the risks?

[Reflexive Practice 2.5](#) gives you a chance to explore features of Evernote, and to reflect on your experience.

Reflexive Practice 2.5

Take a moment to sign up for and download Evernote on your computing device(s). Create a note and some tags. What worked well? What was difficult?

Ethical Considerations of Digital Tools for Qualitative Research

From contemplating how best to navigate entry to a research site to concerns around unfair and even damaging representations of people, places and spaces (Knight, 2000; Wax, 1995), qualitative research requires you to remain reflexive about the ethical dilemmas that will inevitably arise. While the meaning of ethics is complex and open to debate (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012), there are guidelines that serve to shape how you can and even should carry out your research studies.

Emerging from the concerns surrounding the atrocities associated with medical research conducted by the Nazis during World War II, the Nuremberg Code of 1947 put ethical principles specific to medical experiments in place. This code was eventually more broadly applied within the field of psychology. In 1964, the World Medical Association released the Helsinki Declaration, which outlined principles for conducting fair and humane medical research with human subjects. Further, the Belmont Report, released in the United States in 1979, outlined basic research practices for biomedical and behavioural research scientists. This report presented three primary ethical principles, to: 1) protect the autonomy of research participants by engaging in an informed consent process; 2) minimize harm and maximize benefits to participants; and 3) engage in non-exploitative research procedures.

Hammersley and Traianou (2012) noted that, regardless of your research pursuit, there are at least three primary 'values' to consider when engaging in qualitative research (p. 56). These include a commitment to: 1) minimize harm done to participants; 2) respect and acknowledge the rights of participants to decide whether to participate or withdraw from a study; and 3) protect the identity of the participants and/or community within which you engage in research.

Visit Web Resource 2.6 to review ethical guidelines and statements from a variety of professional organizations.

Using digital tools for qualitative research presents new ethical considerations, as well as exciting possibilities. In McKee and Porter's (2009) text on Internet research ethics, for example, they reminded us that the first guiding principle for researchers is to do no harm – not only to potential research participants, but also to their communities. Failure to approach research in an ethical manner could threaten not only future research access to a community, but could endanger the community itself, as members may begin to feel unsafe. McKee and Porter (2009) acknowledged that many ethics boards are unfamiliar with Internet research or the best way to protect everyone involved. They argued that ethics should be seen as an ongoing *process of reflection, analysis and action* and, since every community is unique, the use of heuristics, rather than hard and fast rules, should guide ethical decisions.

Throughout this book, we will discuss some of the ethical dilemmas raised by the use of digital tools. For instance, [Chapter 5](#) will explore how the Internet has muddled what researchers and participants consider to be public versus private information. Markham (2006) wrote of how Internet texts are often defined by institutional review boards as public texts rather than data generated by human subjects. In such cases, then, the very notion of informed consent shifts. Ongoing reflexive practice is inherently linked to practising ethical research. Markham (2006) aptly noted that regardless of whether a researcher is working 'online or off, an ethical researcher is one who is prepared, reflexive, flexible, adaptive, and honest' (p. 39). Consider, for instance, [Vignette 2.2](#).

Vignette 2.2 Online Communities as Research Contexts

Trena Paulus, University of Tennessee

As avid hikers, my colleagues and I were interested in exploring an online hiking community for how it could be seen as a site of informal learning. The community we were interested in had user profiles, photos and discussion forums. The online discussions are open to the public – anyone can read them without logging in or being a member of the community. Members of the community use screen names and do not share their real identities. After talking with the institutional review board at our university, we found out that we were not required to obtain informed consent in order to treat these publicly visible discussions as data. To be on the safe side, we checked to be sure that there was nothing in the site's user agreement specifically prohibiting research use of the discussions. We also considered McKee and Porter's (2009) heuristic of variables for guidance as to whether seeking informed consent was advisable. In this case, since the conversations were public, the topics were not sensitive, the participants were not especially vulnerable,

and we did not intend to interact with them in any way, we were comfortable proceeding with our study.

Reflexive Practice 2.6

Reflect on [Vignette 2.2](#) above. Would you have made the same decision? What ethical dilemmas might you encounter in the study that you are designing?

Each chapter of this book provides an opportunity for you to reflect upon the ethical implications that come with digital tool use. [Table 2.1](#) provides an overview of some of the ethical questions and concerns that we address in the upcoming chapters.

Table 2.1 Ethical questions considered across the book

Chapter	Topic	Ethical Questions Raised
3	Collaborating and Managing Projects	• How might collaboration impact the ownership of ideas? • What are the benefits and risks of storing material in the cloud?
4	Reviewing the Literature	• What are some ways to transparently share your literature review process to ensure that sources are properly credited? • What are the ways in which you might avoid unintentional plagiarism?
5	Generating Data	• When is it necessary to acquire informed consent before studying a publicly visible online community? • How might collecting data in the form of images present new ethical dilemmas?
6	Transcribing Audio and Video Data	• Should you anonymize data prior to, during, or after transcription? • When a transcript is synchronized with media files and then shared with others, how might this compromise confidentiality?
7	Analysing Textual Data	• Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis packages make it easier to share analysis as it is occurring. How can we ensure confidentiality at the same time?
8	Analysing Image, Audio and Video Data	• How can you protect the identity of participants when their voices and faces are part of the data set?

		How might linking your data to your research location compromise the anonymity of your participants?
9	Writing and Representing Findings	How might popularizing research findings compromise your ability to protect your participants?

Visit **Web Resource 2.7** to read a *Qualitative Research* article (Iphofen, 2011) discussing ethical decision-making.

Final Thoughts

Engaging in reflexive practice is a key component of qualitative research and can add trustworthiness and transparency to your work. This process can be supported by a variety of tools, some of which you may already be using in your non-academic life. If you have never engaged in reflexive practice while conducting a research study, we encourage you to begin your practice by experimenting with and finding a tool that feels comfortable to you. Each tool comes with its own affordances and constraints – blogs make it easier to participate in collaborative reflexivity through dialogue; audio recorders allow you to reflect when on the go; and tools such as Evernote enable you to use any computing device at any time for reflection. Reflexive practice requires you to keep ethical concerns at the forefront of your research process, providing a space and a process for documenting decisions along the way. Ensuring that the identities of research participants and contexts are protected is one such consideration to keep in mind.

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. Have you kept a journal before? Was your journal handwritten, typed, written online or recorded in some other way?
 2. How might digital tools afford a more transparent and collaborative approach to reflexive and ethical practices?
 3. What other tools, besides those mentioned in this chapter, could be used for reflexive practice?
 4. What ethical dilemmas have you encountered in your research practice, and how did you resolve them?
-

Suggestions for Further Reading

Watt (2007) chronicles her reflexive journey and provides a rationale for engaging in regular reflexive practice.

LaBanca (2011) highlights the ways in which reflexive blogs increase trustworthiness. Hertz's (1997) edited volume explores the various ways in which reflexivity plays a role in various methodological traditions. McKee and Porter (2009) provide heuristic guidance for making ethical decisions when researching a variety of online groups. Buchanan and Ess (2009) also explore issues around Internet research specifically, as do the 2012 recommendations by the Association of Internet Researchers.

Visit **Web Resource 2.8** to review the recommendations from the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee.

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