

Writing online vignettes

In the recent months we moved from in-person meetings and gatherings to virtual communication. When I started my PhD study, I conducted in-person Innsbruck vignette research at preschools, observing three-year-olds' behaviour within their learning environments. There I was, sitting on small chairs and kneeling on the floor to co-experience their experiences.

More than a year later and we communicate virtually, when possible, to protect ourselves from the Virus. Nevertheless, we can continue doing research and venture into professional development by co-experiencing the online environment. Yes, I wrote an Innsbruck vignette from a Zoom event. Unlike the ones I wrote for my thesis, I could not follow people around or see what they see. Online, I had a limited view of their realities. Half a body with a glimpse of their surroundings in the background. I doubt if we behave similarly in-person as we do on an online event. But this, the way we communicate online, can become a vignette; co-experiencing and studying human behaviour in 2021.

So where do one start writing a vignette from an online situation, you might wonder. Start with your side of the computer. Where are you sitting? What is the weather like in contrast to what other participants experience? What do you see? Your screen might divide into small frames with familiar or unfamiliar faces. It could be one presenter or a frequent change between participants' faces. Remember that technical difficulties, poor sound quality or bad connectivity is part of the experience you can capture in your vignette. During my online vignette observation, the screen divided into six frames: some frames in portrait and other in landscape position. I commented on those that were relevant for the vignette I was writing. The portrait frames allowed me to see more of the participant's body movements, while the landscape frames provided more background information and less movements.

All online events have a purpose, even if it is for leisure. If you are writing a vignette about a conference or webinar, remember to capture the topic. If you are observing a meeting, you can write down what the meeting is about. You might start writing notes when the first participants enter the 'room,' or if you have enough time, find the participant/s who draws your attention. Who is the person with explicit facial expressions or body movements? You can zoom into someone who is interesting, well-spoken and audible or if something in the background intrigues you. We can capture contrasts and similarities of viewpoints, seasons and cultures across the globe. Knowledge and theory might be ironically shared within an online setting that does not mirror what is communicated verbally. For instance, Tammy talks about social skills within the classroom, while Lee is seemingly busy typing a message on her cell phone or Stacey, who switched off her camera audibly has another conversation.

Remember that, while you cannot see what the participant sees, you can only guess what is happening on their side of the computer. Can you see the person writing or does it seem that the person is making notes on a notepad? You might think a person is sitting at a desk, but are they really? Your vignette should thus be clear on what is reality and what is your perception of what you think is happening.

Different from an in-person experience, most online events are recorded. With the necessary permission, this recording could help you in writing your vignette. A recording can also allow you to write a vignette about your own participation afterwards. Online vignette writing can be used for research purposes, self-development and professional development within the workplace.

If you still feel unsure about writing your online vignette, there are loads of free online-seminars and discussions on the internet which you can use to practice writing online vignettes. Remember that ethics and professionalism still apply within the online community.

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