In the previous chapter, I described a theoretical framework that could be adopted for the study of identities in online contexts such as virtual exchange projects, but I did not dwell on methodological considerations. In this chapter, I outline the methodological orientation adopted for the in-depth study which the rest of the book is based on. I then provide a brief description of the context of the study and my positionings within it.

Andritsopoulos (2008) endorses Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography (DCOE), that is, the use of ethnography to supplement and support the linguistic analysis of interaction. In his view, “DCOE uses ethnographic insights as a backdrop to the selection, analysis and interpretation of log data, in order to illuminate relations between digital texts and their production and reception practices” (Andritsopoulos, 2008, p. 2), that is, broadening the scope of interpretation beyond what the transcripts alone could account for (Deppermann, 2000, in Andritsopoulos, 2008, p. 17).

In their ‘pure’ forms, the ethnographic and the interaction-based approaches can be seen as quite distinct from one another. Ethnographers use a wide range of data collecting instruments such as participant observation and interviews in order to provide a description of social settings and to capture aspects of members’ life worlds. However, those working strictly in the tradition of conversation analysis, one of the more widely-used interaction-based approaches, do not take context into consideration. For them, the ‘organised sequence of turns’ in which an utterance appears is sufficient as the context of recognisable social actions. This strong version of conversation analysis “eschews ethnographic description because it draws on resources that are external to the participants’ ongoing or real-time situated talk” (Maynard, 2006, p. 58).
Ethnographers critique conversation analysis for its avoidance of field methods and its deliberate neglect of social structure, unless of course social structures of various kinds are oriented to as relevant by participants within the interaction. However, researchers in the fields of discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1985), linguistically-oriented anthropology (Duranti, 1997; Goodwin, 1990; Gumperz, 1982), and sociology (Miller, 1994; Silverman, 1993) have been using recordings together with ethnographic methods – sometimes to supplement participant observation and interviews and sometimes without prioritising either approach (Maynard, 2006). These different approaches can be used with varying relations of affinity. Maynard (2006), for example, regards ethnography as an ineluctable resource for analysis but uses it with limited affinity, that is to provide analytic control over the interpretive statements.

With the increased interest in online interaction and identity work, researchers have been bringing the two closer together, and exploring how ethnography can provide greater access and understanding of the contexts of interaction. Given the vast range of online environments, the variety of mediating tools and the affordances and constraints that they place on interaction and identity work, it would perhaps be misleading and reductionist to rely on interaction data alone. As the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter highlights in the principles of situatedness and mediation, all online interaction is situated in an intentionally designed context and is mediated by technologies, both of which have some influence on the interactions taking place.

This study lies within the ethnographic tradition in that it is a qualitative study which seeks to provide a detailed, in-depth description (a ‘thick description’, Geertz, 1973) of a sociocultural context and the interactions that take place within it. Ethnographic understanding is acquired through close exploration of different sources of data, and also through participant observation and long-term engagement in the ‘field’, that is, the setting studied (Hoey, 2014).

The context of this study is an online community which I have engaged with for over eight years in various guises (described in the following section). What I seek to represent is the emic perspective, the ‘insider’s point of view’, with
categories and meanings emerging from the data and my understanding of the context rather than from a pre-existing, outside model.

This insider knowledge and understanding of the context which I have acquired over the years allows for an ethnographic approach, yet at the same time I have sought to take a distance from the context and approach it with a critical lens in order to explore the power relations that are constituted within this site. As in all situated contexts, there are structural affordances both within and outside the site which influence the identity work that takes place within it. There is thus a duality in this study (which indeed characterises all ethnographic work) for whilst I have been a participant in the context which I study, I also try to ‘detach’ myself from it and take on the stance of the observer and analyst of interactions. Hoey (2014) writes that

“[g]iven that so much of ethnographic fieldwork depends on the researcher’s own experience and perspective – i.e., the ‘I’ must be acknowledged – it really does matter where you as that researcher ‘stand’ relative to the process of your own fieldwork and ultimately to the subject of your study. That means not only whether or not you might consider yourself an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ to a group that may be your focus but also the attitudes and/or preconceptions that you bring to that study” (p. 4).

I therefore begin this chapter by providing a brief description of the online environment in which this semi-ethnographic study has been carried out, then I outline my different positionings and identities as regards this context.

### 4.1. The online context of this study

The Soliya Connect Program was set up in 2003 by the American non-governmental organisation, Soliya. The founding members were Liza Chambers, with a background in conflict management and youth dialogue, and Lucas Welch, with a background in media production and teaching media.
Established in the aftermath of 9/11, the main aim of the program developers – as written on the website – was to bridge the gap between ‘Western’ and ‘predominantly Muslim’ societies, a gap widened by tensions which media representations were serving mainly to exacerbate. In order to do this, they designed a curriculum, drawing on their backgrounds in conflict transformation and dialogue, media production, and in consultation with experts in the field and academics from partner universities.

This curriculum formed the basis of the Soliya Connect Program, which since then has run twice a year, once in the spring semester and once in the fall semester, and involves partner universities who integrate the programme into their institutional courses in various ways. As the programme has evolved, two ‘strands’ developed, one focusing more on academic/political issues, and the other less academic and more intercultural, and several different versions of the programme targeted different audiences.

Originally, partner universities were based in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa, reflecting its original need and aims. Gradually, the geographic scope of the programme has expanded and Soliya began to include universities in Europe and other largely Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia in the Connect Program. To date, the Connect Program has been implemented in over 100 universities in more than 30 countries. The main goals of the Connect Program regard the spheres of understanding, relationship building, skill-building, and promoting change, as defined in the Soliya Curriculum (Soliya, 2010).

4.1.1. What are the goals of the Connect Program?

The goals of the Connect Program are clearly defined in the facilitator guide (Soliya, 2010):

“Connect Program provides an opportunity for students to share their voices. Through this exchange we aim to accomplish the following objectives:
Understanding:
• Gain understanding of and empathy for the perspective/narrative of others in the group – not only the positions taken or the opinions expressed, but the core issues, the underlying assumptions, values, needs, and fears.
• Develop a clearer understanding of our own perspective, assumptions, values, identity, etc., as well as one’s personal relationship with the issues.
• Gain understanding on each other’s cultures and daily lives.

Relationship-building:
• Develop positive personal relationships with one another – not necessarily friendships, but relationships of mutual respect and understanding.

Skill-building:
• Cross cultural communication and collaboration.
• Critical thinking.
• Media literacy.
• Dignity-based approach to difference.

Change:
• Our hope is that all participants will have the opportunity to genuinely re-examine and analyse pre-existing opinions and beliefs in a space in which transformation and reconsideration of existing views is possible”.

4.1.2. How does Soliya set out about reaching its aims?

Each semester, professors sign up for an institutional partnership with Soliya in which an agreement is made regarding the number of students that will participate and from which courses they will enroll. The number of student participants every year has gradually been growing, from several hundreds of
students\(^1\) to over 1000 at the time of writing. Each student participant creates their individual blogs in the Soliya Community area and then participates in a synchronous audio-video online facilitated dialogue for eight weeks as a member of a small dialogue group. Students may participate as a compulsory part of a curricular course they are following, as an optional component, or a stand-alone module. How the Connect Program is integrated into a university course, and how it is evaluated depends on the professor who registered their class for the Soliya Connect Program. For many students in the US, for example, it is a component of courses in conflict resolution, cross-cultural communication, or media studies, and it is an integral part of their courses. In my context (Political Science Department of the University of Padova), it is offered as an alternative to traditional classroom-based advanced English courses, and students have regular seminars about the project and written assignments (Helm, 2014).

There are currently over a hundred different dialogue groups each semester, led by different facilitators, but all the groups follow a shared calendar and curriculum. This shared curriculum was an intentional design feature to meet the requirements of universities who need some consistency in the programme in order to include it as an accredited part of their courses. A list of goals are defined for each week, and certain activities and topics are carried out over the course of the semester, other activities and topics are defined by the groups themselves. Facilitators use the Online Curriculum, a large resource pack with a series of activities they can select from for each of the themes and goals to be addressed each week. Within this framework and with the support of these resources, facilitators have the flexibility to address issues that their group identifies as important and to introduce activities that they feel will work well for their group.

Below is the calendar with the topics for discussion and suggested activities for the 2011 iteration of the Connect Program which was the object of this study.

**Week 1** of the online dialogue. Topics that will be discussed:
- Introduction to group members and the online dialogue process.

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\(^1\) This varies from semester to semester. It has expanded from 200 to over 1000 at the time of writing.
• Introduction to *Identity and Culture*: students participate in activities that enable them to explore identity issues and share cultural information.
• Identification of topics that students want to discuss.

**Week 2** of the online dialogue. Topics that will be discussed:
• Investigating the nature of the relationship readings.
• What is the nature of the problem?
• What are ‘Western societies’? What are ‘predominantly Muslim societies’?
• After defining (or problematising) these terms, students outline what their community understands to be the root of the conflict between ‘Western societies’ and ‘predominantly Muslim societies’
• **Discussion will be based upon the required readings for this week.**

**Week 3** of the online dialogue. Topics that will be discussed:
• Culture and background: students will engage in activities enabling them to get to know one another and one another’s backgrounds better.
• Investigating nature of the relationship. Follow your students’ suggestions. Some topics that can work well are: immigration/integration, foreign policy, extremism, social movements, etc.

**Week 4** of the online dialogue. Topics that will be discussed:
• Investigating the role of religion in society and students’ lives.
• What role does religion play in your life? What role does religion play in your society?
• Does religion play a role in politics? What role does religion play in the politics of ‘Western societies’ versus ‘predominantly Muslim societies’?
• The pair activity is highly recommended this week.
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• Discussion will be based upon the required readings for this week.

Week 5 of the online dialogue. Topics that will be discussed:
• Culture and background: students will engage in activities enabling them to get to know one another and one another’s backgrounds better.
• Exploring the connection between the personal and the political through the Life Stories activity.

Week 6 of the online dialogue. Topics that will be discussed:
• Investigating the nature of the relationship: media.
• Discussion of the video projects.

Week 7 of the online dialogue. Topics that will be discussed:
• Working for change: group members formulate ideas as to what they can do individually and as a group to promote improved relations between ‘Western societies’ and ‘predominantly Muslim societies’.
• Reflecting on the group process and ending the semester on a positive note.

4.2. Researcher positioning within the context

I first heard about the Soliya Connect Program when reading an academic paper about telecollaboration by Julie Belz (2007). I looked for the website, and read more about the Connect Program, which seemed like the ideal telecollaboration project to offer students in the department where I teach at the University of Padova, the Department of Political Science, Law, and International studies. I therefore wrote to Soliya asking whether and how I could have students participate. I received a positive response, inviting me to have a small group of students participate in the programme and subsequently signed up on the Soliya website as a professor and enrolled eight students as participants. I asked these
students to write reflective diaries in the form of blogs about their experience of Soliya, which I regularly read, and had seminars every two to three weeks with the students to discuss their experience and progress. I was so struck by the impact that I could see this exchange having on students as I read their reflective journals that I too wanted to experience the Connect Program. In response to my request to participate in the following round of Soliya, I was invited to enrol in the facilitator training programme (for the exchange itself is generally limited to students) through which I could learn more and possibly progress to facilitating a group.

I thus entered the Soliya Connect Program with a new ‘hat’, that of facilitator trainee, and completed the eight week online facilitation training. Soon after I was offered my first co-facilitator assignment with a dialogue group. At the time of facilitating, however, I was not planning to do a PhD, so I did not approach the facilitation with an ethnographer’s eye, but rather as an apprentice facilitator. Since then I have facilitated several groups, and have also had the opportunity to become a Soliya coach. Soliya coaches serve a dual function, on the one hand they are there to offer support and advice to the facilitators, particularly to the novice facilitators, but they also ensure the quality of the programme. They observe sessions and provide feedback to facilitators and also to Soliya on the progress of the groups and their facilitators and indicate any areas of concern. This new identity offered me further perspectives from which to understand the Soliya Connect Program: on the macrolevel I gained insights as regards the structure of Soliya and its workings, and on a meso-level I was able to observe interactions across different groups, gain an understanding of the heterogeneity of groups and their interactions, but also the way the facilitators influenced these different groups’ interactions.

These situated identities of mine within the Soliya Connect Program are illustrated below in Figure 4.1. The identities are not mutually exclusive, however. I have continued to be a Soliya professor while I trained and became a facilitator and coach, though I have never had my own students in the groups I facilitate. At the time of writing, I have my sixteenth cohort of students participating in the Connect Program.
Chapter 4

Figure 4.1. Progression of my situated identities in relation to Soliya

Through these various levels of engagement, and also due to my research interest in Virtual Exchange, I have had contact with many members of Soliya staff and have engaged considerably with the ‘Soliya Community’. Staff have organised events such as webinars with members of the board, facilitators, and alumni. Through these activities and Soliya’s interest in developing their network and working in Europe, I became further engaged in Soliya’s advocacy work. Soliya joined forces with other American virtual exchange providers (Global Nomads Group, iEARN) in the Virtual Exchange Coalition and concentrated their activities on gaining further recognition for the field of virtual exchange in general. I have also become involved in this activity to a certain degree, and was invited to meetings of the coalition with various stakeholders in Europe. My situated identity in these contexts was that of a European academic with experience of and research carried out on virtual exchange.

In the paragraphs above I have outlined the reasons that led me to Soliya, and also how my insider status has given me the opportunity of getting to know the

context of my study from a diversity of perspectives. This was important to specify because in ethnographic studies it is essential for the researcher to state ‘where they are coming from’, as the subjectivities of the researcher inevitably influence the studies they carry out. The different experiences of encounter and dialogue that I have had and continue to have through this community have offered me different ways of thinking and knowing and have led to self-reflection and learning experiences which continue beyond the confines of this study. At the same time, I am completely independent from Soliya, I work as a university researcher and seek to engage critically with the objects of my studies.

4.3. Data for this study: the dialogue group

As mentioned above, a key component of the Soliya Connect Program design is the dialogue groups. In every iteration of the Soliya Connect Program, students from partner universities are divided into small groups of eight to ten, with an equal distribution of students from ‘Western societies’ and ‘predominantly Muslim societies’ and with an equal balance in terms of gender as far as possible. The facilitators are also preferably from these two broad groups. It is clearly very difficult for Soliya to create every dialogue group to these specifications as they work under many constraints (for instance time zones, number of participants from different classes, local timetables, etc.), but this is the aim.

A group dynamic is expected to emerge through the exchange which allows participants to begin exploring different perspectives on what are often seen as controversial issues. According to the Soliya training materials (Soliya, 2010), there are several predictable stages in the group process. It starts with groups showing extreme politeness, not highlighting difference and carefully choosing their words. Groups then go into a more conflictual phase where various levels of disagreement may be reached and there can be intense emotion and lack of empathy for others. This is generally followed by a phase of frustration with the communication patterns (e.g. conversations going in circles) and then participants attempt to understand one another’s perspectives. They also begin to explain their points of view in a way that individuals on ‘the other side’ can
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hear. According to this model, when groups have been working effectively in stage three for a while they feel they can spread what they have learnt to the broader community and may also think about how they can make an impact together, as a group. Clearly not all groups are expected to reach this final phase, nor is the group process linear. Every group is unique and dynamics within each group differ in every encounter. Nonetheless, having an understanding of group processes is expected to support facilitators in performing their institutional roles (Soliya, 2010).

The dialogue group whose interactions are object of this study ‘met’ in Soliya’s ‘main meeting room’ over a period of seven weeks. I consider this online meeting room with this group of people a situated context, where participants have access to one another and a glimpse into one another’s local physical surroundings through the small webcam picture. This context becomes a space in itself, with a culture and norms of behaviour of its own which, however, are influenced by a multiplicity of factors: the curriculum described above and the ideals of its developers who in turn have been influenced by the broader, socio-political context (see Chapter 5 for a more in-depth analysis of the situated context); the technology and its ‘affordances’ for communication (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of this from the perspective of the mediation principle); the individual participants and what they bring to the space which is influenced by aspects of what Blommaert (1991) – drawing on Bourdieu (1990) – would describe as their ‘ethnic habitus’ and aspects of their local contexts on a multiplicity of levels. However, it is within the context of and in relation to the group that participants’ identities emerge, through their interactions across communication modes, as they position themselves and make relevant different aspects of their own and others’ transportable identities.

It is also important to situate this group’s discussions in the historic time in which they occurred, that is in the midst of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, or the ‘revolutions’ which took place in much of the Southern Mediterranean in 2011. Events began in Tunisia on the 17th of December 2010 after the self-immolation

3. Though clearly there were situations and events prior to these which laid the ground for the revolutions.
of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, and led to the ousting of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, who fled to Saudi Arabia after 23 years in power. The first day of occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo was the 25th of January 2011, which marked the beginning of the Egyptian revolution that saw the ousting of Hosni Mubarak on the 11th of February 2011. The dialogue sessions began in March 2011.

In the dialogue group under study, there were two facilitators who had recently finished their training. Jessica was the ‘Western’ facilitator and Ranà, from the ‘predominantly Muslim society’, was a speaker of Arabic as well as English. There were ten participants: four male and six female, three from ‘Western societies’ and seven from ‘predominantly Muslim societies’.

I have deliberately decided not to include a table listing participants’ gender, countries of residence and disciplinary backgrounds as from an interaction-centred perspective, these become relevant only as and when the interactants themselves make them so. What this study sought to do was to explore why and how identities were oriented to by participants, and in what ways this influenced interaction, participation, and power dynamics.