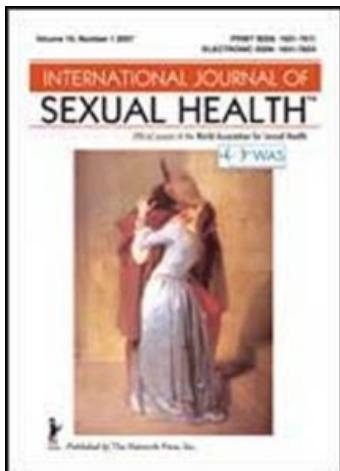


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Ese:o and the Sexualities Project: A Critical and Feminist Methodology for Collaborative Online Work

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ABSTRACT. This article describes how through the innovative use of an Internet platform, Ese:o, a Chilean nongovernmental organization grounded on a critical and feminist perspective, contributed the communication strategies for the Sexualities Project. This 5-year academic collaboration involved more than 30 researchers in five countries and four continents. The results include transformation of Ese:o's research and writing methodologies into daily practices—occurring across borders and disciplines—capable of achieving two primary objectives: (1) generating a progressively self-run, self-sustaining online community, owner and producer of its own discourse; and (2) making work modes visible discursively and materially (through platforms, forums, and workbooks) focused on the objectives and products of the Sexualities Project (documents, reports, papers, books, conference, and meeting organization).

KEYWORDS. Gender, sexuality, computer-mediated collaboration, feminism

ESE:O: BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Ese:o, which means “literary essay” in Esperanto, is a nonprofit organization that designs, develops, and implements social projects through writing and online interaction in “virtual” communities. It was founded in 2001 in Santiago, Chile, by three researchers (Dr. Soledad Falabella, Prof. Rodrigo Marilef, and María Rosa Maurizi) with backgrounds in gender and sexuality studies, literature, philosophy,

and communications technologies.¹ The organization’s objective is to use the creative potential of the Internet and digital technologies to promote and coordinate socially engaged research-action projects that involve writing, teaching, and coordination, and which aim to produce written texts such as papers, articles, reports, and books.

The need to found Ese:o is related to the deep crisis experienced by the Chilean university system during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–

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¹For more information on Ese:o, see: <http://www.eseo.cl>

1990) and its aftermath. The military regime undertook the neo-liberalization of all modes of production in Chile, resulting in a profound shift of values in all spheres of national endeavor, including intellectual. In academia, this led to the overvaluation of "hard" sciences and their methodologies, to the detriment of the humanities. For the past 25 years, the knowledge most valued as prestigious is produced primarily by economists (Dezalay & Garth, 2002), notably renamed "*ingenieros comerciales*" ("commercial engineers," thereby recasting their identity as practitioners of the "hard" sciences) and traditional engineers. In contrast, academics, intellectuals, and practitioners in the humanities are viewed as "soft" and thus less legitimate (De Toro, 2008; Rojo, 1998; Silva, 2001). This shift has had enormous negative impacts in the educational system, including funding cutbacks and even the elimination of humanities departments in many Chilean universities. The public university system was thus plunged into a severe crisis that is still unresolved (Bentolila, Pedranzani, & Clavijo, 2007).

As a not-for-profit organization, Ese:o operates independently from the national university system to provide an alternative learning environment, which includes face-to-face and online learning modes that complement traditional academic offerings. Strategically, being outside of the system allows it to accomplish collaborative work across multiple linguistic, geographical, and disciplinary borders. The result is the potential for groups to work autonomously and build a common language, allowing the project community to collectively create a unique identity and discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; Cornejo Polar, 1994).

The methodological precepts of Ese:o are rooted in feminism, which promotes a shift from the traditional paradigm of work based on a hierarchical division of labor to a more collective, horizontal mode and critical awareness of the production/reproduction, visible/invisible aspects of gender in the traditional work paradigm. Methodologically, language and other media (including technology, virtual space, and the particular service desired) are regarded as social, political, and performative media. As such, there is a strong push for com-

munities to take "ownership" of these media thereby facilitating the capacity-building process.

Dialogue becomes a critical aspect for producing the written results needed by the community. The methodology developed by Ese:o uses peer editing among writers as a way to encourage a guided process of collaborative dialogue. Another element is the Internet platform, which is used to facilitate communication and exchange over time and distance (Amhag & Jakobsson, 2009; An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Schrire, 2006). The final objective is the creation of self-sustained learning communities where capacity building is central. An expected result of working with Ese:o's methodology is to become independent of Ese:o.

One such learning community in search of a way to coalesce was the community convoked by the "Introducing Gender and Sexualities in the Academic Curricula" Project² (referred to as the Sexualities Project), which aims to incorporate gender and sexualities in the academic curricula of universities located in Asia, Africa, and Latin America through a research-action initiative. Specifically, the Sexualities Project was designed to "build a critical mass of scholars, public intellectuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and decision-makers sensitive to the challenges of researching and teaching sexualities and gender issues" and "constitute a group of scholars to *work together across time and space* in favor of the formal inclusion of these topics in academic settings in different fields of study and disciplines."³

For Ese:o, the Sexualities Project was an opportunity to respond to two distinct interests: As an organization with founders that work in humanities and gender, it identified with the need to develop curriculum for the study of sexualities. As an organization created in reaction to the edging-out of humanities in Chilean academic institutions, it posed an opportunity to create a community of learning in a parallel institutional environment, putting to work its methodological developments.

²See <http://www.sexualityproject.org/>

³Sept. 18, 2006 Ford Foundation Midterm report.

ROLE OF ESE:O IN THE SEXUALITIES PROJECT

Ese:o came to the Sexualities Project in 2005 when Dr. Adriana Ortiz-Ortega, project coordinator, invited Dr. Soledad Falabella, director of Ese:o, to join the group to envision its communicational strategy. Ese:o's role in the project was defined once Dr. Ortiz-Ortega was introduced to Ese:o's Internet platform. The Sexualities Project required a communications system that was simultaneously local and global, where independent local research could be enriched by both local and international dialogues.⁴ The main methodological concern was how to foster a global dialogue between local researchers who would propose solutions to their own methodological needs and communicate outcomes to diverse audiences for local, regional, and global purposes. As such, the first task was to design efficient strategies for both "virtual" (at a distance, over Internet) and face-to-face written interaction coherent with the epistemological framework of the research to be conducted. Ortiz's invitation to Ese:o was based on a leap of faith, as it meant restructuring the Sexualities Project around a concept—a "virtual" platform—that was totally new for most of the participants. By the end of the first meeting, however, even the most skeptical participants were eager to experience the innovative space proposed by Ese:o.

Previous to the Sexualities Project, Ese:o had worked with students from different countries, regions, disciplines, and languages for periods ranging from 6 weeks to 8 months. The Sexualities Project, however, was much broader in scope. It meant working with researchers from different continents to form a community and working together for a time frame of at least

7 years, funding permitting. At first, the differences in cultures, languages, disciplines, and contexts of the Sexualities Project seemed daunting, but these differences allowed it to develop and demonstrate the potential of the methodology adopted to facilitate in-depth research and academic collaboration.

One initial challenge the participants faced was to "unpack" the geopolitical framework of the project in terms of the distribution of power and the role of language, since the Sexualities Project defined itself as a project for South-South collaboration. The participants needed to define for themselves the meaning of the label "South." Who belongs in this category? Are Mexico and China in the "South"? If so, does it imply they have less power because they are not from the "North"? Spivak (1988) argues in her *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that subalterns, or people living and moving outside of hegemonic power (or the "North"), are limited to voicing themselves within paradigms constructed in the first world. Since subalterns do not have access to local discourses that are either recognized or valid in the "North," they cannot engage in "dialogue" with the "North." Spivak insists that not only are subalterns unable to "speak" but non-subalterns are unable to "listen."

To confront the very real challenges that speaking from the South involves, Ese:o proposes the concept of "logodiversity" to recognize and validate the value of diverse languages and mindsets working together toward a common understanding and identity. This concept is useful in that it acknowledges the "silences" that Northern, hegemonic paradigms have constructed in regards to the "South." Second, it recognizes socio-linguistic differences as well as differences in the meanings and use of "logic" or "reason" in the "South." And finally, this term assumes that linguistic diversity always implies epistemological heterogeneity and cultural diversity. (Castro-Gómez & Mendieta, 1998; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1989; Lander, 2000; Meyer, Kaplan, & Charum, 2001; Spivak, 1983, 1988; Walsh, 2008).

A related challenge for the Sexualities Project was to assess how language figured into the Project's framework. English was the only language shared by all participants (even though, for

⁴Participating were researchers from five countries (Argentina, China, Chile, Mexico, and South Africa), as follows: Mónica Gogna and Mario Pecheny (Argentina); Peng Tao, Pan Suiming, and Ying Ying Huan (China); Teresa Valdés (Chile); Adriana Rosales, Betania Allen Leigh, Aymara Flores Soriano, and Daniel Jones (Mexico); and Jane Bennett and Vasu Reddy (South Africa). All researchers worked at universities with relatively equal access to the Internet. However, they had disparate experiences with virtual technologies when the project began.

most, it is not their first language). This posed a point of contention that made it necessary to take into account the barriers and resistances implied in the use of English as a second language for academic purposes (Swales, 1990). A strategy was required to address this complexity, make it visible, and validate the multiple forms of using English that would appear in the interventions on the platform. Given the controversial nature of using English only, certain considerations were advisable before adopting it as the project's *lingua franca*. Could the participants turn the practicality of using English into something more meaningful than utilitarian that could also serve to integrate the group's linguistic diversity? Or could the use of English only be subverted? What strategies need to be developed for the voices from the South to be heard and acknowledged?

Equally central to this enterprise was the challenge of constructing dialogue among diverse academic disciplines. Initially, participants were researchers from both the "hard" and "soft" sciences, including medicine, public health, sociology, psychology, political science, and literature. This diversity contributed to a multiplicity of views on the nature of research, validity of data, and the nature of truth (Sperber, 2003). Literary theory and experience with linguistic diversity allowed for understanding the value of diversity. In this respect, the contribution of Profs. Jane Bennett and Vasu Reddy, both South African literary scholars, was very significant, as they insisted on the importance of linguistic issues that were determinant in the project dialogue and outcomes.

Being able to validate different approaches was key to the production of a collaborative dialogue community. The Russian philosopher of language Bakhtin (1981) uses the terms *dialogue* and *dialogic* (as opposed to *monologue* and *monologic*) to signify the multiplicity and open-endedness of the construction of meaning. The notion of "dialogic" has an underlying utopian implication: When individuals partake in dialogue or engage in communication, they do so as equals. Each person has the ability to "ask questions, to heed, to respond," etc., and when they do, they contribute to a social process of making meaning. Cornejo Polar (1994), a literary scholar from Peru, also stresses the

open-endedness of dialogue, but takes the notion one step further by linking it to the building of discourse and identity. In his view, social groups based on diversity, such as migrant communities, will collectively build new and heterogeneous identities as a product of dialogue.

For both theorists, meaning is always dynamic and constructed both collectively and horizontally. This contrasts to vertical construction, which corresponds to traditional, patriarchal modes of creating meaning and of understanding how meaning is made. The challenge is how to build a discursive community capable of recognizing and embracing its heterogeneity and taking advantage of this to achieve its goals. In the context of this project, it was important for this awareness to emerge from within the group, which would shape how the work to come would unfold.

The Sexualities Project and Ese:o were able to fuse these geopolitical and philosophical underpinnings into a technological foundation that served as the community's main communication channel: a learning management system or "virtual" platform. The advent of new information and communication technologies offers the ideal space for dialogue that enacts the horizontal communication about which Bakhtin (1981) speaks: the virtual platform facilitates the possibility of creating "communities." Understood as groups of people with a common purpose and identity, virtual platforms allow groups to develop their common purpose as they work toward mutual goals (Rheingold, 2000). In terms of identity, virtual platforms can be spaces where participants formulate unique bonds between one another that extend beyond the practical necessities involved in the community's purpose (Smith, 1999).

Platforms are spaces, either public (open) or private (closed) where communities can communicate about a certain topic. Public platforms include portals such as MySpace, Facebook, and the public face of institutional Web sites. A private platform is a space accessible only to those with permission to use it and features that restrict access (requiring username and password for entry).

The use of platforms can benefit academic work in general and academic writing

specifically, as they allow people to work both individually and collectively. The writer can work from anywhere—living room, cyber café, office—and receive feedback from colleagues around the world. Virtual spaces and platforms can organize interactions so that multiple drafts of a single article are systematically arranged, allowing readers and writers access to multiple versions (Perry & Smithmier, 2005; Staley, 2009). Once the technology is mastered, it becomes a medium and no longer a focus; written dialogue, the living fabric of the platform, can take place beyond the conventional barriers of time and place (Clark, 2008; Clark & Chalmers, 1998).

Platforms today are commonly used by universities around the world, but this was not the case at the start of the Sexualities Project. In fact, new information and communications technologies (ICTs) were viewed with suspicion and regarded as more of a barrier than a bridge. When researchers from the Sexualities Project held their first meeting in June 2005, coordinator Adriana Ortiz-Ortega had never heard of platforms and virtual forums. “It sounded like something from the 22nd century,” she recalls, but intuition told her “the future of academics is headed in this direction” (comment from platform, March 1, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

Ese:o's Specific Contribution

Two essential elements of the methodology brought to the Sexualities Project by Ese:o are provision and working of the Internet platform and the ways this encourages and shapes peer editing as a methodological tool.

Platform as Locus and Focus

The figure of the platform, which emerges from new possibilities being created by ICTs, has been discussed in general terms in the previous section. For the Sexualities Project, platform use was guided by a combination of shared academic culture and Ese:o's specific methodology. This sees the platform as a space for *open-ended dialogue*, in which the community builds its own

discourse, creates its own life, and becomes a world of its own.

The platform created by *e-ducativa*, an Argentine software company, is a private platform, where participants can enter the site only with prior approval. The platform, for this project, has three primary sections: group messages, thematic folders, and forums. All entries into the platform, and all written interactions, are registered and recorded on the platform itself as public information for approved members. This resource can then be tapped to produce subsequent project outcomes, such as papers, articles, reports, and book chapters.

Since participants had diverse levels of accessibility and/or technological expertise but all had to be able to master the technology, Ese:o devised a step-by-step methodology of gradual induction for researchers. Participants were asked to introduce themselves and resolve key methodological questions before starting the research. Through the platform webmaster, Ese:o monitored these preliminary steps and ensured proper functioning.

Simplicity and easy access were the guiding principles of the platform for the Sexualities Project. A reduced number of collaborators from Ese:o intervened, each with a distinct function: Soledad Falabella, coordination; María Rosa Maurizi, webmaster; and Allison Ramay, assistant. Statistical information produced by the platform was systematically shared with the Sexualities Project coordinator, Dr. Adriana Ortiz-Ortega, to track usage and use this information to stimulate dialogue.

Peer Editing as Dialogue

The second key methodological tool developed by Ese:o is the collective exercise of peer editing as a space where groups have the potential to build their own shared languages. Peer editing stimulates the construction of a community based on collaborative dialogue, solidarity, and collective work, fostering trust and social cohesion. The peer-editing process involves participants working in pairs or as a group and reading and commenting on the written work of another. The Sexualities Project used both modalities: At times, teams were paired together, and at other

times, the entire group commented on the work of the teams.

While peer editing may imply a focus on “correcting” a given document or grammar or content, the methodology developed considers it as something broader: a sensitive, critical, and constructive orientation and dialogue toward written work. In this perspective, the document itself becomes an entry point for *dialogue*, and guided online interaction rests on “collaborative theory” and “social process of written production” (Bruffee, 1984).

It is important to keep in mind that in the peer-editing process, language is both a focus of and the medium for dialogue. According to Butler (1997; and in line with Bakhtin), language is as much of an action as it is the effect or consequence that results from the ways we use language. As she says in her book *Excitable Speech*: “Language is a name for our doing: both ‘what’ we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences” (Butler, 1997, p. 8). Following this, peer editing is a process both for doing and for reflecting on the effects and consequences of our doing.

Several peer-editing opportunities were offered during the course of the Sexualities Project: Starting Point documents, discussion of methodologies, curricula proposals, networking, and writing of reports, articles, and chapters. One of the first platform activities in which researchers participated was an exercise to present to others the status of gender and sexuality in their local universities and how this related to the use of language. Teams were asked to submit a “Starting Point Document”⁵ outlining these and reflect on assumptions about sexuality they were bringing to the Sexualities Project and to post their reactions in a forum. The vigorous feedback on similarities and differences between local contexts

lasted for 3 months and was vital in establishing the understandings about language and assumptions needed to develop a common language. In this respect, peer editing according to the Ese:o methodology is a collaborative effort that entails a social process of building a common language of which the effect and consequence is the building of a community.

Paradox of (In)visibility

An additional methodological consideration was the “presence” of Ese:o in a technological platform designed to be as non-intrusive as possible. In the words of Webmaster Maria Rosa Maurizi and Director Soledad Falabella:

Our collaboration as Ese:o staff has intentionally been from a feminist perspective — one which methodologically assumes the weight of gender identity and of the aporia implied in ‘providing a service.’ That is, traditionally, service provision is related to ‘the feminine,’ and this location is then erased, and therefore, forgotten. Ese:o consciously approaches the academic community as a ‘service provider,’ and uses its ‘erasure’ for the benefit of the virtual fantasy. To the extent that the academic community makes use of the spaces and practices designed, these spaces and practices then become visible. This is a phenomenon by which a group gradually becomes an autonomous virtual community, appropriating the virtual spaces that were originally created by Ese:o. This project seeks to explore many of the current challenges with respect to how communication technologies modify the ways in which we create knowledge and also how it questions the most established and accepted practices of traditional academic collaboration. (comment from platform, January 20, 2009)

⁵The project coordinator requested submission from each country team of a “Starting Point Document” (maximum 10 pages) where each country establishes clearly: “(i) the analytical categories they will use; (ii) the people to be interviewed; (iii) what kind of interview technique should be used; and (iv) the theoretical frame work and point of view.” (letter from Adriana Ortiz-Ortega dated August 1, 2005).

As an organization inspired by feminist theory, it was important to acknowledge the generally “invisible” role played by technological collaborators who maintain the Sexualities Project platform. The platform is a space *in*

between, neither global nor local, a *path* that links different worlds and is created daily by every action it facilitates and supports. This permanent “availability,” this immediacy (an illusion of virtuality), takes place in a space that is traditionally gender-defined as feminine.

A symbolic parallel of this invisible channel is the “forgotten vagina” described by Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, where she critiques the Western philosophical tradition of erasing women from discourse and therefore language (Irigaray, 1985, p. 247). The “forgotten vagina” section reflects on Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s allegorical cave (2002), a comment on how Western tradition, as exemplified by these two thinkers, overlooks the “medium” that constitutes the “passage” that sustains the allegory. As such, the methodology aims to subvert this invisibility by using it to enhance productive processes that create new knowledge.

Both the invisibility of the platform and the service rendered by Ese:o as media is desirable in terms of unobtrusiveness but also creates the void denounced by Irigaray. This brings with it inherent lapses of communication and a diminished sense of equal participation and value. In addressing this dimension of online collaboration, it was important not to lose from sight service provision, solutions, and the involvement of all Sexualities Project participants. In regard to its own visibility, Ese:o saw its responsibility in the project as “mirroring” or reflecting on the interventions of researchers in terms of their participation. This is evident in a comment by Dr. Falabella in one of the initial forums when she noted that:

... it is important to reflect on the methodology or ‘working modality’ of the project’s research as a group: How are we understanding the main guidelines and issues involved in this project’s research? (María Soledad Falabella, comment from platform, December 12, 2005)

One way to illustrate this process was through the use of graphs that compared and contrasted team reactions. At the completion of every stage of the project (team report, team chapters, etc.), these graphs highlighted both common themes

and constructive tensions. Computer-generated graphs also charted the types and frequencies of participant interventions.

In accordance with the aims of the Sexualities Project, Ese:o’s participation also aimed to resist patriarchal ways of organization, in line with Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), regarding the perils of a “technology” that “... aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of labor of others, capital” (p. 2). The methodology employed in the Sexualities Project does not attempt to “dominate nature” but to create an “other” production mode that is opposed to the ruthlessness and violence of market-driven exploitation. It seeks to foster a production mode informed by self-awareness and solidarity. This is achieved, in part, through the peer-editing process and the insistence upon logodiverse and heterogeneous dialogue. In addition, the methodology made visible the medium that Irigaray (1985) identifies as the “envelope.” The platform became a space of containment, a womb as it were, for the community.

RESULTS

Constructing the ‘Dialogue of Voices’

It is difficult to select the specific moments in the “dialogue of voices,” to use Bakhtin’s (1981) term, that best illustrate the results of participation in the Sexualities Project. One way of evaluating the results is to review usage statistics that the platform automatically registers and that Ese:o has analyzed. These demonstrate the steady and active participation of a community of 20 researchers on four continents (North America, South America, Asia, and Africa) over a period of 4 years (2005–2009), with some 3,600 separate entries, in which each researcher entered the platform an average of 144 times, and their “visits” lasted an average of 18 minutes. The most frequently visited section of the platform was the forum. Another source for evaluation is a survey conducted by Ese:o in 2008 (the third year into the project), from which some of the comments below are taken. A third source of the results

obtained is the gradual emergence of a common “language” in which participants operated. The best evidence of this is found on the platform itself, in the subjective comments (as cited below) through which researchers reflected on their relationship to the group and the medium.

Cross-Country Dialogue

One of the most fascinating elements from the Ese:o perspective was observing how team interactions unfolded into collective and individual “discoveries” that facilitated their academic productivity. This process was essential for fostering the intercultural dialogue at the core of new “Southern” perspectives of gender and sexualities. The platform recorded how the approaches of particular teams to their own local research evolved as a result of the collaboration across cultures. Mexico’s response to China’s Starting Point Document in a forum is an example of this process.

In this particular forum, the Mexican team pointed out the importance for all participating countries to note the ways that China proposed to implement sexual education. The following intervention illustrates Dr. Adriana Leona Rosales’ reaction to China’s proposal by drawing a general conclusion that was later adopted by the entire group:

China’s starting point document proposes to explore the feasibility and validity of implementing sexuality education; reducing the barriers and improving the capability to strengthen abilities in areas of sexuality and education. (Dr. Adriana Leona Rosales, comment from platform, January 31, 2006)

This comment served to reconfirm the project’s overall goals and China’s contribution to them.

In another forum, Mexico received a suggestion from Argentina regarding searching university Web sites before carrying out interviews. Mexico eventually incorporated this suggestion into their methodology. Consciously and not, the teams wove questions and methodologies from the forums into their research processes, and

Ese:o helped make this process visible and explicit. This “guided” dialogue fostered a process of methodological integration that intertwined theory with practice to create a discourse in which ideas are reformulated in such a way that identity and property fuse, and the final results are created, and belong to, the collective. These results materialize the theoretical foundation.

Working in English

The majority of researchers involved in the Sexualities Project are not native English speakers, but English was the only language common to all. Given the project goal of publishing a collaborative book that would require peer editing in a single language, participants agreed to carry out the project in English. This decision was a difficult one. There were moments in the discussion when researchers reflected on the idiosyncrasies of using their non-native language to communicate intellectual work in a field in which they are greatly versed. Some participants were uncomfortable using English and made that clear in their interventions. As one researcher commented:

I sent the answers to all your comments to Adriana in Spanish. She offered me to translate them, since for me it is very difficult to give complex answers to important questions with my limited English. (Teresa Valdés, comment from platform, September 20, 2007)

The decision to communicate in English was met with great appreciation by the single native-English speaking team, as this comment elucidates:

Hello everyone—I hope you are well. It is wonderful to see you in the screen—I miss everyone—and want to thank you for writing here in English. I know it is an added pressure for many (I have started Spanish classes!) (Jane Bennett, comment from platform, December 13, 2005)

While English was the language in which researchers communicated, they also developed a

language (as in vocabulary and discourse) that was unique to the project and community. This communal language involved the researchers' experience with the technology, the research, and their personal lives. It was not imposed on the group; rather it developed out of dialogic communication and reflects the intricacies of communication in platform work. The following is an opinion expressed by Prof. Peng Tao of China:

Frankly ... the sexuality research is not easy, especially the dialogue between and within different scholars, not only due to different values, but also from the language and culture. The technology of the virtual platform provided me a better bridge which is helpful for understanding each other and communicating ideas in a framework. More importantly, we used the same language to discuss the same topic, which enhanced the project's procedure to be forward and forward step by step. (Peng Tao, comment from platform, April 3, 2008)

For this researcher, the difficulties of communicating in his non-native tongue were overcome by the fact that the collaboration occurred in a shared language. He also alludes to the notion that this communication was "enhanced" by the platform; in this sense, the "bridge" is more than just the English language—it is also the negotiation of communicative styles that the platform facilitated.

Pleasure, Non-Synchronicity, and Commitment over Time

The pleasure and sense of fulfillment that the community experienced was related to the interpersonal, human relationships made possible through the platform, becoming a space in which researchers shared their personal trials and lives with the rest of the group. Researchers sometimes shared personal information to explain their absence from discussions and other times to share their happiness or sadness with the rest of the group. Although the majority of the researchers saw each other twice yearly in face-to-face meetings, the platform remained a space in

which they shared their public and private lives. The following comment illustrates how public and private spheres coexisted:

I am working at home and cannot access my CEDES email so it's difficult for me to reply to your last e-mails and thus paste this in the correct place. Allison, would you move it if necessary? ... I am including some questions and suggestions regarding the Chinese outline, which I find very interesting and complete. PS: I will send you a picture I took of my father last Sunday. (Mónica Gogna, comment from platform, February 29, 2008. N.B. Mónica's father had been seriously ill during this discussion.)

This illustrates nicely how one researcher worked and lived simultaneously in the public and private spheres. The intermingling of both demonstrates the relations of trust that the group had developed on the platform.

The platform community grew to serve as a type of "envelope," to echo Irigaray's term (1985). In one notable example, researchers preferred the platform to face-to-face interaction out of both necessity and interest. In fact, some interventions on the platform suggest the pleasure of working in a closed, safe, and warm environment reminiscent of the "envelope"/womb. While attending a conference in Lima, Peru, where they had little time to interact, a forum was opened on the platform for researchers to comment and discuss the presentations they heard. Researchers participated with a genuine desire to share their experiences, which attests to the ongoing, and not simply utilitarian, desire for community. While the conference offered opportunities to listen, the platform was the place where researchers could engage and "voice" their opinions with great freedom and privacy. In the following intervention, one conference attendee expresses her desire to share her intellectual experience and receive immediate feedback from the group:

Hallo, everyone. Thank you, Soledad, for opening this space and for starting off the conversation. I think you are right about the

absence of the body in relation to issues of the erotic . . . and I wonder if that isn't the result of the decision to (re)focus on the debates on sexual rights — I am not suggesting that discussion of rights necessarily excludes the erotic, but that the paradigms and languages used for rights do not readily lend themselves to in-depth exploration of the erotic — it is the challenge of asking law to interact with poets . . . What did you all think of Ros Petchesky's paper this morning? I thought it was brave, smart, and theoretically panoramic . . . I also thought it was about grief. I wonder whether grief is enough." (Jane Bennett, comment from platform, June 28, 2007)

The conference was a synchronic experience (one that is lived, and cannot be reproduced or controlled); the platform, in contrast, was a non-synchronic experience (that is, accessible at any hour), even in the midst of a conference presentation. Researchers felt continually accompanied by this intimate, intellectual community. The following comment echoes this sentiment:

Someone should give us an award for the careful and solid way in which we keep building this project! Mario is doing a superb job in interpreting and keeping in dialogue with each one of us. I truly feel his support regardless of the fact that we have not talked even once over the phone!! (Adriana Ortiz-Ortega, comment from platform, March 22, 2008)

When researchers reflected on their experience with the platform after 3 years, they praised this non-synchronic function for accomplishing their academic duties. Following are two examples on importance to participants of the non-synchronic aspects of the platform.

Over the years, I have grown familiar with the platform and I have learned to take advantage of it: Primarily, we have a complete archive of everything that we have discussed, all the files, all the notes. It is a written memory of the project that is quite useful for me. And it can be consulted

from any computer, in Chile or anywhere in the world. I've been able to participate in the dialogue and tasks even when I am out of the city or outside of Chile. (Teresa Valdés, personal communication, September 20, 2007)

The most important for me was to be able to return to past conversations long after they took place and consult documents that had circulated previously. (Mario Pecheny, comment from platform, July 1, 2008)

This style of work did have its critics, however, and the simultaneity of online interaction was not to everyone's taste. In the 2008 evaluation survey, several respondents identified problems and shortcomings. In some cases, researchers suggested that the problems they experienced were attributable to their own lack of familiarity with the platform technology. In others, they suggested that the weakness was inherent to the technology itself.

This was the case for a researcher from Mexico, who noted a lack of depth in the conversations conducted online.

This may be a self-fulfilling prophecy, but I do not feel that, in general, the (online) discussions about the project reached the same level as face-to-face discussions often do. In general, the discussions did not touch upon theoretical issues; there were generally no discussions about what people are reading in relation to the project, or about methodological issues, or other things relating to the research being done. I personally did not feel that the interactions were as rich or fruitful as face-to-face interactions often are. Perhaps because the rest of the participants have (mostly) already met in real life, they transfer that feeling over to the platform. But this hasn't happened for me. (Also), I have not used the platform for as long as other participants, so this may be an individual thing . . . (Betania Allen Leigh, Mexico, response to 2008 survey)

The forums also posed an unexpected challenge to the webmasters and facilitators behind the scenes. The general objective of these forums was to facilitate the formation of the online community that would facilitate the coordination of the Sexualities Project. However, the individual topics that found their way into forum discussions were numerous, especially in Phase II (2005–2007). In the words of the Ese:o webmaster, (María Rosa Maurizi), “there came a moment in which we were deluged in multiple and fragmented commentaries on diverse messages” (comment from platform, January 20, 2009). To address this proliferation and reduce the potential for confusion, the Ese:o technical team proceeded to reclassify all forum topics, close some forums, move others to the end of the list, and circulate an instruction sheet on how to use the option to view by date.

The challenge of keeping abreast of and responding to multiple online forums was also a concern for some participants. One participant found the asynchronous nature of online discussions more confusing than helpful.

I found it extremely hard to find time to take part in the discussions. I would have preferred if specific times were set aside for group discussions, perhaps not live, online chats, but something similar; for example, on such and such a day, everyone will contribute their ideas on this or that issue or topic. (Betania Allen Leigh, Mexico, response to 2008 survey)

This suggestion to combine “virtual” meetings with conventional meeting times was echoed by other participants as well.

This same respondent said she would have preferred to receive a daily digest of e-mail messages instead of separate messages with individual posts: “I also would have liked it if instead of receiving an e-mail message each time a participant posts (with just the first line in it), I could receive the whole message, or else receive nothing and just consult the platform online, or if I could receive one message with all the messages posted that day or that week.” She notes that this option might have been available to her on the platform but that she never felt comfortable

enough with the platform to find and configure this change.

A positive contribution of the platform was the possibility of staying connected to the collective memory of the Sexualities Project. This allowed the dialogue of multiple voices over an extended period of time. Both researchers cited above allude to the continuous nature of the community; despite their physical location, they continued to be a part of it and were able to access the content from previous discussions. The process of building a community could happen consciously over time and space: That is, the methodology and the platform make visible the process of becoming a community.

Researchers reveal that the community exists on the level of a collective imaginary; when one is away, it remains a collective space nourished by every intervention.

Dear all, These messages make me so happy—you see, Soledad, you are right about cyberspace—it is a zone for really powerful, idiosyncratic, and revolutionary writing—here is Mario (not listening to Naomi Klein, thinking of us instead!); there is Adriana, figuring out a new creative plan; there is New York in the about-to-be-winter and most of us in the full-on summer; there is Soledad with Diego and Josefina; Peng Tao is thinking about his teaching course; Monica is sending me budgets even though she is in recovery from a hard time; Adriana Leona and Teresa are thinking of plans to make Adriana Ortiz president; Huang and Ines are always awake; and everyone else is also here, in my screen, in New York, in Buenos Aires . . . (yes, maybe I have had too much coffee today) — thank you for letting me be part of this conversation. (Jane Bennett, comment from platform, November 30, 2007)

This message illustrates the unification of the public and private spheres and the dimension of pleasure involved in the process and community. The change in academic work and culture — from an enclosed and isolated practice to a shared and open experience — signals a moment of success in the capacity-building process.

A year later, two interventions echo the joy and intensity of the process and the desire to share and open the platform to others to create more networks and to share their work.

Unfortunately, only our teams have had access to this platform ... Nobody can even imagine how intense our exchange of ideas and discussion has been. (Teresa Valdés, comment from platform, March 24, 2008)

With the developing of the dialogue from the South, we should open this platform to the public, which means we should let more people access this platform or to integrate some contents for publishing on the homepage. . . . One goal of this action is to make the public know what we are doing, who we are, etc. (Peng Tao, comment from platform, April 3, 2008)

Valdés and Tao's quotations reveal a desire to share their findings, not only in regards to the research but more specifically in regards to the process of virtual "community making." Both comments reflect the solidification of a professionally and personally significant community.

Also, the platform allows groups to make their dialogues "open" to outside members but never to the public at large. This group did so with some professionals whose work they believed would nourish their own. Attempts to incorporate outside experts, including telephone calls and offers to walk them through the process, were not as dynamic as hoped, and, in this respect, the community constituted a closed circle. Additionally, the original proposal of developing virtual offices for each country did not result as envisioned. The plan was for each national team to receive feedback from a wider circle of national groups, but (with the possible exception of the Mexican team's attempts to coordinate among diverse participating institutions) this did not take place. In general, local groups beyond the specific national team did not make use of the platform, which ended up hosting the dialogue necessary for global coordination only.

CONCLUSION

Ese:o's collaboration with the Sexualities Project (2004–2009) allowed for the implementation of its innovative methodology based on feminist and critical theories for facilitating channels for collaboration across multiple linguistic, geographical, and disciplinary borders. Of all the "borders" involved in this transnational and multidisciplinary project, building a common language was essential to the project's success. Both the participation of literary scholars in the Sexualities Project and Ese:o's literary and feminist grounding were key to the project's accomplishments. Even though the community of researchers made the decision to use the English language for communication, there was a constant and lively negotiation of communicative styles, which implicitly included epistemological heterogeneity and cultural diversity. In this way, in addition to conversations about the project's content, reflecting on *how to talk* about the content involved negotiation and dialogic communication. Furthermore, communication was not only made materially possible by the platform but also "enhanced" by it, as one researcher commented, because it allowed them to reflect (synchronously and non-synchronously) on the very language they used to communicate.

The most noteworthy outcome of the project was the creation of a self-sustained global research community. Online interaction using the project's platform became an envelope, a private space for the creation of a common language and a common identity. This implied using peer editing in a broader social sense, viewing writing as a process and collaborative work as a key to the building of a community. This is evidenced in statistics regarding platform use by researchers, which gradually surpassed that of Ese:o's team members. In this sense, the community was facilitated by the measured (and intended) withdrawal of Ese:o as facilitator. Graph I (Appendix 1) shows that when the project began, Ese:o and the coordination's participation on the forums was the highest. As the project progressed, their participation decreased and the presence of Mario Pecheny of Argentina increased dramatically. Pecheny and Centro de Estudios de Estado y

Sociedad (the Center for Studies on Society and the State) (CEDES) eventually played a lead role in directing the logistics of the project, and his presence in the platform is clearly visible here.⁶ While Pecheny played an essential role in leading and proposing forum discussions in the last year of the project, he suggested in his survey that he indeed had to overcome difficulties with the technology (and “virtual community” information) to reach the level of comfort seen at the project’s end. He stated:

I would note the resistances, the difficulties for us, researchers trained in the ‘write and work alone’ style, to integrate new tools into our ‘private world’ of thinking and working. (Mario Pecheny, comment from platform, July 1, 2008)

Pecheny’s use of the technology and his experience with the “community” involved a transition in how he approached his research. As Pecheny notes, in a field where “working alone” is the norm, using new technological tools to advance the “transition” into working in community posed some difficulties. This is not to ignore that the trend to more collective work has been gaining a foothold in many regions, including the Americas, over recent decades, partly in response to funding possibilities, the scale of projects, etc. As researcher Mónica Gogna of Argentina noted: “We cannot ignore that many of us have a long history of working in teams.” But online work added new possibilities for immediacy that enhanced enjoyment and the sense

of cohesion among researchers, as noted in the commentaries of Pecheny and others.

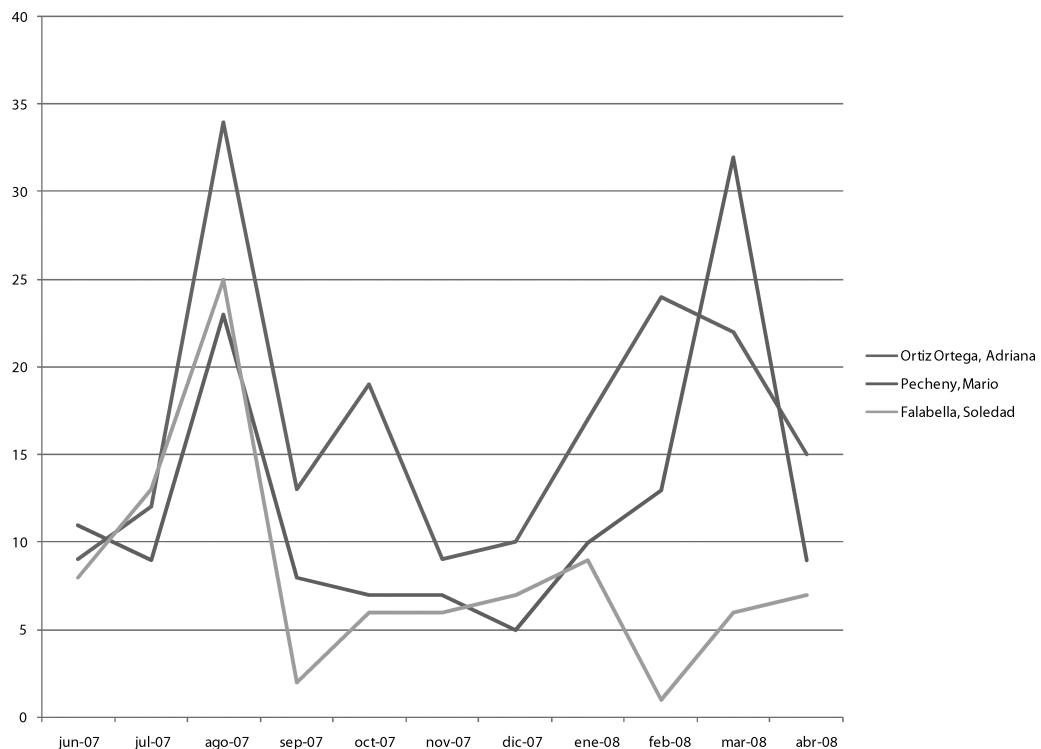
Further evidence of the self-sustained community is in the ongoing collaboration between researchers. For those who participated in the project as well as the coordination, the platform continues to serve as a source of archived material for further development as well as a community of colleagues who continue to work together. They have used the platform to develop the final outcomes of the project, book chapters, journal articles, and global advocacy, among other written documents. Beyond this project, teams such as Argentina and South Africa are currently developing a joint university course.

The extreme wealth of diversity inherent to the project’s make-up, combined with Ese:o’s methodology and the platform, allowed participants to take full advantage of the richness and heterogeneity of local perspectives. Circulating these perspectives is an essential element to the study and development of sexualities and gender-related issues in “Southern” university settings. This experience confirmed the positive potential of this methodological approach to collaborative work: Feminist-inspired communication methodologies including ICTs can indeed lead to the generation of long-lasting virtual communities, which involve positive transformations in international, “cross-border” collaborations. These types of collaboration are fundamental to academia today, and for this reason, Ese:o will continue to explore the potential for ICTs to facilitate progressive and innovative approaches to collective academic work.

⁶In the course of the project, Mario Pecheny became its co-director, along with Dr. Ortiz-Ortega, and the logistical responsibilities for the Project moved from El Colegio de México to CEDES (Argentina).

APPENDIX

FIGURE 1. Comparative Graph: Number of times platform accessed by Project Coordinators (A. Ortiz-Ortega and M. Pecheny) and Ese:o (S. Falabella)



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