Survival Skills for a Netnographer
Derya Kulavuz-Onal**, University of South Florida

I am a doctoral candidate at the Second Language Acquisition and Instructional Technology (SLAIT) program at the University of South Florida (USF). Soon after advancing to candidacy, I came across of Robert Kozinets' (2010) book, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online.* I had a long-term interest and contact with a long-standing online community of practice of English language teachers, *Webheads in Action,* and I thought that this methodology would be a perfect fit to study this community in depth. As I read more about netnography, I was happy, because it seemed to be a very 'comfortable' research methodology that could be carried out in pajamas, within the warmth and familiarity of my own home and my own computer. I was not going to a place far away where I would struggle with diet changes, be under the risk of serious diseases, or have to adjust myself to a new culture. In short, I was pretty sure I would easily 'survive' in an online community.

Things did not turn out to be the way I expected. I had to follow the activities of this multi-site distributed community of teachers, whose interest is to explore pedagogical uses of web-based technologies in language teaching. Therefore, the members of this community (i.e. Webheads) were highly-advanced technology users, as they consistently interacted about and through various advanced technologies and virtual communication platforms. During my online fieldwork that spread over a year, I had to hold accounts on several online networks (such as Diigo, Delicious, Yahoo Groups, Flickr, etc.), virtual worlds (such as Second Life), and social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, SlideShare, etc.). I also soon realized that I was not as advanced in all of these technologies as Webheads are, which made it difficult to follow their activities at times.

On one particular day, I was going to attend a synchronous meeting that they were holding on Second Life (SL). Although I already had an avatar on SL for a while, I was not an active user of SL. I still thought that this would be enough to attend the meeting, follow the discussion, and take fieldnotes of my observations. When the time came, I logged into the link they had previously sent to their Yahoo Group email list for the meeting. The meeting was going to take place on Edunation on SL. After I logged in, I was able to hear voices but could not see anybody around. I was somewhere like an ocean or an isolated virtual island that nothing looked like a conference area. That made me nervous, as if I was lost in a cyber island. Moreover, I had the default SL avatar, which made me feel like I joined the meeting with some ordinary clothes, without brushing my hair, or putting make-up. My avatar did not represent who I was. However, I thought it would not be very important, and I had a more serious problem: I did not know how to teleport myself to the session. Then, I discovered a chat window, and hopelessly asked for help through the chat window. Somebody wrote: "We are in men's clothing!" as if I knew what that meant. Then, seeing that I am still crying for help, somebody teleported me to that place. I felt safe, secure, and happy seeing familiar names around.

My culture shock in this SL live meeting did not end there. In the session, someone was giving us a tour of the Edunation, so we had to move around. Now, I had to move my avatar at the same time. Other avatars looked so comfortable; they were even able to sit on benches -crisscrossing their legs- around a camp-fire. Because I was still not able to figure out how to take a step forward, but was embarrassed to ask for help, I thought I would just stand where I was and focus

on taking fieldnotes. However, I did not realize for a while that I (my avatar) had my back to all the other participants, standing a little away from them, while they were all sitting around the camp-fire. Someone at that point said through the chat window, "Daria (my SL name) looks just like me when I first joined SL!" Maybe she referred to my weird behaviors during the session that portrayed me as an outsider to the group, or to my default appearance and clothes, given the unique carefully-selected avatars of others. I felt embarrassed and decided to leave taking fieldnotes and continue to figure out how to move my avatar.

Throughout this live meeting, I constantly had to focus on my avatar and trying to behave like others so that I did not intrude upon the natural setting or flow of the session. This did not necessarily happen, as I felt a culture shock and was not able to follow the discussion. Hence, I could only take one-page of handwritten fieldnotes during my synchronous participation.

This particular instance proved to me that technological expertise, which seemed to be an additional advantage for an ethnographer in a physically-located field, turns out to be a survival skill in netnography or online ethnography. Because online communities rely on computer-mediated commucation technologies for their existence, advanced comfort level with specific technologies that a community uses becomes an essential survival skill. Additionally, the netnographer also needs to know the cultural practices or expectations in the virtual platform being used by the community. For example, before I joined this SL session, it did not occur to me that having a unique avatar, as opposed to a default one, would make it easier to become a part of the group, nor that moving my avatar appropriately was a sign of closely following the session.

All in all, what I would suggest other netnographers is to familiarize and update themselves with the digital tools and social media or virtual platforms their community is using. Perhaps, they would first need some time to get accustomed to the community and its practices before they actually begin their study. In addition to the basic operational skills with these digital tools or platforms, they should also know the cultural practices the community has developed when using these tools. For example, is oral interaction expected from the participants? If so, then it is necessary to know how to talk through a microphone in a live session over that particular platform. What about the length? How long are participants expected to talk? What kinds of interactions are common on the chat window? Should you address a technical problem through the microphone or through the chat window?

In short, although you can conduct netnography within the familiarity of your cozy and comfy couch, you should be prepared to experience 'technological' survival issues and culture shock, and discover new cultural practices and environments that come with various digital tools, even with those that you think you are already familiar.