

INTRODUCTION.

# INQUIRIES INTO OUR WORK WITH INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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To understand writing, we need to explore the practices that people engage in to produce texts as well as the ways that writing practices gain their meanings and function as dynamic elements of specific cultural settings.

– Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior,  
*What Writing Does and How It Does It*

[A] “program” or a “campus” for IE is always a site of contest, disorder, divergence, and disagreement—created in the interactive tensions between what are loosely related sets of individual practices that live below official, institutional, or professional discourse.

– LaFrance, M. “An Institutional  
Ethnography of Information Literacy Instruction”

Those familiar with IE, will know it as:

[A] method of inquiry designed to discover how our everyday lives and worlds are embedded in and organized by relations that transcend them, relations coordinating what we do with what others are doing elsewhere and elsewhen. It starts and remains always with individuals and what they are doing in the actual situations of their bodily being, but focuses on how what they do is coordinated beyond local settings. (Griffith and Smith 10).

The methodology has gained the attention of a number of writing studies researchers, who have found its framework and analytic stepping stones keenly attuned to writing studies research undertakings, particularly the coordination of work in writing programs and writing instruction.

Our collection began with our ongoing fascination with writing program research and the study of “the ways that institutions—as sites of everyday work

practice—organize people and their experiences.” We sought to see how others might adopt IE as a methodology keenly attuned to uncovering the often elided, erased, and invisibilized experiences central to the work we carry out in the hierarchical contexts of our home programs, departments, and initiatives. We asked contributors to show us how they have used IE as a tool for thinking about “the situated relations of practice” in the sites where they teach, administer, and study writing and writing instruction.

Work practice, we argue, is a significant entrance point into the relational complexities of our institutional lives. A focus on work practices, in our teaching, writing program leadership, interactions with student writers, and research endeavors, helps researchers to uncover telling micro-moments where the institution takes on a very particular shape, reflective of many complex site-specific tensions. Because IE is interested in how knowing individuals carry out their work in coordination across time and space with others and demonstrating uniquely individualized understandings of the expectations, norms, beliefs and sensibilities most active within a site, an attentive study of work practice, we argue, is one way that writing studies researchers might uncover how powerful and interrelated influences, such as social values, beliefs, norms, professional standards, and/or disciplinary ideals, often implicitly order the hierarchical environments of our interest.

When the IE researcher asks how does our work take shape? we seek to actively re-frame the institutional sites we study as dynamically “co-constituted”: Generated when people knowingly negotiate the social, ideological, and material topoi of institutional settings. Who we are, what we do, and how we do it often comes about as we embrace, resist, and recast the prescriptions offered by macro-level forces within the sites we traverse. IE holds that when we attend to what knowing and active people do in the everyday, our research narratives might make visible what is too often implicit, such as the material influence of wide-reaching social forces like neoliberalism and austerity measures—and in this process of bridging micro and macro, we might begin to think more intentionally about how those expectations and ideals have compelled, granted value to, or circumscribed what we do. Once uncovered, these moments often shed light on opportunities for critical reflection, if not intervention and coalition building toward more collaborative resistance, re-evaluation, and re-alignment.

In light of this continuing interest, this collection does not begin where other inquiries into ethnographic research as a methodology or IE more generally have begun—opening with a consideration of the value of one particular practice over others or offering a more extensive introduction to IE as a methodological tool of new interest to writing studies researchers. Readers who would like further investigations into the workings of critical and feminist ethnography or IE,

more specifically, will find important initial arguments in previously published sources by the editors of and contributors to this collection.

The chapters we've collected here instead take up and integrate portions of previous conversations about IE, critical ethnography, and the complexities of writing programs, sites of writing, and writing instruction to move beyond and more deeply into these conversations and points of origination. Collectively, we dive more deeply into the study of work and work practices as a means to reveal the undeniable power of material conditions, institutional and field-based values, and the influence of cultures of writing as these shape how people carry out their everyday work. The site-specific snapshots collected here open richer understandings of the cultures of work that are of interest to writing studies researchers, what constitutes work, and how work takes shape within institutional contexts. We offer these new findings to expand exploration of IE as a form that can make important contributions to the fields' many ongoing conversations about the nature of our work, labor, and other writing-related interests.

## PRAXIS POINTS: MAKING THE MOVES OF IE

People participate in social relations, often unknowingly, as they act competently and knowledgeably to concert and coordinate their own actions with professional standards.

– Marie Campbell and Francis Gregor, *Mapping Social Relations: A Primer in Doing Institutional Ethnography*

This highly theoretical backdrop translates into a flexible, dynamic, and scalable set of moves for researchers interested in the study of institutionally organized work practices, processes, and lived experiences, as this section will lay out. While IE research seeks to explore individual experience, it also seeks to give voice to how the micro-moments of those work landscapes take shape—how things happen (in the parlance of IE)—uncovering what practices constitute the institution as we think of it, how discourse may be understood to compel and coordinate those practices, and how norms of practice speak to, for, and over individuals. In the IE framework, the institution is co-created in the “interindividual” interplay between ruling relations and the everyday work of individuals (Smith *Sociology*). Dorothy Smith's framework asks researchers to interrogate their own understandings of a setting as they begin a study, so that those preconceived ideals of organizational standards, forms, and relationships do not erase important understandings of what is actually happening.

IE's focus on the day-to-day work life of individuals and how work is coordinated across time and space, as well as its emphasis on how the practice of those

individuals takes shape with/in their institutions, provides a methodology for explicating, and thereby gaining insight into the actualities of our academic work lives. IE sets out a number of key points that are central to its shifts of frame. Some researchers have called these “heuristics”—though Marjorie DeVault has suggested that “ruling relations” are not a heuristic, but instead “an expansive, historically specific apparatus of management and control that arose with the development of corporate capitalism [that] supports its operation” (295)—as they can provide a regularized model of analysis for a study.

For those involved in writing programs or the study or writing, writers, and the sites where writing and writing instruction take shape, these analytic tools are also useful as reflexive moments and gut-checks. We do not offer them as checklists or a series of rote moves, but rather as reflexive opportunities for thinking about the shifts toward the coordination of practice that IE requires. In this collection, these terms are foundational to the studies our authors undertake, so we offer anchoring understandings of these terms and initial gestures towards how those terms are used in specific chapters, allowing our authors to stretch into the ways these key terms helped them structure their studies. The definitions we offer below apply throughout the book.

*Experience:* Smith writes:

The term experience is used to refer to what people come to know that originates in people’s bodily being and action. Only the experiencer can speak of her or his experience. It emerges for the ethnographer in dialogue, spoken or written, among particular people at particular times and in particular places, including self-reflection. Institutional ethnographers sometimes refer to lived experience to locate those interchanges of awareness, recognition, feeling, noticing, and provide sources for experience as it is evoked in dialog. (*Sociology* 229)

*Institutions:* Ervin defined institutions as “complex[es] of relationships between discursive and material constructs (124). Porter et al. have subsequently defined institutions as “rhetorically constructed human designs” (123). Michelle LaFrance and Melissa Nicolas defined institutions as “shapeshifters” that are rhetorically and structurally cued to the standpoints of individuals, such that

[A] professor experiences “university” very differently from the student who experiences “university” very differently from her parents who, again, experience “university” very differently from the trustees. And even an individual’s micro-level account of “university” changes over time: a first-year student has a

different relationship with “university” than a senior whose definition will change as she becomes an alumnae. (131)

Drawing from this understanding of institutions as complex sites co-constituted in the relational and experiential moments of the everyday (LaFrance).

*Institutional Discourse:* Similar to the broader category of “ideological discourse,” institutional discourse operates at meta-levels to rhetorically coordinate conceptions of, so, what people are expected to do. Institutional discourse creates generalizations which offer a sense of continuity across individuals, practices, times, and sites.

*Institutional Circuits:* The mechanisms of accountability and authority that distribute, differentiate, and lend value to particular types of work, “in such a way that an institutional course of action can follow” (Griffith and Smith 10). These often take shape around ideals of professionalism, expertise, as they seek to regulate, or “standardize” what people do, mediating idiosyncrasies and variability in local settings

*Ruling Relations:* “Ruling relations” have been defined by Smith as “that extraordinary yet ordinary complex of relations . . . that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives” (*Institutional* 8). Closely tied to concepts like expertise, marginality, influence, and values, ruling relations remind us that working conditions and daily routines are not accidental, but bear traces of ideology, history, and social influence. “Social mechanisms grant practices legitimacy . . . [T]he social order comes to sanction doing, knowing, and being” (LaFrance and Nicolas 130). Ruling relations carry ideas, language, and rhetorical frameworks between individuals (even those with little personal interaction), impose ideals of practice and affiliation. As such, ruling relations shape thinking and doing within institutional settings, routines and conditions are not accidental, but bear traces of ideology, history, and social influence.

*Standpoint:* This term draws from feminist cultural materialism and feminist critical theories of the 1970s and 1980s (See Harding) and foregrounds participants and researchers as materially situated within local contexts, unique and embodied in space/time. The term recognizes that all knowledge is “partial,” grounded in “material experience,” and a reflection of social dynamics.

*Texts, Textual Coordination, Boss Texts:* Smith writes:

[T]exts and documents make possible the appearance of the same set of words, numbers or images in multiple local sites, however differently they may be read and taken up. They provide for the standardized recognizability of people’s doings as organizational or institutional as well as for their coordination across multiple local settings and times. (“Texts” 163)

*Work*: Denotes a series or sequence of coordinated practices within a local setting that an individual routinely puts time and energy into. Institutions coordinate the experiences and practices of individuals through their work. IE researchers might think of work as multilayered, first and foremost a conceptual or ideological coordinating force (think the difference between faculty and staff, for instance, or the differences afforded tenured, tenure line, and contingent faculty); work then takes a secondary and material shape when it surfaces as the telling “micro-moments” where those dynamic and multilayered materialities have shown their influence in how people go about doing what they do.

*Writing*: All told, in the IE frame, writing, a micro-level action, is inseparable from other macro-level considerations, such as work and labor, or the larger site-specific and social contexts of austerity—as Tony Scott notes, “the distinction is a matter of emphasis and perspective rather than material reality” (9). (We might think of writing instruction similarly.)

We offer these key terms as central to the studies adopted when using IE—some of our contributors took them up as starting points for developing their projects, others saw them as tools for analyzing data sets, or as what to look for when unpacking the highly situated actualities of practice within the programs, sites of writing, and writing instruction they studied. We note that the terms are often difficult to understand in isolation, even as one term used singularly, “Boss Texts” or “Work,” for instance, might provide a central focus for an important project within a writing program. IE enters a field already attuned to many of the critical interventions, core questions, and epistemological challenges central to work with ethnography. And, potentially, IE offers us some ways of thinking about how we might undertake the study of work, labor, and writing instruction. In that effort, we turn to the ways ethnographers have helped us to understand the study of writing.

## IN THIS COLLECTION

To establish the theoretical assumptions of his collection, we open with a theoretical chapter that traces the ways our key terms—practice, work, and work practices—have been adopted in writing studies research. I argue that “unravel[ing] the histories and assumptions commonly indexed by the use of these terms” is important not only for deepening our work with IE, but for truly embracing its social justice possibilities. This chapter continues conversations begun elsewhere about the value of IE and adaptations to its framework for the study of writing, writers, writing instruction, and sites of writing, but also further research-based conversations about the nature of our work, our experiences as workers within institutional contexts, and how we participate in, if not resist and remake, those sites towards more equity and inclusion.

Responding to the framework sketched in Chapter 1, the remaining chapters in this collection demonstrate what writing studies researchers have uncovered about the many ways institutions coordinate the experiences and practices and, so work, of individuals. Using IE to study the “work” that people carry out uncovers the deep and often hidden investments and experiences of those people, making visible the values, practices, beliefs, and belongings that circulate below more visible or dominant discourses. The researcher might then uncover opportunities for recognition, conversation, or intervention. Because so much about how people carry out their social lives is undergoing radical change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—an age where higher ed is clearly coordinated by the material discursive structures of austerity politics (Scott and Welch), those interested in how actual people are negotiating these emerging contexts have found the study of work an invaluable tool for unpacking how our labor in sites of writing takes on value, how literacies and sites of instruction take the shapes that they do, and how we may negotiate each of these interlocking social circuits toward more proactive ends.

Anicca Cox’s contribution details her study of how writing program teaching observations are taken up by both the observed and the observer. Her investigation reveals what she calls the “means well paradigm” (MWP), which posits that while writing programs often have positive intentions in their management strategies and professional activities may catalyze important conversations about practice within a program, these activities may also produce punitive and exclusionary experiences that belie the original intent. Cox concludes that: “writing departments and programs can make their positive discourse more actionable by looking *up* power gradients, and in the case of faculty observation for the purposes of professional advancement, by honestly asking: what is this thing for?”

In “Not the Boss of Us: A Study of Two First-Year Writing Program Boss Texts,” co-authors Jim Nugent, Reema Barlaskar, Corey Hamilton, Cindy Mooty, Lori Ostergaard, Megan Schoen, and Melissa St. Pierre “fashion a radically alternative account of [their] department’s work,” challenging previous studies that had “fail[ed] to account for the complex interplay of individual standpoints, ruling relations, and . . . how things actually get accomplished.” Investigating the coordinating nature of two possible “boss texts,” *The Department of Writing and Rhetoric Faculty Handbook* and *Grizz Writes: A Guide to First-Year Writing at Oakland University* (Schoen), the authors found that their “department’s boss texts act, react, and interact with one another in complex ways.” “The methods of IE,” they noted, enabled them to “appreciate the nuanced and nondeterministic ways that policy texts move from the pages of [their] workaday department documents to coordinate the material and ideological activities of individuals within our institution.” These understandings have helped departmental leadership to strategically negotiate a DEIA policy initiative, overcoming

tendencies toward “performative, hortatory declarations” that may have short circuited desired changes to the status quo.

Continuing with the theme of uncovering disjunctions and divergences, in “‘The tensions in this room!’: Negotiation and Resistance in IE Focus Groups,” Ruth Book explores the importance of focus groups in IE research for their ability to uncover otherwise untraceable moments of resistance. According to Book, “institutional ethnography provides a way for WPAs to view how instructor resistance is performed and negotiated within the writing program, [. . .] because they show these resistances and negotiations *as they happen*.” Throughout the chapter, Book provides examples of the ways individuals in a particular writing program negotiate the tensions within the program even as they are negotiating their own positionality within the focus group.

Ruth Workman, Madeline Crozier, and Peter Vandenberg argue in their chapter, “Writing Standpoint(s): Institution, Discourse, and Method,” that writing is both “a vehicle for work processes” and “work in many institutional sites,” though many institutional stakeholders do not share this view. Because scholars in writing studies are predisposed to value writing and see it as “continuously coordinated” and “co-accomplished” (qua social), we may not always understand how others in our institutions may then devalue or dismiss the work of teaching writing. The study they undertook provided renewed “exigenc[ies] for revising [their] FYW curriculum to be inclusive of and [to honor diverse] literacies, cultural rhetorics, and rhetorical traditions beyond the ‘Aristotelian rhetorical model.’” Such work, they suggest, may inform faculty development efforts and more audience-savvy communication about how writing and so writing instruction might be framed around institutional norms and goals.

Elizabeth Miller takes up the idea of writing as work in her study of the community-based Madison Writing Assistance (MWA) program supported by the University of Wisconsin—Madison’s Writing Center. The MWA is based on “‘The Wisconsin Idea,’ [a] philosophy, tagline, and ruling relation at the University of Wisconsin—Madison” that frames the university “as a land-grant institution committed to public engagement.” Miller uses IE to tease out some of the tensions among several boss texts/ruling relations: the Wisconsin Idea, writing center praxis, and the mission of the MWA. She suggests that these texts/theories “fail to account for the complexity of the work on the ground of MWA—potentially limiting both instructors and writers.”

“From a Faculty Standpoint: Assessing with IE a Sustainable Commitment to WAC at a Minority-Serving Institution,” Cristyn L. Elder’s chapter, describes how Elder used the IE framework to explore and uncover the institutional landscape of her university, as she designed and implemented a mixed-methods study about faculty and departmental support for a WAC initiative on campus.



Particularly, Elder relied on IE's key moves to make visible "ideologies about writing [that] might help or hinder the development of sustainable WAC." Elder's study revealed that faculty at her institution not only supported undergraduate WAC across "a wide range of undergraduate programs," in ways that could be built upon sustainably and pedagogically, but also identified "a lack of commitment" from university and state leadership, who oversee "the conditions for faculty teaching and student learning" through university and state policies.

Michelle Miley's chapter, "IE and Pedagogical Possibilities: A Framework for Thirdspace Explorations," juxtaposes the realizations she has gained from working with the concept of "thirdspace" as an additional layer of understanding within the IE framework, particularly helping writing center tutors think through how language, culture, and writing practices meet in sessions. Miley argues that writing center research should be more grounded in student experiences, particularly if we hope to better understand "students often considered 'at-risk' for economic, social, or academic reasons," and that IE and third space provide "a framework through [students and writing tutors] made visible the coordinated activity within their worlds."

The chapters in this collection are illustrative of the ways in which institutional ethnography as a practice can uncover, bring to the fore, and/or provide new insights into the sites of the everyday work of writing studies. They also demonstrate the critical and creative range of problematics, methods, and findings that can be found in studies of writing, writers, and sites of writing undertaken by writing studies researchers. Smith, who passed away in June 2022, as we were moving to complete this collection, would undoubtedly be simultaneously proud and critical of the work we have produced here, pushing us each toward greater discernment, activism, and reflection in our relations as researchers. Smith's influence will long be felt in the ongoing efforts of writing studies researchers to uncover and understand the powerful forces of coordination that order our everyday lives.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnography is subversive—it challenges the dominant positivist view of making knowledge. It demands attention to human subjectivity and allows for author-saturated reconstructions and examinations of a world; in fact, it is grounded by definition in phenomenological understandings of knowledge and meaning making. Equally, it is generative and creative because writing research ethnographies are overtly rhetorical; they are producing informed stories and arguments about the world.

—Wendy Bishop, "I-Witnessing in Composition:  
Turning Ethnographic Data into Narratives"

We end by foregrounding (once more) Wendy Bishop's belief in the subversive potential of IE and for the study of practice. The urgency and exhaustion of the era of COVID has once more exposed the hard limits of our work as a field. The material and the institutional have been concerns for writing studies for some time, and any number of ethnographic, empirical, and rhetorical methods may be and have been used to study the broader material relations of interest to our field (see for instance, Bishop 1992; Ivanic et al. 2009; Scott 2009; Sheridan 2012; and Welch and Scott 2016, among others). In the span of our careers, we've heard the many calls for the study and revision of policy regarding writing program labor, labor relations, and the terms of our work (particularly in composition and writing program contexts). And yet, we see that for many—in contingent positions, those who live the everyday inequities posed by race, gender, sexuality, and neoliberal/corporate culture—we have clearly not done enough to mobilize, to respond, to listen deeply and with care, or to make sustained change.

We see the subversive potential of work with IE as one means to continue the slow drip of progress toward social justice and equity. Research conclusions, program review, curricular and policy development (and subsequent recommendations), and other research-driven initiatives based on IE methodologies, I argue, are more likely to initiate productive and lasting interventions, lines for further inquiry, and value to researchers when they are grounded in actualities of practice that demonstrate the erasures, the damages, and the violence wrought within institutional contexts.

When we are more attuned to the many different value systems and material realities at work within our sites of study, when we better understand how personal value systems shape classroom, program, and campus practices, we are also more effectively situated to support the people we work most closely with and for. This is a crucial step forward for our study of the relationships between pedagogies and material conditions and for further generating research-driven understandings of how our work with writers, writing instructors, and in sites of writing may claim value, legitimacy, and support in the broader contexts of higher education.

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