

Chapter 17: Research Remix: Soundwriting Studies of the English Language

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1. Benjamin Flournoy's Discourse Ethnography: Campus Resident Life Office

Benjamin Flournoy examines the balance between professionalism and personalization of a campus residence life program.

Transcript

[knock on door]

Woman's Voice: Housing and Residence Education.

[Sound of door opening and quiet conversation between male and female voice in the background. Over this background, Benjamin Flournoy narrates.]

Benjamin Flournoy: Home. It means many things to many people. But have you ever had to leave home and most of your familiar life behind so you could go to a new place? If you're a college student, the answer is probably yes. The transition from home life into college life can be confusing, uneasy, and sometimes even scary. But it's during these difficult times that Housing and Residence Education goes to work.

[Background conversation fades up.]

Man's Voice: Okay, cool. Um. I do have just a couple questions. Um, when do quiet hours begin?

Benjamin: Hey there. My name's Benjamin Flournoy, and today I'll be taking you behind closed doors to talk about how Housing and Residence Education functions as a unique discourse community.

[Background conversation replaced by quiet crowd noise under the following narration.]

A discourse community is—in simple terms—any kind of community that shares beliefs, experiences, and a unique use of language. As a member of Housing myself, and as someone who studies English, it's the last of these features that I am interested in looking at.

[knock on door signaling switch to field audio]

Woman's Voice: Are we okay to come in and do some Health and Safeties?

Man's voice: Yeah! Absolutely, come on in. . . .

Benjamin: *[narrating]* Recently, I interviewed some of my fellow staff members to see what thoughts they had on the subject. I began by asking them how they would describe the department's goals.

Male Interviewee: To begin with, it's definitely to serve the needs of residential students.

Female Interviewee: The experience. The safety of the students.

Male Interviewee: . . . and then also foster a community in which those individuals are living.

Benjamin: *[narrating]* What they told me is that the main goal of housing is focused on the student. It's Housing's job to make sure that the student is safe and doing well. Not only this, but it's Housing's job to make the student feel at home.

[Background switches to ambient sounds, perhaps of someone walking around a dorm.]

To see this, one only has to step inside the Housing suite at Gardner-Webb University. The room is kept quiet and comfortably warm; there is a beautiful, homemade display on the front desk. Sometimes, there is even soft Christmas music coming from the back—a staple choice from a professional staff member. The office tries to create a safe and welcoming environment for students to come into.

So, the question is raised: If the goal of the department is to meet a student's needs and make them feel at home, what kind of communication is used to help accomplish this?

Man's Voice: Well, I mean, we use a lot of emails.

Woman's Voice: Email. Text.

Man's Voice: . . . group text messaging system.

Woman's Voice: . . . within the professional staff, we scream at each other [laughs]. That's our personal kind of, um, telecom and what not.

Benjamin: *[narrating]* So there are many different forms of communication that the department uses. One of the texts produced is the Christmas Break Checklist. The checklist describes what a student must do before they leave campus for the holidays. It includes things like "Defrost and unplug minifridges" and "Make sure that all windows are shut." It's present as an aid to the student, reminding them of what has to be done and providing gentle guidance. In an effort to be effective, it mixes professional jargon—such as "University Commons" instead of "apartments" and "units" instead of "rooms"—with more personal language.

My fellow staff members explained more about this relationship between personal and professional language, and how it is tied to communication in the department.

Man's Voice: There are really two mediums: You've got written and you've got verbal. You use a verbal face-to-face communication when you're wanting to understand a person's reaction, when you're wanting to give it a personal touch. Concise or clearness of communication is gonna be probably the thing that is harped on the most. That we use all these different mediums to try and have clear communication.

[Quiet conversation continues under the following narration.]

Benjamin: *[narrating]* The document that demands the most amount of clarity in the department is the incident report. These reports are summaries of important events that have happened around campus, mainly pertaining to violations of university policy. Because these documents are used by professional staff members to take judicial action, it is important that the document clearly states what happened.

Man's Voice: . . . it's one where no pronouns are used whatsoever. You always use title and name, for every single person given. We want to keep it as consistent as possible, so that when it comes up for review there is not a shadow of a doubt as to what happened—or at least the account of what happened.

[Conversation continues, faded out under narration that follows.]

Benjamin: [*narrating*] But, again, clarity isn't the only thing the department cares about. To be effective in its job of caring for students, Housing requires its staff to be personal as well as professional.

Man's Voice: I mean, my way of using communication is also to build a relationship. I think that's another good way that we can communicate, is not just to communicate all the nuts and bolts of what's going on, but to use it to communicate affirmation, to use it to communicate what's going well. We do a lot of writing, it seems like, of what goes wrong.

Interviewer: And is that what they look for usually, is just kind of emotional support?

Woman's Voice: I think so. I mean, when it comes to student staff, of course they're looking for guidance.

Benjamin: [*narrating*] So, as you can see, the use of language and communication in Housing is . . . interesting, to say the least. There is a need to balance both the professional side of clarity and the personal side of relatability when dealing with students and fellow staff members. Possessing both attributes is a challenge, but it's one that Housing staff continually try to rise and meet.

The two attributes that we've looked at today only scratch the surface of how language is uniquely used in the Housing department, and there is so much more to think about. If you have a chance, come by sometime and we can talk about it more. Because, as a Housing staff member, my door is always open.

Woman's Voice: If you ever need anything, let me know!