

CHAPTER 3.

MAPPING ASSESSMENT POWER WITH INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

As established in Chapter 2, writing assessment functions within the larger neoliberal economy of accountability in the current university. Compositionists have argued that good writing assessment is local (Huot, 2002), and yet, we cannot deny the function that assessment plays in maintaining the institution of higher education nationally. Historically, studies of writing assessment have focused on either large-scale or local assessment, and we have thus far lacked strong methodologies for connecting these large-scale institutional practices with local, individual perspectives. Also common is the move to acknowledge or criticize larger institutional movements but counter them immediately with local alternatives. For example, Chris Anson et al.'s (2012) piece "Big Rubrics and Weird Genres" began by discounting the utility of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics for assessment due to the failure of generic rubrics across disciplines and then moved immediately to providing examples of "best practice" for disciplinary assessment. While such examples are valuable for WPAs, not all have the luxury of using other means of assessment if administrators farther up the chain dictate practice. This fixation on best, rather than actual practice, is not unique to studies of assessment. LaFrance (2019) noted that an overall weakness in the research of the field has been that work on program design and management tends to "standardize, generalize, and even erase identities, expertise, and labor contributed by diverse participants" (p. 7). Those who compose articles on writing program design and assessment, for example, are likely to be tenured or tenure-track members of the field of rhetoric and composition, yet there are many who conduct writing assessment who come from other disciplinary backgrounds or are assessment professionals, rather than writing instructors or administrators.

I have my own skepticism regarding large-scale, national assessment in both theory and practice, and Chapter 2 outlines many reasons why such assessment contributes to a history of accountability, austerity, and even racism. Yet, this book is not focused on alternatives but rather on everyday, real-world practice of individuals at institutions that align themselves with the larger national movement of the AAC&U's VALUE assessment. That alignment may be purposeful,

imposed, or even unknown by the individuals participating in the use and adaptations of the rubrics. The shift from outlining best practice in our field to looking at actual practice, requires a different approach to research, one I outline in this chapter.

Institutional ethnography, or IE for short, was established by Dorothy Smith in sociology and popularized in writing studies by Michelle LaFrance. IE provides researchers a means to study “local actualities as... manifest in, around, and through writing” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 12). It puts these local practices in the context of larger, institutional systems of power. Within the landscape of neoliberal austerity, it is imperative that we “uncover how what we do is coordinated by the ideological and political discourses that imbue our lives and our work” and institutional ethnography gives us a methodology for doing so (LaFrance, 2019, p. 16). Although IE has not yet been used to look specifically at writing assessment, LaFrance (2019) saw that potential when she noted that rubrics are “institutional circuits” used to bring cohesion to a writing program and align faculty work (p. 43). IE is well suited for drawing connections between individual faculty members’ use of rubrics and larger, national movements that use rubric-based assessment.

IE offers a robust vocabulary for understanding the role that institutions and institutional texts play in the everyday work of individuals (LaFrance & Nicolas, 2012; LaFrance, 2019). By studying local writing assessment practice using the methodology and vocabulary of institutional ethnography, I seek to uncover how large-scale national trends, specifically the AAC&U’s VALUE movement, are interpreted, used, and resisted in everyday, local practice. In this chapter, I outline the details of how IE is used to connect local practice and institutional power and describe my own methods of using IE to study the use of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics. I define what is meant by both institution and ethnography in the IE lens. I explicate key vocabulary that I will use throughout the book: problematic, ruling relations, standpoint, and boss texts. I then detail the methods of my own study and analysis, noting that while methods within IE vary widely, a common vocabulary and epistemological approach guides the collection, analysis, and presentation of data.

DEFINING INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE

What does IE mean by institution or institutional? For Smith (2005), institutions appear in local settings, but also participate in standard operations across locations. They are “complexes of relations and hierarchical organization”

(Smith, 2005, p. 206). Universities are one example. Universities exist as local institutions and as a part of the institution of higher education as a whole. However, “the university” is very different depending on whose standpoint it is viewed from (LaFrance, 2019). Writing programs and other campus communities come “into being in the moments in which people negotiate the everyday toward some highly individualized end” (p. 24).

Institutions are also held together by texts, some of which span across individual, local institutions. These texts, and their local interpretation, define “the university” as an institution. For example, LaFrance (2019) explained that statements by national organizations, such as the CWPA Outcomes Statement, are used to guide work on multiple campuses. They, therefore, define writing for individuals who may encounter them from a variety of standpoints: WPAs, teachers, students, upper administrators, and even the public. Texts like these are often key to the relationship between individuals and institutions and connect local and translocal practice (Smith, 2005). IE provides researchers a means to tie together these two different meanings of “institution”—the local, embodied practice of the institution and the institution of higher education—and allows us to explore how the two are co-constitutive. Institutional ethnographers look for texts that are replicated across settings (Smith & Turner, 2014). Such texts create what Smith and Turner (2014) labeled “institutional circuits” or “sequences of text-coordinated action” that span locations but authorize local and individual action (p. 10). Similarly, Campbell (2006) used the term institutional discourse to define shared ways of knowing across professional or managerial communities that govern institutional relations and allow for action within institutions.

Although IE looks specifically for the way that institutional discourse reinforces institutional power, it also stresses the role of individuals and the agency they have within systems. LaFrance (2019) noted that institutional discourses are “powerful and coercive” but individual, everyday activities as equally powerful (p. 115). This statement is key to the way institutional ethnographers view the institution, and why institutional ethnography does not focus solely on the study of texts. Smith and Turner (2014) explained that even when texts span institutions, the institutional ethnographer is interested in “‘occurrences’ at the moment of reading” (p. 9). It is in these occurrences that individual power can also be seen. One of the most important and powerful tenants of institutional ethnography is that these texts and the talk surrounding them are, in fact, “acts of the institution” (Turner, 2006, p. 140). Although institutional norms “speak to, for, and over individuals,” ultimately for IE, individuals are the institution and can thus resist and change these norms (LaFrance, 2019, p. 18).

DEFINING ETHNOGRAPHY IN IE

It bears repeating that: “An *institutional ethnography* is not simply an ethnography of or an ethnography that has been constructed within an institution” (Tummons, 2017, p. 150). Nor is IE a specific set of methods. In fact, unlike other forms of ethnography, IE can be conducted without conducting any sort of observation (Rankin, 2017b). Rather it is a particular *approach* to multiple types of data. Jonathan Tummons (2017) called it a “framework for inquiry,” a way of thinking, and a “philosophy as well as methodology” (pp. 153-154). Similarly, Janet Rankin (2017b) called IE an “epistemological shift,” noting that this precludes it being combined with other methodologies (p. 1). LaFrance (2019) clearly defined how IE functions as a methodology within writing studies to focus on the social context of writing and the way networks of texts influence people. IE can be used with a variety of specific methods, including observations, interviews, surveys, or textual analysis (such as archival work), but it always works toward the goal uncovering the influence of institutional power on everyday practice.

One distinct feature of IE that fits particularly well with writing studies is a focus on texts and institutional discourse. Rather than focusing on any and all experiences in a specific setting, IE looks specifically for “replicable forms of social action that actual situated textual activities produce” (Turner, 2006, p. 140). Textual analysis is not a means of triangulation, as it might be more traditional ethnography. Rather, IE combines a focus on textual analysis and human interaction specifically to see how human interactions are textually mediated (Tummons, 2017). In addition, IE often combines data from different locations rather than an exclusive look at one setting. In so doing, institutional ethnographers aim to map how practices are textually coordinated across settings (McCoy, 2014).

The ultimate goal of IE seems to vary somewhat among those who employ the methodology; however, some common motivations link together different approaches. As with other forms of ethnography, detailed descriptions are an agreed upon feature of IE. For Campbell (2006), the institutional ethnographer aims to develop a description of institutional relations as they play out in individual experiences. Smith (2005) referred to this detailed description as creating a “map” of institutional complexes. Throughout the literature on IE, it is clear that these descriptions of individual experience are meant to relate to a bigger, institutional picture—one that connects social relationship and texts. Another common theme is the “uncovering” or exposing of power relationships that are often not apparent to individuals. LaFrance and Nicolas (2012) defined the goal of IE to: “uncover *how things happen*—what practices constitute the institution

as we think of it, how discourse may be understood to compel and shape those practices” (p. 131). This focus on *how* things happen over *what* is happening is a key difference between IE and traditional ethnography (LaFrance, 2019). Description is still key to IE, but it is for the purpose of connecting sites of practice and showing how institutional power interacts with local relationships rather than to describe what is happening at one specific site.

For Rankin (2017b) the major shift that distinguishes IE from other ethnography is that IE seeks to generate knowledge about the ways that individuals are “being organized against their own interests” (p. 1). Thus, IE often has a liberatory, social justice tint to it—it ultimately functions from the assumption that if we can uncover the ways that institutions affect individual experience, we can then work to change and improve our institutions. As with all forms of critical ethnography, IE views “personal experience *as uniquely responsive to* the social organization of institutions” (LaFrance & Nicolas, 2012, p. 134). By situating texts in the local settings where they are written and used, IE has consequences for actual practice.

Although some institutional ethnographers, including Smith (2005), see IE as addressing larger issues of power that are generalizable across multiple settings, the institutional ethnographer is not solely responsible for generalizing from the data. Rather, the knowledge produced by IE is seen as a collaboration between the research and participant. Even before IE, Newkirk (1992) acknowledged the role of the reader and their interpretive process in creating knowledge from ethnography. IE extends ethnography’s focus on “the relationships between inhabitants and between the environment and its inhabitants” (MacNealy, 1998, p. 215) beyond the “boundaries of any one informant’s experiences” to identify social relations and power structures that replicate across inhabitants and environments (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 90). Those boundaries also extend beyond the researcher’s experience and written account to connections readers make to their own local relationships and power structures.

KEY VOCABULARY IN IE

In addition to defining institutions and ethnography, IE comes with a set of vocabulary that is useful for understanding institutional power and everyday practice. One of the great ironies of IE is that as researchers, we are ourselves agents of institutional power, and that power is reflected in our own vocabulary and jargon. Although Naomi Nichols, Alison Griffith, and Mitchell McLarnon (2017) noted that the researcher should “resist the use of social science categories to group and name people’s experiences” (p. 112), IE itself uses a specific set of vocabulary. In the section, I explain four key concepts in IE: the problematic, ruling relations, standpoint, and boss texts.

PROBLEMATIC

The process of conducting an institutional ethnography starts with a “problematic.” The problematic in IE draws on Althusser’s problematic as an ideological context for work and is broader than starting with a research question. Rather, the problematic is “a territory to be discovered, not a question that is concluded in its answer” (Smith, 2005, p. 41). The researcher may start with a work process or issue that they have observed in their own life; however, it is key for an institutional ethnographer to expand beyond their own institutional context (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2006; Turner, 2006). For example, Griffith (2006) used her own experiences as single mother as a starting point to examine how the term “single parent family” is used in educational research to gain funding for inner-city schools and how this use relates to real experiences of single parents. The problematic, for Griffith, was the way this term defined families within both local institutions and schools and within the larger institution of education.

As the researcher expands their research, the problematic also changes and expands. According to Rankin (2017b), while the research may begin with a problematic, that problematic should be further developed from the institutional ethnographer’s analysis, which connects smaller problematics to the larger research arc. LaFrance (2019) also noted the way the problematic influences data analysis, as the researcher looks for overlap between everyday lived experiences gathered in the data and the problematic. Rather than define everything that is happening in the site of study, the researcher looks for relevance to the problematic and develops the study accordingly. It “becomes the basis for how the inquiry is conducted” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 48).

RULING RELATIONS

The term “ruling relations” is key to understanding the perspective on institutional power and texts offered by IE. Smith (2005) defined ruling relations as the “extraordinary yet ordinary complex of relations that are textually mediated, that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives—the corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and professional discourses, mass media, and the complicit relations that interconnect them” (p. 10). The role of texts in maintaining ruling relationships is crucial; they are the “principle instruments of ruling” (Rankin, 2017b, p. 2). Smith (2005) explained that as capitalism evolved, workers no longer knew their managers and were thus ruled not by individuals but by texts. Thus, ruling relations are specific to the arena of systemic management in which work became coordinated through texts. Writing scholar JoAnne Yates (1989) tied the evolution of systemic management in

the 1870s to the expansion of genres in business communication—specifically genres such as forms, manuals, and memos. These texts evolved as genres because they fit a particular rhetorical need that emerged during this time period. Ruling relations are not created by a single text, but rather it is the “*replicability of texts*” that allows for ruling (Smith, 2005, p. 166). Again, the concept of genre applies here, specifically administrative genres that are replicated over time and eventually become “how it is done” across different settings (LaFrance, 2019; Miller, 2017; Smith, 2005).

Thus, ruling relations operate in the background and are often invisible to the subject. These texts define our roles, our subject positions, regardless of our own embodied experiences, and those experiences are displaced by “the textual real” (Smith, 2005, p. 28). For example, institutional ethnographer George Smith (2014) demonstrated how legal code defined gay sex acts as “indecent acts” and thus tied the subjectivity of queerness to the subjectivity of criminal (p. 39). Thus, ruling relations function through genres to define individuals within systems of power. It is how ruling relations function in all spheres, including higher education.

Although not using IE, Donna Strickland (2011) described early work in composition as aimed to systematize the first-year course and standardize teacher practice. The WPA role—or standpoint—came into being as a means to control the “disordered masses” of composition teachers and even the most activist WPAs cannot be entirely separated from that position (Strickland, 2011). As a part of the move toward academic management, common texts—such as common rubrics—have defined what it means to be a “teaching subject” who needs to be managed by a WPA. In addition to being textual, ruling relations are often tied to “economic relations” that are “operationalized within and beyond an institution” (Russell, 2017, p. xiv). From their position within the institution, WPAs must deal with the economic concerns of the university, such as hiring adjunct faculty to fill a last-minute vacancy. As a field, writing studies has theorized this labor, but IE provides us with a new vocabulary and ability to expose ruling relations and may “reduce the frustration we feel about living and working in societies such as ours where things seem to get decided behind our backs, or at least outside of our control” (Campbell, 2006, p. 105).

STANDPOINT

When analyzing subjectivity and subjects, IE often draws on the concept of standpoint. Standpoints are “shared identities” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 5). Standpoint is the role that an individual occupies within a larger institutional structure. Researchers often decide to approach individuals who occupy a particular

standpoint and draw connections among individuals that occupy that same role. For example, a researcher looking at the medical field might choose to focus on either the standpoint of the patients or the standpoint of the nurses (Rankin, 2017b). While each individual patient will have their own perspective on their treatment, they occupy a similar standpoint in relationship to the medical institution. Standpoint is a complimentary concept to ruling relations: “Where ruling relations enable institutional ethnographers to trace broad social patterns, ‘standpoint’ helps the ethnographer to uncover disjunctions, divergences, and distinctions experienced by individuals within those groups” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 35). As used by feminist theorists in the 1970-1980s, standpoint theory works against positivist notions of research that obscure ruling relations and call for universality (LaFrance, 2019; Smith, 2005). Rather, the post-positivist approach of standpoint theory acknowledges that individual social realities are never neutral and that individuals are always partially defined in relationship to their role within an institution (LaFrance, 2019). An institution looks different and operates differently, depending on one’s standpoint.

By turning to the concept of standpoint, institutional ethnographers can avoid defaulting to standpoint of ruling (Rankin, 2017b). The researcher becomes aware of the multiple standpoints participants occupy in relationship to institutions and ruling relations. In so doing, they can uncover social networks and ruling relationships that are otherwise obscured and contextualize an individual’s social reality within the institutional setting (LaFrance, 2019). For example, in LaFrance’s (2019) chapter about writing assignments in a writing intensive course, she separated out the standpoint of teaching assistants (TAs) working with the course from the standpoint of the primary instructors. In so doing, she was better able to explicate how these roles and power differentials affected individuals’ interactions with course assignments and documents.

Standpoint comes into play for institutional ethnographers both as they plan their research and as they analyze their data. Smith (2005) advised starting research by identifying “a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which that order will be explored” (p. 32). During data analysis, the researcher should also seek to understand the standpoint of each participant (Reid, 2017). Finally, standpoint should be considered as the researcher reports on their research. Marie Campbell and Frances Gregor (2004) argued that part of the responsibility of an institutional ethnographer was to write texts “that express the standpoint of people and to help make them available to those who will use the work’s subversive capacity in their own struggles” (p. 128). Of course, one of the critiques of standpoint theory and institutional ethnography is that the researcher can never fully remove their own standpoint in order to focus on the standpoint of the participants: “research produces rather

than preserves the presence of the subject” (Walby, 2007, p. 1009). In addition, standpoints are always limited, and thus when research is presented through standpoint, our understanding is always partial (LaFrance, 2019).

BOSS TEXTS & INSTITUTIONAL CIRCUITS

Texts often form a key part of the work of IE. In particular, researchers look to examine “boss texts” that span across institutional settings. LaFrance (2019) defined boss texts as: “texts that transmit ruling relations between sites—carrying rhetorical influences, granting agency and authority, casting representations of people and their work, and sanctioning activities” (p. 42). She explained that texts such as websites, textbooks, syllabi, rubrics, and even classroom management software “can dramatically order conceptions of writing” (p. 43). Another example LaFrance (2019) gave was “employment texts,” and her book detailed the way that job descriptions and annual review processes for writing center directors either value or diminish their work.

Those in writing studies may be familiar with the concept of institutional and administrative genres, concepts that overlap with the notion of boss texts. Carolyn Miller (2017) defined “institutional genres” as genres with strong conventions that come from a long historical tradition, such as the research article or presidential inaugural. Similarly, Miller (2017) defined “administrative genres” as genres dictated by those in power to serve the needs of the institution, such as forms and reports that with preset guidelines. While IE’s notion of institutional discourse might include both institutional and administrative genres, it is nearly impossible to trace structures of power inherent in institutional genres through IE since they are more historically embedded in institutional systems. However, administrative genres may be viewed as they are being developed, written, or enacted.

Boss texts are part of an institutional circuit, making everyday practice actionable and authorized by the institution (Smith & Turner, 2014). They are linked to accountability and standardize practice across settings (LaFrance, 2019). Working within a genre lens rather than an IE methodology, Leslie Seawright’s (2017) study of the police report fits well with this definition. The report closes a circuit of textual interactions and serves as the official account of what is often a complex series events, representing those events from an institutional rather than individual perspective. The genre of the report ultimately serves to “perform the police as an organization” (Smith, 2014, p. 34). The police becomes synonymous with the *institution* of the police rather than the standpoint of the officer on the scene. Seawright (2017) explained that the police report ultimately obscures the experiences of individuals in an attempt to gain cultural capital for

the police. Thus, Seawright's explanation of the way genre works in this instance fills well with IE's terminology of boss texts and institutional circuits.

However, using the IE terminology of boss text, rather than the term administrative genres, focuses our attention on how these texts enact ruling relations. They are, in many cases, a stand-in for an absent boss. Such institutional texts often use passive voice and nominalization in order to obscure the actual agent behind the work (Grace, Zurawski & Sinding, 2014). For example, rather than a supervisor reviewing a teacher's grades, the text of a programmatic rubric fulfills that "boss" function by standardizing how and what a teacher should grade. Just as an individual police officer was rendered *the police* through the process of reporting, we see individual faculty members become synonymous with the institution of higher education through the boss texts that guide their work.

Institutional ethnographers seek to interrupt this circuit of texts and return to the moments where boss texts are created and responded to. Dorothy Smith and Susan Marie Turner (2014) referred to this moment as the "text-reader conversation" (p. 12). Unlike some methods of analysis (such as actor-network theory), IE does not grant texts agency but rather sees individuals as agents who "activate" texts (Smith & Turner, 2014, p. 9). Thus, observation and interviews with individuals are key to IE rather than focusing on textual analysis.

THE IE PROCESS

The process of conducting an institutional ethnography varies from researcher to researcher as well as by each individual study. While I define certain stages to the process of IE and my own study, it should be noted that these stages are often recursive. It is the flexibility of research process and the valuing of participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's that maintains IE's specific ontological approach (Rankin, 2017b). For example, gathering texts might be done as an initial stage but new texts might be gathered as they are created or come up in interviews. Likewise, defining the problematic sets the study in motion, but also keeps it flowing as the researcher continually returns to and re-defines it. Research methods in IE are always evolving to the benefit of the study. IE resists the positivist approach that rigid set up ensures quality research; rather, rigor comes from continually returning to the problematic to draw connections between individuals and social structures (LaFrance, 2019). IE also finds its rigor in the map of social relations that is developed as the final product of the ethnography (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). For example, the selection of interviewees may be open-ended, and new participants may emerge as the study evolves, but those interviews must ultimately inform the researcher's understanding of the problematic.

1. DEFINING THE PROBLEMATIC

According to Marjorie DeVault and Liza McCoy (2006), the first stage in IE is to “identify an experience” from which the problematic is drawn. This experience is often drawn from the researcher’s own practice. For Susan Marie Turner (2006), that practice often centers on a process that uses a particular text. My problematic stems from such a process: university-wide writing assessment completed using the AAC&U VALUE rubrics. In 2014, my institution began a university-wide assessment of their upper-level core curriculum classes, some of which were designated “writing intensive.” As we do not have a writing across the curriculum (WAC) program, this assessment was led by the assistant provost for institutional research. He led a small committee in adapting the AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics for written communication and critical thinking and then trained a group of faculty raters to assess artifacts from across campus. This was the first time I had heard of the VALUE rubrics and, believing that best writing assessment is local, I was curious and concerned about the use of a national rubric to score artifacts at my own institution.

Defining the problematic also involves identifying the standpoint or standpoints at play. For example, LaFrance (2019) defined the practice of constructing writing assignments in a course that involved teaching assistants (TAs) and faculty members collaborating in a hierarchical setting as the problematic for one of her institutional ethnographies. For LaFrance, the standpoint of TAs and the standpoint of faculty members were central to researching her problematic, which rested on how the interaction between these two standpoints formed a perception of writing within the university. Knowing that the assessment using the VALUE rubric at my institution was not administered or conducted by experts in writing studies, I was curious how understanding of the rubric would vary according to disciplinary standpoint. Thus, my initial research at my institution involved observing the norming sessions using the rubric and interviewing faculty from across campus about their scoring experience. Indeed, I found differing understandings of the rubric based on different perspectives about writing.

This local research served as a sort of pilot study that defined my research and the problematic. I was concerned with taking a national rubric for writing into a local context and modifying it, and I was particularly concerned about how doing so influenced non-compositionists. However, to truly define my concerns as a *problematic* in IE terms, I needed to see if other institutions were taking similar action and if these actions raised similar concerns. This step involves expanding to different work sites to see how similar work practices are carried out in other settings and how institutional power connects these processes across sites (Smith, 2005; Smith, 2006). After two summers of research at my home institution, I decided to expand my study to other colleges and universities.

2. GATHERING TEXTS

In writing studies, stage two of an institutional ethnography is often focused on gathering of public documents about the site that has been identified for research. The researcher locates official documents before going into the site and interviewing local informants about the use of the documents (LaFrance, 2019). These documents may be policy documents rather than local texts (Rankin, 2017a). For my study, stage two involved the gathering of and analyzing AAC&U documents about the VALUE movement. In addition, I conducted a national survey about the use of the VALUE Written Communication rubric to gather local versions of the rubric and information about their use. The first grounded me in national policy (or at least national suggestion) about best practices in assessment. The second allowed for insight into actual practice and gave me a set of modified rubrics to analyze.

I should note that I initially saw this part of the study as gathering background information or “getting up to speed,” not as a part of the institutional ethnography. In other research methods, it might be viewed as such. However, LaFrance’s (2019) book, which was released after my data was collected, clarified for me the importance of gathering these institutional texts as a key part of process of the institutional ethnographer. Without a deep familiarity with the way the AAC&U frames their VALUEs rubrics, I would not be able to analyze the way the larger institution of higher education interacts with local institutional practice. In addition, DeVault and McCoy (2006) framed the second stage of institutional ethnography in terms of following action over time as it is organized in a set of documents. Although I would later do this with my specific institutional settings, it was also important to trace how the VALUE rubrics were organized and enacted over the course of many years by the AAC&U in their own literature and studies. Document collection, however, was not one static stage of my research—particularly as the AAC&U continues to release new studies and data about the VALUE rubrics, and the rhetoric of those resources continues to shift. Even after local data collection ceased in 2018, I continued to attend multiple presentations and webinars held by the AAC&U about the VALUE rubrics and read new materials they released. These materials are featured prominently in Chapter 4 but also appear throughout the book.

3. IDENTIFYING SITES OF STUDY & STANDPOINTS

Identifying standpoints is also ongoing throughout the research process. I initially identified the standpoint of non-writing specialists as key to my study; however, at the time, I had not fully embraced IE, and thus my initial attempt

to identify participants was more positivist in nature. I separated my survey participants into schools based on Carnegie classification, and then identified where the VALUE rubric was used: in a first-year writing program, a WAC program, a university-wide assessment, or another setting. I thought that this would offer me a range of standpoints, but ultimately, this type of positionality was not useful. I found that these classifications—the classifications of the institution of higher education—conflicted with the lived experiences I found at the two institutions I selected for further study. Thus, it was almost serendipitous that I ended up with two institutions that represented vastly different standpoints within higher education.

The two schools that I identified for further research are referred to by the pseudonyms St. Rita's and Oak University. I selected St. Rita's as a representative "MA college" with "postbaccalaureate programs," as it is listed on the Carnegie classification website. However, this extremely small school, with a student body of less than 1000, is confined to one building, and the master's degree programs had no bearing on my study or the use of the VALUE rubrics. Likewise, defining the type of program was not fully relevant to the two small institutions I selected. At St. Rita's, the general education committee was looking at the VALUE rubrics, but a version was also used to assess portfolios from first-year writing classes. At Oak, the writing program covered both first-year writing classes and writing across the curriculum. However, the rubrics had also been used for general education and some Oak faculty had attended the national AAC&U training.

Thus, my understanding of and selection of standpoints evolved throughout my data collection. Rather than the positionality of the institution, I began to look at the positionality of my participants, non-writing specialists. Much has been written about the use of rubrics within our field, and our scholars in writing assessment already have a voice in this conversation. Drawing from my own experience where a local assessment professional rather than a composition specialist conducted university-wide writing assessment using the VALUE rubrics, I wanted to know more about the standpoint with which non-writing assessment and non-writing studies faculty approached such processes. The two schools I selected were both small, and neither had an area of rhetoric and composition faculty. Although Oak University has a writing center professional, their writing program administrator, Kristen, came from the discipline of history, and their new writing program was established under the leadership of a computer scientist, Ben. At St. Rita's, the general education assessment process was being led by a faculty member in English, Dwayne, who specialized in creative writing, but who had some training in composition and was thus drawn to improve writing instruction. However, he held no official title related to writing.

These two main informants—Kristen and Dwayne—thus provided a standpoint not often depicted in writing studies. In addition, I sought a variety of standpoints within the two institutions I visited. I interviewed faculty from across the curriculum as well as a provost or associate provost at each institution. By interviewing a member of the upper administration, I was able to see how larger institutional initiatives, such as grant funding from the AAC&U, influenced assessment decisions on campus. Together these perspectives helped me define my problematic and explore how writing and writing assessment is defined from these multiple standpoints within these institutions.

4. OBSERVATIONS, INTERVIEWS & HIDDEN DOCUMENTS

The next stage of IE is collecting personal accounts and gathering non-public documents (LaFrance, 2019). Turner (2014) stressed that institutional ethnographers should examine the “traces of [a text’s] production” but also show the way these texts are read and how those readings influence decision making. The core of my institutional ethnography comes from the data gathered from observations, interviews, and textual resources gathered at St. Rita’s and Oak between 2016-2018. I observed meetings where the rubrics were discussed and norming sessions where raters were trained to read the rubrics. At Oak, I observed several writing committee meetings as well as a norming session for assessors. At St. Rita’s, I observed a general education committee’s members discussing goals and the VALUE Written Communication rubric. These moments “activated” the text of the rubric and defined how it was used in the real practice of assessment at these universities.

Kevin Walby (2007) also suggested interviewing those who “bring the text(s) into institutional processes” (p. 1013). Interviews in IE are often not as structured as they might be in other methodologies, but they are more than just “talking to people” (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). Site visits and observations may lead to less formal interviews and interview questions emerge organically from the research process (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; DeVault & McCoy, 2006). I began by setting up interviews with members of the committees I observed, but I also allowed my research visits to develop organically. At St. Rita’s, I found participants saying things like, “you should talk to so-and-so, let me see if they’re in their office.” Although Oak was more spread out, I noted others who were mentioned in interviews or suggested to me as potential participants and contacted them for an interview. Thus, my interview pool expanded as my research developed.

Interviews in IE often involve referring back to specific texts. DeVault and McCoy (2006) instructed the institutional ethnographer to question interview-

ees about boss texts and to also collect any additional texts as mentioned in interviews. For example, they reference Ellen Pence's study, where she asked social workers how they would change a reporting form they used if they could. Similarly, when I interviewed writing committee members, I asked them about the rubric they were using, including their understanding of the terms used and any changes they would make to their rubric. These interviews were somewhat structured because I focused primarily on the text of the rubric and the process of revising the rubric and/or assessing artifacts that the participants were involved with. However, I did allow these interviews to digress into multiple tangents as led by participants, and this data revealed particularly relevant information about how participants' backgrounds and relationships influenced their work with the rubric. As I continued regular interviews over the course of two years with my main informants, these interviews, in particular, became less formal. Although these interviews still focused on assessment and rubrics, the less formal nature of the ongoing relationship with my key informants also allowed for factors such as institutional politics and faculty relations—and their impact on the work of assessment—to emerge as key factors in my study.

Finally, as they conduct and transcribe interviews, institutional ethnographers listen for information about other texts that may relate to the problematic (Walby, 2007). These texts may be official local documents or may be less official texts used by individual interviewees. Kristen at Oak diligently gave me copies of reports, meeting minutes, and rubric drafts. However, I was sometimes handed texts within an interview, such as a rubric used in class by a particular faculty member, and these "hidden texts" served as another data point in uncovering the ways that ruling relations affect perceptions of writing and writing assessment on campus. For example, Patrice at St. Rita's handed me a rubric that she was given years ago by English faculty that she still used to assess writing in her classroom. While participants were not always able to locate texts that they referenced or did not always follow through, these local "hidden" texts added to my understanding of ruling relations at these schools.

5. THE DIALOG OF ANALYSIS

Analysis in IE is seen as a form of dialog that emerges between the researcher and their notes/interview transcripts (Smith, 2005). Institutional ethnographers also put data from one institution in conversation with data from other institutions, thus creating a dialog across scenes. Rather than applying formal coding, the researcher might approach their data with a new set of questions that allows them to draw connections between participant stories (DeVault & McCoy, 2006; Smith, 2005). For example, Campbell (2006) suggested approaching interview

transcripts with questions such as: “What is the work that these informants are describing or alluding to?” and “How is the work articulated to institutional work processes and institutional order?” (p. 111). LaFrance (2019) stressed the importance of the connections the researcher makes between lived experiences and institutional discourse, and the need to look for “overlap of competing values and ideals” (pp. 39-40). In short, the institutional ethnographer looks for “recurring events or recurring use of words” across institutional contexts in order to define “how things happen *here*, in the same way they happen *over there*” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 69).

Often, institutional ethnographers refer to analysis as a process of mapping, which leads some researchers to form textual or visual maps demonstrating power relationships between institutions and individuals. For example, Debra Talbot (2017) created visual maps to show how each teacher she interviewed connected to ruling relations. Even if there is no creation of a physical map, the researcher engages in a “kind of analytical mapping that locates individuals and their experiences within a complex institutional field” (Campbell, 2006, p. 113). Mapping can also refer to a more narrative form. Walby (2007) described a process of “ghostwriting” where the interviews were transformed into narrative accounts that were then shared with the participants. Rankin (2017a), too, wrote chunks of narrative representing the experiences of different participants. While maps look different for each institutional ethnography, the process of linking individuals to ruling relations is key to the work of analysis in IE.

I used multiple techniques when analyzing my data, and as is typical for institutional ethnography, this process was ongoing rather than one final stage of the research. During my site visits, I took extensive notes as well as some photographs. Afterwards, I wrote brief narrative accounts of my visit, particularly centering on the embodied experience I gathered from being physically present at the sites. I transcribed all interviews and meeting recordings myself and wrote memos with my initial thoughts after I completed each transcription. Working across these experiences, I drafted the narratives seen in the introduction to this book, which I shared with my two key informants who agreed that they represented their experiences.

When analyzing interview and observation transcripts, I drew on James Reid’s (2017) concept of a “listening guide.” Reid (2019) analyzed transcripts for four institutional factors: relations of ruling, reflexivity, textually mediated relationships, and cultural/social context (p. 37). Although I used different terminology, I also read my interviews and meeting transcripts for multiple levels of interaction between individuals and institutions. I separated out larger institutional influences (organizations, grants, etc.), disciplinary influences, local influences (from the particular school), classroom teaching, and personal/ex-

ternal influences (family, individual interests). I also marked statements about writing and about assessment in which the participant made broad statements that seemed absent of these influences. As a researcher, I do not see these instances as void of institutional influences; however, I found it important to see what statements about writing the participants expressed as being universal rather than disciplinary or personal. For example, when I asked some participants what good writing looked like to them, they responded with statements that seemed generalized—it is *clear, concise*—but as we know from previous research such terms mean different things to members of different disciplines (Zawacki & Gentemann, 2009).

When identifying large-scale institutional influences, I particularly looked for factors that spanned local settings. The AAC&U VALUE Written Communication rubric was clearly one of the major influences I looked for in my study. However, participants also referred to other large-scale institutional factors, such as accreditation, grant funding, and testing. I paid attention to any references to these wide-spread influences on higher education as a whole. I also looked for more specific “institutional *language*” in transcripts, such as places where participants reference position titles or policies (Rankin, 2017b, p. 4). Talbot (2017) looked for teachers using language from policy documents. Similarly, I “listened” when participants used specific language from the VALUE rubrics, such as using terms like “benchmark,” or titles of other VALUE rubrics such as “Civic Engagement.” I also looked for institutional language that reflects practices in higher education as a whole, words such as “proficiency” or “standards.” Also included in the category of institutional influences were references to training sessions held by the AAC&U that my participants attended. Mapping these large-scale institutional influences helped me see how the AAC&U and other organizations, policies, and financial considerations influence writing assessment and how that assessment represents institutions of higher education.

I marked local institutional influences separately from large-scale institutional influences. These local influences ranged from specific factors of institutional setting, such as student population to individual faculty relationships. Although committees are a common structure in academia as a whole, I marked references to specific local committees and times that interviewees referenced their role on these committees as local influences. In particular, I focused on the faculty relationships on these committees. Some of these instances involved specific local stories, but others were about the interaction among faculty in the meetings I observed. One of the stark differences between Oak and St. Rita’s was the element of faculty relationships as well as the very different populations of students they serve. These local influences help show how larger cross-institutional initiatives play out very differently due to multiple local factors.

Another way to examine the relationship between large-scale influences in higher education and local institutional context was to look for moments where participants referenced larger disciplinary structures. Often (but not always) when participants spoke of a disciplinary community (chemistry, English, etc.), they spoke as teachers with individual classrooms rather than as members of a larger institution. For example, they rarely mention disciplinary organizations or journals. These moments contrast with moments when participants make generalizations about writing that they view as universal, such as referring to the “standard academic essay” as if one form transcended disciplines and classrooms. This tension between disciplinary language and generalizations about good writing is common when assessing writing across the curriculum (Zawacki & Gentemann, 2009). Common rubrics can reinforce these bad ideas about writing as a general form. Although both institutions I visited had committees with representation from around campus, I found that acknowledging disciplinary difference was more common at Oak than St. Rita’s where faculty were more likely to talk about writing and teaching as general enterprises. In part, this may be due to the size of St. Rita’s. Faculty there routinely taught in what I might consider a variety of disciplines. Patrice, for example, taught government along with sociology—disciplines that would likely be separate at a larger institution. Also, in the category of disciplinary influences, I included references to the discipline of writing studies or composition. Although neither of my main participants had a Ph.D. in the field, both interacted with the discipline in different ways. In addition, other faculty had experiences, often during their graduate studies, with composition as a field of study, and these experiences influenced their views on teaching and assessing writing.

Finally, there were a range of external and/or personal influences that proved to be an important part of understanding the relationships between these individual participants and their institutional settings. These influences connect individuals with larger societal structures, particularly racialized social structures. In particular, two participants shared a good deal about their own personal background and how that influenced their relationship to their profession in academia. Dr. Gerald Z, a key participant at St. Rita’s, continually discussed his “blue collar” upbringing as the son of a cop, an identity that complicates his relationship with academia as a whole as well as with his first-generation students. Brad, an art history professor at Oak, also talked about his working-class upbringing, but he shared how his own participation in a study abroad program expanded his empathy for international students and upended his views on education. These two interviews, compared in Chapter 7, brought unexpected individual circumstances to the study that provided significant insight into how *individuals* operate within—but also in opposition to—the institutional structures of higher education.

Although much of my analysis focuses on these rich interviews and observations, the texts of the AAC&U as well as local texts also inform this study. The VALUE rubric for Written Communication and the “adaptations” the participants made to the rubric to create local versions were the focus of the interviews and observations. Early in my study, I imagined tracing the language changes between the VALUE Written Communication rubric and local writing rubrics over time, but as I will explain throughout the book, this type of analysis was not possible with the data gathered. Rather than ask “how” the rubrics were adapted, I often asked what adaptation meant to my participants and how the rubrics informed their views on writing and writing assessment. Like Walby (2007), I listened for references to all texts that influenced participants views on writing and assessment. In so doing, I aimed to map the limits of the influence of the VALUE rubrics in relationship to other texts that influenced writing assessment on these campuses. Following DeVault and McCoy (2006), my analysis of these texts is always in relationship to the interviews, which explore how the participants use and interact with these documents as assessors, curriculum planners, and instructors.

ANALYSIS CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

In what follows, I use the lens of institutional ethnography to discuss the AAC&U Written Communication VALUE rubric as part of an institutional circuit that includes many texts working together to define writing and writing assessment at colleges and universities. Drawing on Campbell’s (2006) goals for institutional ethnography as a methodology, I seek to “develop a detailed, descriptive analysis” (p. 123) of the way that this a national rubric for writing shapes and organizes the work of those who teach and assess writing at Oak and St. Rita’s. Chapters 4 and 5 work together to define the VALUE rubric for Written Communication as a boss text and to uncover the ruling relations behind the rubric. Boss texts have authority because they define “ideals of accountability, professionalism, and disciplinarily” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 80). The VALUE rubrics have redefined accountability in higher education in terms of rubrics, particularly when accounting for “soft skills” such as writing. Over time, the VALUE rubrics have also emerged as a means of national comparison, a tool for accreditation that proves schools are meeting national “ideals of accountability.” Chapter 4 explains how the VALUE rubrics, in conjunction with larger governing forces in higher education such as grant funding and accreditation, defines what it means to be an institution of higher education. I describe how administrators and faculty at Oak and St. Rita’s strategically adopt the rubrics as means of legitimizing their institutions and writing programs.

A second way that the VALUE Written Communication rubric functions as a boss text is in defining what it means to assess writing not through the original rubric, but through the rubric adaptation and assessment process designed by the AAC&U. Although the exact text changes, these alternations do not erase the influence of ruling relations. As Smith and Turner (2014) explained, replicability of texts does not imply that they are read or used the same way in each setting, yet the text is significant because it is recognized and replicated across settings. From the beginning of my research, I discovered that even when I could not directly trace the language of a locally-used rubric to the original VALUE Written Communication rubric, participants viewed the rubric as an adaptation. The very fact that they were using a *rubric* to assess writing came from their experiences with the AAC&U. In Chapter 5, I look at what “adaptation” means at both a national level and also to participants at Oak and St. Rita’s. I examine how the dynamics of the writing committee at Oak and the general education committee at St. Rita’s influence the final “adaptation” of the rubric for use in particular ways at these institutions.

Originally, I considered classroom use of the VALUE Written Communication rubric as a part of my problematic. However, the majority of my research participants did not use the rubric in the classroom. Nevertheless, their standpoint as classroom teachers influenced the way they viewed rubrics. Chapter 6 discusses the rubric as a genre of power both in and out of the classroom. In this chapter, I examine how faculty evaluated writing in their classroom and how they developed classroom rubrics. I also explore how the genre of the rubric becomes as stand-in for all classroom practice when used for large-scale assessment. Specifically, committee members at Oak and St. Rita’s were seen as representatives of their departments and classrooms and thus worked to make sure large-scale assessment efforts accounted for their specific pedagogical practices. When looking at programmatic and national practice, which is often done in the absence of an assignment prompt, the student artifact is viewed as representative of classroom practice and the rubric is separated from other classroom genres.

Finally, Chapter 7 directly addresses the way that societal factors, specifically American individualism and a White racial habitus affect assessment and views of faculty members at St. Rita’s and Oak. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu as well as Bonilla-Silva, Asao Inoue (2015) explained the way that “race as *habitus* structures and is structured into our lives,” including our “expectations for writing” and the way that we assess it (p. 43). The idea of a racial habitus means thinking about race as continually being constructed through the body, through language, and through differences in opportunities and experience in the world. The racial makeup of the student body varied significantly between Oak and St. Rita’s. Oak is a primarily White institution, while St. Rita’s has a mix of White,

Black, and Hispanic students. Yet, the faculty at both schools often adopt a colorblind rhetoric where the default for a prepared college student is White. This White racial habitus is coded within the rubrics these faculty members use and create, particularly in the dimensions for sentence-level “errors.” While many faculty members in my study represent a sort of colorblind racism, I delve further into the way that two faculty members in particular discussed race, language, and their own experiences as White men. These two interviews also show us how White men exercise and/or abdicate their own individual power within the White racialized structures of academia.

Together these chapters present a nuanced and complex view of how rubrics, specifically those developed at the national level interact with local institutional and individual power dynamics. My conclusion addresses how the context in which rubrics are used is set at the national level, the university level, and the classroom level. I work to offer suggestions for how we think about these institutional levels in relationship to each other and to our own individual practices within teaching and administration. The rubric is a genre of power, a boss text, that is part of an ecology of assessment. Institutional ethnography helps articulate how that power is enacted and embodied in the everyday working lives of those who teach and assess writing at post-secondary institutions.