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## Introduction

### TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY EXIGENCIES

#### *Materialist Methods for Writing Studies*

*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”

*Institutional ethnography explores the organizing INSTITUTIONS as people participate in them and from their perspectives. People are the expert practitioners of their own lives, and the ethnographer’s work is to learn from them, to assemble what is learned from different perspectives, and to investigate how their activities are coordinated. It aims to go beyond what people know to find out how what they are doing is connected with other’s doings in ways they cannot see. The idea is to MAP the institutional aspects of the RULING RELATIONS so that people can expand their own knowledge of their everyday worlds by being able to see how what they are doing is coordinated with other’s doings elsewhere and elsewhere.*

—Dorothy Smith, *Institutional  
Ethnography: A Sociology for People*

This book is about conducting ethnographic research in institutional sites of writing, such as writing programs, classrooms, curricular initiatives, and other areas of higher education. Informed by the lifelong work of Dorothy E. Smith, a Canadian sociologist, chapters explore, adapt, and expand “institutional ethnography” (IE) for writing studies researchers. Smith’s career work recognized the highly personal, situated, and embodied nature of knowing and challenged traditional models of social science research. Positivist paradigms and universalist

models of empirical research in the social sciences, Smith (2005, 9) argued, frequently oversimplified and reified the material conditions of sites of study, objectifying research subjects. Instead, the model of ethnography Smith developed drew upon principles of feminist cultural materialism to focus the researcher's eye on the unique personal experiences and coordinated practices of individuals, as these revealed recurrent patterns of social organization. Smith, in short, "studied up"—a term popularized by Laura Nader (1972) in the early 1970s—to reveal elements of everyday experience that were often otherwise occluded, elided, or erased by qualitative models that sought to study predetermined aspects of culture and community. Smith (2006, 5) calls this the process of "looking up from where you are" a means of uncovering the knowing, doing, and being of active individuals who negotiate their everyday contexts in highly personal ways.

Ethnography itself is a well-known methodology in the field of writing studies. Defined by Linda Brodkey (1987b, 25) as "the study of lived experience," by Janice M. Lauer and J. William Asher (1988, 39) as a "kind of descriptive research [that] examines entire environments, looking at subjects in context," and by Clifford Geertz (1998) as simply "deep hanging out," ethnography offers an adaptable and reflexive means by which to explore the complex and highly networked terrain of interest to writing studies researchers, exposing, as Brodkey (1987a, 26) contends, "how, in the course of fabricating their lives, individuals also weave into their material cultures." Ethnography has largely been a go-to for researchers in writing studies because it offers a sense of richness and specificity that other forms of research may not, a "holistic view of the behaviors, beliefs, rituals, and interactions" central to those involved in sites of writing, as Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (2012, 201) has argued.

While traditional ethnographers in writing studies are often interested in what is happening in sites of writing—what students or faculty are doing, for example—the IE project sets out to uncover *how things come to happen*, noting that "people participate in social relations, often unknowingly, as they act competently and knowledgeably to concert and coordinate their own actions with professional standards" (Campbell and Gregor 2002, 31). The methodology—or theoretical framework—of IE often focuses on the shape of people's "work," a concept defined generously (Griffith and Smith 2014). In IE, "work" denotes a series of coordinated practices within a local setting into which an individual routinely puts time and energy. It is through our work that institutions *coordinate the experiences and practices of individuals*, particularly in highly prescribed sites, such as "corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and

professional discourses, [and] mass media,” social complexes that have an inordinate power over the ways people go about their everyday lives (Smith 2005, 10). IE holds that individual experience, ideals of practice, local materialities, and institutional discourse are mutually constitutive; what individuals do is always rule-governed and textually mediated. Using IE to study the “work” that people carry out allows writing studies researchers to reveal 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.

A number of distinctive analytic moves are foundational to IE, but two are absolutely central to understanding the larger framework IE offers ethnographers: “standpoint” and “ruling relations.” With both terms, Smith asks us to think about the socially organized and specifically regulated situation of individuals within institutions, a move that collapses distinctions between broader discursive forces (such as professional and institutional discourse) and the ways we carry out our work. Individuals are unique and knowing but also act from places of shared identity, professional alignment, and investment—their “standpoint.” “Ruling relations” are “that extraordinary yet ordinary complex of relations . . . that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives” (Smith 2005, 8). Institutional ethnographers seek to trace the empirical bridges that connect these two points of understanding, noting that there is always a relationship between the “micro” and the “macro” elements of the sites they study (DeVault 2008, 4). The goal is to reveal how our lives take shape as a process of negotiation of social relations. As such, the IE framework shifts the ethnographer’s eye away from reified or static understandings of the people, events, or sites studied. The methodology asks us instead to investigate how the individuals within a location co-create the dynamics and processes under investigation.

Writing studies researchers have long recognized that writing instruction is mediated through highly institutional, bureaucratized structures, but we have few specifically designed research tools to help us uncover the rich actualities of these sites that we have theorized so exactly. As writing studies researchers begin to account for the complex interconnections between the material conditions of our sites and how people do what they do, we begin to recognize how writing, writing pedagogy, and our multifaceted work in sites of writing are coordinated by particular institutional factors. These practices do not, indeed cannot, exist independent of local contexts and the unique individuals who bring them

into being; they are always produced within situated contexts by actual people who are negotiating any number of professional, institutional, and highly individual ideals toward specific ends. IE offers researchers in writing studies a series of tools to begin to trace, unpack, and make visible the types of negotiation and coordination that are this process of co-constitution. We are better enabled then to understand how writing, writers, and writing instruction are shaped by the material conditions—labor, work, space, place, resources, and material aspects of culture—that surround, inform, and generate them. With tools like IE, we are able to generate rich research-driven stories that help us to talk back to these forces and their constraints. We benefit from the resulting opportunities to intervene in local contexts and reclaim our understanding of ourselves and our work on our own terms.

Reframing more traditional forms of ethnography through IE is a crucial move for writing studies research in the twenty-first century, an age marked by the rise of neoliberalism and increased austerity measures, as Nancy Welch and Tony Scott (2016), among others, have argued. In light of federal and state funding restrictions for public institutions (in accord with reduced support for the public sphere more generally), we've experienced a number of challenges to our ideals, our core pedagogies, and our notions of our expertise and value. These challenges are insistently reshaping our work in writing studies as they intractably remake the broader contexts of higher education.

Moreover, regularizing some aspects of ethnography (as *method*) using importable, scalable frameworks is crucial for revitalizing ongoing conversations about the particularities of ethnography in writing studies. Conducting ethnography (even critical ethnography) in and of itself does not necessarily set up a researcher to attend to the constructedness of institutional life or the actualities of our work, factors that must be considered to make effective research-driven changes to practice and policy or to effect program-wide improvement. IE poses the ongoing critical work of ethnography as a continuation of our theoretical, rhetorical, historical, and other discursive investments; but IE also grounds these critiques in the actualities uncovered by ethnographic practice. What is more, IE's attention to the rhetorical and material constitution of the institution and its adaptable heuristics offers an approach to ethnography that regularizes researchers' attentions to institutionally suppressed or standardized experiences so we can fully understand the work we carry out in institutional settings.

The focus on *our work* is key for understanding what IE offers that other methodologies do not. 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, Welch and Scott 2016; Brandt 2014, Scott 2009; Sheridan 2012; Bishop 1999, among others). More narrow calls for studying and revising policy regarding writing program labor, labor relations, and the terms of our work (particularly in composition) have been central to ongoing conversations in writing studies as well (for example, Cox et al. 2016; Horner 2000, 2016).

However, as generative as these critical interventions are, we have lacked for methodologies that enable us to understand the situated actualities of our work within institutional contexts. The field has often been preoccupied with narratives of program design, curriculum development, and management—discourses that tend to standardize, generalize, and even erase the identities, expertise, and labor contributed by diverse participants. Scholarship in the field needs tools to help us deliberately compensate for that erasure. IE offers a comprehensive and situated means to uncover all the highly specific and individualized ways in which work actually takes shape within institutional settings. Research conclusions, program review, curricular and policy development (and subsequent recommendations), and other research-driven initiatives based on IE methodologies, I argue, are likely to be based on a more comprehensive understanding of how work proceeds in institutions and thus more likely to enable insights that initiate productive and lasting changes.

With its comprehensive framework for understanding how our work is institutionally generated and coordinated with the work of others, IE offers a working vocabulary and ready set of heuristics for new and practiced writing studies researchers interested in understanding the particularities of our everyday lives. This is a crucial step forward for our study of the impact of the labor conditions of the field and the relationships between pedagogy and material conditions and for further generating research-driven understandings of how our work with writers and writing instructors and in sites of writing may claim value, legitimacy, and support in the broader contexts of higher education.

#### **ETHNOGRAPHY AS DEEP THEORY: WRITING AND MATERIAL RELATIONS IN THE NEOLIBERAL INSTITUTION**

*Much in the world of literacy, language, literature, and writing instruction has changed in the last decade. External entities have sought to shape our curricula, pedagogies, and teaching*

*conditions and to promote their own agendas on assessment and professional development. Political and economic forces shape schools and public views of education. How we read, write, and learn continues to be transformed by technological and social forces. Against this complex backdrop stand our students, each with crucial needs and aspirations. NCTE remains committed to serving all students by drawing on all that we know about literacy, learning, and teaching.*

—“An Update on National Council of Teachers of English Initiatives,” members’ email, March 15, 2016

*One of the most important aspects of research methods and methodologies in rhetoric, composition and literacy scholarship has been the concerted effort to analyze and assess how writing, rhetoric, and literacy practices have been shaped by material constraints and realities.*

—Eileen Schell, “Materialist Feminism and Composition Studies: The Practice of Critique and Activism in an Age of Globalization”

Institutional ethnography enters a field already attuned to many of the core questions, research practices, and epistemological challenges central to work with ethnography. Theresa Lillis (2008, 355) argues that the field’s discussions of ethnography have typically been organized around two concerns: ethnography as *method* and ethnography as *methodology*. Unfortunately, Lillis also notes that these conversations have frequently explored writing in separation from the rich contexts that surround, shape, and produce it as a social practice, resulting in over-determined and operationalized understandings of writing, writers, and sites of writing in our research narratives. She poses instead that we re-conceive of ethnography as a form of “deep theorizing,” that is, as a “fully fledged methodology and as a specific epistemology and ontology” (Lillis 2008, 355). That is, ethnography not only seeks to understand people, what they do, how they do it, and how their practices take shape, but in effect it theoretically constructs each of these interests as interdependent or relational. None of these points of ethnographic focus can exist in separation from the others.

Lillis’s argument that ethnography can be understood as a form of “deep theorizing” offers an excellent starting point for this introduction’s exploration of IE in today’s neoliberal institution. But before we begin this exploration, we must first unpack a few more key terms and epistemological moves that are central to our ongoing conversation in

writing studies about research and how we design and carry out projects. What, for instance, does it mean to distinguish ethnography *as method* from ethnography *as methodology*? Writing studies scholarship provides answers for us to build on:

**Method:** Rebecca Rickly (2008, 261) defines method as the “variety of techniques for gathering data, such as participant observation, interviews, surveys, and so forth,” focusing on how particular techniques of data collection provide more or less effective understandings of doing and knowing around our research interests.

**Methodology:** This term has been defined as both “the underlying theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (Kirsch and Sullivan 1992, 2) and the means by which researchers “explore and track the dynamic and complex situated meanings and practices that are constituted in and by academic writing” (Lillis 2008, 355). In this vein of thinking, ethnography offers a “theoretically driven” approach to the design of research projects; as Beverly Moss (1992, 157) explains, “The theoretical perspectives that ethnographers adopt influence research questions, tools, and techniques of data collection and analysis, and the conceptual framework of the study itself.” Similarly, Stephen Gilbert Brown and Sidney I. Dobrin (2004, 1) have argued that ethnography offers a “dialectical engagement between theory and practice,” which grounds the field’s central theories, pedagogies, and professional ideals in actualities that play out for real people.

As a method—the means by which we collect data—ethnography offers a standard set of practices: observations, interviews, surveys, textual analysis, and so on. As methodology, ethnography is commonly noted to be highly attuned to the social contexts of writing—a commonplace that aligns ethnographic practice with conceptions of writing currently active in the field.

This attunement to the situated nature of practices (such as writing) explains the continuing popularity of ethnographic research for writing studies researchers.<sup>1</sup> Scholars in the field have long put forward a vision of writing as “situated” (Smit 2004), a “social and rhetorical activity” (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015; Kent 1999), and dynamically responsive to the communities that generate, rely on, and engage with it (Berkenkotter and Huckin 2016; Swales 1990). We can see analogous sensibilities at work in Mary P. Sheridan’s (2012, 73) description of the opportunities afforded the ethnographer: “Ethnography is highly responsive to the situation at hand, applying particular methods to specific issues or problems. Yet, what is distinctive about ethnography is its orientation to understanding the rich visible and seemingly invisible networks influencing the participants in the study. Through long time



research, ethnography highlights the impact of these networks; in the process, ethnography examines perspectives that are often misunderstood, under developed, or occluded in popular understandings of an issue, thereby informing policies and practices that both affect the participants and inform the much-larger networks and structures in which these participants are located.”

The field’s long-term concerns for inclusion, social justice, and reflexivity align as well with other elements of research practice typically associated with ethnography, such as “collaboration [with research participants], the writing of multi-vocal texts, and the use of self-reflection on the part of the researcher” (Stinnett 2012, 130). Indeed, in one of the first texts to engage research methodologies and designs in composition, *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*, Lauer and Asher (1988, 45) argued that ethnography’s concern for the social nature of writing not only produces a “rich account of the complexity of writing behavior” but does so with “a complexity that controlled experiments generally cannot capture.” Lillis (2008, 354) further notes that the interest ethnographers display for social context arises out of “a deep pedagogic concern, as teachers around the world grapple with complex communication situations, often in the face of impoverished public discourses on language and literacy, as well as a growing awareness of the geopolitics governing writing for academic publication.”

Even so, challenges to the epistemological and ontological centers of ethnography as a means by which to study writing are not difficult to find. Stephen M. North (1987, 278) takes the research method to task for its idiosyncratic, highly subjective, and insular results. Ethnography is of little use for developing authoritative study of a site, North concludes. Continuing this tradition of critique, Michael Kleine (1990) argues that writing studies ethnographers often fail to take a critical enough stance in their research narratives, overlooking pivotal relationships between the knower and what can be known—an oversight that casts suspicion on the empirical nature of the findings of ethnographic undertakings. Similarly, Carl G. Herndl (1991, 320) argues that it is the “imaginative power” or “persuasiveness” of the ethnographer’s “narrative structures” (or “textual strategies”) that makes ethnography a powerful form of sharing and understanding experience, but this recognition raises questions about the veracity and empirical nature of ethnography as a form of research.

In response to these critiques, ethnographers have adapted and evolved their stances, according to Brown and Dobrin (2004, 1–2), “discovering new sites for praxis, occupying new theoretical topoi,

developing new signifying practices, articulating a new ethnographic subject, redefining [ethnography's] goals, reinventing its methodologies, and revising its assumptions in what constitutes a radical ontological and epistemological transformation." These arguments suggest that ethnography is keenly attuned to helping researchers uncover aspects of writing and sites of writing that other methodologies might not. These conversations also gesture to the importance of situating our chosen methods and methodologies firmly in the field of writing studies, offering models of research that are positioned within areas of our research interest but that methodologically extend and deepen our understandings of research practice as a local and grounded endeavor.

Cindy Johaneck (2000, 33) notes the limits of generalized conversations about methods and methodologies, which lack "full analyses of research contexts." Johaneck (2000, 35–36) argues that conceptualizing "research methods as merely methods and procedures devoid of context" tends to render them "difficult to grasp" and "meaningless without some grounding of purpose." Lillis (2008, 380) argues similarly, hinging her reconceptualization of ethnographic methodology as deep theorizing in the simultaneous recognition that *writing mediates geocultural difference*. Without writing, in other words, we cannot coordinate what people do and how they do it across time and space; the process of deep theorizing recognizes the generative and coordinating nature of *all* writing—"even as seemingly simple a text as a shopping list," as Charles Bazerman (1988, 8) would argue—which simultaneously engages material, historical, and cultural aspects of our social systems.

Twenty-first-century ethnographers, such as Elizabeth A. Campbell (2011, 10), contend that work with ethnography aligns well with efforts to study writing as "*constitutive*." Citing Peter Vandenburg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, Campbell (2011, 10) argues that ethnography recognizes writing as "inextricably interrelated with the creation, organization, and continuing development of contemporary Western society, as well as the formation and evolution of individual identity." "To understand writing," Bazerman and Paul Prior (2003, 2) argue in parallel (though their focus tends toward linguistic analysis of writing, such as Critical Discourse Analysis), "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."

Each of these researchers is arguing that we must acknowledge the ways our methods and methodologies produce the very grounds on which we claim understanding as researchers. More plainly, as Rickly

(2012, 262) notes, “Sociologist John Law maintains that ‘methods, their rules, and even more method’s practices, not only describe but also help to produce the reality that they understand.’” It follows, then, that to understand the nature of writing in institutional locations, we need an appropriately theoretical architecture for our research practice. IE is ideally suited to support this type of nuanced, emic, and holistic approach to institutionally situated writing research.

IE’s approach collapses distinctions among writing, writing instruction, and the institution, framing writing as a discursive technology that enables people to negotiate, organize, and understand their institutional environments. Through its focus on the individuals carrying out the work of the institution, the IE framework enables us to answer current calls in the field to uncover how what we do in our classrooms and our programs and as writers or writing instructors is coordinated by the ideological and political discourses that imbue our lives and our work with meaning. IE enables us to systematically study the hierarchical systems of labor, professional systems of value, and notions of expertise and prestige that structure the realm of higher education, the field itself, and our local actualities as these are manifest in, around, and through writing.

Writing studies is a field intricately bound up with institutions. The institution of higher education provides an intellectual and physical location that supports, sanctions, regulates, and lends value to our work and interests. Writing and writing instruction themselves are institutional constructs, as Susan Miller (1993), David R. Russell (1991), Ellen Cushman (1999), and Ryan Skinnell (2016), among others, have argued. The literature of writing program administration, writing center studies, assessment, placement, and remediation have frequently given light to the intricate institutional negotiations that are undertaken by professionals who carry out these types of work (see, for instance, M. Harris 2002; Anson and Brown 1999; Bazerman and Russell 2002; Soliday 2002 as a small sample of authors who have treated institutional dynamics in their projects). This long recognition of the institution—as the site of our work and our field’s professional grounding—has led to complex understandings of these locations in some of our research conversations. IE challenges us to push these visions toward further holistic complexity.

Descriptions of the institution, such as Elizabeth Ervin’s (1996, 124), have noted the “complex relationships between discursive and material constructs” at the center of these social entities, contending that the field’s institutionality acts as “what Mike Rose has called ‘a

political-semantic web that restricts the way we think about the place of writing in the academy.”<sup>2</sup> Others, such as James E. Porter and colleagues (2000, 613), have posed institutions as “rhetorically constructed human designs” and suggested that members of the field position themselves within institutional settings through “reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action” to determine the most productive locations and strategies for change. Materialist theory, analysis, and critique has likewise directed scholarly attentions in writing studies to “a variety of material social relations” such as “work/life [and] institutional life,” as these overlap with more persistent concerns for embodiment, difference, the materiality of texts, space, and actualities of experience (Schell 2012, 123). Meanwhile, recent scholarship on writing and place has also invoked the institution, as it has called writing studies researchers “to scrutinize how the locations of our work matter” and held that all locations are “formed by discursive options and by social and economic and political negotiations” (Shepley 2016, 3). These arguments readily align our work in writing studies with the materialist principles of IE.

IE further aligns ethnographic research with efforts to understand sites of writing more holistically. Conversations about the institutional organization of writing have at times reflected an inherently ecological perspective (calling up Marilyn Cooper’s [1986, 364] “ecology of writing”). Mary Jo Reiff and colleagues (2015, 3), for example, argue that much of the scholarship of writing studies “envision[s] writing as bound up in, influenced by, and relational to spaces, places, locations, environments, and the interconnections among the entities they contain.” Deborah Brandt and Tony Scott have similarly situated their understandings of the dynamic complexities of institutional contexts, posing the “economies of literacy” (Brandt 1998) and the “political economies of composition” (Scott 2009), respectively. With these moves, Brandt and Scott acknowledge that sites of writing are both responsive to and implicated in broader socio-political structures. Brandt, for instance, describes literate activity as a “resource” that is mediated by a series of powerful individuals, organizations, and institutions. Literacies engage students and their “sponsors” in “ceaseless processes of positioning and repositioning, seizing and relinquishing control over meanings and materials of literacy as part of their participation in economic and political competition. In the give-and-take of the struggles, forms of literacy and literacy learning take shape” (Brandt 1998, 173).

When we speak of an economy of literacy, we make visible the ways individuals, resources, and discourses, according to Brandt (1998, 178), “organize and administer stratified systems of opportunity and access.”

Likewise, for Scott (2009, 16), recognizing that writing courses and the work of writing studies are situated within a “political economy” presumes “a dynamic and integrated relationship between individuals and their socio-political contexts.” Like Lillis’s work, Scott’s project collapses the distinctions between broader socio-political structures (the macro) and the personal or local (the micro), illustrating that macro and micro processes of social organization act as “feedback loops.” In the political economy, larger socio-political forces influence everyday practices, decisions, and judgments of real people. People, in turn, enact the policies, systems, and structures that perpetuate the social order. As Scott (2009, 18) writes, “Writing education isn’t just shaped by political economic factors, it also produces the political economic.”

Yet even with this attention to the dynamic social complexities of our institutional economies, we have far more work to do to understand the nature of our institutional lives and to study writing as institutionally constitutive. Despite the field’s abiding concerns for how our programs produce notions of writing, pedagogy, and labor, *much of our field’s discourse elides concern for what people are actually doing, how they are doing it, and how they are enabled to do it.* Herein lies the rub for much of the writing research that circulates in the field today. Some of our work remains notable for its focus on people and their experiences, sensibilities, and activities. However, a closer look at how we have theorized the institution (in the examples above, for instance) or an analysis of how we discuss the materialities of our institutional lives demonstrates far more attention to broad rhetorical patterns in the field, the university, and higher education *than to the ways individual people actually negotiate those discourses in an everyday sense.* As Richard H. Haswell (2005, 201) has argued, the field benefits from, but has not often made, “best effort inquiry into the actualities of a situation.”

Institutional critique, for example, treats institutions and institutional structures as explicitly rhetorical, arguing that there is power in a project of re-seeing, as Porter and colleagues (2000, 633) have argued, “our disciplinary and institutional frames” as spaces of shifting opportunity and rhetorical intervention. In institutional critique, individuals *are present* as people doing the material work of the institution; however, beyond this, the project of institutional critique hovers above the actualities of on-the-ground experiences. Cultural material analyses, such as Bruce Horner’s (2000) influential text *Terms of Work for Composition* and Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola’s (2004) *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*, have similarly focused on the discursive work of key terms and the consequences of corporatist logics in higher education,

revealing ideological investments and broad organizational strategies at the center of the field's labor relations. *Rarely have these critiques peered into the actualities of an individual's everyday work, however.* As such, they offer a limited picture of everyday experience and practice.

As a case in point, in the introduction to *Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange* (a text that revises and updates *Terms of Work for Composition*), Horner (2016, 1) embraces the project of cultural materialism, which “takes as a given the materiality of the ‘conceptual,’ as well as the ‘conceptuality’ of the seemingly purely material.” With this move, Horner (2016, 1–2, original emphasis) doubles down on the theoretical nature of his project, posing it as an intervention into “conceptualizations of the conceptual as distinct from material.” But, tellingly, as Horner (2016, 1) also notes that “readers who do not accept this argument will find the book frustrating,” he acknowledges the constraints on his project. Critiques that stay at the level of the theoretical and the ideological absolutely help us to understand the generative schemas and reach of broader organizational patterns. Yet in telling half the story, these approaches are not necessarily as helpful as they might be to find points of intervention, buy-in, or investment.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this body of work, people and the actualities of their work and experiences are simply often elided from our field's ongoing discussions of our materialities. IE offers us an additional set of tools to complement and extend this ongoing effort to understand the material nature of writing, writing instruction, and our work in sites of writing. Continuing the project of understanding the everyday impact of twenty-first-century *materialities as actualities* is crucial to the realization of many of our field's projects. Ethnographers are prepared to step in to bridge this gap. Because ethnographers most often seek to uncover macro-social understandings of how people do what they do and the contexts that people must negotiate, ethnography, particularly forms like IE, allows ethnographers to theorize the intricate relationships among location, material cultures, and actual work.

In light of the increasing material constraints of our daily lives in the university as institution—where we remain in dire need of more explicit heuristics for studying the material realities that actively shape sites of writing and our lives as people who teach, study, and produce writing—this project responds to a here and now in writing studies that cannot be understated. Tony Scott (2009, 18) has argued similarly, noting that the field of writing studies has rarely attended to “writing education as concrete production.” We may give lip service to contingency and exploitation, we may note how the field's patterns reflect managerial logics, we

may discuss ideologies “as they play out in student texts and in writing classrooms” (Scott 2009, 19), but we seldom turn our attentions to the actualities of experience and practice that are the result of these political economies. Scott (2009, 19) writes: “Rather than rigorously seeking to understand how what we do is shaped by how we do it, the field’s normal science continually sutures the split between disciplinary ambitions and projections and the material realities of writing education. It continually finds means of turning away from the contradictions that become apparent when the immediate and the material are juxtaposed with the structural and cultural.”

Moreover, the professional situations of researchers—appointments as tenure-line faculty and writing program directors—frame the research interests, personas, and methods employed in our scholarly conversations, inevitably casting and presenting these concerns as administrative. The problem becomes that “systematic connections are rarely made between these factors and the character of literacy and learning as manifested in day-to-day classroom activity. In contrast, scholarly discussions of writing-pedagogy—method, purpose, and praxis in writing classrooms—tend to account for factors other than the institutional settings of writing education: textuality, rhetorical theory, ideology, technology, revision, gender, race, and so on. Though everyday institutional practices and the material terms of labor for teachers and students have a profound effect on the character of writing pedagogy, they don’t often appear in research- or theory-driven discussions of postsecondary classroom pedagogy” (Scott 2009, 7). Scott’s research has demonstrated the different types of stories that might emerge from work on how writing programs take shape within institutional economies (*qua* hierarchies).

IE is one more crucial response to these gaps. Because it turns the ethnographer’s attention to actual people carrying out the work of the institution, IE speaks immediately to the concerns of writing researchers like Lillis, Scott, and others for how our work on writing, as writers, and in sites of writing is carried out in relation to the rich geocultural contexts and political economies/ecologies that generate that work. Through its theoretically grounded and systemic understanding of writing as constitutive, the framework enables us to answer current calls in the field to uncover how what we do is coordinated by the ideological and political discourses that imbue our lives and our work with meaning and value.

At this historical moment, IE responds to these increased calls in the field by offering a reexamination of the broad contexts of our work and how that work actually takes shape within our localities. The national landscape of higher education is being radically reshaped by the forces



of neoliberal austerity (Welch and Scott 2016), a series of political and economic movements that have corporatized the governing structures of universities and threatened the material resources that support our work. Because ethnography is a research method that “examines perspectives that are often misunderstood, under developed, or occluded in popular understandings of an issue,” it sheds light on “policies and practices that both affect the participants and inform the much-larger networks and structures in which these participants are located” (Sheridan 2012, 73). Ethnography, as such, remains among our most flexible tools for uncovering the actualities imposed on these networks and structures. IE, as this project argues, offers a means to continue these conversations with a sharper focus.

Research that systematically attends to how people must negotiate the landscapes created by austerity measures, material constraints, and local organizational efforts within their national and particular institutional contexts helps us understand our work in new ways. As institutional ethnographers observe, interview, and collaborate in work efforts with people—tracing the productive valence of texts in local settings and mapping the relationships that emerge—they offer a critical perspective on writing instruction as an institutional practice, investigate the ways we sustain programs and core philosophies that may find themselves under fire, and identify ways of intervening in larger systems that seek to reconstruct us in the image of the corporate university. Because IE foregrounds the standpoints of those who carry out their work in institutional venues, it serves to decentralize the focus of typical research activities in writing studies, bringing forward more and different perspectives and examining the positionalities that shape lesser recognized experiences (such as contingency, rank, HR designation, and union structures). The framework and analytic moves IE offers for understanding institutions and their impact on our work provide an opportunity for scholars to consider how our institutional affiliations and settings organize our most central ways of doing and knowing.

Putting institutional materialities at the center of our research on writing and writers does require us to be more deliberate in our approach to understanding sites as actual locations populated by real people. We gain enormously as researchers when we look into the relationships between the various pieces of the whole, seek to uncover the nature of that relationality, and draw tighter links between elements that might not, on the surface, appear to influence one another. We gain even more as a field when we develop methods that allow us to study the interconnections between seemingly discrete pieces of a dispersed social



puzzle. IE allows us to bring our concerns for pedagogy, professional identity, disciplinary practice, labor, and other forms of materiality into conversation. The findings of the case studies shared in this project demonstrate exactly these dynamic interconnections among writing, the personal, the local, the everyday, and national discourse.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEWS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

To undertake an IE project is to uncover the empirical connections between writing as individual practice and the conditions that make a site of study unique, “show[ing] how the organizational context invisibly shapes the practices of a site” (Townsend 1996, 179). More particularly, IE aids researchers interested in uncovering what local practices constitute the institution, how discourse may be understood to compel and shape those practices, and how norms of practice speak to, for, and over individuals. IE’s focus on the day-to-day work life of individuals, as well as its emphasis on describing how individuals choose to interact with and within their institutions, provides a mechanism for naming, and thereby gaining insight into, the actualities of our academic work lives.

The following chapters explore the methodological (*qua* theoretical) and practical considerations of work with IE for understanding writing, demonstrating how I have used this methodology as a form of inquiry into the relationships between institutional locations and the writing-related practices that constitute them. The findings of each case study demonstrate the ways conceptions of writing (ruling relations) constitute the space studied and how people then use writing and a variety of related professional practices and identities (standpoint) to negotiate the landscapes they are situated within. As they do so, these case studies challenge the typical conceptualizations of pedagogy, labor, professional position, and the structure of programs currently active in the field, uncovering the situated relationality of these sites and the generative nature of institutional ways of doing, knowing, and being.

Because IE is at once a theory of institutional organization, a set of analytic moves that allow for a distinctive approach to analyzing and understanding a site and the people who carry out their work within that site, and a practical tool that aids writing researchers interested in how writing constitutes our work, chapter 1 has two goals. I begin with an exploration of the ways IE helps us to reframe our understandings of institutions as sites of writing (experience and practice), laying out the analytic moves IE offers for the study of how people do what they do in sites of writing as a means to negotiate their institutional standpoints.

The key analytic moves detailed in this chapter include ruling relations, standpoint, social coordination, problematic, work and work processes, and institutional circuits. This chapter draws on the corpus of work that has developed in sociology to then frame the possibilities of critical inquiries with IE for writing studies.

The remaining chapters offer different case studies that demonstrate IE in action in writing studies contexts—describing the theoretical framework that informed each study and the ways my own research practices took shape within complex institutional contexts. These chapters enact a praxis-driven exploration of the key terms in action, deepening and extending the theoretical model described in chapter 1. These chapters also uncover the highly relational nature of the terms, practices, and concerns that constitute our work in writing studies. My work with IE examines our professional conceptions of these terms, re-seeing the organizational work of these terms as a process of generalization that often erases and conceals more than it reveals.

Chapter 2 explicitly outlines the moves central to conducting a study with IE (from problematic to final analysis) and shares the findings of a study about how writing assignments took shape in a curricular initiative involving linked courses. This curricular initiative, referred to in this chapter as the “linked gateway,” connected a large lecture (about the critical, historical, and theoretical frameworks for the study of literature) with a series of smaller writing courses that drew their content from the large lecture. Tracing the collaborative development of shared writing assignments in this hierarchical but collaborative setting, I argue, opens for deeper understanding how material actualities (such as patterns of labor, disciplinary identity, and ideals of writing instruction) coordinate the work of the sites we often study. This chapter is helpful to those who want to see IE in action, as I apply the central terms of the framework and explain how the key analytic moves of IE helped me uncover aspects of the site, particularly how the material relations of the site shaped conceptions of writing and subsequently the work of writing instruction. The findings of this study demonstrate that whereas members of the field have often posed pedagogy as a generalized conceptual tool or theory, pedagogy is instead a *highly individualized and material process* that invents and reinvents itself within situated, local, and material contexts as it organizes the particularities of work. The experiences and practices uncovered in this linked-course initiative allow us to reflect upon how the material contexts of our work in a local sense resist, refuse, and remake generalized ideals of pedagogy, as those ideals are driven by the field and its professional organizations.

Chapter 3 offers findings from a collaborative, cross-institutional study about the differences of experience and work for staff and faculty writing center professionals. Posing the HR distinction and annual review processes of writing center professionals as “boss texts” that govern the work actualities of people in hierarchical employment situations, this case study traces how these boss texts organize the labor of writing center professionals quite differently. With so much of the work in writing studies carried out by individuals, such as adjunct instructors and term faculty, who are increasingly articulated to universities and programs in tenuous and impermanent ways, this project demonstrates that an analysis of employment practices can inform writing researchers about the disjunctions and experiences that underwrite the day-to-day operations of writing programs, writing centers, and other significant sites of writing. This study demonstrates the power of IE for uncovering the disjunctions and erasures of experience that inform local practice. Our professional and personal discourses may gloss the very conditions that have produced the work of our programs—but in coming to closely analyze those missing elements of the stories we may tell, we see a fuller frame for understanding and mobilization.

Chapter 4 shares the results of a three-year study on the circulation of *information literacy* as a key term in a writing program for first-year students. In this chapter I argue that material actualities shaped classroom practice around *information literacy* instruction in ways that belied the recommendations of national statements and standards. Tracing the use of “information literacy” as it proliferated through sites of instruction, teaching conversations, and other moments on campus revealed the deeper values and investments active in the program and on campus. Findings reveal that instructors deployed the term as a means to negotiate both the landscape of the program and stakeholder expectations but did so in ways that enacted personal value systems, revealing highly individual understandings of the role of first-year writing in the preparation of student writers as researchers. Moreover, instructors and library faculty took up the term differently to manage the material conditions that influenced their everyday relations on campus. In this study, work with IE again reveals the ways the ideals of our work bump up against the coordinated nature of that work within local contexts.

These case studies argue explicitly for methodologies that allow writing studies researchers to uncover the local actualities of our work and to more effectively study the construction of our work and labor. With IE and similar research frameworks, we might better understand the impact conversations in the field have on what actually happens in our

classrooms, programs, and cross-campus relations. As a field, we have become increasingly savvy about how the methods we choose shape the stories we are enabled to tell. Yet too often our research continues to generalize, and therefore over-determine, understandings of key terms and pedagogical concerns, turning away from opportunities to interrogate the grounds on which we make our most cherished arguments, identify and circumscribe research efforts, and continue ongoing research-driven conversations. I hope these case studies compel other ethnographers and researchers to ask: What other stories most need telling to internal and external audiences, and how might we continue to extend and deepen our thinking as writing researchers interested in institutional conditions? We have only just begun to uncover the ways our everyday actualities shape our work as writers, writing faculty, writing program administrators, and professionals in writing studies. As other researchers carry these questions forward, I look forward to the answers we will uncover.

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