



Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers

Michelle LaFrance. Logan, UT: Utah State U P, 2019. 151 Pages. \$22.95 paperback.

Ryan Michael Murphy

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In all, Rood's book deftly demonstrates that political problems like gun violence are deeply rhetorical in the sense that our individual and collective responses to such problems inform how we interpret or conventionalize their recurrence. *After Gun Violence* provides an instructive model for extending rhetorical interventions into the multifaceted impacts of gun violence, including police brutality, extremist vigilantism, urban violence, suicide, and domestic violence. As both a citizen and scholar, I find Rood's eloquence and care to be vitalizing. He never allows theoretical murkiness to occlude the material repercussions of deliberative stasis. Likewise, Rood's lucid explanations of both the history he recounts and the theories he draws from offer a methodology for a wider public audience to find common ground and push past a static, harmful political environment that disproportionately debilitates Americans and migrants of color. This framework invites rhetoricians, teachers, and community members to reflect on the recursive force of memory in the constructions of individual and collective identity, and it opens the door for further deliberative interventions into the material, emotional, and rhetorical tolls of political struggle.

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Richard Branscomb
Carnegie Mellon University

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9412-6987>

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Michelle LaFrance. **Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers**. Logan, UT: Utah State U P, 2019. 151 Pages. \$22.95 paperback.

Institutional ethnography, a research methodology originally developed in sociology by Dorothy Smith, has entered writing studies with Michelle LaFrance's *Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers*. Institutional ethnography (IE) is a method for data collection and a methodology situating practice and theory that guides researchers as they investigate connections between each of our everyday worlds (3). LaFrance delivers a compelling case for IE's applicability in writing studies by explaining the methodology's theoretical and historical underpinning before modeling it in case studies.

Chapter one "adapts the sociological framework of IE for the study of work in institutional sites of writing," positing IE as a methodological tool to make apparent institutional features that might otherwise be occluded (22). As a methodology, IE centers around six core concepts for analysis. *Ruling relations* "show themselves in established disciplinary discourses and the professionalization of practice," as they organize work and social relationships (33). *Standpoint* draws on contributions of feminist theorists and acknowledges various perspectives, noting, "we are implicated in social networks in ways that may not always be entirely clear" (36). Importantly for writing studies scholars, "standpoint also supports a focus on what we bring to a study," including our teaching (37). *Social coordination* describes institutional features that draw people into action, often in repetitive or habituated ways. Repeated practices are legitimate because "that's the way we've always done it" (38). *Problematics*, which are not necessarily

problems, establish a scope and focus of research for IE by foregrounding lived experience, noting “not all individuals will be oriented to a practice or experience the site in the same way” (39). *Work and work processes* represent the time and energy people put into an institutional setting, recognizing that some work processes go unnoticed while others are codified through text. Finally, *institutional circuits* and discourse include written communication produced in institutions that guide and situate action. LaFrance highlights each of these core concepts in the subsequent case studies. Although each concept could stand alone as a formidable IE study, together, they model a full range of applicability for IE as a research methodology.

Chapter two, “How Work Takes Shape,” traces the curriculum design of a “shared assignment” in linked courses from its representation in institutional discourse to the graduate TAs who taught the assignment (47). This case, which features textual analysis and interviews, indicates how material contexts modulate pedagogy. From the embodied and material sites of labor we occupy, IE invites us to look up and “see how the material relations of a site shape and reshape the generative work of the idealized intervention” (49). Standpoint is emphasized as a core concept as LaFrance explicates differences in perception and worked experience between the tenured faculty who created the linked gateway courses and the TAs who taught them. LaFrance’s reporting of these different standpoints illustrates methodological nuance that employs triangulation “not to validate data, but to extend the researcher’s understanding of what is taking place” (54). Differences in perception draw complexities of problematics into consideration when they might otherwise remain unacknowledged.

LaFrance models IE interview method by providing detailed researcher notes along with interviewee responses. When one TA describes “limits of [their] autonomy” in designing an assignment, the accompanying researcher’s note remarks “this strikes me as a strong indicator of standpoint,” linking the TA’s perception of personal agency with their institutional standpoint (57). Conversely, researcher notes can point to places where interviewee reports diverge from common concepts in IE. In one instance, TAs engaged in “off-book teaching,” or heavily revising the assignment they were asked to teach. Due to this, the researcher suggests the linked assignment does not govern action like a “boss text” as we see in other IE work situations because “there’s just too much slippage around practice to be certain about their power” (59). This negative definition helps readers understand boss texts as a form of institutional discourse.

IE draws attention to perceived uniformity and can help identify differences in perspective, despite similarities in standpoint, such as widely differing attitudes among tenured faculty regarding the concept of disciplinarity (63). When IE helps to expose difference in seemingly homogenous contexts, it challenges stereotype and generalization. Chapter three, “The Annual Review as ‘Boss Text’ and the Coordination of Writing Center Work,” reports the results of a nationwide survey of faculty and staff in writing centers. This case implements surveys and interviews as another method of IE. Featuring tables of quantitative results, as well as rich, qualitative interview responses and sample documents provided by respondents, this chapter displays another form of data triangulation via a multi-method approach. This approach might be particularly useful to writing studies scholars and administrators who need to pivot in reporting data to different audiences.

The boss text as a subset of institutional circuits is highlighted in chapter three. The annual review emerges as a boss that “exert[s] a powerful material and local influence over the everyday work lives of professionals” as it seeks to “regulate and standardize experience and practice as well as mediate the idiosyncrasies and variability of local settings” (80). A survey of the experiences of writing center employees at different institutions found that seemingly monolithic institutional texts ask for information using standardized forms that prevent the employees from using their own language as part of the review. While this standardization allows institutions to make categorical comparisons between employees working in different offices or

departments, the formulaic reporting means unique contributions and aptitudes of employees cannot be documented or must be reduced to fit a mundane label.

Chapter four, “Mapping Information Literacy in a First-Year Writing Program,” features an instance in which multiple core concepts of IE interact to motivate a compelling research question. In this case, LaFrance centers on the term “information literacy,” noting that several different definitions circulate. When definitions of information literacy become institutionally adopted, they function as boss texts. Such multivalent keywords can serve as problematics, or research inroads. In this chapter, noticing different understandings of “information literacy” leads LaFrance to ask how they shape instructional practice in first-year writing programs (110). Whereas chapter two focuses on a single department and chapter three examines many different institutions, chapter four analyzes ruling relations between units within the same institution.

By tracing institutional loci for the development, transmission, and uses of key terms, LaFrance models keyword mapping as yet another method that analyzes rather than collects data. For example, LaFrance surveyed writing instructors, asking them, “how do you define information literacy?” and used frequency coding to count the number of times keywords such as “find, evaluate, and use” appeared together or independently (124). Since these terms aligned with the definition of information literacy provided in the library course guide, LaFrance concludes respondents “defined ‘information literacy’ in ways that coincided” with the library guide (124). This mapping opens additional problematics about the relationship between teaching and institutional discourse. Should teaching reflect institutional discourses? Like boss texts, key terms can lend “a sense of sameness to what are in fact *quite diverse actions in the name of a shared goal*” (emphasis in the original, 112). Critical components of these differences are the various standpoints and material conditions people work in, often including race, gender, and class.

LaFrance balances several variables across the case study chapters, with each case foregrounding different dimensions. Sites of study and scope are varied, ranging from the granular to the macro. Investigative methods are similarly varied from close interviews to wide-reaching surveys, which permit LaFrance to model various ways of analyzing and reporting data—from extended interview dialogue to tabular data. Empirical researchers in writing studies, even those not interested in IE, will appreciate the breadth of topics, sites, and methods, as well as LaFrance’s nimbleness in pivoting between data and discussion.

Because LaFrance has ported IE from another discipline, this book also serves as a valuable piece of transdisciplinary scholarship. Scholars interested in drawing additional theoretical frameworks and research methodologies into writing studies would benefit from LaFrance’s structural approach, which represents the applicability of extra-disciplinary views in writing studies. Instructors might consider assigning *Institutional Ethnography* (or select chapters) in their classes. Graduate courses in institutional or organizational rhetoric or research methods might benefit, while undergraduate courses could incorporate IE in assignments related to campus improvement projects.

LaFrance concludes *Institutional Ethnography* with the admirably optimistic vision that “We imagine the institution as a locus for possibility and change” (136). Though IE appears retrospective in asking how things come to be, it also provides generative ways forward. The core concepts of IE offer readers an affirmation that research design and teaching in writing studies are important sites of institutional awareness and creation.

Ryan Michael Murphy
Purdue University

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