Beyond Triangulation: Ethnography, Writing, and Rhetoric

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In "Classroom Contexts and the Development of Writing Intuitions," Kenneth Kantor provides an excellent summary of the traditional concerns of ethnographic research. He tells us that ethnographers are first of all concerned with the contextual fields that contain the phenomena being observed; that ethnographers attempt to assume, and acknowledge, participant/observer roles as they do their work; that they attempt to include multiple perspectives—their own, the subjects', other outsiders—as they "triangulate" the data they are gathering; that they finally are concerned with studying the meaning-making processes of their subjects. Kantor goes on to demonstrate how ethnographic methodology, though it is borrowed from anthropologists and sociologists, can help writing researchers better understand student writing.

Writing researchers are by now familiar with the kind of ethnographic approach to studying writing that Kantor summarizes. We have applied such an approach in a variety of institutional contexts, including not only the public schools and universities but also corporate and governmental institutions. And many of us would agree with Kantor that the process of doing ethnography has helped us grow as both researchers and teachers of writing. However, as a researcher who has attempted to do ethnography and who has published several ethnographic studies, I have become increasingly troubled by some nagging epistemological questions:

1) What, exactly, do we know when we do ethnography?

2) What, exactly, do we know when we write and publish ethnography.

The answers to these questions at first seem obvious. Doing ethnography seems to lead to an understanding of the written discourse of the community we are studying. Writing and publishing ethnography seem to help our own community of writing researchers and teachers understand the written discourse of different writing communities.

But here I would like to problematize what seems at first to be obvious. In order to understand the discourses of the communities we are studying, we must participate in our own meta-discourses with the members of those
communities. If we accept the social-constructionist ideology that has been popularized in our own community by Kenneth Bruffee, if knowledge is in fact constructed through and in discourse, then all that ethnographers can really know is the meta-discourse that exists between us (the researchers) and them (the subjects). Moreover, we are not at all like the first ethnographers, who enjoyed the illusion that their work was scientific and non-rhetorical. That is, in the beginning anthropologists worked largely among “natives” who spoke but did not write, who were illiterate and thus could not read the published ethnographic accounts that intended to both uncover and disclose the “emic,” or underlying, meaning of their oral discourse. Now, however, as we write and publish ethnographies of writing communities, our own academic discourse potentially will be read not only by fellow researchers and teachers, but also by the very “natives” we have studied. Our natives know how to read what we write about their writing, and thus our work is inevitably sensitive to audiences beyond our own academic community and, therefore, is highly rhetorical.

I believe that we writing researchers need to examine critically our own assumptions about what we are really studying and about what we really know. The kind of ethnographic approach summarized by Kantor, the kind I have used in my own research, does not adequately address the epistemological questions that are beginning to arise in our research community as social-constructionist discourse deepens among us. In the rest of this article, then, I will critique the notion that ethnographic methods enable writing researchers to know about the construction of knowledge in the various communities we study. As I will show, so-called “radical anthropology” has already provided anthropology itself with such a self-critique. We writing researchers, who sometimes still harken back to the structuralist assumptions and the scientism of Claude Levi-Strauss, need to undertake a similar radical critique if we are to address honestly the epistemological questions I posed earlier. Such a critique would lead us to acknowledge that ethnography is not mainly an empirical methodology capable of discovering and interpreting the knowledge of a community; it is more a rhetoric wherein we can begin to discover as much about ourselves as we can about the natives we intend to study.

**Radical Anthropology as Epistemological Corrective**

Del Hymes introduces a 1974 collection of essays entitled *Reinventing Anthropology* as “radical” in the sense that “it attempts to go to the root of anthropology itself, as an institutional fact, and considers the possibility of its disappearance” (9). Hymes contends that traditional anthropology, in its quest to understand alien and exotic cultures, has perpetuated a kind of “scientific colonialism.” He explains that “scientific colonialism is a process whereby the center of gravity for acquisition of knowledge about a people is located elsewhere” (49). In other words, anthropologists who study alien
cultures in an effort to know about them must inevitably construct that knowledge within the discourses of their own cultures. Thus, what traditional anthropologists know about the knowledge of the natives is known not through the discourse studied, but through meta-discourse with the natives and ultimately through written discourse with other colonial scientists. In terms of the colonization metaphor, traditional anthropologists, despite good intentions and correctives like triangulation, end up exporting and distributing their own versions of the native knowledge that they study, and in doing so they distort it. Hymes suggests that because traditional anthropology is a colonial institution, "each anthropologist must reinvent it, as a general field, for him or herself" (48). He then offers a series of essays by sixteen radical anthropologists, each offering a reinvention.

The essays move inexorably toward anthropological self-critique and reflexivity. In "Up the Anthropologist—Perspectives Gained from Studying Up," Laura Nader suggests that the kind of scientific colonialism that concerns Hymes is the result of a power imbalance between anthropologists and natives. As a corrective, Nader suggests that anthropologists should begin to study "up"; that is, they should begin to study the institutions and bureaucratic organizations of the powerful. She points out that when anthropologists begin to study "up," they quickly discover that they are relatively powerless and that participant observation becomes difficult, if not impossible. The power imbalance that enables powerful anthropologists to become participant observers when they study "down," when they study powerless natives, becomes obvious, and anthropologists who study "up" are better able to understand themselves and their own methodology.

In a later essay, "Anthropology in Question," Stanley Diamond argues that both anthropologist and native are victims of "contemporary, imperial civilization" (401). Diamond associates the scientific relativism of Claude Levi-Strauss, and many traditional anthropologists, not with a methodology, but with a dehumanizing social discourse. By claiming objective structural knowledge of alien cultures, Levi-Strauss reduces his subjects to objects. When this happens, Diamond argues, the anthropologist too is reduced to an object and as a result becomes an alienated victim. In other words, Diamond believes that "objective" structural anthropology is a dehumanizing construct of our own civilization that must be radically critiqued:

Unless the anthropologist confronts his own alienation, which is only a special instance of a general condition, and seeks to understand its roots, and subsequently matures as a relentless critic of his own civilization, the very civilization which objectifies man, he cannot understand or even recognize himself in the other or the other in himself. (402)

In "Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology," the final essay of Reinventing Anthropology, Bob Scholte argues that anthropology—despite
correctives like contextual thick description and the triangulation of observer, data, and subjects—is incapable of producing value-free studies of different cultures. Objective and scientific anthropology, Scholte claims, is a myth that has been constructed within the anthropological institution. The logical conclusion of radical anthropological discourse and argumentation, then, becomes obvious: if anthropologists should study cultural institutions and discourses in which they themselves participate, and if they should refrain from studying down and exporting second-hand knowledge, and if anthropology is itself both a cultural institution and a discourse, then anthropologists should begin to study themselves—their raison d'être, their own ideologies, their own myths. In other words, ethnography should be reflexively applied to its originating institution: anthropology itself. Scholte writes,

Intellectual paradigms, including anthropological traditions, are culturally mediated, that is, they are contextually situated and relative. The inference I draw is also elementary and obvious: If anthropological activity is culturally mediated, it is in turn subject to ethnographic description and ethnological analysis. (431)

Scholte’s language here, his own radical discourse, evokes both the prior social-constructionist discourse of Thomas Kuhn (1970) and the future social-constructionist discourse of Richard Rorty (1979). Indeed, the radical anthropological discourse of the 1970s no longer seems radical when it is associated with contemporary social-constructionist discourse and epistemology. This may well be why contemporary anthropologist Clifford Geertz is so frequently associated with names like Kuhn and Rorty, and it may be why his work has been widely read outside of the anthropological research community. His particular brand of anthropology, concerned as it is with problems of epistemology and discourse, crosses the ordinary boundaries of anthropology as a discipline. It’s hard to remember whether Geertz is an anthropologist, a discourse linguist, a philosopher, or a literary theorist. When we read Geertz’s essay collection, Local Knowledge, we understand that anthropology, for Geertz, is neither well-defined methodology nor academic discipline; it is, instead, a starting point, the ground for an exploration of both human knowledge and self.

In his introduction to Local Knowledge, Geertz clearly explains that he is not interested in cultural understanding alone—ethnographic understanding of a Balinese custom, say. Instead, Geertz begins to explore, hermeneutically, a new country: the nature of understanding itself. In his quest to understand understanding, Geertz joins other social constructionists in asserting that knowledge is socially constructed by means of human discourse, and that knowledge is inter-subjective and dynamic rather than objective and static. In the penultimate chapter of Local Knowledge, “The Way We Think Now: Ethnography of Modern Thought,” Geertz recommends a new ethno-
graphic project that would focus not just on the natives, but on anthropologists as well. He suggests that anthropology itself is "a way of being in the world," and that an understanding of understanding necessitates analysis and interpretation of "those roles we think to occupy," which "turn out to be minds we find ourselves to have" (155).

Geertz, then, urges anthropologists to study their own construction of knowledge, to take on the perspectives of the non-anthropologists with whom they share the world, to turn ethnography on ethnography itself:

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. If interpretive anthropology has any general office in the world it is to keep reteaching this fugitive truth. (16)

Self-Critique among Ethnographers of Writing

At the 1988 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in St. Louis, and again at the 1989 convention in Seattle, I heard participants complain about the lack of consensus in the area of writing research—consensus concerning how we should go about knowing, what we actually know, what we should try to know, and what we should do with what we know. Indeed, our own discourse often seems muddy, a kind of confluence of disciplinary and intellectual currents. On the one hand, we tend to buy into social-constructionist epistemology; on the other hand, we still operate out of the traditional methodological assumptions of disciplines like cognitive psychology and structural anthropology as we do our own research. At least part of our confusion, I believe, is that as a community, as a discourse, we tend to parasitize and synthesize the discourses of already established disciplines. This tendency to synthesize other discourses is what makes our own discourse so rich, but it also leads to problems. Although we writing theorists and researchers have absorbed an exciting new epistemology (social construction) and a powerful naturalistic methodology (ethnography), we have not subjected ethnographic practice and discourse to the kind of radical critique that would allow it to become—and seem—what it actually is: an act of social construction performed in relationship to other acts of social construction. In other words, if we were to focus ethnography on our own ethnographic enterprise, it would become clear that ethnography is a discourse, not the purely empirical methodology we sometimes try to pretend it is.

As I have shown, radical anthropologists have already allowed ethnography to become—and seem—the social construction it really is. In this way, their research and their theory have become somehow consubstantial, and they have gained the ability not only to study "the other," the native, but also...
to study themselves as they study the other. If our own disunified community of theorists and researchers is to become a community of people who relate to the natives they study as people, not as objects, then it is time we update our understanding of ethnography by initiating the same sort of radical critique anthropologists have already undertaken.

The first step in such a self-critique would involve acknowledging that our own ethnographic "reports," because they are published and then read by various interest groups, are inevitably rhetorical. A research report published in journals like *College Composition and Communication* or the *Journal of Advanced Composition* is likely to be read by university administrators, members of our home departments, other writing researchers, editors with a variety of agendas, the "natives" that we study, tenure-review committees, the corporations that hire us as consultants, and the students we teach. In our roles as teachers, writers, consultants, and agents of change, we are incapable of maintaining purely the stance of "objective researcher"; instead, we need to acknowledge that we are rhetoricians who endeavor to understand the audiences we influence.

In "Problems in the Publication of Field Studies," sociologist Howard S. Becker emphasizes that the publication of contemporary ethnographic studies is invariably problematical. Because the "natives" themselves tend to be literate and frequently read the published study, contemporary ethnographers run the risk of incurring the wrath of the groups they study. Most communities define themselves against external communities, and though people might participate in an open discourse within their own community, they tend to resent outside disclosure and interpretation. Thus, an ethnographer, who must gain participant status in some community in order to observe, necessarily violates community trust when community secrets are published outside the community. Becker observes:

> The scientist does a study with the cooperation of the people he studies and writes a report that angers at least some of them. He has then to face the problem of whether to change the report or, if he decides not to, whether to ignore or somehow attempt to deal with their anger. (270)

In other words, the ethnographer who writes and publishes is not a strict empiricist at all, but a writer who must construct a text that is perhaps not "true," but might be "effective." Effective in what sense? Becker contends that though the publication of ethnography may upset folks, it can bring about positive changes—both within the community studied and within the larger cultural field. Positive in what sense? It is, finally, up to the ethnographer/rhetorician to answer this question. And the answer, of course, has as much to do with ideology as it has to do with objective observation.

Thus, the second step in a self-critique would involve retrospectively examining our own prior ethnographic publications in an effort to discover...
our rhetorical slants and ideological biases. To understand our own understanding, to recuperate the emic "truth" underlying our texts, we would need to admit that our published discourse frequently masquerades as scientific discourse and that it attempts to disguise its own persuasive aims.

It is true that modern ethnographic researchers frequently write in the first person as they attempt to allow for—and account for—their own ideological filters. Norman Denzin’s theoretical work in sociolinguistic methodology, which stresses the importance of "triangulating" research data with the perspectives of observers and subjects, has by now influenced both the methodology and discourse of ethnographers of writing. Still, in most ethnographies of writing that I have read, and written, researchers write in the first person not in order to understand themselves and their own research communities, but in order to acknowledge subjective bias as they report on the communities of others. As a result, the brunt of our ethnographic discourse still maintains the objective focus and appearance of traditional scientific discourse.

To investigate our own discourse honestly, then, we will need to participate in a meta-discourse that is both reflexive and unpretentious.

**Telling the Truth about Our Own Ethnographic Discourse**

Ethnographers of writing might find a model for reflexive meta-discourse in Bronislaw Malinowski’s confessional publication, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. Through his *Diary*, written late in his career as an anthropologist, Malinowski escapes from ordinary ethnographic discourse and writes reflexively about his work and his writing. By writing a personal and expressive discourse, Malinowski is able to come to terms with his academic pretenses and his ideological filters.

Like Malinowski, we will need to go beyond triangulation. We will need to write and share a radical first-person discourse that aims to construct, not present, the truth we are trying to tell. If we wrote about ourselves—our own ethnographic research and writing, our journals, our conferences, our affiliations, our academic institutions—we would demonstrate that what we really know as ethnographers is not the emic secrets of the communities we study, but something about our own research community, about our interaction with others, and about the construction of our own knowledge.

I am not trying to suggest that ethnographic writing research is pointless. Not only has ethnographic study made us aware of the dynamic relationship between social context and writing, but it also has improved our ability to teach and consult effectively in a variety of complex social situations. Instead, I am trying to suggest that a radical critique would help us understand social construction in terms of what we do ourselves, not just in terms of what the "natives" do. We need to begin to ask the same hard questions that anthropology has already asked:
1) Why do we do ethnography in the first place?
2) Why do we choose to study the communities we do?
3) What do these choices reveal about us?
4) What is the nature of our ethnographic discourse?
5) What sort of rhetoric underlies our discourse?
6) What does ethnography reveal about our own ideology?

Our ethnographic discourse sometimes evinces a rhetoric of anthropological pretense. By assuming participant-observer roles and by triangulating our data, we hope to establish ourselves as savvy contemporary scientists who have acknowledged, and in a small way surmounted, the problems of observational interference and subjectivity. But if we are to radically critique that discourse and that rhetoric, we must, in addition to writing traditional academic articles, allow ourselves to write even more in the first-person singular, to write personal diaries—even confessions—about our experiences as ethnographers. Perhaps these diaries should be published and shared. Perhaps they should supplant formal academic articles for awhile. By studying ourselves, we will come to terms with our own rhetoric.

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Works Cited


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