# *Inkshed*

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**Inside This Issue**



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**From the Editor's Notepad**

This issue of *Inkshed* focusses on ethnography. As more and more members of the Inkshed community incorporate ethnographic techniques into their study of reading and writing practices in both academic and workplace contexts, we thought it would be interesting to hear about some of that work. The first two articles both examine the role of notes in the construction of knowledge. Kathryn Alexander's examination of staff members' daily log notes in a mental health boarding home looks at how documentation practices create identities for

both staff and residents in the home. My own study of the writing of an evaluation report in a department of a post secondary educational institution examines how researchers' "field notes" provide the basis for the construction of the apparently objective knowledge that informs decision making in the organization. Jean Mason focusses specifically on aspects of data collection using email and synchronous instant messaging.Margaret Procter describes a project in which she is studying whether on-line writing promotes literacy skills. And finally, Brent Faber gives us a taste of creative ethnography with his excerpt from a much larger project on cultural change. Also in this issue, information about the next Inkshed conference and a reminder to pay your Inkshed dues for this year!

Barbara Schneider

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**Writing Up/Writing Down a Textual Ethnography:**
**Documentary Practices in a Mental Health Boarding Home**

**Kathryn Alexander**
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In 1993 I completed an extensive "textual" ethnography which argued for a critical examination of literate practices in workplace and professional contexts. My textual ethnography explored the writing practices of mental health workers in a community mental health boarding home. At the time I was unaware of the extensive range of research on genre theory and workplace writing, but it appears that I was writing alongside some of the discourses of genre theory and workplace writing.

The working title "Writing Up/ Writing Down" was inspired by ethnographer Paul Atkinson who describes the "triple" constitution of the ethnographic field in the following manner. First, the field is constructed through the ethnographer's gaze; second, it is reconstituted through writing down the "texts-of-the-field"; finally the field is reconstructed as "writing up" research and then recontextualised through the reader's work of interpretation (Atkinson, 1992, 9). The same kind of constructed, reconstructed and recontextualised work also occurs in workplace writing and reading, although we often encounter these texts as factual and objective. It is exactly this "facticity" which connects the documentary text to the larger social mechanisms of contemporary life. Dorothy Smith writes: "The text comes before us without any apparent attachments. It seems to stand on its own, to be inert without impetus or power. But in the situations of our everyday life as contrasted with our scholarly activities we find texts operative in many ways (l990b, 122).

As an on-call mental health worker I experienced many contradictions and conflicts between the purported goals of care and support of independence of the residents of the boarding home and my role as a mental health worker. I suspected that many practitioners across the social institutions of education, literacy, social work, health care and crisis intervention also

experienced similar contradictions.. I wondered if my project would shed light on the ways that these contradictions are manifested in the conflict between the everyday/every night lived experience of workers and the social control mechanisms that are concealed in the documentary procedures of social institutions.. Dorothy Smith calls these control mechanisms the "conceptual relations of ruling" and claims that they are primarily activated through our everyday textual activities as the writers, readers and subjects of documentary texts (Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b).

**Why a textual ethnography?**

I called my research a textual Ethnography because my site for analysis was comprised of a large corpus of almost a decade's accumulation of handwritten anecdotal workplace diary entries or log notes. I claimed that the historically extensive, longitudinal and detailed narrative nature of this corpus of documentary text qualified as an ethnographic field. This text was known in the community as "the daily log." I described the function of the daily log as the major "organ" of communication in the mental health boarding house. It organized the "eyes, ears and voices workers, and represented a kind of central nervous system in conjunction with the supervisor (PIC) who coordinated our activities with the care of the residents. As a non-profit organization, adequate staffing was constrained by financial resources and therefore relied on reliable "textual" co-operation and coordination of workplace knowledge and household duties through written directions in the log notes and log book.

I was an on-call staff member for several years while I completed a degree in English. My "text" work at the university sensitized me to the text-talk of the staff, and the inter-textual writing within the log. Later, as a novice researcher immersed in the analysis of the daily log, I was faced with the implications of reading and analyzing the entries that I personally had written as a worker. I discovered that removed from the original context of their writing, I had to discover new ways of reading and understanding the implications of the log notes. I wrote:

> Working in such an intimate and intense setting offered an opportunity to witness the complexities of administration, caregiving, and daily coping within the mental health system, and to participate in the official writing and reading through which these complexities took their shape. The daily log not only documents life within a mental health community boarding home, it also provides a textual annotation of the complexities of life and work in a documentary mediated setting (Alexander, 1993, 6).

**What is a log note?**

Since work shifts seldom overlapped, it was mandatory that a worker read the log book prior to her shift. Workers were instructed to read as far back as their previous shift, and up to a week's worth of log entries prior to engaging with residents, especially if there had been an absence of more than several days. It took approximately an hour to read the 30 - 40 or so hand written pages that could represent a week's accumulation of log notes.

After each work shift, the mental health workers wrote an account of what occurred during their shin, and what was considered important to communicate to other workers. Log book entries included details about the emotional or physical condition of each resident, housework duties, administrative details, information about changes in medications, and any critical events that occurred in the house and among the residents. On occasion, they also contained scraps of poetry, jokes, and illustrations from the artistic and gifted supervisor who strove to develop strong community bonds among workers and residents.

A typical log note consisted of usually one to two pages unless special circumstances warranted a need for more written instruction. The number of sheets of double sided loose-leaf paper representing a month of log book entries ranged from 60 - 87 sheets, with the average being 140 recorded pages a month (Alexander, 1993, 11). The purpose for all this "counting n of pages is to acknowledge the tremendous amount of textual and intellectual labour that took place with this workplace writing. My sense is that few of my co-workers took notice of this aspect of work as "writing" even though much of their daily physical, professional and emotional contact with residents and each other was coordinated through this crucial inter-textual literacy work.

I note that it is in reading and writing up activities that workers' understanding and reception of the community and residents is mediated. I posed the following illustration of a shift change after a worker engages with her mandatory reading of the log, prior to entering the bustling chaotic world of the community life of the residents.

> Preloaded with the events and descriptions of the past few days, this institutional worker encounters a textually inscribed community; her understanding of what has occurred has been mediated by the log entries of her coworkers and by her own lived experience. She has read a text of a particular "world., now she closes the text and enters that world. Or does she enter the text? She simultaneously enters as a potential reader, a soon-to-be writer, and a woman immersed in a mental health worker identity (Alexander, 97).

The next excerpt is what Janet Giltrow has described as evidence of "meta-genre-, that is "situated language about situated language" which orients readers and writers how to participate with a genre (Giltrow, 1998, 3). This entry was written by the PIC (person in charge or house supervisor) and is quite atypical in that it calls explicit attention to the importance of specific kinds of writing and reading practices. Normal practices seem to have been jeopardized because of a recent spate of novice (on-call) workers.

> *Thursday October 6*
> *General Request to All Staff*
> *Please be more careful and thorough about reading the 109 & making your log entries. In order for us to function as a staff team -- and especially when there are many different on call staff working, it's very important to pick up info from the log and to log and pass on info more clearly. If a general request or a specific one-to-one staff person request*

*has been made you either get it done, get 1/2 of it done or can't get to it (which is fine) please acknowledge in the log that you've read about it -- what you were able to do or not do -- so the info gets passed onto the next shift to pick up . . . .*

*The better we all get at this, the easier it is for us all to do the job -- function co-operatively smoothly as a staff team -- thanks C*

Typically, the replicability of reading and writing strategies for log book entries was taken for granted. Apart from minimal instruction in the staff orientation, most workers learned through direct participation and peer example how to read and write in the log. I argued that they came to approximate the right "feel" of a good log note largely through the kind of situated learning which Lave and Wenger describe as "learning as increasing participation in communities of practice [that] concerns the whole person acting in the world" (Lave and Wenger, 1992, 51). Thus the novice mental health workers were instructed through written participation with the textual models of veteran workers which gradually coordinated all workers into a seamless interpretive and textual community (Stock, logo, 150; Smith, 1990a, 1990b; Lave and Wenger, 1992 51).

As Dorothy Smith notes, the power of the documentary text is that it is geared for instrumental use, not contextual or interpretative action. Little analysis is required (and is likely discouraged). Rather IT requires routine reception and action. The reader of documentary texts becomes an objectified reader, the reader for which the text is intended and the text is assumed to be the same for everybody, at all times. Smith writes: "Objectified knowledge. . . subdues, discounts and disqualifies our various interests, perspectives, angles and experience, and what we might have to say speaking from Them" (Smith, 1990a, 80).

Regardless of the anecdotal and narrative quality of the log book entries, workers could not argue with The "facticity" of others' log entries. They might add to The stock of knowledge about a situation or person, but the question of wrong interpretation was rarely called up, unless a novice inadvertently "diagnosed" a resident. The PIC. and the other veteran workers relied on Their well honed experience and knowledge of the women in their care to construct inter-subjective and inter-textual "readings" of the ongoing complexities of the lives depicted on the pages of the log book.

**Ethical implications of textual practices**

I was initially alerted to The significance of The ethical consequences of writing practices because on several occasions the full-time workers literally voted to maintain a particular style of writing which they stated facilitated their working relationships with each other and the care of die residents. When they were confronted with external demands to change the way they wrote in the log, they split the log into two separate formats and maintained a dual entry system. One fulfilled The mandates of external authorities and supported what I described as The "rhetoric of management." The other, the narrative anecdotal entries of the original log, I described as the "poetics of care." I examined these textual practices in considerable detail in

later chapters of the thesis. Each genre or form had material and social consequences for the women who worked and lived in the "textual community" of the group home. The following entry describes a transition back to the "old method" after a trial experiment with "progress notes."

> *Trial system discarded July 18: Today we resume old method of logging as per staff meeting discussion and decision. For particulars/ comments see yellow pages, end of this section, and staff meeting minutes [no longer attached to log]. As for the resident's log i.e. resident summary, profiles, special routines etc. Let's give it some thought next few days.*
>
> *July 22, . . .Good to see the log back in its original form, easy to read*

As I read through the historical corpus of the daily log, I recognized that the issue of the kind of writing that would be practiced in the workplace emerged as an important nexus of care, ethics and community building, and this sometimes placed the women who worked in this community in direct conflict with external discourses of the medical models of psychiatry, professional service and legal accountability.

To briefly summarize, my exploration settled on how workplace literacies and documentation practices created particular identities for the worker/writers as wed as for their "subjects/clients." I wanted to shift attention to the processes and practices of writing up, to show how these texts might also "write us" possibly toward unintended outcomes and perspectives. I thought that ethical problems were created by institutional ways of knowing and writing which had the capacity to conceal dominant power relations that might work against the emancipatory and care-giving intentions of front line workers. Although this research took place in an unfamiliar setting, a community mental health boarding home, it seemed that theory in a strange place might be useful when developing a critical lens with which to re-examine a familiar practice or home place.

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## The Role of Field Notes In The Construction of Ethnographic Knowledge

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My recent ethnographic research has turned out to be an ethnography of ethnography. I entered my research site with the intention of studying the talk that surrounded the writing of an evaluation report in a post-secondary institution. I observed two administrators of a department in a college conduct an internal review and evaluation of a group of their educational programs for children. The administrators interviewed the program coordinators and the teachers involved in the programs, took notes on the interviews, compiled the notes, and then wrote a report detailing their findings and making recommendations for the programs. They sent their report to a senior administrator of the college and discussed the findings with the coordinators and teachers. They then made changes of various kinds to the programs. I attended, taped, and transcribed all the interviews with coordinators and teachers and all meetings between the two administrators at which they discussed the evaluation. I also collected copies of the notes the administrators took during the interviews and copies of all drafts of the report itself.

By the time I was done, I realized that I was in a position to say something about the doing and writing of ethnography itself and the way in which ethnographic writing practices produce knowledge. Some readers might contend that what my research subjects did was not really ethnography. As members themselves of the social setting in which they were conducting their research, they could hardly be regarded as neutral observers of the situation. I believe their research has much in common with what is generally regarded as ethnographic research. They talked to members of a social setting, recorded the experiences of those members, and then wrote a description of those experiences. My purpose here is not to define the boundaries of ethnography, but rather to examine the process of knowledge construction in the doing of ethnographic research.

As is usual in this kind of study, I have more material than I know what to do with. For this brief article I want to focus on one aspect of the practice of ethnography -- the writing and reading of "field notes." Field notes might be regarded as a genre in their own right, as there are specific writing and reading practices associated with them. But I want to examine the role of these notes in the construction of the purportedly "objective" knowledge that the administrators in my study were gathering as a basis for decision making about the programs they were evaluating.

> One short example will illustrate the way in which the field notes were implicated in the construction of knowledge in this study. What follows is an analysis of one brief question and answer sequence from an interview between the administrators and a teacher. D is the administrator who was speaking at the time; T is the teacher.
>
> *D: How do you feel about the general quality of instruction within the program?*
>
> *T: Like each teacher, what they do?*
>
> *D: Yeah, not asking to break down each teacher individually, but are you* generally *comfortable that there is a good standard of instruction, good teachers doing good work, or do you have concerns about it?*
>
> *T: I would think they do good work, but I have never seen anybody. I saw a few of Mary's and Crystal's [not their real names] students, so that is what I can say I saw. So this is it, I don't know exactly how many we have in the program, who is in the program. I saw Mary and Crystal's students because we had a few recitals together, so what I saw I liked, but I am not sure, is that it or is there more to it, or did everybody perform.*

In this excerpt we get a sense of the teacher being unwilling or unable to commit herself to an opinion about the other teachers in her program. She conveys a sense that she thinks they probably are good but she cannot say for sure. Here is how that answer shows up in the field notes. One administrator's notes read, "Think they do good work." The other's read, "Think they do good work. Saw some of the other teachers' students on recitals. What she saw she likes. Not sure she knows from the outside." Both sets of notes have left off the teacher's first two words, "I would.. In doing so, they have stripped away all the teacher's uncertainty and reluctance to commit herself on this topic. Without the context of the interview, the word Think" in both sets of notes can be read to mean that she has made a definitive statement that the other teachers are doing a good job. In the context of the interview, it is clear that the words "I would think" mean that she supposes but doesn't really know if the other teachers are doing a good job.

The second set of notes captures some of her uncertainty with the words "not sure she knows from the outside." But this is not the language the teacher used. She said "I have never seen anybody," meaning that she had never actually seen any other teachers teach and so had no direct personal knowledge of the teaching abilities of other teachers. This is presumably what

the director was trying to record with the word "outside" in his notes, but without the context of the interview for reference, "outside" does not convey this meaning with any certainty. It could, for example, mean that she has not heard any comments from people outside the program.

In any case, because of the way the field notes were amalgamated in the list of notes which the administrator used when writing the report, the point is moot. The amalgamated notes that he worked from and that are appended to the final copy of the report read as follows: 'Think they do good work. Teachers have different approach, some H. some reading. Sees other teachers' students in recitals, what she sees she likes." (The remark about the different approaches comes from a later section of the interview.) The director's phrase "not sure she knows from the outside" has disappeared and with it any indication of the teacher's reluctance and uncertainty. The notes now convey the sense that she thinks the other teachers are doing good work because she likes what she sees in recitals.

The notes that the administrators took in the interviews thus condensed and transformed the teachers' answers. The answers that appear in the notes therefore cannot be taken to represent the answers the teachers gave. They can, however, be taken to represent what the administrators regarded as relevant to their administrative concerns. They selected from what the teachers said on the basis of what would be important and relevant for the construction of the report they would write in which they would assess and make recommendations for the various programs. It would have been impossible for the administrators to do otherwise; they could attend to everything that was said in the interviews only if they taped and transcribed them, and even then they would have had to select from the material in some way in order to produce a report of reasonable length. When it came time to write the report, the administrator had access only to these transformed versions of the teachers' answers, not to the words the teachers said. He may also have had memories of the interviews, but, as six months passed between the beginning of the interviews and the beginning of the writing of the report, these were likely not vivid. Whether or not he could actually remember what was said in the interviews, however, the notes now stood for the interviews. The notes at that point were the interviews and formed the basis for the managers' version of the organization as presented in their report.

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**Ethnography in Cyberspace: Data Collection via Email and Instant Messaging**

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I am in the final stages of a web-based doctoral dissertation (http://www.masondissertation.elephanthost.com) in which I have used ethnographic research to address the question:

*How are writers' perceptions of the new rhetorical situations presented by hypertext affecting their attitudes towards writing and the consequent decisions they make in response to these perceptions?*

The overall design of my research is constructed around the phenomenological concepts and methods common to qualitative research using an emergent, field-based, modified case study approach. My data collection methods reflect the "indwelling" posture of the qualitative inquirer (Maykut & Morehouse, 2536). They include in-depth and group interviews, observation, journals, and document collection and analysis.

Much of my data collection has taken place in one-on-one interviews. Many interviews have been face to face, and some data has been collected over the telephone. These methods are relatively "tried and true.. I have also ventured, however, into the brave new methodology of computer-mediated communication (CMC). I refer specifically to asynchronous email, and synchronous instant messaging (IM). Very little research exists yet as to the viability of collecting data this way.

"Experimenting" with this new methodology, I have been concerned with both the logistics and ethics involved. Consequently, I have tried to develop some criteria for using email and instant messaging to collect qualitative data. My observations here are simply the result of experience reflected upon, and familiarity with the scant research that exists.

I agree with Barbara Sharf that "these exchanges constitute a unique hybrid genre somewhere between written text and spoken conversation" (Jones, 243). I find that there is a continuum between simple small and instant messaging, with the former closer to the writing end of the continuum and the latter closer to the speaking end.

I also concur with Annette Markham, who observes that when "users frame computer-mediated communication, their definitions fall along a continuum from tool to place to way of being" (85). As Markham notes, "people who connect to this network often feel a sense of presence when they are online" (17). I have experienced this sensation myself, and find that it is different from a telephone conversation. Perhaps the physical presence of text as opposed to the ethereal quality of spoken words that disappear upon utterance creates this sensation. Perhaps the interaction one can have with text based discourse in CMC enhances its presence. Text can be altered, stored, and recalled by the receiver-- even in synchronous IM.

And instant messaging is by far the most intriguing and challenging form of CMC from a researcher's point of view. It is a new and fascinating experience to conduct a "conversation" in print, watching text appear, change, and disappear on screen as the informant "speaks" in real time. This text can even be inflected with emoticons to express emotion more typical of interpersonal or verbal exchange. The computer itself, with its luminous screen and humming central processor, creates a unique atmosphere that "feels" quite different from exchanging information by telephone. I find that it seems both more intimate and more public at the same

time-- the intimacy of silent almost covert exchange combined with the notion of public sphere inherent in the Internet. I believe this sensation is part of the nature of virtual reality.

Here are my observations to date on the advantages, disadvantages, and satisfactions. At this point, I have not differentiated to any great degree between instant messaging and email, although the following points do not necessarily apply equally to both.

Some obvious advantages are that CMC offers convenience, easy transcription, and access to informants in remote locations other than by telephone. There is also, perhaps, an enhanced comfort level for some participants since they can have the opportunity to "measure words" more privately before offering them. In certain instances, it might also be very useful for an informant's visible identity to remain concealed. For example, one can imagine studies where knowledge of gender or race could create a bias. Markham suggests that "text-based, computer-mediated communication equalizes the participants to the extent that everyone, regardless of gender, race, authority, age, etc., is limited to exchanging texts" (155). One could speculate, however, as to how individual facility manipulating text in this medium might affect that potential equality. There could also be instances where informants with information valuable to a study might be willing to be "interviewed" if their identities were protected. Furthermore, the fact that the writer/speaker controls the transcription process means that s/he supplies the punctuation which, perhaps, gives the informant an added measure of control over meaning.

The most obvious disadvantage of using CMC is loss of body language as a key source of understanding. Software does exist that allows for online interviewing, either written or spoken, to be accompanied by visual imaging using a digital camera. I did not use this method in my research. I find that the image quality currently available over the Internet is so distorted as to be distracting.

From an ethical standpoint, computer-mediated chat opens the possibility for fraudulent data (i.e., how do you know it's really so-and-so on the other end?). This could, I suppose, be dealt with by sworn statements, witnesses, etc., but then that's not really the ethos of qualitative research, which is supposed to be built on establishing trust. Another concern might be that, in highly sensitive studies, the chance for invasion of privacy is greater on the Internet than in person; the risk is probably somewhat greater than with the telephone. Information, once digitized, always resides somewhere.

Moreover, any CMC requires access to relatively expensive equipment, familiarity with the technology, and relative comfort using a keyboard to transmit one's thoughts at a reasonable pace. There is also the risk of equipment failure mid-interview, but this is possible in tape recorded interviews as well, although probably less likely. Last, but not least, these programs aren't faultless; I found that some of the dialogue was stored and printed out of sequence, and I experienced cross platform problems between my PCand an informant's MAC.

Although I found that for me the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages, my satisfaction with the data collected varied in terms of both process and product. Email presented no particular problems in terms of process, but the data was often less than satisfying since there was no opportunity for spontaneous dialogue. Instant messaging resulted in a much better data quality since it does integrate "dialogue," albeit text-based. However, I found that not all interviewees were equally comfortable in this medium. At one end were those informants who felt totally at ease with IM; at the other end were those who found it very awkward. One respondent summed up that awkwardness by commenting that it was like "painting a picture through a keyhole." He attributed this to his dislike of keyboards. I cannot help but believe this discomfort affected the quality of his data. Finally, I definitely found a difference between using either email or IM to supplement personal contact as compared to using CMC in place of it. I only did the latter when personal contact was not possible because of distance, but the results were never as satisfying. I never had the same sense of "knowing" my respondent in depth in the context of my study.

In conclusion, in any study the principle of triangulation implies that it is best to approach one's subject from a number of perspectives. Although a researcher might not choose to use computer-mediated chat as the only means of gathering data, I see no reason why it should not be of value as an option. Furthermore, if it were the only way to gain access to a crucial respondent, I believe it would definitely be better than nothing and, for reasons cited above, I believe there are instances when CMC could be preferable. Overall, I would put it on a relative par with a letter or a recorded telephone conversation but different in nature. In the final analysis, as Annette Markham concludes, "online or offline, all of us make sense of our experiences and tell the stories of our lives in self-centered and sdf-understood ways. Truth is an elusive term in any context" (210).

**Instant messaging interview protocol**

Following are some basic practical guidelines I developed specifically for conducting interviews via instant messaging. I used ICQ instant messaging, available as a free download at http://www.mirabilis.com.

- Go through a "dry run" to make sure all hardware/software is operating properly and that all parties are comfortable with its operation.
- Establish the interview time in advance taking into account different time zones. If possible, choose a time when the Internet is not too crowded so there's less chance of being disconnected.
- Establish a set of common cues that allow participants to communicate rhythms usually apparent in voice and body language. For example, we typed the word "over" as a code to signal when each of us was finished "speaking" in order to allow for uninterrupted thinking pauses.

- Prepare a set of flexible questions and keep a printed co" in view. I found the spontaneous questions that often arise in face-to-face dialogue are hampered because of the distraction of managing the technology.
- Follow procedures to save data carefully to avoid any loss of data.
- Download and print data as soon as possible so you can note and modify any faulty sequencing. Download to a full-powered word processing program where you can adjust fonts and spacing, and add features such as line numbering.
- Keep a backup copy of all interviews on a floppy diskette in case your hard disk crashes.

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## Watching People Online

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If ethnography means studying groups from up close, then my research project on online writing may be a type of ethnography -- or several types, as I learn different ways of observing in this new environment. My work is part of EvNet, a SSHRC-funded research network that evaluates the uses of technology in education and training. As the literacy person in the group, I'm trying to put together a picture of the ways that online writing in a range of courses contributes (or not) to students' mastery of literacy skills.

The ten or so courses in the project range from secondary ESL classes corresponding with "keypals" through university courses in Economics and Literary Theory. Course listservs extend class discussion to huge pre-med courses in Cell Biology where students know each other mainly through the multi-folder Web-based conferencing. All this online writing is built into course structures and encouraged by grades. Instructors participate in the exchanges to some extent -- their ways of doing so and their effects are another interesting thing to observe.

I too took part in the secondary classes, along with Scott Kenney, a graduate student in Sociology. We wrote back and forth with students and visited the classes regularly, notepads in hand, recording what people did and said. We also gave out two questionnaires and did some taped interviews. That was a rich experience, giving us a chance to see behaviour patterns and personalities. The teachers were glad of our presence because we made students feel their work was important; I guess we also modelled nativespeaker English. But as social-science theorists warn, our presence also affected the nature of the online writing and interactions. Students played up to us, appealing to our sympathies and asking for our admiration or at least our attention. Well, we were used to that as teachers, and I think we did help students learn. Most worked hard at developing their ideas, trying out various styles of writing, and getting as much language correct as possible. Their progress pleased them, their course instructors, Scott and me. But it made it hard to see how online writing would work when there weren't always three teachers around.

In the university courses, I'm trying to cast a lighter shadow, though I'm not entirely a lurker. I send an early message describing the research and asking students to return an online consent form (most do). I read the flow of messages fairly regularly (students in some systems can see my name listed as a reader). I post an online questionnaire late in the course (nearly all students reply). But I don't take part in discussions, and my presence doesn't seem to be noticed. It's like standing behind one-way glass in a psych lab, and it lets me think I'm seeing the students' world, not a performance. I feel successful when I'm not having a visible effect -- an odd position for a teacher.

There's lots to watch. Students fool around, set up meetings, collaborate on homework, complain about instructors and assignments, raise issues not covered in class, and argue about

tangential topics: in the Cell Biology folders, for instance, the environmental effects of salt on roads, the desirability of immortality, the gender of God, and people's motivation for writing so much online. Students pay lime attention language correctness, though they create effects deliberately, using typography and punctuation and playing rifts on key words and phrases. Paragraphing is either absent or creative, sentence structure ranges from fragmented to baroque, vocabulary is indecorous but wonderfully colourful. Somehow the topic of online communication -- its affordances and constraints, strategies for managing it effectively -- always arises for discussion. I can see learning happen.

As a hopeful ethnographer, I want to understand how it happens. That means reading huge amounts of electronic text and noticing patterns, re-reading to confirm them, and finding yet more things to notice. [m told this is the sociological method of "content analysis." It feels like childhood reading: going through the same texts over and over, finding favourite parts and seeing what new things crop up -- though as a kid, I never felt the need to take notes. Record-keeping is crucial, though, when you call it research. With Irena Ganeva, a graduate student in Second-Language Education, I have learned to harness a data-analysis program called NUD*IST (Nonnumerical Unstructured Data by Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing). It lets us code messages and other data for things that strike us as interesting, and then it shows us what we've noticed. It's like scribbling notes in the margins and then being able to find them again and look at them as a set, with the added advantage that they're legible.

What I'm learning to see in this data encourages and surprises me: students really are interesting people, courses in Economics and Biology can be exciting entities, and literacy is changing in front of our eyes. I hope to report at the May 2000 Inkshed conference on what I'm looking at.

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## "Rodeo": Creative Ethnography and Change

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Creative ethnography borrows much from John Van Mannen's description of confessional and impressionist tales of ethnography.1 Confessional tales are highly personalized accounts which emerge from a readily identifiable and self-conscious author. Impressionist tales use dramatic language and imagery to produce an imaginative account of ethnographic research. Both styles share much with what Lee Gutkind and others have called "creative nonfiction," a poetic blend of nonfiction analysis and literary techniques.2 By merging close description with creative prose, such writing attempts to create a text that is accurate, informative, and at the same time narratively compelling. My own work in this area has focused on the concept of change -- change within organizations and within cultures. "Rodeo" emerged as an early narrative from this study and helped me to form several preliminary impressions about change. The story is

about a rural couple who seemed to exist outside of change; it is also a story about the interpretations and individual perceptions of change. What follows are two brief excerpts from this ethnography.

Seated along wooden planks overlooking the sandy pit of rodeo grounds, we are watching and admiring the clamor of neighbours and relatives waving, talking, and rescuing children who have wandered too close to the bulls. Despite our attempts to pass as locals, we always miss the subtle and not so subtle signs of membership exchanged in rural America. Our jeans carry the wrong designer label and they have faded too much in the wrong places. My shirt is wrong, and even with Rebecca's authentic red cowboy boots (mine are brown) we simply don't fit in. Like most small-town rodeos, tonight's event is the capstone of a fun week's activities. There has been a beauty contest for the crown of rodeo princess, a pancake breakfast, parade, and amusement rides at the fairgrounds. But these are an preliminary to the rodeo, tonight's big event.

To start things off, a group of eleven cowgirls riding quarter horses gallop into the ring carrying an assortment of coloured flags. In silent ritual, the men remove their hats, and the crowd stands up to greet the town's rodeo princess atop a huge white horse. She's carrying the Star-Spangled Banner and the national anthem rumbles the loudspeakers. No one waves, no one takes a picture, no one sings. At the conclusion of the anthem, to the whoops and cheers of the crowd, the women spur their horses and the princess leads a chain of unbridled energy around the ring before bolting out of the arena. The dirt is phenomenal. The loudspeakers switch to America's current Francis Scott Key, Garth Brooks, and the announcer preps the crowd for the first event, the bareback ride. The actual event is a bit anticlimactic as six of the eight cowboys get thrown early. The audience does not mind, they've settled in. The teenagers have taken daddy's money and are beginning to congregate around the competitors, trying desperately to be seen while feigning dispassionate coolness.

Between the bare backs and the saddle backs, the announcer successfully wins the audience's attention and polite applause by announcing local birthdays. Then he asks us to direct our attention to the far end of the ring "just above the Dodge Truck sign." He asks an elderly couple to stand. "I'd like to introduce a special couple who you probably all already know." The crowd begins to hush. "Ted and Mary Heber met each other at this rodeo 55 years ago today. Five years later they were married and for their honeymoon they came right back to those two seats. And folks, they've been coming back to those two rodeo seats every year for the last 50 years. Let's wish them a happy 50th and many more rodeos! In a world of constant change," the announcer booms, "it sure is nice to see that a few good things never change."

This scene occurred nearly five years ago. At the time, I was a Canadian graduate student studying organizational communication at an American university. I was living in my fifth city in as many years and I could not imagine the kind of fixity Ted and Mary represented. Here, at this rodeo in central Utah, I was astonished to see two people who were reported to have spent the past 50 years immune to change. As I thought more about Ted and Mary, I started to doubt the rodeo announcer's claim. I started to wonder about the relative and interpretive aspects of

change. Perhaps change is a highly individual phenomenon: Where one person sees change, another will see the status quo. Perhaps where we all saw Ted and Mary holding out against change, they saw themselves as having changed a great deal. I began to wonder if there were other accounts and different interpretations of the events I had witnessed. Interpretations that were meaningful, but not available to me. Interpretations that would be forced to remain Actions, but nonetheless would still be relevant to an understanding of change.

*"Well, we'd better get a move on if we're going to catch the rodeo this year." Ted slides back from the dinner table surveying the devastation they have jointly wrought to another anniversary meal of Chinese food. Ted used to be strictly a steak and potatoes guy until he discovered the joys of Chinese take out. 'Lou load up the dishwasher while I Jim my hair," Mary shouts en route up the stairs.*

*Ted always feels conspicuous driving to the rodeo in a sedan. He'd much rather be in his pick-up, but several years ago he hurt his back shingling the porch roof The pickup seemed to aggravate the injury so he traded it in for a used Oldsmobile. Truthfully, he prefers the ride, the comfort, and the spaciousness of the Olds. But it's tough for an old rancher to be without his truck. Ted parks the Olds a few rows away from the entrance to the rodeo arena. Looking around, he is still surprised at how different the rodeo has become. He first started bronc riding as an eight year old on his father's ranch. Then, ranches had competitions among their cowboys to see who could rope the best, who could ride the fastest, who could outlast the ranch's toughest bull. Now, Ted knows that few of the competitors work ranch lip. He knows about the rodeo schools, the training camps, the big time management, and the ways rodeo has become big business. He's disappointed when the competitors are from places like Texas, California, Missouri, or Canada. On the one hand, he identifies with the story about the old rodeo, about local kids testing their strength and testing their animal stock. On the other hand, he knows the story about developing the west, about bringing money to these deserts they call towns, about leasing something behind for the next generation who win try to scrape a living off of this land. Yet, as he watches the first four cowboys get thrown off their bare back mounts, he has yet to reconcile the two accounts.*

*Mary grabs his hand as the announcer starts reading off birthdays. He'd almost forgot about this, the special welcome they would be getting at tonight's event, it being their 50th and ale Ted looks over at a delighted Mary, brimming in the glow of her anticipated 15 seconds. He listens as the announcer shouts out: "I'd like to introduce a special couple who you probably all already know. Ted and Mary Heber met each other at this rodeo 55 years ago today...." As the announcer drawls on, Ted gives Mary a quick kiss on the cheek and whispers in her ear "I'm sure glad we do this every year, it gives me a chance to see just how much our life has changed."*

Although it is not acceptable to pass fictional events off as reality, my own work on change has suggested that in changing contexts, the distinction between fact and fiction is often arbitrary and is itself changing. This results in numerous problems for the ethnographic researcher intent on documenting what is "real." Yet, this unique context becomes a rich territory *for* stories, interpretations, myths, and tales -- communicative devices that are essential to culture building

and to the processes that maintain and change those cultures. Change seems to exist somewhere in the divide between fiction and nonfiction, between what we know and what we invent. What this will ultimately mean for academic reporting I am not sure. But I do know that studies of change offer ethnographic researchers rich, multi-dimensional texts, intriguing, dynamic subjects, and creative ways to report, narrate, and engage the subject. As Perkins and Blyler have recently argued, "researchers in professional communication are just beginning to be influenced by the concept of change in professional environments and to contemplate the effects [this study may have] on our field. . ."3 Studying change is a significant project, and it will undoubtedly produce many interesting and well textured stories.

**Notes**

Van Mannen, John. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

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