A Review of *Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers*

By Michelle LaFrance, 2019. University Press of Colorado. [ISBN 978-1-60732-866-7. 146 pgs. $22.95 USD (paperback). EISBN 978-1-60732-867-4. $9.99 (E-book).]

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Institutional Ethnography by Michelle LaFrance is an invaluable contribution to writing studies, a discipline that has long engaged in conversations about policy, labor conditions, justice, and inclusion. Although writing studies scholars have used many methodologies to study these topics and to create sustainable change initiatives, institutional ethnography (IE), which seeks to uncover *how things happen*, may best equip us for this important work. IE focuses on the complex social relations that carry out the work of teaching, mentoring, administration, and research. IE's goal is to shift the researcher's focus from generalized understandings of people or events and instead to investigate *how* individuals within a highly situated institutional context co-create the process or action being studied.

Although *Institutional Ethnography* has a practical dimension for analyzing, interrogating, and understanding all of higher education, it is a must-have for studying writing-focused departments, programs, classrooms, and curricular initiatives. Scholars in WAC/WID, composition, rhetoric, literacy, cultural, and women's studies, plus many others who live and work in institutions of higher education will benefit from the book's focus on socially-constructed institutions and the diverse individuals who create, participate in, and maintain them. The book's focus on socially-constructed institutions is especially relevant in the midst of a global pandemic. Students, faculty, and administrators alike are experiencing new initiatives, layoffs, difficult work, and health crises. This book provides a methodology to begin studying and seeking answers to some of these wicked problems. Beginning with a Foreword and an Introduction, *Institutional Ethnography* contains four primary chapters, the last three of which are case studies that illustrate IE in action. LaFrance concludes by positing some implications for programmatic, departmental, and university focused research using IE. The foreword by Tony Scott, author of *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition,* provides a brief review of the benefits *Institutional Ethnography* holds for teachers, scholars, and administrators:

> This book shows an exciting way that composing theory is not just a commodity for scholars: it is something we all *do* in the world. It is *work*. As work, writing education is unstable, produced, social, individual, distributed, and material. (xiv, emphasis in original)

The Introduction, "Twenty-First Century Exigences" outlines ethnography and IE theory and methodology, both in writing studies and other contexts. IE as methodology draws upon Canadian

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sociologist Dorothy E. Smith's lifelong research on sociology and institutional ethnography. In this book, LaFrance explores, adapts, and expands Smith's work illustrating its potential for writing-related research in departments, programs, writing centers, and other contexts. Engaging with Rebecca Rickly's (2008) definitions of method and methodology, LaFrance claims that IE can be both a means for data collection and also a larger structure for theorizing writing research. Drawing on Theresa Lillis' (2008) call to re-conceive ethnography as "deep theorizing" or a methodology, epistemology, and ontology, LaFrance illustrates how IE makes visible the invisible networks influencing writing-focused people, places, and things. In the Introduction, LaFrance outlines the methodological similarities and differences between IE and ethnography, a popular methodology in writing studies.

Ethnography is often used for studying the sites of writing where scholars can closely engage with texts, processes, students, instructors, administrators, and other stakeholders. Texts such as *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* (Naples, 2003), *Writing Studies Research in Practice* (Nickoson & Sheridan, 2012), and *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy* (Heath, Street & Mills, 2008) discuss the various ways ethnography can be used to study individuals' rituals, values, and habits that influence their role as members of a space, community, or society. IE diverges from ethnography with the distinction that ethnographers study what people are *doing*, while institutional ethnographers look at how things *come to happen* (LaFrance, p. 4) through the work (experiences and practices) of individuals in institutions. For example, ethnographers might look at what students, faculty, or administration are *doing* (homework, creating lesson plans, assessment, curriculum design, etc.), while institutional ethnographers look at the coordinated work that these individuals produce in an institutional setting (the kinds of social relations, ideologies, and rules that govern and influence these practices, texts, experiences, etc.).

Following the introduction, the first chapter delves deeper into IE theory and methodology, situating it in institutional sites of writing such as classrooms, diverse writing programs, and writing centers. This chapter is especially important for researchers who plan to engage in IE research as it defines key terms for site-related work including "*ruling relations*, *standpoint*, *social coordination*, *problematic*, *work* and *work processes*, *institutional discourse*, and *institutional circuits*" (p. 23, emphasis in original). By providing a methodology that simultaneously carries the feminist research values of careful subject attention, reflection, and the potential for co-researching—along with a focus on the individual-institutional coordinates that impact work—LaFrance illustrates how timely this methodology is for writing studies and other disciplines across the university. Ultimately, LaFrance argues IE can provide insight on "how the field's research might more adequately account for dispersed contexts, divergent experiences, and an inevitable range of practices" (p. 135), impacting not only institutions but also the social world. IE's detailed attention to individuals such as students, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders who make up the larger institutions of programs, departments, colleges, universities, and disciplines shows how individual players contribute to the shared spaces where writing happens. Engaging with this methodology leads researchers toward praxis-focused studies where we can re-imagine institutions, and reflect on institutional values, practices, and ethics. This is a radical, change-making methodology.

Two foundational moves in the IE framework are *standpoint* and *ruling relations*. These moves encourage ethnographers to see complex relations among individuals, organizations, and space and time, or, in simpler terms, the "macro" and "micro" elements of an institution (DeVault, 2008, p. 4). Imagine a writing program's website. On the surface, most programs appear to have positive culture: access and inclusivity are highlighted; there are usually strong mission statements. However, these texts can often obscure individual experiences. Using IE, researchers can begin to really "see" diverse populations of people, influenced by factors including their past experiences, current work they are

engaging in, and their seemingly invisible hierarchies. Institutional ethnographers may look at the scholarship faculty in a program are publishing, or not publishing. They may look at their site of study's demographic information. They could interview students and faculty to see if individual experiences line up with front-facing websites' claims.

Institutional Ethnography seems especially relevant for writing studies scholars who are interested in studying departmental or institutional culture, with the intention of creating sustainable and ethical change. Many universities, colleges, departments, and programs have implicit racist, sexist, xenophobic and homophobic cultures that are destructive to students, faculty, and staff. For example, after George Floyd's murder in late spring of 2020, there were months of protests and riots condemning police brutality, and loud cries for racial justice, criminal justice reform/disbandment, and focus on sustainable change. Students and faculty shared their experiences of erasure, racism, and microaggressions in their programs and departments through social media, listservs, and formal documentation. Many universities crafted anti-racism statements after student organizations and faculty began to place pressure on upper administration. Now that many institutions have crafted anti-racism statements, do these statements line up with individual experiences, classroom texts and pedagogies, and department initiatives and professional development opportunities? LaFrance discusses IE's value for writing studies researchers in terms of its potential "to reveal [] deep and often hidden investments and experiences…making visible the values, practices, beliefs, and belongings that circulate below more visible or dominant discourses" (p. 5). IE has the potential to reveal "our responsibilities, our power, our ability to resist, and our ability to listen and respect others" (p. 134). These are important revelations to begin the process of institutional change. IE is a strong methodology for writing programs—as well as departments, colleges, and universities—to put to use.

In the last three chapters of *Institutional Ethnography*, LaFrance illustrates IE in action through three case studies focused on writing instruction and administrative contexts. Throughout these case studies, LaFrance illustrates institutional scenarios writing scholars can relate to, providing a methodology for writing studies scholars to discover how individual work relates to broader institutional contexts. The first case study—the focus of Chapter Two, "How Work Takes Shape"—describes a series of undergraduate "linked" courses dedicated to introducing students to the work of the English major. This chapter explicitly outlines how an IE project is carried out, from initial problematic all the way through the final analysis. LaFrance says, "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" (p. 19).

The second case study—the focus of Chapter Three, "The Annual Review as 'Boss Text' and the Coordination of Writing Center Work"—shares findings from a study about the differences of work experiences for writing center faculty and staff. Drawing on the IE concepts of *ruling relations*, *standpoints,* and *boss texts*, LaFrance explores faculty work lives in a writing center and the influence of the HR department in the annual review process. This chapter is important for learning how IE can uncover workers' potentially problematic experiences that have been, often unintentionally, covered by hierarchically arranged institutions. These individual experiences should inform local practice, and IE provides a methodology for uncovering those individual stories and experiences.

The third case study, and the focus of the final chapter, "Mapping Information Literacy in a First-Year Writing Program" shares results from a study focused on a first-year writing program that values *information literacy*. This chapter reveals difficulties instructors face as they support student researchers and programmatic outcomes, while wrestling with what the term *information literacy* constitutes in individual, disciplinary, professional, and national contexts. Depending on personal, programmatic, departmental, and institutional ideals, different individuals and stakeholders may

"bump up against" the supposedly coordinated nature of their work in local contexts. This chapter is especially useful for administrators to determine where differences lie between programmatic values and the individuals who carry out the work required to enact these values.

Institutions may be hierarchical in nature, but the individual experiences of those who work and study within them must be considered when conducting research or enacting any sort of institutional change. In the conclusion, LaFrance notes that "our research doesn't just describe social realities, it creates them" (p. 132). *Institutional Ethnography* provides a powerful theoretical framework, research methodology, and method, as it insists that individual people *are* the institution. Individual people are moving pieces in a larger puzzle that is dynamic and shape-shifting. IE provides researchers a lens to take a snapshot of this puzzle, zooming in on individual pieces to get a high-resolution image.

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