

CHAPTER 2.

(RE)VIEWING FACULTY OBSERVATION AND EVALUATION BEYOND THE “MEANS WELL” PARADIGM

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At the heart of IE research is a desire to create positive changes in the relationships and structures we share with those who we work beside. In writing studies, this impulse encompasses a broad number of activities from teaching and scholarship to administrative and institutional change work. Increasingly, it encompasses a need for deeper collective self-reflection as we adapt to both changing economic conditions, including the disappearance of tenure-stream models, and a renewed exigency for social change in anti-oppressive frameworks. With its grounding in materialist feminisms and feminist standpoint theory, IE presents a useful tool for taking up these concerns in both reflective and actionable ways. IE offers transformative potential in this way because it so easily builds a relationship between critical evaluation and a mapping of locations for positive change. It does so by providing actionable research tools to illuminate shared concerns, identify patterns of oppression, and move institutional participants toward transformation of our social and material conditions. As Michelle LaFrance notes in the introduction to this volume, the way IE studies “practice” “illuminate(s) those finely grained moments where language, literacy, and so, writing, are inextricable from social contexts, institutional values, and systems of domination” (Introduction, this collection).

Specifically, IE works to uncover “problematics” that reveal and help us explore further the persistent conflicts, slippages, and disjunctions in the work that we do, *despite* our best efforts. We do so to avoid “institutional capture” (Smith, *Institutional . . . Sociology*). In fact, those problematics nearly *always* work in contradiction with or “underneath” the dominant discourses of the workplaces we study. Another way to consider it, as Michelle Miley so usefully does in Chapter 7 of this collection, is to use the problematic heuristic to reveal the tensions between the “real and ideal” of our institutional relations. In the site I studied here, an independent writing

department in a research institution that I'll call the "IWD," I used IE and its heuristic tools (problematics) to better understand the function and impact of course/faculty observation practices. The set of dynamic tensions I uncovered there, the central focus of this chapter, were illustrated by a concept I call the "means well paradigm" (MWP), or, a slippage between the positive discourses used to coordinate work—in this case ones oriented to democratic, participatory, egalitarian notions of care—and the actualities of that work from faculty standpoints.

Exploring the problematic from the "anchor standpoint" (Devault and McCoy) of faculty working off the tenure line, I worked to engage IE's principles of activist methodology by identifying possible locations for change rooted in the margins. In this chapter, I do so by drawing a departmental portrait for context, next, by discussing data from anchor standpoints and administrative perspectives that encapsulate the MWP, and finally, by offering a salient example of institutional change work rooted in those standpoints. As LaFrance notes, "the study of work [particularly the experiences of contingent workers] is increasingly pressing in today's higher ed contexts" and that exigency guided my study (Introduction, this collection).

The findings of this study revealed that those working off the tenure track in the IWD commonly experienced observation and its attendant circuits of evaluation at the interstices of a particular tension in both formative and summative observation. This tension manifested between (1) observation appearing as a sort of "benign" experience without clear markers linking the observation process to pedagogical practice or professional standing, and (2) the ways it appeared (often opaquely) as a tool of advancement. Taken together, most participants were unclear about formative impacts on their teaching *and* about the long-term impacts of observation on their professional trajectories in the department. By "looking up" my findings illuminate the importance of considering shared governance and department design as constellated with observation and evaluation. Doing so uncovered some of the value and impacts of a commonplace practice like course observation from the standpoints of the *subjects* of that practice, an important orientation to help better determine models of shared governance that achieve the democratic, participatory structures the IWD sought to create.

COURSE OBSERVATION COMMONPLACES AND IE

Course observation itself is a salient and standard practice in institutions and writing programs as a feature of coordinated work structures especially in writing programs where we rely heavily on the symbolic value of pedagogy. Observation has been described in disciplinary literature as "usability testing—the usability of [a] program's assumptions about teaching and learning, and also, 'macro-teaching'" (Jackson 45-7).

Observation is relational to program cohesion and the professional development of teachers of writing, and disciplinary literature frames it as such (Dayton; Hult) but it is often ignored as an aspect of the material conditions and collective workings of a department. As Jim Nugent et al. importantly explain, “the material context of writing instruction” is salient to all aspects of how we understand work there as my study sought to do (Chapter 2, this collection).

IE afforded me a more complex view of the role course/faculty observation visits played—beyond professional development and pedagogy—in a departmental space. Here, by using standpoint, IE illuminated what Smith calls “the phenomena of organizations and institutions” in their “nominalized forms of organization, information, communication and the like” that can suppress “the presence of subjects and the local practices.” Smith explains that by looking at organizational forms and standpoints alongside ethnographic observation, IE “expands the scope of the ethnographic method” (“Texts” 159-60).

DRAWING A DEPARTMENTAL PORTRAIT

The department whose story I tell here exists within a large, well-funded land grant university. Broadly described, the department is well-funded, and significantly, is not staffed with part-time labor, though its workers are nonetheless, contingent. Its decision-making and governance structures are made to be egalitarian and participatory. The department houses a first year writing program (FYW), an undergraduate major in professional and public writing, and a nationally renowned graduate program. The faculty are comprised of roughly 50 non-tenure-track faculty (NTT), 18 tenure stream faculty (TT), eight “academic specialists” (AS), and around 40 graduate students (TAs).

Observation in the IWD is conducted for graduate students in their first semester as TAs, for NTT faculty in their first semester of teaching, and for any faculty member going up for promotion of any kind. Summative observation particularly appears as a component of evaluation for advancement in an extensive set of departmental bylaws (boss text), a node of social coordination that “hooks” participants into the discourses of the department (LaFrance). However, formative observation is the most frequently conducted form of observation and is not codified by the bylaws. Formative observation applies to TAs and NTT faculty and happens primarily in the FYW program.

When it is summative in nature, observation is connected to advancement for any rank (e.g., when TT, NTT, and AS faculty are seeking promotion). It is not used for summative purposes for TAs. As outlined in the bylaws, for faculty, a “teaching review committee” is formed to conduct multiple observations and write a teaching review letter. TT faculty are required to be present

(Department). Given that TT faculty make up a small portion of the department, this puts an unusually large service burden in their hands. This labor is a major contributing factor to the MWP where faculty *want* to support their colleagues but are overburdened and lack time to do so fully without detriment to their own professional trajectories and well-being.

Holistically, this socially coordinated process extracts broadly distributed labor from several institutional participants who must conduct, review, evaluate, document, and engage in the promotion process from peers, supervisors, and department chairs to deans and provosts. Interview participants tied this social coordination, or “the established ways of doing, knowing, and being co-constituted by people who participate in an established social order” to a culture of care, a feature of the MWP (LaFrance 38). Yet, the lived experiences of observation did not always match the official outlined processes nor the narrative of the MWP. As Erin Workman et al. explain in Chapter 4, “the processes by which . . . work is continuously coordinated and co-accomplished” are not always evident, especially as processes and practices become so routinized as to be “how things are done” (this collection). Instead, here, observation seemed to appear as somewhat flexible, frequently “opaque,” and at times unclear in impacts or purpose even within the advancement process.

DEFINING OBSERVATION, EVALUATION, AND THE MWP

Interview participants off the tenure line located slippages in their work around the *value* and *impact* of their professional assessments as they intersected with the trajectories of their work over the long term and as they contrasted with the well-meaning departmental culture which they openly acknowledged they were “lucky” to be a part of.

The MWP then appeared in descriptions of a set of practices meant to support equity and quality in a department that exerted a high level of agency over its own shared governance and interpellated a high degree of participation from its faculty. Yet, the IWD’s design was unable to fully attend to persistent structural problems around labor, many arising at the very same locations in which it simultaneously acted as agentive and participatory. IE helped make sense of this, where, according to LaFrance what people do always takes shape in relation to material conditions that surround and inform a site *and* the quite “unique sensibilities, values, investments, identities, histories, expertise, and predilections of knowing and active individuals” (Introduction, this collection).

Interview data revealed this clearly, where those *conducting* observations saw it as useful, pleasurable, and generative and those *receiving* an observation experienced a broader range of more complex associations with the processes,

purposes, and practices therein. One example of these complex associations is that even as the boss text of the bylaws outlined how and when observation would be used for promotion and advancement in equitable and disciplinarily grounded modes (ruling relations), participants identified a disconnect between the act of summative assessment and its impact on their work (social coordination). In other words, intentions were clear, impact was not.

Disciplinary literature on the topic also seems to take for granted notions of faculty evaluation as potentially complex but ultimately positive if it is rooted in “best practices” read: formative approaches (Dayton; Hult). IE allowed me to instead seek out the ways observation was implicated in *labor conditions* by building a composite, standpoint-driven view of the everyday work landscape in the IWD, or as Workman et al., describe in Chapter 4, a way to “analyze relationships between individual practices and experiences and the social and institutional forces that continuously reshape, and are reshaped by, those practices” (this collection).

In what follows, I report on a central concept from my findings: how observation was experienced both as a benign act that was required of work in the department and the ways it was understood as a tool of advancement. The findings relate directly to how faculty in the anchor standpoint defined the use, value, and experience of observation as a tool for summative or evaluative purposes.

MAPPING THE USE VALUE OF OBSERVATION

This study began with a 19-question department-wide survey with a 66% participation rate. The survey was used to select 13 interview participants across four departmental ranks: TT (4), NTT (4), AS (3) and TA (2). Three selection criteria were used: participants had been recently observed; were able to identify both a text associated with the observation; and identified a connection between the observation and RPT (renewal, promotion, tenure), or for TAs, advancement of some kind (professionally, pedagogically). Using artifact-based reflective interviews, I asked participants to produce an artifact, preferably a text, related to their observation. Surprisingly, though those willing to participate in an interview identified that texts accompanied their observation, most actually had difficulty locating one for our interview. This could have been in part because no formal reports are filed for observation unless a faculty member is applying for tenure or promotion. Then, a formal letter was filed but it was not shared in its final form with the faculty member.

The most common artifacts shared were observer notes, which participants explained they had to “dig up” to meet my request. For many, this was the only written record they possessed related to the observation. Given that the IWD is highly text-driven, this appeared as a notable disjuncture between its ruling relations and social coordination.

One participant remarked, “well, I had to be observed, that was like, part of the ‘gig’ (laughs) so I knew that it was coming.” But they explained how they felt one observation couldn’t say much about their overall teaching. The participant also remarked that the feedback they received wasn’t necessarily any that impacted their teaching and noted relying more heavily on peer interaction for improved pedagogy. This turning toward peers is an experienced echoed in the study of Nugent et al., in Chapter 2 of this collection where they examine boss texts and how they are taken up in the everyday lives of participants.

When I asked participants if they could link the observation to their career trajectory in the department, they described that the relationship between the observation and “merit” increase was “indirect” and their voice took on a sarcastic, somewhat confounded tone when they explained their merit letter, “that, by the way, had a single line about my classroom instruction. Right.” Articulating the MWP, they expressed that they felt the department *wanted* to build a robust culture of observation but that it would be exceedingly difficult given service burdens. Nonetheless, acknowledging an appointment type that is 90 percent teaching, this lack of feedback appeared troubling for the participant.

In contrast, other participants spoke directly to the role observation played in their promotion work while simultaneously defining it as benign/necessary. One participant said, “My observations have always been good,” and went on to describe their experience as, “So, like, so-and-so, and so-and-so, would have to come to the same class and then talk about it and then write about it and then share a report with me. Um, at which point, I am allowed to ‘respond’ (starts laughing); the whole thing, it just it like, reminds me of some weird religious ritual from the 16th century, it’s so bizarre.”

The slippages here between the benign nature of observation and its rich, though often unfulfilled potential, were also encapsulated perfectly in moments like this:

My experience of both the observation and this entire process has been that it’s rubberstamping. And I am simultaneously thankful, that I am, within our department at least, valued enough that it’s like, yes, just push [them] through, and very frustrated that this moment, that is supposed to in some way, offer useful feedback is, actually not at all that, but is still all the stress of that, right?

As many respondents did, another participant imagined the possible potentials for observation and what kind of tool it could be:

I guess if I reflected on it, I guess in theory, if I go back and look at my syllabus in the fall I could reflect on the ways that it,

my experience, in this moment created something for me but the reality is that I changed my syllabus in the fall based on the teaching I did in the classroom . . . it came more out of the act of teaching this class than the specifics of the observation.

In sum, observation was positioned by participants as such that it *should* either support their teaching *or* give them feedback on their value at moments of promotion even as they had difficulty mapping how it did either.

REFLECTIVE RESULTS ANALYSIS

I began to first uncover the MWP in interview work. The MWP was outlined consistently in participant accounts as follows: nearly every interview began with a clear acknowledgement of the good intentions of the department itself, a feeling of being fortunate to be employed there, and a naming of the efforts of their colleagues on their behalf. Further, the very language participants used consistently moved into passive language constructions with a “they” or “it” subject use that limited blame or responsibility when talking about negative perceptions of their work. This appeared as an effort to avoid placing undue blame on the department itself. None of the interview participants ascribed negative intentions behind their experiences and all spent a considerable amount of time hedging their negative experiences in the good intentions of their colleagues, and, in some cases, their own participation, in trying to make good on well-meaning acts that they were unable to fulfil. These sense-making moments capture the MWP or the dynamic tensions between discourses/boss texts and actualities of work taking place.

Because IE builds from feminist theory which values and helps us unveil multiple subjectivities, including researcher positionality, this study provided rich opportunities for researcher reflection. In coding, analyzing, and making sense of data, I was consistently surprised by how many of my colleagues struggled to make sense of the tool of observation directly in their work even if they were sometimes better able to define it from an ideological location. For example, one participant clearly saw himself as a scholar of teaching who characterized evaluation as a professional assessment activity grounded in disciplinary ruling relations. He took rich meaning from that work, hence, evaluation was positioned as highly positive for him. But he immediately noted that he went nearly eight years without an observation and so it remained, it seemed, an ideological stance, albeit a well-developed and important one.

In many ways, then, tracking the role observation played in professional advancement in the IWD and how faculty defined that advancement was the most

puzzling part of my study even as it was my most central concern. Yet, making sense of this practice with participants was some of the richest conversation I shared with them. These conversations allowed me a deeper understanding of how participants see themselves as positioned in a hierarchy, the roles they play in the department mission and culture, and how they chose to engage or resist the MWP.

Moving beyond just a mapping of the MWP itself to its broader implications as I investigated its nuances, I found that despite a value being placed on high levels of transparency and intention, some NTT participants also linked observation to the “stealth requirements” or what we might call the *hidden curriculum* of advancement in the department. They explained that being visible, participating in extra activities and so forth *might*, they hoped, give them access to other opportunities in the department outside of their appointment types and that perhaps, being observed by a WPA and doing well in the observation would increase confidence in their work and open some of those doors to them. This ran counter to how the MWP instantiated narratives of transparent and linear advancement. Administrative interviews confirmed the hunch that teachers might be asked to conduct a professional development activity for others, based on their classroom teaching during observation, thereby increasing their visibility, an important feature of work off the tenure line.

Another salient concern related to boss texts/ruling relations/social coordination emerged as well. Specifically, the IWD has a well-developed and extensive set of bylaws that guide practice in agentive, egalitarian ways, yet several participants noted opacity around the boss texts they were expected to rely on to understand their promotion process and the actualities they experienced in their work. This tension arose around whether or not official processes, even if they were articulated, were followed consistently. One respondent characterized their experience this way:

I don't know what to make of my observation experience here. I was observed for reappointment. And, it was very, um, ad hoc. So, our bylaws say one thing, and, what happens actually in practice was a whole other, both times. The bylaws weren't followed for either one of my observations. And so that has always been concerning to me, and I often reflect on, how, it didn't make me feel insecure, but it also didn't give me a lot of confidence in the process in general.

Following the institutional circuitry of observation further, observation for advancement is accompanied by a formal letter. Yet, the faculty member does not possess the letter and so, many were uncertain of the role those letters played in their advancement or even if they were read.

These divergences speak to IE's notion of ruling relations where they:

Coordinate what people know about what is happening—even if that knowledge does not quite match what is known from being there. Often vested in people's work with texts, ruling relations are activities of governing that depend on selecting, categorizing, and/or objectifying aspects of the social world in order to develop facts and knowledge upon which to base decisions. (Rankin "Conducting . . . Analytic" 3)

Given the ostensibly rich culture of best practices around observation in the department, guided as it is by formative, reflexive, goal-driven, teacher-centered, pedagogical and research-based principles—both administrative interviews and department documents point to it being that—it was curious that again and again, the desire for more summative feedback, in *both* the summative and formative moments of observation, was something that those *being* observed seemed to yearn for. As Nugent et al. explain as we emerge "with a fuller understanding how ruling relations are potentiated and come to coordinate our activity, we come to recognize that the official adoption of a policy" (in this case course observation practice) "marks a midpoint in a complex social process of uptake and activation, not its end" (Chapter 4, this collection).

Collectively, these understandings presented a picture of the social coordination and ruling relations of the department occurring beneath the positive discourses of the IWD and its MWP that were very much tied to the standpoints of the participants located in their departmental ranks with all the complexity and tension they encountered in their work over time.

ADMINISTRATIVE NARRATIVES OF SERVICE AND PLEASURE

Arguably, the positive narratives of and investment in the MWP resided with those *conducting* observation work; it seemed to be most meaningful for them. Those performing observation noted an opportunity to offer feedback (guided by the teacher) and to learn from the good teaching of their colleagues. Each expressed a great amount of enjoyment in the process and saw it as a pleasurable part of their jobs. Each were able to articulate research-based, disciplinarily, and programmatically grounded approaches to best practices (formative approaches) aimed at supporting their colleagues. Their responses captured both the local instantiations of the MWP and larger ruling relations of research guided practice, service, and equity in the discipline. For example, one identified that its

use as a formative tool emerges from and demonstrates the community-oriented approach to both observation and evaluation in the IWD.

However the MWP, as it appears here, deserves some troubling; the bulk of any summative course observation in the department is done in service of a promotion via a letter in service of career advancement, yet those performing observations were focused primarily on the best practices associated with formative assessment. When composing a summative letter, they focused on how to “dress” a formative evaluation in a summative text like teaching letters. Again, this contrasts with the desire on the part of the observed for a more summative and feedback rich experience, viewing it as one of the few opportunities to receive that kind of attention to their teaching.

I interviewed four faculty members responsible for conducting faculty observation as a part of their administrative work. Two were TT WPAs, one a NTT WPA and one an AS program director. Interview data showed that those conducting observations saw the purpose of their observation work as: (1) to support teachers (macro-teaching), (2) a way to understand the composite teaching practices happening in their programs (assessment), (3) a tool to develop professional development activities based in shared teaching challenges (program design), and (4) supporting promotion for a colleague (service). Some definitional moments from those conducting observation which aligned to the MWP here included, “It [is] formative and casual and we don’t only stay on the subject of their teaching; one of the delights for me is that, with a new starting NTT person, maybe we’ll just say, maybe you could try this.” Another said, “it’s almost like an artifact interview using the scene of teaching experience as a method and a methodology because the idea is always to figure out, what should the learning moment be here?” Working as the primary administrator of the program, another respondent said, “We have spent time trying to think about a culture of assessment . . . what is it really intended to do? And observation is an instance of that.” These responses connect to the grounded portion of the MWP that builds the social coordination of observation in the department and reflects how it is taken up in the everyday work of those faculty *conducting* observations. Namely, they expressed care, were thoughtful in their work, and meant it to support colleagues in both their teaching and advancement.

CONCLUSION

I return here to two related questions that drove this portion of my study: first, how does the tool of observation get “taken up” in faculty work trajectories in the IWD? Second, how are those choices and experiences tied to standpoint, in this case, rank or appointment type? The answers to those questions build an

argument about the MWP in and beyond the IWD: writing departments and programs can make their positive discourse more actionable by looking *up* power gradients, and in the case of faculty observation for the purposes of professional advancement, by honestly asking: what is this thing for? That definitional work is fruitful. In the case of the IWD, observation and evaluation were held by the MWP and contained genuine signifiers of care, reliant on notions of formative assessment. Ultimately those practices failed to achieve the well-meaning ideals of departmental design and practice for the *subjects* of those practices. The impacts of the MWP over time then, were marked by NTT interview participants as contributing to a misalignment of evaluation to the actual work they were hired to do in ways that made that work invisible and left them feeling unsure of long-term stability in a department in which most intend to remain permanently.

Simple as that sounds, however, it is important to know that IE, even as it seeks a clear understanding of tensions and identifies locations for change, also brings a relational awareness that so often those who you study, *are you, are your context*. This relational truth—as we seek to understand the everyday nature of work—directs us to a particular orientation in our inquiries. It requires that even as we uncover dynamic tensions, we strive to “see” generously from the standpoints of those who we engage. Put simply, critique is easy; building something better is the real work. To do so, IE resists easy notions of culpability and blame, of overarching, top-down characterizations of the activities we are immersed in in our institutional workplaces as so beautifully explicated by Miley’s exploration of the problem vs. problematic (this collection). Instead, it sees agency as distributed and collectively determined as it seeks change. This interventionist aspect of IE can shift institutional doings at a fundamental and profound level.

Accordingly, I would like to end here with a return to a notion of IE as aimed at enacting positive changes in relational and structural systems of work and a narrative to accompany that notion. Over the course of the year of this study, one participant I spoke with had begun to work on a college-level task force in collaboration with the dean’s office. The task force was specifically meant to address renewal and promotion of NTT faculty and was grounded in a single question, not unlike IEs problematic heuristic: *why are all models for promotion and evaluation based in the tenure-stream protocols, purposes, and practices?* Together, they had begun to draft new guidelines for evaluation and promotion of NTT faculty by reimagining a wider range of activities for appointment type structures relying in “intellectual leadership” (Friezche et al.) over the strict delineations of rank: “The promotion criteria used by xxxx and its affiliated units may be in the areas of teaching, research/creative activity, and/or service/outreach corresponding to the relevant position workload percentages” (Guidelines). That work later appeared in a lengthy departmental report and as a part of longer term set of

changes there that will encompass racial equity, curriculum, hiring, and labor. Their work will hopefully also begin to reshape observation, evaluation, and shared governance. Further, that collaboration represents the complexity of how we can *look up* to better change our shared conditions of work and the agency available when we do so. Such an approach doesn't merely see past or refute the MWP, but rather, *makes good on it*.

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