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Into the Field: The Use of Student-Authored Ethnography in Service-Learning Settings

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This essay explores student-authored ethnographies written by undergraduates in four sections of a service-learning course taught at Wayne State University in Detroit. I argue that the introductory sections of students' ethnographic narratives provide particular insights into the relationship between the service experience, ethnographic inscription, and student subjectivities. Following a discourse analysis of student writing, I offer some thoughts about how instructors might improve the pedagogical pairing of ethnographic writing with service-learning experiences.

Proponents of ethnography as a pedagogical approach in the composition classroom cite a range of positive outcomes for student writers and classroom discourse communities: higher levels of student engagement, richer and more detailed research narratives, and more in-depth analysis and reflection. My use of ethnographic writing as an instructor of service-learning–based composition courses has yielded encouraging results, both in terms of what students say about the work and my sense of the overall quality of student papers. At the same time, ethnography continues to be problematized across the academy as both a research method and writing genre, due primarily to ongoing unease about both the politics and ethics of ethnographic representation. Ethnographic pedagogy, meanwhile, has received far less critical attention. In an attempt to address this gap, this essay presents a reading of the introductory sections of a small sample of student-authored ethnographies, written in the context of service-learning

courses, to explore the range of ways students in community-based settings position themselves as writers, service providers, and producers of knowledge. I also explore some of the ways in which ethnographic research positions student subjectivities in relation to both academic writing and students' relationships with community members. Through this analysis, I theorize some of the challenges and opportunities for the specific pairing of ethnography with service-learning and suggest some ways in which writing instructors might enhance their use of ethnographic writing in the community-based classroom.

Proponents of ethnographic pedagogy argue that ethnographic writing fosters more authentic forms of intellectual and civic engagement than traditional modes of student-authored research. In *Thinking through Theory: Vygotskian Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing*, James Zebroski describes his turn away from the traditional research paper, which he sees as both pedagogically ineffective and uncritical, in favor of student-authored ethnographies in which students write about their local communities via detailed first-hand inscriptions of social life. Zebroski argues that these ethnographic mini-projects produce richer, more engaged writing that empowers students to see connections between academic research and their own experience in local contexts (32-33). Zebroski's view is echoed by David Seitz, who argues in *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness? Practicing a Pedagogy of Humility* that ethnographic research "encourages an affirmation of students' local situations and understanding, which often motivates students toward a more internally persuasive social critique of local cultural groups and their larger contexts" (26). Mary Jo Reiff points to ethnography's ability to explore the relationship between language and culture, and describes its function as a "metagenre, as both a genre (research narrative) and a mode of genre analysis," as a way of re-positioning students from passive consumers to active producers of knowledge (41).

Reiff's description of ethnography as a metagenre invokes the work of genre theorists who have described genres' power to shape students'

subjectivities (Devitt 1993, Bawarshi 2003, Paré 2002). In "Genre Identity: Individuals, Institutions, and Identity," Anthony Paré argues that while the "automatic, ritual unfolding" of many genres obscures the subjectivities they impose on users, particularly institutional genres like forms and technical reports, there are situations or moments when the values and ideologies of genres are particularly open to analysis and critique (141). Paré suggests that the best opportunities for observing the implicit subjectivities of academic genres are when newcomers first encounter and attempt to use them, as happens when teachers ask students to undertake a new kind of writing assignment (141). It is from this framework, complemented by Anne Herrington and Charles Moran's reminder that all student writing is the result of negotiation between students' learned genres and those of their instructors, that I explore undergraduates' experiences with ethnography as novice users (249).

My interest in ethnographic pedagogy evolved out of a practical need for writing assignments for a service-learning–based intermediate-writing course I was asked to teach as a graduate teaching assistant at Wayne State University in Detroit. Professor Gwen Gorzelsky had introduced me to ethnography the year before in a graduate-level service-learning course. I found ethnography's combination of participant observation and reflection a powerful framework for thinking about both disciplinary issues such as literacy and my own subject position as a white middle-class male working with African American middle-school students. In the context of that experience, I developed the syllabus for the course I was going to teach during a course-development workshop with fellow graduate students assigned to teach similar courses under the direction of Professors Gorzelsky and Ruth Ray from Wayne State's Composition and Rhetoric Program. The particular course I was assigned to teach was oriented around an after-school enrichment program at a charter middle school in Detroit, then associated with WSU, in which undergraduate mentors collaborated with middle-school students working on a school web site. Early in the semester, I presented overviews of the techniques

described in Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* and Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's *Fieldworking.* Over the course of the term, I asked students to produce a series of ethnographic essays based on their mentoring experience and descriptive data from fieldnote journals. Students' final projects took on a variety of issues related to their service experience with their middle-school mentees: youth culture, challenges to building mentoring relationships, racism, education, and computers and literacy. After that semester, I went on to teach the same course, with minor revisions, three more times.

The literature on service-learning consistently supports the claim that service experiences positively impact student investment in class activities, class participation, leadership skills, and self-esteem (Deans 2). Research findings also suggest service learning often has a positive effect on students' ability to see social problems as systematic, to see issues from multiple perspectives, and to be more critically reflective of their own ways of seeing the world (Deans 3). I observed many of the same positive patterns in the course I taught; the majority of undergraduates were committed, compassionate, hard-working mentors and students, and they consistently reported higher levels of intellectual and personal investment compared to their other coursework. At the same time, student feedback both during and after the semester made it clear that, while they were deeply invested in the service experience, students found the course's ethnographic writing activities extremely challenging. Many students articulated confusion over the obvious and significant differences between the open-ended nature of ethnographic research and the web-based research they had learned in high school, and it was not uncommon for students in conferences to plead, "Just tell me what you want!" As my experience with ethnographic pedagogy has grown, I now believe that students' early anxieties with ethnography are a common and appropriate response that slowly eases as they become increasingly invested in the particularities of their service experience and the steadying rhythm of observation, note taking, reflection, and drafting. Even so, students' anxieties with ethnography raise interesting

questions about its role in positioning student writers, in relation to both the community members at the center of the service experience and in terms of their own subjectivities.

Understanding students' negotiations with ethnography is aided by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who, in *Works and Lives,* explores some of the textual and epistemological dilemmas ethnographers face in trying to produce texts that create knowledge out of personal experience:

> The difficulty is that the oddity of constructing texts ostensibly scientific out of experiences broadly biographical, which is after all what ethnographers do, is thoroughly obscured. The signature issue, as the ethnographer confronts it, or as it confronts the ethnographer, demands both the Olympianism of the unauthorial physicist and the sovereign consciousness of the hyperauthorial novelist, while not in fact permitting either…Finding somewhere to stand in a text that is supposed to be at one and the same time an intimate view and a cool assessment is almost as much of a challenge as gaining the view and making the assessment in the first place (10).

Geertz describes a long-standing tension within ethnography over the visibility of researchers within texts, a tension that can often produce a kind of split personality within texts as writers struggle to create a sense of authorial ethos while maintaining some semblance of scientific objectivity and detachment. For Geertz, one of the best places in a text to observe these tensions is in ethnography's introduction, or in his words, "the scene-setting, task-describing, self-presenting opening pages" (11).

Like Geertz, Mary Louise Pratt's essay "Fieldwork in Common Places," explains the specific role that introductory sections play in understanding how ethnographers attempt to create authorial ethos in their texts. Pratt argues:

> …these conventional opening narratives are not trivial. They play
> the crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and
> authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork. Symbolically
> and ideologically rich, they often turn out to be the most memorable
> segments of an ethnographic work…Always they are responsible for
> setting up the initial positionings of the subject of the ethnographic
> text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader (32).

Geertz's and Pratt's interest in ethnographic introductions encouraged
me to take a closer look at the introductory sections from the student
essays in four offerings of the service-learning course I described
earlier.[1] In the following section, I discuss three of the most interesting
findings from my analysis with an eye towards understanding some
of the ways students manage ethnography's rhetorical challenges and
how ethnography positions students in service settings in relation to
community members.[2] Following the analysis, I will discuss some
of the implications for ethnographic pedagogy and make some
suggestions for how teachers might improve its use in community-
based classrooms.

Opening Moves: Acknowledging the Writer

One of the first things I noticed relates to the different ways in
which students first announce their presence in their texts, a key
rhetorical move that can tell a great deal about how students approach
ethnographic inquiry and their subjects. I found that a majority of
writers (70 percent) open their essay with some statement of their role
in the course. In particular, thirteen out of 31 students (42 percent)
foreground their role as service-providers, as demonstrated in the
following example:

> This semester, I had the opportunity of participating in a middle
> school class as a mentor. At University Public School (UPS), I
> worked with an eighth grade student named Brianna on a web

page for the Tutorial, Recreation, and Enrichment Experiences (TREE) program. The program takes place after school hours and is designed to teach kids in a fun way. My job was to play the big sister role for Brianna…(Ledesma).[3]

Alternatively, nine introductions (29 percent) foreground students' researcher role, a move often accompanied by the appropriation of research-oriented language and a passive stance toward both experience and the creation of knowledge. Eight introductions in the sample (26 percent), however, use other strategies to stake out the writer's ethnographic stance. The following excerpt, from an essay entitled "Losing Yourself: The Search to be Cool," avoids the mention of role entirely and instead invokes personal experience as a way of creating a sense of authorial ethos.

We all remember the popular kids in grade school and high school. They all wore the latest clothes, sat at the cool table at lunch, and went to the wildest parties. Everybody wanted to be a part of that crowd, to be accepted. The styles have changed since then, and the popular kids are different from the ones that we remember, but they still exist. Kids still want to belong and will often change their behavior to accomplish that. In this paper, I will attempt to show how adolescents will change their behavior, and this behavior is undesirable. In order to do this, I will discuss my mentoring experience at University Public School (Kisiel).

This excerpt is interesting for the way in which the author uses her own middle-school experiences to both announce her presence in the text and to build a credible ethos for the ethnographic narrative she is about to present. The use of the personal pronouns *we* and *they* attempt to connect both the readers' and the writer's previous experiences with the topic of the paper (adolescents' desire for acceptance). In so doing, the author makes the general assumption that readers of her paper were not popular: "We all remember the popular kids…*They* all wore the

latest clothes…" (emphasis added) and that as such, *we* (her readers) will be asked to draw on our own memories of yearning for acceptance to understand the behavior of the mentees at the core of her project. Her use of personal experience to connect with both her readers and the subjects of her study demonstrates her understanding of the topic and her identification as someone who was not popular. She thus positions herself as someone who was prone to changing her behavior for group acceptance as an adolescent, and creates a sympathetic position from which to present her argument.

Some students in the sample use theory as a way to establish their rhetorical position within their texts and the experiences at the core of their research. The introduction of the essay excerpt below, entitled "What Your Body Can Tell You in the Mentoring Experience: Somatic Mind as a Tool for Self-Knowledge," draws on Kristie Fleckenstein's concept of the somatic mind to situate the student writer within her project. While at least three other students in the corpus explicitly use theory from outside sources as a way to write themselves into their projects, this excerpt is notable for its attempt at critical synthesis.

> In our current culture, it is unpopular to include the self in our scope of vision when writing for academia. Indeed, "under the sway of postmodernism, 'body functions as an arbitrary abstraction'" (Fleckenstein quoting Geraldine Finn). Regarding the body this way in ethnography, and more specifically in mentoring and recording the mentoring experience, is a sad waste of a valuable resource. The body, at the very least, can serve as a tool, like a compass or thermometer, which can tell us about those aspects of ourselves otherwise unknowable, those that are cloaked by the subconscious (Probst 2).

The author's first sentence states her awareness of the paradoxical tensions between ethnography and the academic ideal of objective distance. It can also be interpreted as an appeal to her audience,

instructor, and classmates in its echoing of class discussions about the presence of researchers in ethnographic texts. The author introduces her presence in the paper as a take-off point to explore Fleckenstein's concept of the somatic mind. In the balance of the essay, she explores the role of the body in both the social interactions and ethnographic observations that take place in the mentoring classroom. In the introductory paragraph above, the author describes the sensory and reflective capacity of the body in instrumental terms, *tool*, *compass*, and *thermometer*, which construct a theoretical frame for the analytic argument of her essay. In doing so, she not only articulates a sophisticated awareness of the role physical presence plays in ethnographic observation but also crafts a persuasive ethos for the argument that follows.

The examples discussed above all explore strategies that student writers use to announce and manage their presence in their ethnographic narratives. While a majority of the texts in the sample attempt to articulate a clear writing position either as a researcher or mentor, the presence of other writing positions and strategies points to the broad variety of authorial personae that student ethnographers appropriate in the inscription of their service experience.

Task-Describing: Framing the Purpose of Writing

The previous section focused on how the student ethnographers in my classes attempted to establish writing positions in the introductory sections of their narratives. Per Geertz's framework, I now turn to the ways in which student ethnographers use their introductions to describe the nature of their writing tasks. The most interesting feature I found relates to the degree to which writers position their narratives in terms of generalized theoretical claims that deductively frame their service experience. In particular, I found that approximately half of the essays in the sample attempt to orient their narrative in terms of a general theory about the nature of childhood. The following excerpt, from a

paper entitled "What's Beneath the Surface," is representative of the essays that appropriate this strategy:

> Middle school is a time of transition for all children, they are leaving the easier times of elementary school and moving into the more academic setting of high school. Middle school children, who range in age from 10 to 14 years old, are going through personal changes that affect their relationships with their family, friends and other adults…I will argue that family structure has a great affect on a child's attitude toward and performance of their schoolwork and that teachers, as well as, parents need to look at the external and internal influences occurring in the child's life as a reason for lack of motivation and poor achievement in the academic setting…(Elmer).

From the outset of this excerpt, the author foregrounds her role as researcher. This is accomplished via the theoretical discourse about the nature of adolescence and linguistically through the use of the third person. In addition to establishing the author's role, however, the theoretical discourse attempts to lay the groundwork for a deductive interpretation of the specific ethnographic narrative at the heart of the paper.

In addition to those students who use theory about childhood to frame their task, others appropriate theory and academic terminology to build knowledge in other disciplinary areas. A psychology major wrote the following passage about the impact of spatial issues on student learning:

> For the purpose of this ethnography, I will argue that the classroom accommodations and the number of people who occupy it alters the amount of production from University Public School students in the 'Building a Web Page' class. This argument refers to spatial relations in the classroom. The definition of spatial relations for the use of defending my argument will be translated as personal space, visual space, audio-related space, and functional or work space. It will be demonstrated through the use of observational data how

> classroom accommodations and the population of the classroom
> violate personal space, restrict visual space, determine audio-
> related significance, and limit the amount of functional or work
> space for the purpose of building a webpage…(MacNeil).

Some of the obvious markers of an academic research stance in the
introduction excerpted above no doubt come from discussions I had
with students about some basic features of academic essays. The phrase
"I will argue," for instance, is one that I modeled for undergraduates
when we discussed thematic statements and use of the first person *I*.
There are other constructions in the example, however, that were not
modeled in class. I believe these say a good deal about this student's
approach to knowledge and her conceptualization of the writing task.
One example is the use of passive voice to connote objective distance
in a phrase like "It will be demonstrated." Other indicators of the
academic, research-oriented stance can be found in the author's move
to define the terms of her argument: "The definition of spatial relations
for the use of defending my argument will be translated as…" Later in
the introduction, the writer lists the sources of data she will use in her
argument: "outside sources," "an Internet analysis," "observation of
students and mentors," and "a questionnaire."

These introductions demonstrate students' capacity to bring a sense of
commitment and intellectual rigor to their projects. The responsibility
that many students in service-learning settings feel toward the
community members with whom they work might partially explain this
capacity. I am sure it is also tied to the particular skills and character
traits that individual students bring to the activity. At the same time, the
use of deductive orientations that interpret the service experience via
general concepts like childhood complicates a number of assumptions
about how students use theory and ethnography.

David Seitz argues that ethnography's foregrounding of the researcher's
experience encourages students to use more inductive-oriented

arguments in their analysis of their field experiences. For Seitz, inductive approaches are preferable because they allow students to "build their own critical theories of a local situation from an insider's view," and students "tend to see more purpose to the social analysis and sometimes its critical use value in their lives" (198). While I agree with Seitz, I was surprised to find so many students in my classes appropriating a deductive stance toward their projects. While course texts like Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* articulate an inductive stance to data gathering and analysis, the specific epistemological distinctions between inductive and deductive theory building is not something I explicitly covered in class. I now see this as a significant gap in my teaching approach. That said, the issue of how and why students appropriate deductive approaches, particularly those relating to childhood, is a question of significant interest that I will return to later in the essay.

Setting the Scene: Subject Positions and Narratives of Entry

The final dimension from my sample that I will explore here deals with the ways in which students set the scene of their research. The most interesting finding relates to how student writers represent their own subject positions versus those of their subjects, the middle-school mentees at the center of the service experience. These differences were a particular issue in my course because of the fact that, while the undergraduates in my classes represented a diversity of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, the mentees at the middle school were exclusively African American. In addition, issues of race and class were frequent topics of class readings and discussions. With this rhetorical context in mind, I found that 24 of the 31 student essays in the sample (77 percent) make explicit mention of the race of the middle-school mentees in their introductions, while only five of 31 writers (16 percent) make either explicit or implied reference to their own racial and/or ethnic subject positions. The passage below is from an essay that I believe is representative of this pattern. Note that it also

contains a general theory about adolescents and their prospects for success in adulthood.

> Parents all across the US learn to make a decision that changes their children's lives forever. Students begin their schooling career with the dream and goal of one day becoming a success in life. Molding a student into a success solely depends on the type of school they choose. Whether it is public or private, unisex, diversified, racially isolated, religious, or non-religious, this variation in schools has a direct influence on a student and their future success. The schools that are most debated on most are the diversified schools versus the racially isolated ones. My experiences mentoring middle school kids at University Public School (UPS) has made it evident that some children at racially isolated schools are at a disadvantage. The great majority of students at UPS are of African American background. When children are grown up with only one racial or cultural background it becomes difficult for them to adjust to language and behaviors that are essential for their future workforce…(Ahmad).

Alternatively, those students in the sample who do use their introductions to engage both their own subject positions and those of the middle-school mentees present the issue in a number of interesting ways. The excerpt below is from an essay entitled "Black and White":

> Ethnography has many elements to consider from the prospective of positioning from the observer and the people observed. My ethnographic research consists of mentoring for eleven, twelve, and thirteen year olds at University Public Schools in Detroit. Our goal is to help the kids build a webzine for their school as an after school activity for them. At the first glance of the school my eyes were confused, looking out the window I saw the city, cars driving through busy intersections honking their horns, buildings that looked like they could touch the clouds, and straight ahead an

enormous sign that reads "Motor City Casino." A casino next to a school, when I was in middle school we saw the subdivision with one prefabricated house after another. The UPS kids attend school inside the Kresgee Building, a building that was once a powerful office of the Kmart Corporation, and now is still a building too much other business. I would never imagine walking into a building like that when I was an adolescent. We walked into a building designed specifically to teach the young youth, a middle school.

The inside of the computer lab looked typical of any other computer lab I've seen in the past. A bunch of the exact same computers lined up in rows of five or six with a walkway down the middle for the teacher to get through. The difference was the kids sitting in front of those computers they were all African American. Now my middle school wasn't one hundred percent Caucasian but I could count the kids of African American decent on one hand, kind of huge flip culturally from when I was growing up (McCartney 1).

Compare "Black and White" with the next excerpt from an essay entitled "Recalling the Days Event":

I am enrolled in an English class that requires me to mentor a student from University Public School (UPS). When I was told that I was going to be someone's mentor on the first day of class I immediately became excited about the idea and couldn't wait to get started. That all changed when I pulled up to UPS, located in downtown Detroit. My excitement diminished as I realized I was about to be introduced to a subculture I had limited contact with. I had once been a part of a middle school subculture, but over the years had forgotten what it was like. I felt nervous about going back to middle school knowing that I would have to relearn a social skill that I no longer posses. I have always been up for a challenge but I was worried that some of my own subject positions like race, age and social class might interfere with my ability to

write what I observe. I argue that my subject positions influenced
my opinion about being a mentor in a black school therefore
creating a situation for myself that made my first experience as
a mentor uncomfortable (Rodzik).

In both of the passages above, students reflect on their initial entry and
discomfort in an urban environment and community very different from
their own. The author of "Black and White" incorporates references
to Detroit's past ("a building that was once a powerful office of the
Kmart Corporation") and city tropes ("cars driving through busy
intersections honking their horns, buildings that looked like they could
touch the clouds") in an attempt to temper his unease and to project
a sense of wonder and awe onto the present. Throughout the excerpt,
the author presents himself as open and hopeful ("Our goal is to help
the kids build a webzine for their school as an after school activity for
them") even as he attempts to relate his inexperience with the urban
environment and persons of color.

Like "Black and White," the author of "Recalling the Day's Event"
also attempts to relate his unease with the culture he has entered. In this
passage, however, the author situates his tale of entry within a narrative
of diminished expectations and disappointment. The author begins
excited, but his outlook quickly turns to shock and disbelief when he
sees the school's gym class being held in a park frequented by *bums*.
The author himself admits that his reaction to the scene makes him feel
like his race and social class "have already gotten the better of me" and
that "I had already formed a bias opinion," (sic) to the extent that his
thesis for the paper claims his views have interfered with his ability to
observe the culture he has been asked to study.

It is possible that the authors of the excerpts above may be using their
introductory narratives to set-up conversion narratives in which their
initial misgivings eventually give way to transformation and triumph.
That is, by acknowledging how their own subject positions may be

affecting their projects, both authors may be attempting to lay the groundwork for something they think their audience wants to hear. Nonetheless, I believe both authors are experimenting with voice and the representation of their subject positions in ways that say a lot about how students think about their roles as authors in ethnographic texts. The author of "Black and White" uses his introduction to situate his own voice and ethnicity historically and spatially, while the author of "Recalling the Day's Event" seeks to locate his outsider status through contrasting representations of expectations and perceived social realities. Students' narratives of entry into community sites very different from their own provide rich opportunities to explore their own subject positions, and to track their own assumptions and expectations about service experiences. Given these passages, however, I find it surprising that so few essays in the sample I studied acknowledge writers' subject positions or use those positions to explore the relationship between affect and experiences of difference.

Implications

This essay's focus on the introductions of student-authored ethnographies was inspired by the work of Clifford Geertz and Mary Louise Pratt, who suggest that ethnographic introductions are the best places to look for students' approaches to developing textual positionality, theories of knowledge-making, and conceptualization of the ethnographic task. While the results of this research are ultimately limited to my own corpus, I believe its major findings point to areas for further inquiry and some possible ways of improving the use of ethnographic writing in service-learning classrooms.

This study has refocused my appreciation of the challenges that ethnographic research poses for writers, and particularly for novice ethnographers writing in service settings. Students come to any course with a range of subjectivities but community-based settings, and the introduction of an unfamiliar writing genre like ethnography, significantly complicate

the negotiation of multiple subject positions and writing stances, some of which stand in direct tension with each other and with students' previously learned ways of writing and knowledge-making. In these terms, Janet Alsup's conceptualization of non-unitary subjectivities has potential for the ethnographic/service-learning classroom where students manage multiple roles (i.e., student, mentor, ethnographer). Alsup's framework, appropriated from literary theorist Leslie Bloom, encourages writers to see their identities, and writing positions, as explicitly bound by the competing demands of time, space, and personal, intellectual, and emotional investment (228). Applied to service-learning settings, Alsup's framework suggests positioning students' multiple roles not as obstacles but as sites of reflection and inquiry, and by extension, as powerful launching points for engaging social discourses embedded in the community-based classroom.

I continue to believe that ethnography has the potential to create sustained levels of student engagement with local cultures that can lead to deeper understanding and critical reflection of social discourses. I also agree with David Seitz's argument that an inductive approach to knowledge-making, in which thick description accompanied by reflection serves as the basis for theorizing social life, is a key requirement for avoiding generalized and essentializing narratives about research subjects, particularly those in subordinated social positions like the middle-schoolers involved in the course I taught. That said, I was both surprised and troubled by the prevalence of deductive research stances in the student essays in my limited corpus. In contrast to the commonly-held presumption that students are either anti-theory or theory resistant, the ethnographic introductions studied here suggest that discourses around concepts like childhood can be very powerful interpretive frames that position students in inherently deductive intellectual stances. If that claim is true, than the epistemological tensions between deductive research genres, emulated by the traditional research paper, and ethnography's inductive stance help to explain students' difficulties managing what is not just a new genre, but a new way of making meaning.

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In subsequent course offerings in which I have asked students to conduct ethnographic research, I have increased the amount of reading and time dedicated to discussing ethnographic writing as a genre and to exploring the significant differences between research genres and how each claims to produce knowledge. Proponents of ethnographic pedagogy have pointed out that because the majority of published ethnographies are book-length monographs, it can be difficult for teachers to find shorter ethnographic articles that allow students to see ethnographic epistemology in action. I often use essays from Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's edited collection *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* as well as chapters from H.G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* to illustrate how ethnographic narratives create forms of social knowledge outside of the scientific research paradigm.[4] Making time for such discussion in service-learning settings where time is a precious commodity can be extremely difficult, but I believe such explicit exploration of ethnography as a research genre can have significant benefits for students both as writers and service providers.

My analysis also identifies the trend, at least as it pertains to this sample, for students to disclose their own subject positions, particularly with regards to race and ethnicity, with much less frequency than they identify and discuss the racial identity of community members involved in service projects. The presence of this feature in an environment where racial and ethnic differences between mentors and middle-school mentees were foregrounded in class readings, class discussions, and in the day-to-day activities of the mentoring activity is cause for both reflection and concern. At issue is to what degree ethnography provides, or fails to provide, a reflective space for students to engage their own subject positions and their positionality in relation to community members. While a broader inquiry into the full context of my course (indeed any course) would be needed to answer this question, my tentative conclusion is that the majority of students did

not see ethnography as a site of critical engagement. I offer a number of possibilities for this claim.

First, and as I explored above, as the instructor of the course I did not spend enough time talking about the epistemological differences between ethnography and other research genres, or the critical role reflection plays within ethnographic research. I was aware of the importance of reflection and it was something we talked about as a class on a regular basis, but as instructors in service settings will acknowledge, time constraints made it difficult to give reflection the time and attention it legitimately deserved. Perhaps more importantly, I want to raise the possibility that the service-learning experience itself, in conjunction with students' pre-learned genre sets, encourages an instrumental view of community members when it comes to course assignments. I am not suggesting that students' did not develop authentic, meaningful relationships with their middle-school mentees. From my perspective and my reading of the course, most did. Rather, I am suggesting that as service-learning practitioners, we should acknowledge that positioning a service experience, and service recipients, as the basis for graded writing (in what for many students are required courses) sets up an instrumental relationship between student writing and service recipients that is difficult to control.

In addition to more explicit classroom discussion about the role of critical reflection in ethnographic methodology, an important way of engaging student subjectivities that obscure or distort their stance towards the service experience, is to provide carefully structured reflective activities that center issues of positionality and ethics. This strategy is advocated by Chris Anson, whose work draws on the principles of reflective thinking advocated by Donald Schön and Stephen Brookfield. Anson argues that "as teachers, we need to approach our service-learning courses with a critically reflective stance

that models for students the kind of discursive explorations they should take in their journals and reflection logs" (177). This can be done by assigning specific reflection prompts and working with sections of both instructors' and students' journals to explore specific issues and notable silences where researchers' subject positions are implicated in the construction of meaning. From this more activist approach to reflection, teachers can then begin to explore with students how the work of reflection can be used in their ethnographic narratives to produce texts that are more aware and engaged with the broader social contexts of service and service relationships.

Mary Jo Reiff suggests that one of the reasons why ethnographic pedagogy is not more fully embraced by compositionists is its relatively undertheorized position within the discipline (36). I agree with Reiff, particularly when we consider the arguably overtheorized position that service-learning occupies within composition. What I have attempted to do in this essay is to provide a descriptive sense of the intellectual and rhetorical strategies used by student ethnographers engaged in service settings. This study has exclusively focused on introductory sections because that is where so much of the rhetorical heavy-lifting of ethnography takes place. Even so, an analysis of the balance of students' narratives is necessary to gain a better understanding of the corpus trends I have identified. The issues this study raises suggest the need for additional classroom studies that take into account the broader context of service-learning experiences, including attempts to understand the different subjectivities and genre sets students and instructors bring to the classroom, the content and range of class discussion, and the impact of service experiences on students' subjectivities and writing processes.

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Endnotes

[1] The student texts cited and discussed in this essay were gathered as part of a larger research project undertaken by Wayne State University's College of Education and Department of English to study the impact of service-learning on student learning. That research was conducted with HIC approval and the informed consent of the students involved. The corpus of student writing examined in this paper consists of 31 student essays collected across four separate offerings of an intermediate writing course. Unless noted otherwise, the essays excerpted are from students' final projects in which I asked students to craft a thematic ethnographic narrative of their service-learning experience. Per their request and unless noted otherwise, the names of undergraduate writers have not been changed. The names of all middle-school mentees are pseudonyms.

[2] The method of analysis I use to explore the student-authored projects at the core of this paper is a form of descriptive discourse analysis called rich feature analysis, described by Ellen Barton in the edited collection *Discourse Studies in Composition*. According to Barton, rich feature analysis is an inductive process that reads texts for "linguistic features that point to the relation between a text and its context" (23). Rich features can occur at different levels of analysis (word, sentence, section, discourse, etc.) and can provide the basis for both qualitative and quantitative claims about the function of features within texts. As opposed to providing a sense of "absolute reality" about a feature's function, however, the goal of rich feature analysis is to provide researchers (and readers) with enough information to make reasonable inferences about the impact of specific features and patterns on meaning (22).

[3] All of the student essays excerpted appear as written.

[4] Although Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* is not generally regarded as an ethnography, I have found its combination of thick description, narrative, and a compelling subculture to be a rich text for class discussion.

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