

Institutional Ethnography

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Institutional ethnography (IE) is a method of inquiry that describes institutional situations in detail and analyzes how people's actions and interpretations make these situations recognizable as particular kinds of institutional contexts (Smith, 2005). IEs are distinct from other kinds of ethnographies because they attend to how everyday experiences are socially constructed within institutional contexts, such as schools, hospitals, or workplaces. IE is also a form of sociological theory that draws on phenomenology, ethnomethodology, Marxism, and poststructuralist forms of discourse analysis. IE was developed in the 1980s by Dorothy Smith, a Marxist feminist sociologist who was interested in problematizing male-centered and normalizing approaches to understanding social phenomena (Smith, 2005). Her goal was to develop a feminist research strategy for analyzing and potentially changing inequitable social dynamics within organizational contexts by analyzing these contexts from women's perspectives to illuminate how women's lives are shaped by "complexes of relations that are textually mediated" (Smith, 2005, p. 10). She argues that these textually mediated relations of power operate in bureaucratic discourses and form "ruling structures" that organize women's social roles across time and space (2005, p. 10). Using the metaphor of DNA, Smith maintains that socially organized knowledge and ideologies constructed in one location are packaged in bureaucratic forms and then replicated and unpacked in multiple, more distal locations as a means of regulating local activities and social dynamics among individuals (Smith, 1993). These bureaucratic texts therefore wield an enormous amount of power in contemporary life, especially when they are used to justify the allocation of resources.

While initially a methodology used in feminist sociology, IE is now used by researchers in social sciences, education, human services, and policy research to analyze how institutional relations shape not only the everyday worlds of women, but also other nondominant groups. Some examples of IEs include Diamond's (1995) investigation of profit making in nursing homes, DeVault's (2008) edited volume on inclusion and exclusion in workplaces in the New Economy, and Comber and Nixon's (2009) analysis of teachers' work in an era of high-stakes accountability. The methodological features of these studies are that they are interdisciplinary; begin with a microanalysis of everyday practices and then make connections to macropolitical forces; rely on long-term observations, ethnographic field notes, interviews, and institutional documents; use methods that explore how power travels within and across institutional boundaries; and attempt to merge research and practice in service of an equity agenda (Smith, 2005; DeVault, 2006; Taber, 2010).

Institutional Ethnography and L2 Literacy

These conceptual and methodological features of IE are exemplified in studies conducted by several second language (L2) literacy scholars, including Harklau (1994a, 1994b, 2000), Olsen (1997), and Gebhard (2004). These researchers have explored the implications of micro classroom and macro institutional discursive practices on L2 literacies by conducting longitudinal ethnographic case studies of English language learners (ELLs) attending public schools in the United States. Data types used in these studies included semi-structured interviews with institutional actors (e.g., students, parents, teachers, administrators), the collection of different types of texts produced by participants (e.g., samples of students' work, teachers' lesson plans, textbooks, students' school records, and policy documents), and detailed field notes from observations of classroom and school life. In addition, these

2 INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

studies analyzed data inductively and recursively by identifying emerging themes and developing analytic codes, which in turn influenced subsequent data collection and analysis. Last, each of these studies relied on the triangulation of data sources and member checking to verify findings.

Harklau (1994a, 1994b) analyzed how tracking structures influenced the language learning trajectories of four ELLs attending a US high school. She found that low-track classes were poor L2 learning environments because low-track students had exposure to truncated, inauthentic reading material, little practice in composing extended texts beyond the word or sentence level, and few opportunities to participate orally in peer-directed learning activities. As a result, the texts they produced could be described as ungrammatical, awkward, and academically deficient. In a subsequent study conducted in 2000, Harklau used IE methods to follow ELLs in their last year of secondary school and first year in college. She found that those who were constructed as “the good kids” in high school were subsequently characterized as underachieving in their college ESL classes when compared to international students (Harklau, 2000, p. 36). Harklau describes how institutional discourses regarding who ELLs are and the nature of the resources they bring to collegiate studies resulted in tensions between students and instructors, threatened students’ persistence in learning academic English, and ultimately weakened their commitment to remaining in college. In line with the goal of IEs to merge research and practice in service of an equity agenda, Harklau concludes that as a result of this study, the college faculty began to reorient their curriculum to draw on the diverse experiences and resources ELLs bring to college ESL instruction.

Similarly, Olsen (1997) describes institutional practices that produce inequities, but examines how issues of race are implicated in the process of L2 learning. In a two-year study she describes how Madison High School (a pseudonym) celebrated diversity on the surface but continued to produce a stratified hierarchy based on English proficiency and race. She writes that the task of learning English in high school “is accompanied by another major task—becoming racialized into a highly structured social order, where one’s position is determined by skin color” and where, as a result, one has “very unequal access to resources, opportunities, and education” (p. 11). She illustrates these findings by analyzing the schooling experiences of a recent immigrant from Brazil named Sandra. At the beginning of the study, Sandra felt pressure to define herself as White, Black, or Latino, when these categories ran counter to her understanding of herself as Brazilian. By the end of the study, however, the pressure she felt to fit in led her to place herself on the racialized social map that structured social interactions at Madison High. The peer group she aligned herself with was a group of Latina girls she described as “*cholas* . . . the tough girls” (p. 108). Moreover, Olsen maintains that the socialization of ELLs into racialized peer groups included the adoption of specific dispositions toward school. For students like Sandra who identified with the Latino race track, this meant giving up on the notion that social mobility might be achievable through education. As Olsen makes clear, Sandra’s attitude toward schooling was not a matter of succumbing to the whims of her peers. Rather, institutional practices cultivated and reinforced peer group dispositions. For example, Olsen describes two school structures at Madison, one in the Newcomer Center for ELLs and the other at Madison High proper, which tracked students according to their perceived academic ability. Olsen describes the Newcomer Center as a marginal space on campus with overcrowded classes that lacked academic rigor and were taught by inexperienced, often unqualified teachers who described their assignments as “low-status” or “overwhelming” (Olsen, 1997, pp. 167–8). As a result, Olsen argues, ELLs had serious gaps in their education. Following Harklau (1994b), Olsen says that the portion of the school day in which ELLs attended classes at Madison did little to fill in these gaps because tracking practices assigned Latino and Black students disproportionately to low-level classes and White and Asian students to honor

and college preparatory classes, further reinforcing the construction of racialized identities and the creation of race-based conditions of academic advantage and disadvantage (see also Ibrahim, 1999; Talmy, 2008).

Building on Harklau's and Olsen's work, Gebhard (2004) examines how ELLs, teachers, and school administrators attempted to respond to dynamic political, economic, and historical forces shaping school reforms in the United States and how these responses influenced ELLs' academic trajectories and teachers' abilities to act as agents of social change. Using IE methods, Gebhard (2004) analyzed how patterns of institutional and classroom discourses intersected in an elementary school serving Latino and African American families during the height of the economic boom in California's Silicon Valley. This school received funding from a state policy initiative and a high-profile corporate sponsor to implement school restructuring plans representative of organizational changes taking place in "high-tech," "high-performance" workplaces (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). These reforms were characterized by a belief that teaching and learning should not be organized to look like factory piecework or the "old work order." Rather, following discourses influencing the organization of "knowledge work" in the "new work order," and the discourses of constructivist pedagogy, school reformers argued that students should participate in project-based, collaborative teamwork in accomplishing purposeful academic tasks and that teachers, administrators, and families should approach the management of schools through shared decision making and a flattening of hierarchical structures (Gee, Hull, Lankshear, pp. 24–5).

Gebhard's (2004) analysis demonstrates that restructuring resulted in classroom spaces that were technologically well-equipped and less institutional in character (e.g., access to computers and the internet, uses of lighting, music, and living room furniture). In addition, students were constructed more as self-directed actors than as consumers of facts, and teachers were positioned more as consultants than as information givers. However, in regard to literacy practices, these reforms also placed ELLs and their families in jeopardy in new and ironic ways. Specifically, becoming and remaining a student at this school meant achieving high scores on standardized tests given in English. Room for negotiating the rights of students who were not proficient in English was possible if parents were able to fit a rather narrow definition of what it meant to be a responsible parent. This definition necessitated that immigrant parents not only have some fluency in English, but also adopt culturally specific roles such as "parents as partners" and "parents as volunteers." The degree to which the parents of focal students understood the roles they were expected to play and/or the degree to which assuming these roles was a possibility varied and had profound implications for their children. For example, one focus student's mother worked as an unpaid bilingual aide for a full year and was thus able to secure her daughter's future at the school. Another mother was able to keep her son in good standing because she played a key role in the school's fund-raising event. However, the parents of a third student, "Alma," had less flexible work schedules and were less proficient in English. Both of these factors contributed to the teachers' perceptions that Alma's family was less able to support her and she would be better off attending a less academically rigorous school despite the fact that her ability to complete assigned tasks over the course of the study was almost identical to her peer ELLs. In providing a microanalysis of Alma's textual practices over two years, Gebhard (2004) shows how ELLs, despite interacting in a well-equipped classroom, still participated in literacy practices that were distinctively modern in character. These practices constructed language as a system of parts and language learning as the silent assembly of these parts (e.g., the completing of grammar worksheets, copying texts accurately). In addition, teachers evaluated ELLs' work in ways that valued individual activity, adherence to formal rules, and efficiency. These more factory-like approaches to teaching and learning, echoing the logic of the old rather than the new work

4 INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

order, denied ELLs like Alma access to the literacy know-how that was socially distributed around them. As a result, over the two years of this investigation, Alma's ability to produce academic texts changed very little, thus making it unlikely that she would remain enrolled at this school or be able to position herself favorably in the future in the rapid redistribution of wealth and power taking place in the Silicon Valley at the time.

Conclusion and Implications for L2 Research

Harklau, Olsen, and Gebhard's research illustrates the potential of using IE concepts and methods in analyzing the academic literacy trajectories of ELLs participating in US educational systems. Collectively, these studies support an argument for pursuing more robust ways of conceptualizing and researching how institutional contexts, teaching contexts, learning contexts, and language development are mutually constructed through discursive practices in schools. In making this argument, Gebhard (1999) calls for a reconceptualization of classroom L2 learning as an institutional phenomenon given that L2 research has tended to render school-based language learning as occurring in isolated islands of classroom practice without analyzing how classroom textual practices are shaped by broader historical, political, and economic forces associated with institutional educational systems. Drawing on the scholarship of Harklau (1994a, 1994b, 2000) and Olsen (1997), as well as theorists such as Halliday and Hasan (1989), Fairclough (1992), and Peirce (1995), she outlines the principles of such a perspective. Following the characteristics of IE, these principles include: (a) grounding an analysis of the origin and structure of students' sociolinguistic knowledge in their daily semiotic practices; (b) analyzing learner variables as socially constructed, not as descriptors of stable mental states; (c) conceptualizing contexts as created by successive turns at talk and uses of print and as influenced by how learners are institutionally positioned in time and space in relation to meaning-making resources (e.g., technology, curricular materials, peer expertise, professional educators); and (d) analyzing the role schools play in legitimating the distribution of privileged discourses, including academic literacies. A research agenda guided by such a framework is needed given the degree to which economic changes, demographic shifts, and new forms of hybrid multimodal communication pose challenges to traditional schooling practices.

SEE ALSO: Conceptualizing and Researching "New Literacies"; Critical Analysis of Discourse in Educational Settings; Critical Ethnography; Critical Theory and Literacy; Ethnographic Approaches to Literacy Research; Ethnomethodology in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Feminist Research; Poststructuralism; Research Methods and Sociocultural Approaches in Second Language Acquisition

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Suggested Readings

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