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## **Our Journey to Becoming Ethnographers: An Exploration of Rhetorical Structures as Lived Experience**

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### **Abstract**

This article, originally written as a performative piece, presents the experiences and perceptions of five graduate students and one professor as they reflect on and write about becoming ethnographers throughout a graduate-level research course. Data sources include reflective journals, synthesis papers, and academic literature. Following the completion of

the course, the group came together and applied grounded theory to analyze the data and write collectively about their experiences, feelings, and insights on ethnographic work. They present the data as a readers theatre that incorporates portions of a children's book with the group's reflections. Like authors of other academic literature the group discusses the challenges and benefits of ethnographic research. Their collaborative writing reflects their polyvocality as they negotiated their journeys toward becoming ethnographers.

**Key Words:** polyvocality, performative writing, ethnography, collaborative writing, collective reflection, readers theatre, grounded theory

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*How one writes shapes what one says.*  
(Eisner, 1997)

Eisner (1997) made a case for using alternative forms of written representation to share knowledge with others. Multiple perspectives are represented throughout this article, as it is written in two rhetorical structures, the expository narrative and the readers theatre, each with its own purpose. Given our exploration of two rhetorical structures to create a performative text, this paper is a contribution to the research literature as an example of how to play with genres so that everyone's voice is heard (Richardson, 1997). Throughout a graduate course, as five students and one professor and as the co-authors of this article, we reflect on becoming ethnographers as a negotiated lived experience (van Manen, 1997). First, we share how the readers theatre evolved and how such a rhetorical form encouraged a democratic, collaborative writing process that depended upon weaving together our multiple voices and perspectives. Second, we present the readers theatre in its original form to speak for itself about our journey. The professor adopted the narrator's voice in our readers theatre to accentuate her students' voices by muting her own. In the conclusion of the expository narrative, she contributed her thoughts on the course and the collaborative writing experience from her perspective as an ethnographer and a teacher of graduate students.

### **Evolution of Our Readers Theatre**

#### **How We Began**

Early in the semester, to get everyone into a research stance, the instructor of our ethnographic research course planned a fieldtrip to a local area of town where we might find ourselves outsiders. The task required that we step into a new context and put ourselves into an investigative situation in which we had to quickly use our eyes and ears as the primary tools of data-collection. We then had to step back, think, and write about what we had found. This trip was food for thought for many weeks to come as reflections in our journals, class discussions, and rough data analysis with the use of participant observation jottings, expanded field notes, photos, and literacy artefacts. This experiential learning was essential to understand not only the research

process, but also interpretations and theory building.

In the context of this ethnographic research course, we submitted a proposal to present our experience at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) conference. To be able to write about researching ourselves and using course reflections, our own and each others', we applied to the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (REB) for ethics approval according to the Tri-Council regulations. Because we are both the authors of and participants in this research, we each offered our informed consent and disregarded all course content or data involving other classmates who did not wish to be part of the project. We collaborated on the proposal and the ethics application and found that doing so clarified our purpose: to share our journey to becoming ethnographers. In keeping with our ethics approval, we did none of the reading of our data and reflection until the course was over and marks were submitted to avoid potential ethical conflict. Our collaborative writing process began during the proposal-writing experience. Initially, one person typed at a computer while everyone else contributed ideas. This original collaborative effort was relatively effective, although inefficient. Therefore, we divided the writing task into smaller pieces and developed working pairs, who co-edited and brought their final written products back to the group. Eventually, one person wove the pieces of the proposal together into a whole. Throughout the composing process our professor was the facilitator; she preferred to ask probing questions rather than provide definitive answers.

After we developed our collaborative writing roles and processes, we entered the next phase of negotiating a common understanding of what our journey meant to us. Our data collection included reflective journal synthesis papers based on class discussions, readings, and explorations of culture in public spaces. Our professor removed names and identifying features from all written texts (journals and synthesis papers) to ensure anonymity and distribute ownership of the ideas. We collectively applied grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as we read these texts, and as we individually read and reread these texts until we agreed on common codes. Next, we coded the data and transferred the codes onto large chart paper that became a "commonplace text" (Sumara, 2002, p. 96) that became thicker with side notes and verbal discussions. In other words, we negotiated our meaning of the phenomenon of becoming ethnographers through grounded theory as a methodological process. The coding process was recursive and iterative, and we eventually collapsed the codes into themes.

### **Collaborative Writing Process**

Writing a collective paper is a challenge. When we analyzed these written texts, we discovered different writing styles and different constructs about ethnography. Negotiation was key. The experience of reading each others' papers was akin to entering spaces of difference—in writing styles, interpretations, and philosophical stances towards phenomena that we studied throughout the course. The process of methodically reading and rereading, identifying codes, and eventually negotiating themes smoothed the edges of difference into voices that overlapped and worked together. This process wove together written and verbal thoughts; it was essential to our success as collaborative writers.

### **Readers Theatre as a Creative Process**

We define readers theatre as "a form of oral interpretation in which all types of literature may be projected by means of characterized readings" (Akin, 1962; as cited in Coger & White, 1973, p. 4). The picture book *The Wise Woman and Her Secret* (Merriam, 1991) was the literary piece that began our discussion on how best to represent our collaborative experience. The iconic figure

of the wise woman resonated with us because, throughout the course, each of us sought answers to what ethnography was and what it meant to be an ethnographer; therefore, we turned to our professor and scholarly resources in search of 'answers.' By the end of the course we realized that there are no answers to such enigmatic questions and that becoming ethnographers required that we embrace our questions as a lifelong endeavor, an academic career.

Jenny, the main character in the picture book, who repeatedly returns to the wise woman for answers to her life questions, realizes that there are no definitive answers to her questions. This coalescence of the theme of our experience and the picture book prompted us to construct our collaborative composition as a readers theatre and to select key quotations from the story to become the narration that framed the beginning, middle, and end of it. We reread the quotations written under the themes in our data-analysis chart and created characters as reader parts for the readers theatre. However, we discovered that we had to act as bricoleurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4) and weave parts of each of our quotations into the characters' voices. We realized that the only way to capture our collective intention that underpinned each theme and to fairly interpret the narrative intent of the literary text was to write "a pieced together set of representations that [was] fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). There, the text became a *bricolage*, in which each reader was a polyvocal, or a composite character composed by weaving bits and pieces of emic data from each of us into reader parts that we then numbered rather than named. We collectively read aloud and revised the order of the parts to ensure thematic coherence, continuity of characters, and equal weighting for each reader. The reciprocity of this dialogic process allowed us to blend the narrator's voice into our own voices. Our writing focus coalesced into a negotiated lived experience as we collaborated throughout the course while in the process of composing our text "Journeys in Ethnography," a readers theatre, as our lived experience.

### **Journeys in Ethnography Readers Theatre**

Presented at CSSE 2008 in Vancouver, British Columbia, by Dr. Heather Blair, Jacqueline Filipek, Meridith Lovell, Marlene McKay, Rhonda Nixon, and Miao Sun from the University of Alberta. Please note that all sections presented in italics comprise extended text from the storybook (Merriam, 1991).

#### **Opening: Journeys/What Is Ethnography?**

Narrator: *Once, not long ago, in the hills past the hollow, there lived a wise woman. She had long, dark hair that was streaked with white like patches of snow on the muddy spring ground. Her eyes were bright as blackberries, and she had a smile for every creature. Her voice was soft as the fur of her cat, yet you could hear every word from far away.*

*She was so wise that people from many towns in the valley gathered together and came to seek her out. If they could discover the secret of her wisdom, how fortunate they might all become! (p. 2)*

*So they climbed and they clambered up the long meandering path to where the wise woman lived. They all hurried as fast as possible. The quicker they got there, the sooner they would possess the secret of wisdom. (p. 4)*

*Faster and farther they journeyed, past orchards and silos, past walls and fences, until they came to an open field with a barn, a well, and a small wooden house. The wise woman was sitting on the porch rocking to the rhythm of a silent tune.*  
(p. 5)

- R1: I have no idea right now about where to begin. I feel like I should have my question and my purpose figured out, but I am living in a sea of uncertainty at the moment. I trust that my advisor is right about this course as the starting point for my doctoral work.
- R2: This first week of class readings has provoked some deeper thinking about becoming an ethnographer. Something our professor said in our first class struck me. She told us that “ethnography is one approach or qualitative research method focused on learning social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings.”
- R5: I found that reading LeCompte and Schensul (1999) really helped me to frame my thinking about ethnography. The first quotation that helped me was: “Ethnography assumes that we must first discover what people actually do and the reasons they give for doing it before we can assign to their actions, interpretations” (p. 1). A second quotation that caught my attention was, “Unlike qualitative research in general, the principle and most important characteristic of ethnography is that it is rooted in the concept of culture” (p. 8).
- R4: I always love to write in my journal immediately after our class. I find that it helps me to reflect upon the many readings and discussions. What resonated for me tonight was a quotation from Patric (2003): “To view ethnography as travel or as a means of collecting not just stories of other cultures, but of collecting ourselves . . . speaks to the heart of Ethnography” (p. 4).
- Narrator: *The tallest among the travelers pushed forward. “We are here for your secret. We have come a long distance and we wish to get back home before dark, so give it to us without delay.”* (p. 7)
- R3: Becoming an ethnographer is an ongoing journey. There are many aspects to consider in describing my journey so far. As Spradley (1979) said, “The ethnographer sees artefacts and natural objects but goes beyond them to discover what meaning people assign to these objects” (p. 6).

### **Culture/Identity**

- R4: At first the idea of culture seemed reasonably clear. Culture is culture, but something kept nagging at me. If culture is the key to understanding ethnography, what does culture really mean? It seems that the critical element that separates ethnography from other types of qualitative research is culture, so I began to question the concept and definition of culture. Are schools cultures? If so, how do we know? Are groups of teachers in a school a culture? How is culture defined? If the study of culture is the one critical element of ethnography that makes it unique and different from other kinds of qualitative research, I need to fully understand what is meant by culture.
- Narrator: *So they went searching. They ran to the barn, stamped on the earthen floor, jabbed at the piles of hay, pointed up at the rafters. Perhaps the secret was there.*

*The tall man lifted Jenny onto his shoulders; she could fetch it down for them.*

*“Oh!” Jenny exclaimed from her lofty perch and “Oh!” again. She must have found it! (p. 9)*

R1: The two constructs, identity and culture, seem to be interrelated: Identity is a complex construct. It is not about discovering one’s own values, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes; it is about locating those aspects of oneself which arise because of our place in a sociohistorical, cultural context. . . . In fact, in my journal I wrote that Leroy (2001) reminds us of the ‘embeddedness’ of these concepts” (p. 90). Trofanenko (2006) stated, “The term *culture* remains, as Raymond Williams (1985:87) noted years ago, ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’” (p. 310).

R4: I discovered that the following two excerpts from LeCompte and Schensul (1999) helped my understanding of and thinking about culture: “Culture consists of group patterns of behaviors and beliefs which persist over time” (p. 21), and culture is “what we need to know to function as a member of society” (p. 22).

Narrator: *The tall man swung her down and held out his hand. But all Jenny had was a speckled feather and a twig in the shape of a “Y” with a silky cobweb spun inside. So they went searching some more.*

*They tip-toed around the house, inspected the herbs in the window boxes, followed where the wise woman’s cat went. (p. 12)*

*“Yes,” others said, nodding, “something strange is going on. Perhaps this wise woman is a mischief-maker.”*

*A graybeard stroked his chin. “She may not be of our kind at all.” Perhaps she isn’t a human being like us; perhaps she is from another planet.”*

*“Yes, yes,” they began to whisper in excitement, “That must be the answer. That is why we can’t find the secret.” (pp. 13-14)*

### **Method/Field Work/Interpretation**

R1: The ethnographic research process should be reflective. The ethnographer needs to shift the emphasis from phenomena to meaning in observing the behavior, customs, and emotions in the research culture.

R2: It is difficult to remember to think about the research methodology when I am reading the assigned articles because I find myself so engaged in the content. If I am going to improve as an ethnographer, I have to use these articles to help me understand methods as well as other parts of a research study.

R3: In one of her articles Kouritzin (2002) commented that researchers make personal and subjective judgments about the state of mind of those they describe every time they write about them. The excerpts from her observation assignments made me feel self-conscious, but not in the good, reflective way she suggested. At the same time in our course, we were asked to write expanded field notes from an observation of people’s interactions; I began to wonder and worry about my

- word and text choices. This simple task turned into an uncomfortable experience of reexamining every word for potentially pejorative language.
- R4: Writing the expanded field notes was easier than I thought it would be. After the difficulty of getting the information down, I was surprised at how much I could recall of the incident while I elaborated my notes. Through this experience I noticed two things. First, expanded field notes revealed the gaps in the information that I had gathered. This highlights the importance of revisiting your field notes as soon as possible as there may be opportunities to return to the field and clarify and obtain additional information. I also noticed that, although I felt I recalled more information as I expanded my notes, I questioned the accuracy of that information.
- R5: We talked about field notes and how they reflect the researcher as much as the topic being researched. The use of language in fieldnotes, which I would have thought nothing about, became vital because it revealed my assumptions and thoughts about what is being observed.
- R3: Is there any way of being an objective observer? Heath (1983) commented that her book cannot be considered a model piece of either educational or child language research because she claimed to not adhere to “standard experimental conditions or linguistic record keeping” (p. 8). Kouritzin (2002) concluded that no matter what form field notes take, they serve as an ethnographer’s memory. Because the records are likely the only ones available about that time, place, and situation, they are “authoritative in whatever form they have been written” (p. 125).
- Narrator: *“No, I am not from another universe. I am of your time and your place.” So they went back to her house and watched while she kept on rocking to her silent tune.* (p. 16)
- R4: After my first complete read of Heath’s (1983) work, one of my Post It™ notes read, *Do I really want to spend years with the same people, living, breathing, writing my research without a separation between life and Ethnography?* I recall writing this note at a late hour (after midnight) and shutting my eyes, unable to see my alarm clock past the thick pink spine of this seminal work. My view of an ethnographer’s life was that Ethnography became their life, their frame for who they became as people.
- R1: On October 3 the professor began our class with a key question: “How do researchers get at someone else’s perspective?” We were asked to observe a situation in which two people had different perspectives on an issue. Each of us explained how we use various questioning techniques or prompts to keep the person talking about his or her thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and feelings about an issue. For example, one researcher in the group tried to get girls’ perspectives on boys’ harassment in her study. Her participants didn’t define the boys’ behavior as harassment. Thus, she remarked, “Perspective is a multilayered construct that takes time to untangle. It doesn’t happen in one interview; it happens through interviews, observations and analysis of artefacts over time.”
- R2: More and more it seems that ethnographies that I read are focused on playing some sort of activist/advocate role. I don’t know how comfortable I am with this aspect of ethnographic research. I would think that being openly activist would cancel out the idea of objective observation and reporting, but perhaps if the researcher was really explicit about her own beliefs and purpose, the study (Fine, 1991) could be read with these biases in mind.

- R3: Because of my previous work, I felt fairly comfortable discussing the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, but I struggled to understand just exactly where ethnographic research fit into qualitative research. I am a very practical person, or I try to take a practical, efficient view of how to do things. I have always had a bit of a quantitative stance rather than a qualitative stance. It has always seemed that numbers are more straightforward than description. My prior knowledge and thoughts about ethnography were based on my understanding, which came from quantitative research.
- R5: Identifying and talking about my assumptions can be a difficult experience. I was challenged to uncover my assumptions and reflect on how easy it is to make them based solely on one source of information; it was pivotal in my awareness of researcher positioning and reflexivity. As a researcher, I cannot presume something to be true about a person or action without proof. I discovered that I made presumptions based on past experiences and expectations, which was a bit frightening to me, particularly if, as an ethnographer, my job is to tell about an experience from a participant's perspective.
- R2: In our second class we looked at some contentious photographs from our local newspaper, and I felt myself censoring what I was sharing with my classmates. It wasn't until others started talking about and interpreting the photos that I felt more comfortable saying my thoughts out loud. I didn't want my classmates to think that I am a person who makes assumptions based on only a few pictures of someone I don't even know. It was easy to share the facts about what was actually happening, but it was uncomfortable to share my feelings and assumptions.
- Narrator: *After a while she got up and went to the well, filled a bucket with water and walked slowly back to the house. They all watched, and as soon as she was out of sight, they pounced. The secret must be at the bottom of the well! Everyone crowded around while the strongest among them brought up bucket after bucket. Quicker, quicker, hoist the rope!* (p. 18)

### Struggles/Researcher Position

- R4: We talked about the role of researchers in getting to know the lay of the land and fitting in. Sometimes we were at one end of the continuum where we fit in well and were comfortable, whereas at other times we were at the other end where we did not fit in as well and we experienced more difficulty being part of the culture and environment. At times, being partially an insider would help the researcher to be more easily accepted into the culture and would help him or her to know how to act in the culture being studied, but an insider also has the difficult task of making explicit for others things that insiders take for granted.
- R1: I position myself as an *ethnographer-in-training*; as such, I write from two perspectives: *insider* and *outsider*. As an insider, I write from the first-person perspective, sharing my thinking (assumptions, understandings, Aha! moments, and worries), and I refer to my journal entries that I record two to three times per week throughout this four-month university course. As an outsider, I narrate what happens throughout this university course. My use of two rhetorical structures, the narrative and the academic paper or article, is intentional. The linear narrative structure permits me to view this course experience as a living story—to see it from afar, to appreciate it anew, to take the role of an observer who enjoys the

events like an audience enjoys a good storyteller. The academic voice brings me into my own story with a close theoretical proximity that demands an analytical and critical stance.

R5: Until our class field trip, I was not aware of what it was like to be an insider in the culture that we were visiting. Being an insider who is very familiar with the environment, I encountered some difficulties in conducting informal interviews with the people and ignored many important details in my observations. I realized that I did not collect any artefacts because they were commonplace for me. I was amazed at what my classmates collected and how much information they gained through their observations. Is it a disadvantage for ethnographers to be too familiar with the culture within which they are researchers? How do ethnographers overcome their positioning when they are insiders?

Narrator: *What a disappointment. Nothing after all but clear well water and a green tarnished penny that someone must have thrown into the well ages ago for good luck.*

*“Surely wisdom is worth more than a penny,” the strongest person grumbled and threw the coin onto the ground. Jenny looked at the drops of water glinting on the coin like dew in the early morning. As she looked, the green, tarnished metal seemed almost to melt into the green of the grass. (p. 20)*

R3: “The researcher’s eyes and ears are the primary modes for data collection” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 2).

Narrator: *“What do you have in your pocket, little girl?”*

*“Would you like to see?” Jenny offered.*

*“May I?” The wise woman invited Jenny to step closer. Jenny handed over the coin and the wise woman held it up to her eyes and then she turned it over and peered at the other side, then flipped it back again and spun it around and around in her hand. She threw it into the air, caught it, and made a tight fist. “Shall I give it back to you?”*

*“Would you like to keep it?” Jenny asked.*

*“My dear child, it belongs to you.” The wise woman opened her hand and held the coin out to Jenny. (p. 24)*

*Jenny took the coin and held it close to her eyes the way the wise woman had. She peered at one side and then at the other. “Why,” she wondered aloud, “does it look green instead of copper colored? And what are the Latin words? How do they fit into such a small space? What do the numbers mean? Why did they put the face on the coin? What kind of building is that on the other side?”*

*The wise woman listened and laughed. “My dear child, you have found the secret.”*

*Jenny was puzzled. “How can I have found it?” (p.26)*

### Further Musings

- R5: The core of ethnographic research is being open to questions and remembering that we are the primary instruments of research.
- R2: Being an ethnographer is an ongoing journey.
- R1: I have read, reread, written, rewritten, discussed, and discovered a passion for ethnography. I've discovered that being in a sea of uncertainty is what ethnographic research is all about. There are no answers, only questions.
- R3: I guess Patric (2003) was right: We are travelling together and discovering as much about who we are as people and as researchers as we continue to inquire and explore research methodology, particularly ethnography.
- Narrator: *"Because, you see, the secret of wisdom is to be curious—to take the time to look closely, to use all your senses to see and touch and taste and smell and hear. To keep on wandering and wondering."*
- "Wandering and wondering," Jenny repeated softly.*
- "And if you don't find all of the answers, you will surely find more to marvel at in this curving, curling world that spins around and around amid the stars."*  
(p. 26)
- Jenny heeded the wise woman's words. She returned home in good time and she sauntered and sang, tasted and touched, and listened and laughed and cried; and she grew up to become a wise woman herself. (p. 27)*
- All readers: . . . or . . . a thoughtful ethnographer.

### Conclusion

As we moved into and out of the uncertainties of research, wondered what is and what is not research, wrote together, and considered positioning and reflexivity, this collaborative process grew to be very rich. It was complicated at times, and we learned a great deal about stepping up and stepping back to ensure polyvocality. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) explained that the product of ethnographic work is an interpretive story, reconstruction, or narrative about a group of people (a community) that includes historical material and paints a picture of people going about their daily lives as they happen over a relatively representative period of time (p. 4), and we believe that our collaborative text has done that.

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