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## Becoming One of the Culture

by

Sandra Gail Teichmann

Ethnographic research is story telling, is documentation of an event, and as in reading novels, we may find ourselves or parts of ourselves within the text. There we may validate our ideas, our theories, or we may come to some new way of thinking.

Ethnography is also a means of establishing community as teachers and students and researchers read and understand themselves through each other's stories. This community is not unlike the one which Walt Whitman wrote of at the end of the last century in *Democratic Vistas*. Whitman concerned himself with a lack of common understanding and concern for others, those other and different from ourselves. He felt that this "lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close" (Whitman, 1979, p. 324), if left unattended, would forever serve to divide our nation, both morally and artistically.

Community (i.e., democracy in the ideal) as written about by Whitman, would be inclusive and not only lift masses out of wretched poverty and give them material well being and a "deceptive superficial popular intellectuality" (Whitman, 1979, p. 326), but would be a vehicle toward "really grand religious, moral, literary and aesthetic" (Whitman, 1979, p. 326) achievements. Realizing, of course, that the community is made up of the individual, and himself highly valuing the ideal of individual, Whitman was aware of the need to reconcile the two, which are innately contradictory, and he saw the means to this reconciliation through the realization that independence is possible only through a strong and cooperative consolidation. A means of coming to this reconciliation is through literature, through the voices of individuals writing and speaking of themselves to readers, who read and understand themselves through the text of others. Community is established through a common knowing or perhaps questioning, yet the individual is respected and valued and his or her position furthered as the ingredient necessary for further knowing. In "A Song for Occupations," (Whitman, 1979), Whitman cried out wanting to hear everyone and know the details of what they knew.

The bread and cakes in the bakery ... the white and red pork in the pork-store;  
The milliner's ribbons ... the dressmaker's patterns ... the tea-table ... the homemade  
sweetmeats;  
The column of wants in the one-cent paper ... the news by telegraph ... the amusements and  
operas and shows;  
The cotton and woolen and linen you wear ... the money you make and spend;  
Your room and bedroom ... your piano-forte ... the stove and cookpans;  
The house you live in ... the rent ... the other tenants ... the deposit in the savings-bank ...  
the trade at the grocery, (p. 106)

Through knowing each other, knowing the details, the community becomes stronger and the individual's identity clearer. If such a community is to develop in Whitman's broad view or in the smaller interest of specific research projects, the voices of all persons are to be heard: the voices of the teacher, the student, the reader, the researcher, and the interested onlooker. Such voices would be unique and follow no pre-established conventions set up by those who would control the

conversation either for their own purposes or for fear of separating and perhaps alienating this body of knowledge from the still powerful positivistic world of experimental science.

Stephen M. North (1987), in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, defines the process of ethnographic research as that of finding and entering the setting, collecting data, and identifying and verifying themes. According to North, this process seems to be self-contained in that,

Things can never come to mean in quite the same way twice. So Ethnographic studies cannot be verified by being "replicated," nor can their findings be tested against their power to account for other people in other places or times. (p. 310)

As such, there is no need or reason for incorporating outside facts or theories into the ethnographic study, which is one experience complete within itself. An ethnographic report, like a novel, is a little world within itself, a world where the reader confronts reality as displayed by the ethnographic researcher. On display are people, objects, personal growth, motivation, dialogue, and moods in a physical setting. Events and complications, involving all of these details, work within real time. Readers come to these ethnographic stories as they come to works of fiction, with a desire to understand and gain perspective on their own lives. Likewise the authors and researchers of ethnographic studies write the particular story they want to read including the particular aspect of the self they want to look at. Through the safety and distance of the story, both researcher and reader are able to confront themselves and their professional concerns.

It is neither the research methods used to gather experience data nor the interpretation and analysis of the data that I question here. Rather, I question the practice of using an ethnographic study for supporting or disproving existing schools of thought and the practice of doing specific and extensive research of theories in the field for purposes of building and supporting a working question prior to engaging in the already dangerously subjective act of documenting, interpreting, and analyzing a single experience which cannot be repeated for purposes of verification. The practice of ethnography or naturalistic study, though quite simple and straightforward, seems often to be complicated, mixed in with and confused with the process of hermeneutical inquiry which, though dialectical, is "bounded by textual evidence" (North, 1987, p. 120). On beginning the ethnography, the practice in some circles is to write a "review of literature" much like that used in experimental science.

Some established researchers in composition studies justify the "review of literature" as a means of showing that one is *in composition*, as well as a means of uncovering and relating the ideas relative to the proposed question. I, however, have serious concerns about the "review of literature" as used for either of these reasons. If the review is used as a means of showing that one has the right, the credentials, the appropriate language for entering into a process of relating a story, I am aghast. This absolutely violates the right and the need that all voices be heard. Nevertheless the custom is to encourage the ethnographer to identify a question and then gather together and discuss a bevy of theories that relate to that question. In a naturalistic study, however, questions change through the process of the study, so it seems most *unnatural* as well as impractical to enter the study with a question which already has been thoroughly considered in relation to outside theories. If ethnographic research is a study of just one culture at just one point in time of what value are the findings of others in equally isolated studies? There might be a time for bringing together the findings of other studies or the thoughts of other researchers for the purposes of thinking through some possible connections, but at the beginning of the study and throughout it seems awkward, almost as if the researcher were unsure of the ethnographic method as a means of examining her subject matter. Perhaps that's just it. The researcher needs the review of literature to get herself



going. She feels she needs a foundation (not unlike that used in experimentally controlled methods) from which to justify her questions and the methods which would follow her questioning.

By referencing the authorities in the field, the author also shows her familiarity with them and perhaps also her right to equal authority in her statements. And perhaps this is the means and the language used by all those who would be researchers. But isn't the nature of qualitative and natural research such that it is never set in concrete, never forever true as the quantitative research of scientific experimental research tends to be or pretends to be? If qualitative research is by its very nature and definition subject to fluctuation and variability, for what purpose does an author make an effort to connect his or her findings with those of other qualitative researchers? This push for referencing authority in the field would perhaps seem to be a holdover from the purely scientific research reports where the nature of the inquiry and the factual findings demand that prior research results in the field be referenced for purposes of confirming, questioning, and further postulating toward the end of one truth. The purpose of referencing, then, in qualitative research writing does not appear to be that of establishing validity in one's findings, which then leaves the purpose simply that of establishing one's authority by means of association with those who presently hold authority within the field.

My question now is exactly how can or how does mere association or rather mere statement of association set one on an equal or similar plane of authority? I don't think this is possible. Just because I read and understand Past-President Carter's peace plan for war-torn Yugoslavia, and then quote what I have read in a paper I am writing, am I on equal footing with him? Am I not pretending toward a very foolish position that may indeed be very precarious should anyone take me seriously on my stance of authority by association? Wouldn't I be better placed in the field of qualitative research both as a scholar and as an authority on the subject to slowly and surely and subtly build my authority through my experience, my own documentation, and my own thorough interpretation and analysis in a setting where I place myself honestly and openly as one among those and what I research rather than one among those who research like me? This is, of course, not to say that a researcher should not vigorously pursue and consider and value all work produced by others in the area of her research. This is a natural act. The researcher, if indeed in true pursuit of knowledge, will naturally read and analyze all material relative to her area of inquiry, but the information and details gained will be used for expanded knowledge rather than for the purpose of narrowing or for, what seems to me, a rather garish display of this is who I've read; these are my equals now; these are my friends and my colleagues; take us now as one in the same.

And yet, under pressure, I too have bowed to the expected "review of literature." In my own ethnographic research projects I have laid out my theoretical underpinnings as defined by bits and pieces from a variety of theorists. By doing so, I establish my *credentials* through my association with established and acknowledged others. I talk about their theories in the common language of their discipline and, by so doing, I have perhaps accepted David Bartholomae's (1985) theory that persons, in order to be heard and respected, must learn to sound like the experts. And so, I have made my bid to be heard by and accepted into the closed society of teachers and researchers. Though I resist it, I have used the "review of literature" and the "rhetorical context" in the typical researcher's move to quickly and easily find common ground and common understanding with other researchers and from there to proceed with the conversation.

But what about the individuals within the culture of my research? What about Byron or Angela? What if they had wanted to tell the story themselves, tell it directly without the use of me as their spokesperson? Probably neither of them could have entered into the conversation because neither of them are *in composition*, or whatever discipline. Neither of them would have knowledge



of Moffett or Brannon or Cixous or Elbow or Coles. Angela's voice might have been included somewhere, included, within the text of an expert, as an example, as a detail of some learned thesis, but never respected and heard as the story, the valid representation of the culture of which she has intimate knowledge and is a part. What if I, in documenting and writing up the report, had refused to comply with the generally accepted practice? The story of the culture of my inquiry probably would not have been heard.

A second reason given for the practice of beginning an ethnographic study with a "review of literature" is the idea that one enter the study with a question and with a thorough knowledge of the theories related to that question which in turn will direct the methods of the study. Underlying this need for a "review of literature" seems to be the misconception that the purpose of ethnographic study is to work toward one universal truth. This search for truth seems, however, to be the venue of experimental researchers, not that of the qualitative researchers. It is thus that I find myself confused when ethnographic research models call for extensive building of theory before the act of research and analysis, and further confused when the expectation is that such a study might be thought to be an appropriate means by which knowledge about schools of thought can be supported or disproved.

In "Forming Research Communities Among Naturalistic Researchers," Lucy McCormick Calkins (1985) says that methods of research are ideally chosen "based on the researcher's personality and belief system." This seems like a logical and common sense approach to this business of research. Yet, just as I question the "review of literature," I wonder why there is a need to begin and build the research out of the theories of other researchers while ignoring personal beliefs. As Calkins says, some ethnographers or teacher-researchers (Graves, Pettigrew, Shaw, Van Nostrand) have not, for exactly these reasons, "stood on the shoulders of others," have even declared there are no such shoulders to stand on (pp. 133-134). These researchers have had the courage to refuse to place their studies within a theoretical context and to declare that the work of ethnography is "necessarily exploratory" (p. 134).

Ethnography produces theory that comes from the bottom up as it emerges from patterns in the data, rather than from the top down as heavily influenced by the collected theories of others. But at times it seems that Calkins is working against this common sense as she builds a case against individual exploration to the point where she seems to espouse, for purposes of building community among the researchers, naturalistic studies that are a constant interaction between practice, research, and scholarship. She admits, however, to the real danger of illustrating preconceived ideas rather than documenting patterns in data.

There would seem to be a case for reading other ethnographic studies for purposes of communication with other researchers, but not for the purpose of building on and adding to the existing canon of theory. Ethnographic studies are not written as proofs, but as stories that are individual and unrelated. Calkins (1985) considers this possibility but doesn't concur. Rather, she seems to jump into the camp that might say we need solid footing in theory, because (unsure of ourselves) we are, after all, more than just teachers; we are real researchers.

While the practice of "standing on others' shoulders" may be appropriate and desirable to a certain extent in some selected instances, I'm wondering if such widespread referencing doesn't most often cloud the process of knowledge-making by taking the researcher's focus and the reader's focus from the subject of the inquiry to the interpretative statements of others which most likely have little or nothing to do with the reality of the culture and the subjects in the present time of the current investigation. In other words, because qualitative research is not conducted under the

strict environmental controls of quantitative research, there may or may not be a basis for comparative statements. And if it is true that qualitative research is hypothesis-generating, isn't the researcher unnecessarily preempting the efforts of her inquiry by referencing current theory in the process of presenting information as witnessed and inhibiting the possibility of creative new thought?

The very nature of ethnographic research would seem to require a healthy respect for and deference to the reader as co-researcher in the inquiry and thus not want to or need to rely on confirmation or denial of established theory as a means of establishing author authority. The researcher and the reader and the subjects are in the business of generating a hypothesis, and of coming to some tentative conclusions for this one time, this one place of inquiry which may or may not have anything to do with any other one time, one place inquiry. Conclusions corroborated by the canon are not what is important in qualitative research. What is important is the here and now which deserves absolute respect and full attention by all involved.

As I think back to what Stephen North (1987) has to say about ethnographic research, I understand that there is a great deal of confusion in this emerging field of composition studies about what is and what isn't research, and since the model that seems to still hold power is that of scientific research where absolute truths are the goal, it should be no wonder that out of insecurity qualitative research has taken on some of the methods of the familiar and accepted means of quantitative inquiry.

In reading John Van Maanen (1988), "In Pursuit of Culture," it seems that once the culture has been defined, then the ethnography will be written. According to Van Maanen, culture resides in language (quotes from tapes), concepts (description and analysis), categories (analysis), practices (descriptions), rules (listing), and beliefs (analysis). It is my idea, then, that by going to the study of rhetoric one might find some support for ethnographic inquiry that is free of the trappings of qualitative research. The way from classical rhetoric to ethnographic research may at first seem great if not impossible. I will, however, try to briefly outline my thoughts which might make this tentative connection.

Classical rhetoric seems to be more of an art than modern rhetoric in the sense that it is more controlled in its search for truth. For Plato there is a transcendent truth, a private truth, to be reached through the self in a process of inquiry. Aristotle also believed in a transcendent truth, accessible through scientific methodology. Truth for Aristotle would seem, then, to be less private and more public, but the method of inquiry was still directed toward a definable truth. For Plato, rhetoric, in the form of dialectical examination (a process of question and answer), was the means to transcendent truth. For Aristotle, rhetoric played the minor role of communicating the truth to lay persons or of inquiring after unknown truths.

Like Aristotle and Plato, when employing rhetoric in its dialogic sense, Bakhtin (1973 trans./1990) approaches truth through dialectical inquiry. But for Bakhtin the truth is unknown, or even nonexistent, except for periods of temporary societal interactions. For Bakhtin the interaction of individuals within a community creates not only the identity of the individuals, but also meaning. Kenneth Burke (1945/1990), believing meaning to reside in personal interaction, approaches meaning in a similar way through the drama of who, what, where, when, and why. Through the writing of Bakhtin and Burke the identity of truth and meaning seems to move in the direction of the unknown.



For Friedrich Nietzsche (1979 trans./1990), the search for truth seems to be formally replaced by a search for meaning, which seems to lie in the simple moment of being. Foucault and Derrida (1969/1990) build on this transient moment of meaning as they consider the existence and non-existence of the creators of text. For these two twentieth-century philosophers text, as the use of language, is a momentary statement of momentary existence, containing no meaning beyond the words on the page. Replacing humanism with naturalism, the way is cleared for contemporary rhetorical inquiry into reality as perceived and lived by minority groups marginalized by the dominant white males for the last 2000-plus years of rhetorical history. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988/1990) presents a rhetoric, a use of language that is not so much a communication between a writer and a reader, nor so much an inquiry into truth or meaning, as a use of language as a whole performance—nothing more. In this rhetoric there seems to be no concern for interaction or for gaining knowledge. There is an emotional use of language, an energy contained within, locked within its framework. This language use is so tightly bound that it is resilient like a rubber ball and is delivered by the speaker with the intent of bouncing back as a whole unit undisturbed by any audience contamination. This is a self-conscious rhetoric, insular, posturing, and defensive.

Cixous (1975/1990) and Kristeva (1979/1990) push rhetoric even further than Gates, push it out of existence. They, in a denial of the male, in erasing the tradition of phallogocentric language, deny the possibility of rhetoric to the point where it does not exist, neither as a form of communication, as a method of inquiry nor as a weapon of defense.

Confused by all these complexities, I go back to the rhetoric of Aristotle, based in the logical, the political, the philosophical, and the psychological. Accepting that rhetoric is, as classically held, concerned with persuasion, whether that of persuading another or of persuading the self, the means to new knowledge, then, is perhaps through a complicated process of understanding the relationship between these four elements. For purposes of this discussion, the focus of the persuasion is not important, rather the means of acquiring new knowledge that in its process will lead to further investigation.

Interested, however, in the possibility that rhetoric might be about something other than persuasion, I turn to a study of language and thought and meaning as these elements relate to the work of a researcher. I am interested in the use of language as a means toward new meaning and new understanding. I am not so interested in the persuasive power of language, which seems to be the common and traditional definition of rhetoric. I, in fact, perhaps rebelling against the ever growing powers of advertising and mass media, have a particular aversion to the use of rhetoric for purposes of persuasion. Whenever I hear reference to persuasive writing, I get images of Norman Rockwell-like pigtailed door-to-door saleschildren holding out Girl Scout cookies; or California-beautiful hair blowing in the wind in a Breck television commercial; or letter-perfect smoothly empty essays written by undergraduate and, yes, graduate students in marketing and city planning courses; or love fantasies sure to come true with the scent of Obsession drifting from even now *The New Yorker*; or D.C.-haggard statesmen delivering last-ditch campaign speeches; or, of course, not to be forgotten, the hip-slick used car salesman. When I turn to the study of rhetoric, I do so not wanting to learn to be persuasive to become a crook or a new-product representative or to make a fool out of other human beings and myself, but rather to understand the use of language as a means of exploring the world around me.

As I struggle through a reading of Plato's (1914 trans./1990) *Phaedrus*, I think about how our society honors a fine story told by a confident and polished writer, perhaps because it is easy, because it takes us readers quickly to some dreamed-of paradise without much, if any, struggle or

pain. I think about how, in writing fiction, students are often taught to “hook” the reader in the first paragraph and then to get the momentum rolling so the reader has no chance of getting out, that is, persuade the reader that he or she has to become a part of the action, as the author works to eliminate all space between the sentences where the reader’s own thoughts or the reader’s participation might take off on its own. And I think about how the same smoothness was taught and expected in the traditional formal expository academic essay: present the thesis, let the reader know what to expect, and then tell the reader what she expects with absolutely adequate support to the point of conclusion, the neat package tightly sealed, and writer and reader so pleased and proud and full of authority that they think they now know the absolutely final word on the subject because they have written or read the perfectly definitive document, which of course makes obsolete all previous documents and thoughts on the subject.

It seems to me that there might be more to writing, more to reading, more to researching and documenting than bamboozling or being bamboozled. I suspect that rhetoric might be a place to look into the potential of language as a means of acquiring knowledge. I hope to find out more about what I have had glimpses of through my own research, reading, writing, and, I guess, intuition. I have hopes of gaining an understanding of the use of language as a tool for world and self exploration as well as hopes for finding a means of defending my sometimes peculiar ideas and practices in the classroom and at my writing desk.

Going back to Aristotle, then, the means to new knowledge include the use of logic, politics, philosophy, and psychology. These four elements, through their sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting natures as they overlap with each other, create the marvelous atmosphere of ambiguity which makes the act of communication, oral or written, the intriguing subject of investigation of rhetoricians and ethnographers that it is. Investigation then becomes a rhetorical analysis of the communication between a researcher, a reader, and the subject.

A researcher involved in a search for meaning (new or existing) engages in a logical process of thinking that is appropriate to the subject and the kind of meaning desired, and a logical process that can be understood by the reader. The researcher working with this element of the process is engaged in solving a problem and takes steps that are perhaps linear and orderly for purposes of efficiency so that steps can be retraced and/or expanded. In a process of communicating meaning, plagued by complexity and ambiguity, the use of logic is a stabilizing line to grab hold of in the confusion.

But before the order of logic can be laid out philosophical questioning contributes to, as well as confuses, possible facts that might be placed in some temporary order. This philosophical questioning which examines ideas and opinions, giving meaning to the subject under investigation is the art of the dialectics and perhaps the means to new understanding of or new meaning for the subject under consideration.

A researcher then becomes aware of the social circumstances of the subject of the inquiry, the reader of the communication and, of course, the social circumstances from which she writes or speaks. A researcher’s awareness of the political aspects of the investigation are necessary for survival. The success of the communication, the survival of a researcher’s idea, self-confidence, or continued investigation of a subject may be very much at the mercy of the prevailing social powers and communities.

The matter of psychology is employed by the researcher in her artful attempt to understand both the subject and the reader through attitudes, emotions, and prior knowledge. The use of



psychology may become a means of allowing space for the reader to participate in the process of investigation.

Seemingly understanding the conflict and the rich possibilities inherent in and among these four elements (logic, politics, philosophy, and psychology) of an investigation, Friedrich Nietzsche's (1979 trans./1990) "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" takes the focus of writing off of the push for an absolute truth as he considers the human need to be in control of others, the need to be in control and hold "the truth." As Nietzsche sees rhetoric, in its analytic faculty, as the basis of philosophy, the possibilities, when the classical sense of power and persuasion are removed, turn toward that of the dialectical, which is of course a means of investigating the truth in any field, any discipline, on any subject. Get rid of the need for a sense of authority in writing, which is typical of the academic way in most, if not all, disciplines, and the way would perhaps be open to learning rather than possessing.

The pride connected with knowing and sensing lies like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men, thus deceiving them concerning the value of existence. (Nietzsche, 1979 trans./1990, p. 889)

And so we come to the use of qualitative methods for purposes of gathering details for documenting the culture of our interest. Through tape-recorded evidence of community proceedings, taped conversations between individuals, photographs, member writings, participant-observer statements, field notes, and journal notes, we can hope to make a valid representation of the experience of our time within a selected culture.

Despite all the conflicts, the idea that research is or can be a practice of wondering seems to remain constant, as I hold to my belief that research, like writing, is a means toward change when practiced in great abundance in the form of trying out new ideas, of getting beyond what we already know and who we already are or were.

And so it is that in these times of pluralism and multiculturalism I think that ethnographic research is perhaps a means of coming to an understanding of ourselves. As we move into the next century and as the writing of our research seems to be written and read with ever more attention to social and cultural context, the intersection of rhetoric and the process of ethnographic research interests me as I work to become one of the culture of my inquiry, where what is important is the here and now of the experience.

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