

## What We Save: A Bricolage On and About Team Ethnography

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### The instructor says, “Go, see. . .” (Donna)

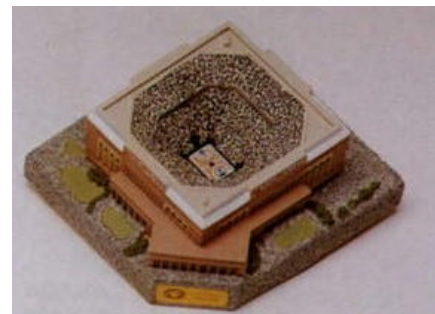
This course is designed as a field study of a particular organization. . . . [A]ll members of the class, including the professor, will conduct an ethnographic study of an organization (298 syllabus).



In my case, it was a multi-level, many themed entertainment complex we came to call the “postmodern bar.” In other cases, it was a hospital, a sports and entertainment arena, and experiences of shopping at multiple venues.

It wasn't easy to pull

A postmodern bar. . . this off. Ethnography was anthropology's turf. A communication studies professor couldn't teach an ethnographic methods course, even if anthropology wasn't interested in offering one. (story related by Heather)



A sports and entertainment complex. . . .

So we went undercover, working under the guise of “a seminar on a communication topic of contemporary concern.” We—some 30 students at California State University, Sacramento (and another 15 at Purdue before us)—became Communication Studies 298.

We became ethnographers. I don't remember if Levi-Strauss' idea of the [\*bricoleur\*](#) came up in our research and writing in Communication Studies 298—so many theoretical ideas came

alive for me during that time I can't keep them straight. Still, the *bricoleur* is what stands out when I think about Nick's approach to team ethnography.

[Jacques Derrida](#) (1978) writes that the *bricoleur* is “someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments [s]he finds at [her] disposition around [her], those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once. . . .” (p. 285).

I've adopted this ethnographic stance—that of *bricoleur*—in preparing this tribute. I corresponded with students in Nick's various team ethnography courses. I read through my own fieldnotes, as well as fieldnotes prepared by Nick and the other members of our team. (I've been moving two binders full of this stuff all around the country since 1995.) I read the texts we created and the comments we shared with one another. I have assembled these words and ideas—these instruments—into a collage of observations on team ethnography, on writing and scholarship, on Nick and us, and on discovering what happens when the instructor says, “go see” and you do.

## **1. “We are each other's eyes and ears”**

The class will be unusual in the sense that all members will form a research team and study the same cultural site. . . . As a member of a research team, the participation of each class member is critical to the success of the field study. We will come to depend on each other for fieldnotes, writing assignments, class discussions, field experiences, and other aspects. (298 Syllabus)

Ethnography was a foreign concept for me when I enrolled in his course, so just about everything I read and experienced was an adventure. (Georgine)

When you have a team approach to anything, a community is formed. And the benefits of a community far outweigh the drawbacks. Students are able to encourage each other because we're all in this together. (Timi)



The Communication Studies 298 group.

One of the most vivid events for me was attending WWF with Nick and [another member of our team]. . . . I remember watching him have an in-depth conversation with a teenage boy sitting next to him about the nuances of wrestling maneuvers; he appeared genuinely interested in this conversation about body-slammings and genital smashing. His openness and willingness to live in the moment produced some great fieldnotes for our team.

(Georgine)

. . . I look forward to Monday nights to, of course [visit the field and feel the interaction there] but most of all, to interact and socialize with . . . my team members. I like this notion of a research team. We are each other's eyes and ears. (Rona)

## 2. “We need to notice everything” (attributed to Donna, written by Rona)

I started the tape recorder and started talking away. I stopped talking briefly at one intersection when four guys in a car next to me were looking over. I could “feel” them looking at me. . . . and I felt quite self-conscious sitting in my car by myself and talking furiously. . . . I recommend this practice. . . . Let’s face it, we’re not always going to immediately sit down at a computer. You’ll need a little time to decompress after a few hours in the field anyway, so why not scan your rough notes from the field and talk into the tape recorder. . . . Always remember: the better the fieldnotes, the better the chances of writing a rich account. (Nick)

As a fledgling ethnographer, I have been exploring different fieldnote styles. For this batch. . . I decided to adopt . . . the “nonparagraphed” style. Having struggled in my previous notes to impose structure upon my utterly chaotic perceptions, I was struck with the value [and] beauty of this idea and how well it seems to capture the essence of the [field] . . . . There, there is no easy delineation of sensory input—everything happens at once; actions, thoughts, feelings and events all bleed into each other. (Donna)

I guess you could say that I got a little carried away writing fieldnotes. I would write and write and write. I felt a little guilty about imposing these massive texts on my teammates, and still, I kept writing. It was one of the most powerful learning experiences of my graduate education. I began to experiment with weaving together theory, ethnographic “data,” my perceptions and observations and, most importantly, my own aesthetic

sensibility. Writing and writing and writing these fieldnotes, I experienced for the first time how an ethnographer might enact the very text she experiences in the field. Writing fieldnotes helped me realize how ethnography might make writing *do*.

[I learned] to keep everything, be open to everything. (Timi)

### 3. Thinking outside the box



Nick with his Golden Retriever Ebbet on their ethnographic journey along the California coast interviewing dog owners and raising money for Homeward Bound, a nonprofit that rescues Golden Retrievers.

Lively debate . . . became the norm and helped to refine differing student perspectives. [And] I was delighted to see how much fun [scholarship] could be. Nick would get really excited before we went into the field and I believe his enthusiasm for fieldwork inspired his class. (Georgine)

I learned that scholarship did not *have* to be so formulaistic. Nick expected us to think outside the box, be original, and be creative. (Heather)

[Nick] taught me that . . . passion will take you a long way. . . . (Timi)

### 4. It must be “in print”

We will also write a major research paper together, as a class. . . . (298 Syllabus)

Nick was adamant that this research paper be published. He said, over and over, “it must be in print.” He wanted others to see what team ethnography could create. He relished the idea that the article be authored by a team—by a collective of writers called “Communication Studies 298.”

These efforts to see our work “in print” were not easy or quickly rewarded. Each collaborative piece required several rewrites and, in one case, a few

resubmissions. Nick was undaunted by any setback or request that we do more work. He coordinated our revisions. He made careful edits, writing, “this is so interesting” and “nice!” and

### Shopping for Family

Communication Studies 298  
California State University, Sacramento

*This article presents an autoethnography of shopping. A team of nine researchers spent more than 100 hours during a 5-month period conducting participant observations in a variety of shopping contexts and conducting more than 25 formal and informal interviews with customers and sales representatives. This article focuses on the interrelationships between shopping and family, as the authors reflect on how shopping and consumption practices have helped define their own identities, their families' identities, and their identifications with their families. The article blends various forms of writing to reveal the unique voice and identity of each researcher and the unique senses of family culture and consumer culture evoked by this field study of shopping.*

Shopping is a spectacle . . . [that] is a functional activity, concerned with the acquisition of material goods, and a cultural one, concerned with the generation of personal and social identity and meanings.

—Fiske, Hodge, and Turner  
(1987, p. 96)

I always go shopping with my mom every Thanksgiving Friday. It's a family tradition.

—Mall Shopper

In this article, we present an autoethnography of shopping. In some ways, the project began as a “traditional” ethnographic one, as our team of nine researchers spent more than 100 hours during a 5-month period conducting participant observations in a variety of shopping contexts, including retail malls, department stores, supermarkets, country clubs, clothing outlets, sporting-goods stores, nature companies, auto dealerships, cyber cafes, garage sales, the Internet, and other sites. We also conducted more than 25 formal and informal interviews with customers, store managers, and

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## FRAGMENTS OF SELF AT THE POSTMODERN BAR

COMMUNICATION STUDIES 298,  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

*Autoethnography renames a familiar story of divided selves longing for a sense of place and stability in the fragments and discontinuities of modernity.*

Neumann (1996, 173-74)

*This facility is a theme park for entertainment. . . . Some people refer to [it] as a Disneyland for alcoholics.*

Manager, Comedy Club

Our research started out like any other team ethnography. Eight of us had received permission to study an interesting cultural site—a large “entertainment center” in the middle of an urban shopping mall that, at the beginning of the project, employed more than 300 people and served up to 10,000 customers each week. The 60,000-square-foot complex, a franchise of a national entertainment complex company, seemed to house something for every possible customer under one roof: a brew pub, a sports bar, a dance bar, a piano bar, a country western bar, a comedy club, a game arcade, and two

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“but that’s not exactly honest” in the margins. He kept at us—and our writing.

His diligence paid off. The team ethnographies, the collaborative papers authored by a collective “Communication Studies 298” are in print—one in the [Journal of Contemporary Ethnography](#) and two in [Qualitative Inquiry](#).

On the way to writing and publishing our major paper, though, we wrote many other things. The team

ethnography experience was a moment of opening up to consider not only John VanMaanen's [realist, confessional, and impressionist tales](#), but also a host of expressive forms. In my class alone,

We wrote  
rhymed couplets and free verse,  
a country and western song,  
a few basketball stories,  
a mock newsletter,  
a lewd limerick or two,  
a screenplay,  
several philosophical treatises,  
one adamant refusal to take out the trash,  
and pages and pages and pages of fieldnotes.

We shared  
notebook paper and meals and the best places  
to record site observations—  
bathrooms and doorways and instant photo booths.  
We met significant others and best friends.  
We celebrated birthdays and made trivial confessions  
and told unspeakable secrets, right there in the classroom.

We sat, stunned by the privilege of being let in.

Inspired by a willingness to create

out of and in confidence,

terror,

abandon,

all of it.

We were

Taking risks,

dancing to 180 beats per minute,

feeling like a deer in the headlights,

getting that ethnographer's headache—

too much, too fast, too hard to get it all down.

Nick, of course, remembered to bring the aspirin.

## **5. Nick is a punk**

I knew Nick pretty well prior to taking the class. . . I guess what I hadn't known was how dedicated he was to himself, his scholarship, and his students. (Heather)

I learned that he hates shopping but was willing to do a team ethnography about shopping. (Timi)



I learned that he does his best work at 2 a.m. (Georgine)

I [learned] that he thinks he has big thighs! (Timi)

Because Nick is a “punk” and takes on controversy, he has attempted to confront some of the issues in our field . . . he needs more people to join the crusade. (Heather)

#### **6. What do we save? (attributed to Nick, written by Donna)**

What do we save? The instructor asks, setting down his pen and leaning back in his chair. He refers to the printed permanence of recorded culture, the scholarly preservation of a social site. (Donna)

Our answers say something else, something more.

I learned what it means to be an ethnographer. More than that, I learned how much it means to have a mentor—someone willing to see the *potential* inside an aside, an idea, an interminable set of fieldnotes. I learned what it means to know someone willing to see a scholar inside a story.

I [learned] that I really enjoyed working in a team environment. I learned that it's okay to take risks. (Georgine)

I was reminded how important my past is to me. . . . I take a lot of my past for granted, but this experience allowed me to think critically about who and what I am, what I was becoming, and how I can control my future. (Heather)

Parts of this class were painful—I cried in class when I read my first paper out loud, not because I had to read it, [but] because in writing/researching the paper I unearthed very personal observations about myself . . . . So I cried because it was painful for me to disclose such personal information for the first time [and] I felt I had to, to be forgiven so to speak. (Timi)

I asked Timi whether she'd found this forgiveness and she said,

I think what I discovered was that I was looking to forgive myself. (Adapted from Timi)

What do we save? We save everything.

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