

Book review

Ethnographies of academic writing research: Theory, methods, and interpretation

Guillén-Galve, I. & Bocanegra-Valle, A. (Eds.) (2021). **Ethnographies of academic writing research: Theory, methods, and interpretation**. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company | 162 pages ISBN: 9789027210067 | <https://doi.org/10.1075/rmal.1>

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General overview

“Ethnographies of Academic Writing Research” examines the adoption of ethnographic theory and methods to the changing landscape of writing research. Edited by Ignacio Guillén-Galve and Ana Bocanegra-Valle, the seven chapters discuss what it means to do ethnography in writing research, what has been done in the field in terms of ethnographically-oriented research, and “the special analytical opportunities that ethnography provides” (p. 11). Thus, the book contributes to debates on how writing research can move forward with regard to the social turn in language study and the increasing technological and collaborative turn in writing. It does this through an overview of theory and practice that moves the field “toward” an ethnography of academic writing/discourse communities—or “forestall the tinge” (p. 6), as the Editors put it.

With regard to the book’s focus, the chapters switch intermittently between academic writing in general and academic discourse communities. This is especially true in its coverage of the literature, wherein the chapters present examples of work being done in ethnographically-oriented (or ethnographically-assumed) research. This switching focus seems to reflect the inherent tension between text (academic writing) and context (discourse communities in which texts/practices are acquired, [re]negotiated, and used). Yet this focus also (implicitly) situates a lot of the book within Academic Literacies research, which is perhaps not so surprising given many of the contributors’ interests.



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Summary of the book's contents

The book begins with an introduction (**Chapter 1**) by the two Editors: Ana Bocanegra-Valle and Ignacio Guillén-Galve. As is customary in edited volumes, this chapter highlights the significance of the contribution of the overall book and the individual chapters. The reader is presented with brief overviews of thick description, deep theorizing, participatory research, researcher reflexivity, ethics and trustworthiness, and differing degrees of methodological alignment to ethnography in writing research. These concepts are then aligned to each of the individual chapters in turn, where brief—sometimes very brief— summaries are presented.

The main crux of the book seems to revolve around the question of “What, exactly, *is* an ethnography of academic writing, what does it look like, and how can we make use of it in academic writing research?” In **Chapter 2**, Tardy addresses these issues through an examination of two key concepts in ethnographic research: *thick description* and *thick participation*. In this (mainly theoretical) chapter, she does an excellent job of problematizing thick description as it relates to publications in some of the bigger journals in the field of academic writing. Thick description seems to be primarily a *process*—something researchers do in pursuit of a *thick interpretation*.¹ This is evidenced by Tardy’s use of Geertz’s (1973) well-known quote: “The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts, to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics.” (p. 321) Thus, the original term of *thick description* seems a little unfortunate, and this alone warrants Tardy’s focus.

A *description* commonly means enhancing, elaborating, or extending upon existing meanings so that people, places, processes, or things are brought to life in detail. Indeed, as Tardy discusses, detailed methods sections in ethnographic or ethnographically-oriented studies often list “elements of thick description” (Tardy, 2022, p. 23). Thus, while Tardy does not use the term, there has perhaps been some *slogonization* of thick description since its initial conceptualization. Slogonization is “a tendency to use a range of popular terms in scholarship, policy papers, practical applications and curriculum development as *if* their meaning were obvious and shared across the globe” (Schmenk et al., 2019, p. 4, emphasis in original). Consequently, theoretical discussions like Tardy’s help us to take stock of oft-taken-for-granted definitions and concepts, which is important because—as argued by Thomas et al. (2021)—how we define and use a concept can greatly impact a field going forward. Useful, in this respect, is Tardy’s decision to focus on Srikant Sarangi’s repeated discussion of thick participation as a means to bring thick description back in line with Geertz original concept. Essentially,

¹ *Thick interpretation* is my term and is never used by Tardy.

thick description can only be achieved through thick participation, thus (re)framing the concept more clearly as a process we go through to achieve a thick interpretation.

Upon moving into **Chapter 3**, by Jennifer Sizer, the reader (like me) may have been excited to find out how we can further ensure thick description and thick participation. However, this chapter moves away from these central tenets that had been so well-established in the previous chapter, and the reader is presented with a whirlwind tour of *textography*. Clearly, the work of Swales and others using textography has been invaluable, and I commend Sizer on her range of coverage in this chapter. As Sizer notes, “textography combines textual analysis with ethnography to explore texts, contexts, and textual practices such as academic writing practices” (p. 40). Thus, the focus of the book firmly cemented itself in terms of mixing (or triangulating) methods that are often found in ethnographies (e.g., interviews, observations, member checks, etc.) with approaches that are more common in writing research. Although this somewhat contradicts the book’s title, it ties in with an earlier statement by Bocanegra-Valle and Guillén-Galve’s that “the chapters in this book ... gather several examples of how to forestall the *tinge* and thus get the methodological aspects of academic writing research on the right ethnographic track” (pp. 6–7, emphasis in original).

Sizer does a good job of highlighting how textography can move us away from this “tinge”, as she charts its history and application in previous studies. In my interpretation of Sizer’s discussion, textography seems to place text (or social/situated practices enacted in texts) at the centre of the research endeavour, yet it also draws upon ethnographically-oriented methods to explore how the producers and receivers of such texts interact in discourse communities. This clearly adds a level of analysis that moves us closer toward a thick description. However, at times I felt that the mixing of textographic and ethnographic citations was a little confusing (and misleading). For example, Sizer makes repeated reference to autotextography (p. 47, 51, 52, 54, 56), yet the works she cites in proximity to the word often discuss autoethnographies and naturalistic data in general rather than being discussions of textographic works. Furthermore, what autotextography is and how it differs from an autoethnography is never really explained (and neither is the difference between a “textographic interview” and an interview in general [p. 52]). Overall, in a theoretical chapter promoting the benefits of one kind of approach/perspective, I would have liked more critical engagement on what textography does not do and how it is situated with regard to other popular approaches that seek to narrow the gap between text and context, as Sizer repeatedly states in synonymous ways.

Chapter 4, by Albero-Posac & Luzón, continues the thread of “ethnographically-oriented research” in academic discourse communities, but it focuses on digital settings. Namely, it focuses on studies that have explored interactions between academics on various social media sites, blogs, and other

digital spaces. Consequently, this chapter focuses not so much on academic discourse in the traditional sense, or on learners of academic writing, but on studies into online communities where academic practices are at the forefront of interactions. As the authors themselves note, finding studies that are, in essence, digital ethnographies of some form or another, is a difficult endeavour, as many studies do not explicitly frame themselves in this light—no doubt because a true ethnography seems to require thick participation (as highlighted by Tardy in Chapter 2), and many of the data sources that were used in the 37 studies that Albero-Posac and Luzón focus on seem to have been collected after the fact (i.e., real-time observation and/or researcher participation in online communities seems to be quite rare). Moreover, the decision of Albero-Posac and Luzón to categorize some of the chosen studies as “ethnographically oriented” (while the authors of said studies did not) seems to reflect an underlining issue that is never really addressed in this chapter (nor in others), and is something that I mention in my summary opinion at the end of this review.

Nevertheless, the authors do a nice job of outlining the vagueness with which the term digital ethnography has come to mean different things to different researchers, and their discussion highlights the proliferation of terms such as *online ethnography*, *virtual ethnography*, *cyberethnography*, *discourse-centred online ethnography*, *internet ethnography*, *webnography*, and *netnography*. Thus, as per the previous chapter on *textography*, the blending of a central research focus with “-ography” seems to be common practice. Yet, the proliferation of these terms in the current chapter seems to reflect the elusiveness of digital ethnography as “a broad, open approach that comprehends the use of different reflexive online and/or offline research procedures to study realities that include but may not be limited to practices in online settings” (p. 65). Personally, in a chapter focusing on theoretical discussion, I think this definition needed some critical examination (and unpacking). This may have then explained why studies using online surveys and questionnaires were included later on in the chapter alongside interviews, observations, and document analysis—I would consider the last three methods as ethnographically-oriented, as per their coverage in the other chapters, but I would question the inclusion of surveys and questionnaires.

Switching focus again, Manchón (**Chapter 5**) takes us into the realm of ethnographic/ethnographically-oriented studies and focuses primarily on second language writing processes and/or text production processes. Manchón defines writing processes as both “those cognitive actions that are behind (mainly) individual production of written language” (p. 85) and “the (individual or collaborative) processes responsible for the socially situated production of texts” (p. 86). Text production processes, on the other hand, refer to “the dynamism and time-distributed nature of the production of such texts” (p. 86). She effectively uses this dichotomy as a kind of sensitizing concept, allowing her to position

ethnographic/ethnographically-oriented studies that have addressed such concerns as an essential part of the writing process field adjusting to *methodological rich points*. These rich points refer to key periods when researchers have realized that current approaches/methods/practices/theories are inadequate, thus they change the way they do research in some fundamental way.

In the field of writing process research, Manchón sees two such rich points. The first reflects the social turn in Applied Linguistics and relates to research that focuses on socio-cognitive and socio-cultural inquiries into writing processes and strategies. However, rather than being a shift from individual to context, Manchón sees this as a shift from individual cognition to person-centeredness within writing process research, which “attempts to strike a balance between the social and the individual” (p. 89). The second rich point reflects the recognition by writing researchers that text production processes have become increasingly distributed in time and space and increasingly draw on collaborations with others, other’s texts, one’s own texts (past or present), and technology. This is an interesting (and unique) way to situate the research she knows so well.

In the rest of the chapter, Manchón goes on to give examples of studies that highlight these shifts. These developments are perhaps most closely tied to my own interests (e.g. Bowen & Thomas, 2020; Bowen et al., 2022), thus this chapter was especially interesting to me. The studies that are presented as examples of each methodological rich point are firmly aligned with the concept of thick description (and sometimes thick participation) outlined earlier in the book. Such studies focus on the “invisible dimension of text production” (p. 85) as Manchón puts it, and serve as exemplars of innovative research designs that are ethnographically-oriented. However, Manchón also rightfully reminds us that there is no need to abandon non-ethnographic methods or laboratory-esque research, as these are equally valid and needed. Instead, she hopes that “the field can be enriched with abundant future initiatives of cross-pollination among methodological alternatives in the study of writing and text production processes.” (p. 100)

At this stage in the book, the content makes a welcome switch from theorizing and synthesizing to an in-depth reflection of a multiple-case ethnographic study. In their aptly titled chapter “Walking on thin ice: Reflexivity in doing ethnography”, Khuder and Petrić (**Chapter 6**) turn a critical lens on their two-year-plus ethnographic work with exiled Syrian academics. Drawing on a feminist approach to reflexivity, which “requires reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the researched, where both become partners in the research process, and both critically reflect on their journey” (p. 107), they explore a number of important issues when working closely with participants: *participant recruitment, conducting and analyzing interviews, the use of text histories, textual representations, and ethics in collaborative ethnography*.

I found this chapter very engaging and informative, and I often found myself nodding along in agreement as they outlined the problems that can arise when participants frame the research and researcher in different ways and vice versa. For instance, on page 112 they note that, when conducting and analyzing interviews, “the participants’ assumption of a shared knowledge between them and the researcher in a wide range of areas” led to a number of “you know what I mean” comments from their participants—a phenomenon I have experienced several times when working from various insider–outsider perspectives (e.g., Bowen et al., 2021; Bowen et al., 2022). The authors point out similar issues with regard to *textual histories*, wherein participants sometimes positioned one of the researchers as a “language broker” (p. 114), with whom they would seek advice on writing. Such issues can impact data collection, yet the authors were acutely aware of this and adjusted their interactions accordingly, thus highlighting how reflexivity is not just something we do after a project.

Khuder and Petrić also highlight the importance of *textual representations* when dealing with sensitive topics, and the importance of using appropriate terms that would not offend or distance participants, such as the use of *Syrian conflict* in lieu of *revolution*, *civil war*, or *uprising*—each of which has different connotations (p. 115). Thus, many of the concerns included in this chapter will be especially valuable to those working with vulnerable populations or sensitive topics, and their inclusion here is all the more important when we consider that such issues are rarely included in the publication of studies.

Continuing the thread of reflection on personal projects, Ávila Reyes (**Chapter 7**) introduces two of her previous ethnographic studies: one cross-sectional design and one longitudinal design, both working with underrepresented students in Chile. Using these studies as a backdrop, and framing her work through a critical stance on normative practices, she shares her insights on methodological procedures, challenges, and integrity, as well as illustrating the benefits of a literacy history approach combined with talk around texts. More importantly, though, this chapter explicitly moves the reader away from a deficit view of learners, particularly in terms of normative practices that silence student voices in writing, such as the proliferation of academic sources and citations that many teachers call for. Here, Ávila Reyes makes several valuable observations with regard to paraphrasing, source use, and the influence of teacher expectations in light of students creating their own “voice”. I believe that such issues are doubly important when it comes to writing in a second language (Bowen & Nanni, 2021), and the kind of epistemological stance that Ávila Reyes calls for in this chapter would be an ideal tool for investigating such issues.

As is the case with the other chapters, there was also a focus on the triangulation of data as a marker of thick description, with interviews, member checks, and repeated interactions with participants being the most prevalent techniques. One key difference in this chapter was the focus on a particular type

of interview: literacy histories. Ávila Reyes, drawing extensively on the work of Theresa Lillis, outlines how these interviews are effectively narrative inquiries where the interview protocol focuses on literacy-related prompts. I clearly see the benefit of such an approach when applied to ethnographies of academic writing. However, the leap from this to the conclusion that “student agency manifests in the desire to make academic writing their own” seemed a bit of a stretch, because—as I have argued elsewhere (Bowen et al., 2021)—agency is more complex than the desire/willingness to do something, and it is inherently tied to issues of identity and how we legitimize our positions in light of different marketplaces/audiences.

Overall opinion

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the book. Individually, all seven chapters are well-written, and I enjoyed each of the perspectives that they offered. However, at times I felt that a little more cross-pollination between the contributions would have strengthened the book as a whole. For instance, the focus of Chapter 3 was textography, while the focus of Chapter 7 was literacy histories coupled with talk around texts from a critical perspective. In this respect, there seemed to be some overlap in the concerns that the chapters discussed but neither mentioned the other. Moreover, as a reader, it was not entirely clear why textography was any different (or better) than other, commensurate (eclectic) approaches that seek to bridge the gap between context and text, such as Fairclough’s (1992) three dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (which Ávila Reyes makes mention of in the framing of her chapter) or the exciting work being done through SFL + Legitimation Code Theory (e.g., Martin et al., 2020). Nevertheless, this seems to be an issue at the macro-level of the book’s construction and it did not distract from the standalone contributions of each chapter.

In terms of likely readership, I believe that the book will primarily appeal to researchers interested in academic discourse communities, writing as a form of social practice in academic settings, and those seeking to reflect on what ethnography can offer to writing research. Thus, it does not seem to be a book for those wishing to learn how to do ethnography in a step-by-step fashion, those interested solely in teaching academic writing (cf. Chapter 7 by Natalia Ávila Reyes), or those interested in researching the development of academic writing in a single situation/text (see Bowen, 2019).

There does seem to be an issue with how the term *ethnography* in its truest sense is used at times. Specifically, while the chapters provide excellent overviews of studies that have used methods traditionally associated with ethnographies, particularly interviews, field notes, member checks, and observations, at the core of many chapters lie two important questions that are somewhat left unanswered (at least for me): (a) When is a study actually “doing” ethnography? And (b) when is a study simply triangulating data over time with some reflexivity thrown in? The

distinction here seems to be an important one, as the “ethnographically-oriented method” assigned to the latter seems problematic when the authors of the original studies do not use such labels. Furthermore, at times, it seemed like pretty much anything could be called “ethnographically-oriented” when used in combination with other methods. This may be a moot point, but this distinction seems important in a book titled “Ethnographies of Academic Writing Research”, because what exactly constitutes an ethnography? Is it a minimum number of triangulation points + a minimum amount of contact + reflexivity? Is it, as Tardy notes in her chapter, the combination of thick description and thick participation? Or is it something else? I have read the book multiple times and I am still not sure; thus I echo the sentiments of Atkinson in his afterword:

Ultimately, I do not know what ethnography is – if it is a methodology to you then that is what it is for you ... For me at least it is not primarily a methodology ... Rather, it is an anti-methodology ... of learning to listen and then learning to tell the variable practices of human beings. (p. 150)

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