TOWARD ETHNOGRAPHIC JUSTICE: EQUITABLE RESEARCH WITH AND FOR LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Liz Crouse | Elon University

Often, linguistically diverse communities face challenges navigating everyday communication systems, regularly facing barriers such as digital and health literacy in addition to existing linguistic and cultural challenges. COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges as communities became increasingly reliant on technological communication systems. Little research has been conducted about the experiences of non-native English speakers as they relate to the communicative shift brought on by COVID-19. Here, I reflect on my selection of methods to ethically conduct research in this gap. Ultimately, qualitative ethnographic methods result in stronger data and more positive outcomes for linguistically diverse communities.

When I set out to fulfill an undergraduate research project about linguistically diverse communities in the spring of 2020 to fulfill the requirement for the Honors Program at Elon University, I could not have fathomed the doors that such a project could open. I set out to collect data, analyze qualitative evidence, and submit a paper that would contribute to the scholarly field of Professional Writing and Rhetoric (per the assignment guidelines). Shortly after I began working with the diverse community of English language learners (ELLs) and their educators at Alamance Community College (ACC), COVID-19 interrupted the preliminary plans, ideas, and methods I had laid out with my research mentor, Dr. Jennifer Eidum. In this article, I reflect on how the pandemic interacted with the unique research site represented by Alamance Community College and how the changes necessitated a shift in methodological framework that ultimately led to a much more intentional, collaborative, and productive outcome.

Wrapped up in my own academic concerns as I faced the daunting challenge of revising my research to be feasible for the conditions of the pandemic, I hardly stopped to think about the ways that those same conditions were affecting the communities on which the research centered, but that changed once I entered the ESOL classroom. When I returned to school for the fall semester in 2020, unsure of how to proceed with my interrupted plan for research,

I took a virtual class called Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL): Theory and Practice. The course, taught by Dr. Eidum, included a service-learning element, meaning that in addition to meeting twice a week via Zoom for lectures and class activities, each student also fulfilled a placement in an ESOL classroom at Alamance Community College. I was placed in an intermediate-level ESOL class with about twenty students and served as a Teaching Assistant (TA) to an experienced ESOL educator for the semester. Once I met the students and formed relationships with the diverse individuals in our class, I recognized that the research I had hoped to conduct was not only possible but necessary given the volatile state of the pandemic. In my role as a TA, I became interested in and passionate about the inequities that affect ELLs in the United States. With the guidance of Dr. Eidum, I realized that the context of the pandemic could offer a new perspective on the challenges ELLs face and a story with which we could call others to attention and action.

Alamance Community College is located in suburban-rural North Carolina. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau estimates, 72.2% of the population of the surrounding Alamance County identifies as white ("Quick Facts Alamance County"). This becomes especially relevant when considering the history of racism in Alamance County and the substantial enrollment of people of color at ACC. The racist events that surface throughout Alamance County's history convolute the already complex web of issues surrounding the ELL experience. During the pandemic, the United States also experienced unprecedented citizen demand for racial justice following an intense string of events involving violence against people of color (Roberts). Since a significant portion of students enrolled in ACC are people of color ("Alamance Community College"), the incidents of racial injustice and racism happening just miles from ACC's campus contributed to the isolation of linguistically diverse students who may lack digital and health literacy skills to combat the linguistic and social isolation caused by their immigrant and/or refugee status. Furthermore, one of the fastest-growing minority groups in the United States—including Alamance County—is the group labeled by the US Census as "Hispanic or Latino." This community has historically been a target for profiling and detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Prioleau). As a site for this case study, ACC highlights many of the general issues among individuals and organizations communicating about crises to adult ELLs, but the situation of ACC in Alamance County also highlights the contemporary cultural issues of race and racism, giving this case study a lens through which to analyze the holistic, multifaceted nature of the ELL experience. This lens offers an important perspective on how crisis communication must be adjusted to fit specific audience needs.

All of these complex realities came into focus as we started to re-envision what a pandemic-conscious project looked like. In the early stages of envisioning the new iteration of the study, Dr. Eidum and I spent time talking about the ways that COVID-19 had brought

long-standing social issues into a new light. The extreme conditions brought on by the pandemic caused deeply rooted inequities to become acutely visible in heartbreaking ways. The pandemic, while undeniably tragic, provided new platforms and improved metrics with which research can—and must—better understand social issues that trouble communities. Working on research related to the pandemic in 2020 offered its own challenges due to the lack of data and literature about the topics, but it also provided an opportunity to interrogate societal norms and structures against a new backdrop. As a researcher who works with marginalized communities, I saw it as not only an opportunity but also an obligation to understand what caused the social inequities that were amplified by COVID-19 and how the structures that allowed for these injustices to occur can be interrupted or reformed.

To begin the overwhelming undertaking, Dr. Eidum and I discussed the literature surrounding health literacy among ELLs and crisis communication, and we analyzed the ideological foundation and positionality of community colleges. As we related the literature to the current situation caused by COVID-19, it became increasingly clear that the ELL students and ESOL educators at ACC were situated right at the confluence of several pandemic-related challenges, which was evidenced by the immense hardships faced by the community during the months and years following the onset of COVID-19. After discussing the potential outcomes of this research that could either benefit or harm the community, we made the decision to carry out this research in partnership with ACC while intentionally and regularly interrogating our methods, motivations, and protocols at each stage of the research process.

DEVELOPING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With a literature review and ideological framework to guide the study, I set out to develop research questions that would establish important contextual background for the project and identify information that could be made into recommendations for more inclusive crisis communication. In pursuit of these goals, I identified the following research questions:

- What do crisis communications and resource distribution channels look like at Alamance Community College?
- How does the geographic context of ACC in central North Carolina affect adult ELL students?
- How have communications about the pandemic changed since its beginning in March 2020, and how have these communications been received by ELL audiences?
- Based on stakeholder feedback, institutional observation, and research about literacy, community colleges, and crisis communication, what can be done to improve communication and resource distribution channels moving forward?
- Which rhetorical strategies and design techniques can be used for the most impactful crisis communication to adult ELLs?

IDENTIFYING GENERATIVE METHODS

Once I established these questions, Dr. Eidum and I considered what methods might help us thoroughly and accurately generate findings in the areas of inquiry while also prioritizing the research subjects' well-being. After reviewing many methodological frameworks, we decided to employ institutional ethnography methods (Smith) that were informed by embodied social justice research methodology (Carter-Tod). The pairing of these two methodological frameworks allowed us to structure a plan that would allow us to gather context through understanding the institution in which we worked while also championing the voices of the historically marginalized and individuals and communities who are usually silenced.

The institutional ethnography data collection strategies used in this study included document analysis, interviews, focus groups, site observation, narrative analysis, and rhetorical theory application. The study aimed to build a realistic contextual understanding of ACC within which we could identify where points of data from ELLs and English-speaking educators and community members align and where those points diverge. Institutional ethnography requires the researcher to acknowledge "the analytic significance of an embodied and agentic subject in a material world" (DeVault 333). Through this lens, a researcher can see that the accounts of subjects who live in the context of a given study have valuable insight into the structures being investigated by virtue of simply existing in and around those structures.

Taking institutional ethnography one step further, feminist ethnography recognizes the inherent value of the humans involved in the study by highlighting the importance of conducting research in relationship with subjects. In addition, feminist ethnographers can and must develop a clear understanding of the role that their own positionality plays in their research. This goes beyond just addressing biases and attempting to set aside ulterior motivations; instead, feminist ethnographers must uncover ways to incorporate their own identities and perspectives into research. There is no such thing as an unbiased ethnographer, nor should there be. Instead, what DeVault might call the "implicitly relational" (333) aspect of feminist ethnography requires the researcher to acknowledge, report, and constantly wrestle with how their own identities play into the research at hand.

Adding a feminist ethnographic perspective to the ethnographic methodology of the research demanded my understanding of the stakes of this community-based research. I had to face the truth that due to my identity-based privilege and scholarly authority in the area I was researching, I had the power not only to help but also to harm to the individuals with whom I worked. Furthermore, the relationships I built with those who participated in the study put names, faces, and stories to the people who could be impacted by my research. During my research process, a professor told me, "Specificity breeds universality." The specificity, individuality, and humanity of the people I sat with during one of the community's darkest and most difficult times caused me to

more fully realize the responsibility that my privilege gave me. However, the advice that professor gave me also highlighted the value of this kind of research: though only a few stories of ELLs and educators are represented in this study, their stories lend a more universal perspective to how we view linguistically diverse communities in the United States.

The relationship-focused, human-centered approach DeVault describes is one that this study aimed to emulate by creating and maintaining strong relationships with ACC community members over the course of the study. By understanding the research subjects' situations as a product of the multi-faceted, nuanced system of which they were a part, a feminist ethnography framework led me to identify the dynamic relationships and nuanced contextual backgrounds that contributed to how the ACC community responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, DeVault theorizes that the context built through institutional and feminist ethnography methods allows researchers to advance a given social cause (334). The feminist ethnographer does not seek neutrality but instead must listen to and support the marginalized group. In other words, they must "face the non-innocence of [their] work" (Motha 115). Suhanthie Motha's perspective on community-based, minority-centered research sheds light on the overarching truth of the work: that an ethnographer—especially a feminist ethnographer—does not, should not, and cannot engage in work as an unbiased individual. Every human being is a product of their environment and, instead of sidelining their own biases, researchers can and must recognize that their perspective is an integral part of the framework and position of the study in itself.

Finally, the feminist ethnographer is responsive to participant voices in human-centered ways (Motha 123). In addition to recognizing and understanding the role that a researcher's perspective plays in the study, they must also use their perspective to listen, analyze, and collaborate with subjects to implement community-determined solutions to the problems being addressed. This study attempts to follow the model of feminist ethnographers: it seeks first to understand and then interrupt existing hierarchical structures with the goal of creating more inclusive, socially just communities. In short, ethical ethnographic research is conducted with and for the marginalized community and champions the members' own visions and solutions to the challenges they are facing.

UNDERSTANDING RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

Following these models of institutional and feminist ethnography, I realized early in this project that I needed to recognize my own position in relation to this research. At the Naylor Workshop for Undergraduate Writing Studies, hosted by York College of Pennsylvania in September of 2021, plenary speaker Sheila Carter-Tod stated, "Identities inform research even if you don't acknowledge them." Her words were particularly relevant to my role in this study of community colleges and ELLs. Refusing to acknowledge the structures, obstacles, barriers, biases, and identities that I

brought with me to this research was not a viable method for conducting truly embodied social justice research or feminist ethnography. For an investigator to conduct socially just research, it is imperative that they identify their own privilege (or lack thereof) as it relates to the institution and context within which they are researching. Carter-Tod also offered some relevant guiding questions to ask as the investigator continues their research:

- What identities do I bring to the context of my research that may affect the ways in which I carry out this research?
- What harm has my research methodology done in the past? How do I avoid that in this study?
- To whom am I giving a voice? Who am I silencing?
- How can people benefit from my research other than me? How do I share profit?

These, along with many others, are questions I have considered throughout this study. I use these questions to continuously inquire about my own motivations, biases, and identities when conducting research relating to linguistic minorities and community colleges. Even now, as I prepare to publish parts of this study, I am constantly using these heuristic questions to better understand my own motivations and combat the hierarchical structures I aim to eliminate through my research.

First, I must acknowledge and recognize my identity as a white person who is researching structural issues relating to the experiences of non-white individuals in the United States. As a student at a private, primarily white institution (PWI), I have had a notable lack of exposure to the diverse backgrounds that make up this country, even in the regions closest to my home. This is a significant ethical challenge. However, on the final day of the Naylor Workshop, Carter-Tod offered some hope for researchers: if conducted mindfully and intentionally, research can bring attention and funding to communities and initiatives that need support. This reminded me of Motha, who, in her article "Afternoon Tea at Su's: Participant Voice and Community in Critical Feminist Ethnography," stated, "What I'm learning to accept is that this work is still me telling someone else's story" (116). I am sobered by the reality that aspects of my identity have caused me to benefit from a system that institutionally represses minority populations. I am humbled that the subjects of this research were willing to share any details of their lives and stories with me, and I hope that although their identities will remain anonymous, this research honors and promotes their vision for the future of ELL inclusion in the community college system and the United States at large.

COLLECTING DATA

Four main steps made up this study's data collection process. They were document analysis, institutional observation, stakeholder interviews, and student focus groups. Table 1 shows the full amount of raw data collected for this study.

Table 1
Data Collected

Collection Method	Quantity of Data Collected	Type of Data Collected
Document Analysis	16 pages	Website postings, links to blog posts, and graphics explaining COVID-19 procedures from community college website
Institutional Observation	20 hours of classroom observation and ten images of wall postings	Classroom observation of intermediate ELLs in a service-learning placement to understand classroom practices; images (taken with permission) of posters on the walls of the school pertaining to COVID-19 protocols and student experience
Stakeholder Interviews	3 recorded interviews ranging from 15 to 30 minutes; total time 1 hour and 5 minutes.	Interviews with three individuals working in ACC's English Language Acquisition department discussing their experiences during COVID-19
Student Focus Groups	One recorded hour-long focus group with six students	Focus group discussion about ELL student experiences during COVID-19

The first step of the data collection process was document collection. To collect relevant documents, I first visited ACC's website and simulated going through the website as if I were an ACC student looking for COVID-19-related information. When I found a document or webpage related to COVID-19, I took a screenshot of it (if it contained a visual element, such as a chart or graphic) or saved the link to the webpage in a Word document to revisit during analysis. I used the drop-down menus and navigation tools provided on the website to comb through each page that contained information regarding COVID-19, making sure to follow links to external sources and webpages and to download documents and PDFs published by the ACC website. In total, I collected 16 pages of documents, links, and content to analyze in the document analysis portion of the study.

After concluding the document analysis portion of the data collection, I conducted an institutional observation. My first observations informally took place in an intermediate ELL classroom in the fall of 2020 on ACC's main campus through a service-learning placement for the course ENG 306: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages - Theory and Practice. I served as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in the classroom under an experienced ELL instructor. In the classroom, I assisted the instructor with lessons and gave one-on-one assistance to students who needed help. However, the in-class portion of the observation was interrupted in September 2020 when classes returned to Zoom due to a spike in COVID-19 cases in Alamance County. Once this happened, I attended classes virtually, and my role became mostly observational. From August to December 2020, I spent 40 hours working with ACC as a TA in the intermediate classroom. My time spent in the classroom, both in person and virtually, offered a strong foundation for my understanding of the context in which ACC is situated. I spent approximately ten hours at a satellite campus of ACC during the fall of 2021 and took field notes of what I observed. I photographed posters, public service announcements, and resource documents. I considered how the buildings were constructed and the interactions those structures facilitated. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval for human subject research in early November of 2021[1], I moved into the project's interview and focus group phases. In the interview stage of the project, I reached out to three individuals employed by ACC who worked with ELL students in varying capacities: one English language instructor, one program coordinator, and one department director. These three individuals gave accounts from different perspectives on their position at ACC during the pandemic and the communicative roles in which they served. I conducted the interviews on Zoom for interviewee convenience and safety. These interviews were recorded and ranged from 25 minutes to one hour each, depending on how much each interviewee was willing to share in response to the interview questions, which were tailored to each interviewee's position at ACC.

After the interviews, I conducted a student focus group at the satellite campus of ACC. The focus group was made up of six students from an intermediate-level language course chosen for their length of study at ACC. I surveyed students in the class on a Monday, asking their names, if they were willing to participate in the study, and how long they had been at ACC. On the same day, I also distributed focus group consent forms in both English and Spanish because a plurality of the ELLs at ACC are native Spanish speakers. I sorted the student responses in descending order from who had been a student the longest to who had been there the shortest and selected the six students with the greatest amount of time at ACC for participation in the study to receive more holistic accounts of the ELL experience throughout all stages of the pandemic. Once those students had been selected, they were brought to the study room the following Wednesday and provided with the same consent forms as Monday.

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Once they signed consent forms, verbally consented to recording, and chose pseudonyms, we began the focus group.

During the group, each student was asked to give an account of their situation at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. Each of the six students spent between four and eight minutes sharing their experiences. Next, I asked the students more pointed questions about their experiences with communication from ACC about COVID-19 and the obstacles and challenges they faced during the pandemic. Finally, they were asked to read an email sent to the students and write a short response about their interpretation of the text. These responses provided insight into the ways that ELLs interpret crisis communication, which became invaluable to the study. At the end of the study, they were given a $10 Walmart gift card as a thank-you for their participation.

ANALYZING COLLECTED DATA

The goal of the data analysis portion of this study was to find the connections and relationships between the content gathered, observations made, and interviews and focus groups conducted. In other words, I looked for ways the documents, observations, and narratives could be put into a "conversation" with one another. When analyzing the documents collected from the ACC website, I started by grouping the documents into categories with common themes. Some of the categories included were health- and healthcare-related documents, communications about federal aid offered during the pandemic, and updates on ACC protocols during the pandemic. Once I had created these loose categories, I looked for the ways in which the categories interacted with each other using a strategy called "mind mapping," which helped to visualize the connections and throughlines among the documents collected. Once the categories and connections were established, I began to categorize the data collected during institutional observation, grouping images of posters from the hallways and brief narratives of observations and placing them into the visual mind map set up during the document analysis portion.

Once I had collected the narrative data from interviews and focus groups, I used my field notes along with the audio recordings of the interviews and focus groups to begin a process of narrative analysis of the experiences shared by the participants. I created Word documents for each interviewee and each participant in the focus group. In these documents, I created the foundations for the profiles that would become an important section of the study's results. I compiled all the information shared by each participant, and from there, I was able to use the categories formed in the document analysis and institutional observation portions of the data analysis process to provide contextual evidence for the narratives that the individuals shared.

Martin Cortazzi observed that "Narrative analysis gives a researcher access to the textual interpretative world of the teller, which presumably in some way mediates or manages reality" (163). The "mediated realities" of the individuals who shared their experiences in this study became the bricks that built the larger contextual narrative of the ACC, while

the document analysis and institutional observation findings shed light on the contexts in which participant experiences occurred. Sonja J. Foss and colleagues identify rhetoric as the epistemological study of knowledge and facts. They describe the ways in which we come to know truth and how that truth can appear differently for different people. Their philosophical view of rhetoric informs the narrative analysis portion of this study. We do not–and cannot–know the degree of veracity included in each of these stories, but we can assume that there are reasons that everyone told their perspective on the story in the way that they did (Foss et al. 14).

While the "truths" may not appear the same way to us or even to each person who participated in the study, there is still much to be learned not only about the narrative that each subject constructed but also about how they told their story. In the context of this study, narrative analysis assumes the truth-telling intent of each individual and seeks to understand how they arrived at their truths to inform a clearer understanding of the institution at hand rather than seeking to validate the veracity of any one participant's account. This perspective works in partnership with the previously discussed notion that researchers must recognize and utilize the role their own perspective plays in the research. If we recognize how our own experiences, motivations, and biases affect our research, is it not our obligation to recognize and respect that same variable in the study's human subjects?

GENERATING PRACTICAL DELIVERABLES

Once I collected the narrative data and completed the analysis process, which was documented in the form of a 74-page article, I began to consider how the recommendations made for inclusive crisis communication in the research paper could be translated into a genre that could be referred to and employed by crisis communicators. In crisis communication research, there is a challenge known as the "scholar-practitioner divide," a term coined by An-Sofie Claeys and Michaël Opgenhaffen (164). As its name suggests, the scholar-practitioner divide refers to the communication gap between individuals who research crisis communication and individuals who communicate during crises. That divide means that while there is extensive research about best practices for crisis communication, there are not many resources that translate these theoretical perspectives into practical approaches for communicators.

To combat the scholar-practitioner divide, I chose to translate the data collected and analyzed during the study at ACC into a genre that crisis communicators (or communicators more generally) could apply directly to be more inclusive of linguistically diverse audiences. To accomplish this, I chose to create a concise, 25-page manual that provided an overview of the six main recommendations offered in the research article. The manual, made in Adobe InDesign, suggested practical applications for the linguistic and visual techniques that were found to be most effective for communicating with ELLs and linguistically diverse

audiences. For example, I included two sets of illustrations I created for linguistically diverse audiences; one set depicted individuals with ambiguous identities, while the other set depicted individuals with diverse identities. This was in line with one of the recommendations, which stated that communicators should aid their audience's understanding of written communication with visual cues that appropriately represent the demographic makeup of their audience.

CONCLUSION

When I began conceptualizing this project at the beginning of 2020, I could not have (and still cannot) understood the depth of the challenges that so many linguistically diverse communities in the United States face every day. I could not have fathomed the structural inequities I would see over the next two years, and I certainly couldn't have envisioned the impact that a global pandemic would have not on the research but on the communities themselves. What started as a passing interest in researching how community organizations communicate with ELLs grew into a project that would mean much more to me than the successful passing of an honors thesis. With the support of the community members I worked with and their willingness to share their stories, this project grew from a mere idea to a fully realized study that both preserved the stories of marginalized communities during a painful and challenging time in our collective human history as well as provided a deep inquiry into one case where the inequitable structures that perpetuate discrimination and disenfranchisement in the United States have affected human beings with names, faces, and stories.

The most striking realization that I made during this study, though, was that research itself should be dynamic. While the challenge of redesigning the study with the onset of the pandemic was an extreme example of this, it still illustrates an important lesson: equitable ethnography must be nimble, constantly ready to adapt to fit the needs of the community members it seeks to serve. If a methodological framework is stagnant, it risks getting stuck using the very tactics used to preserve systems of exclusion for centuries. Therefore, an ethnographer must be open-minded and collaborative, using their expertise to synthesize narratives, feedback, and observations into practical solutions with and for the communities where their research is conducted.

With that, my advice for anyone pursuing ethnographic research is to take an idea and run with it. With an open mind, research with a wide-reaching impact is not only possible but probable and necessary. My project started as a content analysis of how organizations communicate with linguistically diverse communities, but it turned into a project that narrated the stories of how members of one of those communities experienced a once-in-a-lifetime historical event, employing a rhetorical lens to inquire into how communications affected that experience. Writer Frederick Buechner states, "Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need" (95). I wholeheartedly believe that this applies to ethnographic research. Whatever you are passionate about, whatever makes your mind come

alive and sets your heart on fire, find where that intersects with what a community needs, and therein you will find a beautifully imperfect starting point for equitable, intentional, and impactful research.

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