

Using Institutional Ethnography to Explicate Information Work

Jennifer Crispin
University of Missouri

I propose a presentation on using Institutional Ethnography (IE) to describe and explicate work in an information agency. Work in an information agency is socially organized and shaped by other people and institutions. Institutional ethnography provides a frame of inquiry for beginning to understand how the work is shaped. My research was carried out at a middle school media center in the Midwest and my findings in the areas of access, technology, and collaboration have implications for workers in other kinds of information institutions, including public, academic, and special libraries.

Institutional ethnography comes from a critical feminist perspective and implies a desire to correct injustices and make the world a better place. The institutional ethnography frame of inquiry is a natural fit for those who come to library work with the desire to use information access to make the world a better place. Using this frame of inquiry helps the researcher or worker discover how the work is shaped by other institutions, by other workers, and by communities. With a better understanding of how the work is shaped, the researcher can better understand where changes can be made and how they might be made effectively. Using IE, a researcher, worker, or decision-maker can trace the evolution of decisions and policies to better understand their effects and the unseen coordinating relations that affect efforts to carry out decisions.

The IE way of looking at work encourages investigating elements of the work that are often taken for granted. For example, in my research, I examined the work that goes into maintaining and enforcing the “hall pass” policy of the school and questioned how it might affect student use of the media center. I also looked closely at where power is located in connection with decisions made about technology. A third finding I focused on was how collaboration in an information agency is shaped by policies and decisions.

I will describe the theoretical background of Dorothy Smith’s institutional ethnography, show my process of carrying out the research and analyzing the data, and discuss ways the frame of inquiry and the way of looking at work can be used to examine work in various institutions and agencies, both from the standpoint of the information workers and from the standpoint of the information seekers. Like the name indicates, institutional ethnography uses ethnographic methods like interviews, observations, and textual analysis to discover the work processes and examine how they are shaped. Unlike other types of studies, like case studies, the subject is not the people and place; rather it is the work and how the work is shaped. IE is not a critique of the work, but a critique of how environment and culture shape the work. IE also examines how library work is organized outside the local setting. Institutional ethnography is grounded in the standpoint of the people whose experiences are being explicated and it tries to make those ruling structures visible.