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Introduction to the Special Issue on Ethnography

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Introduction

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This special issue of *Faculty of Information Quarterly* marks the second time a collection of papers has been featured from INF2330: *The Information Experience in Context*. The course, offered yearly at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information (iSchool), teaches students to identify and understand what is "informational" in any setting. Participants develop sharpened vision to discern informational patterns - that is, an ability to trace what Bates (1999) calls the "red thread" of information pervading life. By design, INF2330 exemplifies the interdisciplinary philosophy at the iSchool, bringing together advanced students from various *paths* (library and information science, critical information studies, information systems, and archives and records management, etc.); the museum studies program; and other graduate Faculties, as well.

INF2330 begins with an overview of information theory and then focuses on *ethnography* as a means to understand information phenomena in the social world. Ethnography is "the art and science of describing a group or culture" (Fetterman, 1998). A central tenet of ethnography is the idea of *naturalism*: social events and processes are examined and explained in terms of their relationship to the natural environment in which they occur. A second distinction of ethnography is captured in the German term *verstehen*; meaning, the researcher aims for a sympathetic understanding of phenomena from the perspective of its participants.

It follows that ethnography involves the researcher's immersion in a field setting and careful recording of what happens there, an intensive and time-consuming process known as *fieldwork*. During INF2330 class time, students learn and then practice fieldwork techniques such as observation and recording fieldnotes; semi-structured ethnographic interviewing; and visual methods (diagramming, modelling, and photography). Over the semester, the '2330ers,' as they become known, refine their skills through an exploratory, ethnographic research project about information within a context of personal interest or career relevance. Many excellent final papers from these projects were submitted to *Faculty of Information Quarterly* and some are published here.

For newcomers to the genre of ethnography, three features may jump out when perusing the collection. First, projects and resulting papers represent a wide variety of novel and often personal subjects. This is because the INF2330ers took the advice of John and Lyn Lofland (2006), renown methodologists, who counsel students to, "begin where you are" - that is, to study a personal interest or passion. Second, the papers are enriched by photographs. This follows a long-standing tradition in anthropology, in which pioneering ethnographers used still cameras to document elements of culture. INF2330ers were trained in the

“inventory” technique of anthropologist John Collier (1976) that entails systematically photographing different levels and visual perspectives of the field site. Finally, the papers intentionally break with standard essay format and unfold as stories, or “tales of the field” (Van Maanen, 1988). The introduction and literature review are expeditious, and thereafter the narrative blossoms into detailed explications of original field data. Careful readers will detect structural patterns across all the papers, for INF2330ers learned to craft “excerpt-commentary units” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995), an effective, ethnographic writing formula that links striking pieces of field data to concepts of interest in the academic literature or popular culture.

The intriguing and diverse articles, introduced next, will hopefully capture the imagination of *FIQ*'s readership, raise the visibility of ethnography locally, and lure curious students into future offerings of the course.

In “The Constant Search: A Study of Information Phenomena in *Lost*” Andrea Lau became an ethnographer of a virtual world. As fieldwork, she immersed herself in one celebrated episode of the hit television series. Her paper is a remarkable creative feat that links the lead character’s actions to ‘Sense-making’ (1983), a heralded theory of information behaviour.

The paper, “Hunter or the Hunted: The Informational Behaviour of Web-based Apartment Searches” by Rebecca Noone examines one person’s online quest to find a room and new roommates in Toronto. Her paper delivers keen insights into the socio-technical and intensely personal territory of that adventure. Further, the study is methodologically ground-breaking; Ms. Noone applied an arts-informed data-gathering technique and analyzed the ‘doodles’ of her subject.

Karen Pollock was curious about the information experience of canvassers - the overly friendly folks on Toronto’s streetscapes who are armed with smiles, repartee, and clipboards. Ms. Pollock’s “Planting Seeds: An Ethnographic Study of the Information Exchange Between Street Canvassers and People of Toronto” offers, among other things, an unexpected conclusion: there is an ideal time and place for vague information.

Fitting with her career plans in the museum field, Cassandra Zita sought the red thread of information at a drop-in ceramics workshop offered by the Gardiner Museum. In “Come in and Throw Something: An Exploration of the Physical in a Clay Studio” she reveals how information imbues the studio environment, from the shelves full of student artworks to the displays of ceramic glazes.

Jackie Flowers, who plays trumpet as a hobby, explored information phenomena within her community band while it rehearsed for a Christmas concert. In “More Fun Than You Can Throw a Baton At: Information Transfer and a Community Concert Band Conductor” she reports how a band conductor transfers information to his ensemble of musicians through the wiggling of his fingers and the singing of ‘be-ba-dee-da.’

Having taught four sections of INF2330: The Information Experience in Context over two years, I can attest that this special issue showcases some of the best papers in its short history. I wish to offer my congratulations to the authors and encourage them onward into careers as researcher-practitioners. Finally, heartfelt thanks is extended to the talented management and editorial team at *Faculty of Information Quarterly*, for drawing attention to ethnographic research and for celebrating the ideas and accomplishments of iSchool students.

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