

Seton Hall University

From the Selected Works of John Buschman

Spring 2012

Lite Ethnography: An Essay Review

John Buschman, *Seton Hall University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/john_buschman/13/

The University of Rochester has been a veritable cottage industry of studies on student and faculty behaviors and research practices.¹ It is perhaps time that these be reviewed together, since they form such a juggernaut in the profession. Why are they here characterized as a juggernaut? The first thing one might notice when casting one's eyes upon the citations provided below is that all – yes, all – of them are published by ALA. In other words, these studies literally have the imprimatur of our largest professional association, not to mention their investments in editing, producing, and promoting these publications. Second, these publications have gotten pretty respectful reviews in the field. Third, the cottage industry is not limited to books—there is a plethora of associated journal articles out there putting forward the Rochester story and methodology and perspective. Fourth, this approach has generated publicity – lots of it. For instance, the librarian leading the studies has been called the “Michael Jordan of librarians” (<http://www.yaledailynews.com/news/2011/mar/22/new-university-librarian-headed-to-yale/>). *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has featured the Rochester projects – most notably in a splashy, color-photo-on-the-front-page-of-the-Information-technology-section article called “An Anthropologist in the Library” – and mentioned or profiled the studies and/or the lead librarian with frequency.² Finally, there is a claim that Rochester is approaching this from a unique and intelligent research perspective heretofore not utilized, underutilized, or not utilized intelligently. The royal road to learning about inquirers and researchers and library users is paved with ethnography:

- “All of the librarians who volunteered to conduct faculty interviews attended a short training session in ethnographic interview techniques with the libraries’ lead anthropologist. An interview protocol provided us with the main points” (2007b, 2);
- “The undergraduate research project ... focused on how [they] did their academic work. To address this topic, the project ... used a mixture of methodologies” adapted from the in-house ethnographer/ anthropologist characteristic of contemporary ethnography in modern settings “to develop a holistic picture of the lives of our students” (2007a, viii);
- “What we lacked was information about ... the way in which people conduct [research] on their own, ‘in the wild’” (2011, 13).

I want to say here and now that designing library spaces, services, and tools without regard to the skills, habits, and desires of those who use libraries has always been nuts. This is not a call for a return to the good old days when “they” had to come to “us” and learn “our” tools and methods. But the Rochester publications represent far less than the hype around

them. They are shot through with and based on the shibboleths of what I called “generationalism”³ where products and their associated marketing categories are lazily and conveniently reified into discreet and “unique” demographics with World Historic Importance: “Academic librarians cannot rest on the knowledge that Net Generation students do things differently. To continue to support the teaching, learning, and research needs of students through active participation in the creation, transmission, and dissemination of knowledge, we need to know both how they are different and why” (2007a, 96). This tiresomely goes on throughout the three volumes (2007a passim; 2007b, 63-71, 79-83; 2011, 10-12), and it represents the kind of fake “insight” that the Beloit Mindset lists tout every year. Imagine, if you will, an equivalent list when someone over 40 or 50 went to school: “The people starting college this fall were born in 1960. They have no meaningful recollection of the Kennedy era. They were not conceived when the Korean War was waged, but were alive throughout all of the Vietnam War. The Pope was a liberal when they were born. They can’t remember a time before instant coffee or color television or cheap portable transistor radios. They never knew a time when cars didn’t have vinyl seats.” See how stupid that sounds? Is that really an accurate way to describe you or your entire generation – and then design a library system and facility around what that description says about your research and “learning styles”?

However, it is the claim to intellectual legitimacy through the sophisticated use of ethnography that gives the Rochester studies their street cred. Ethnography generally has two broad meanings: first, it is a method that generally involves fieldwork over time through the method of “living with and living like” those who are studied; second, it involves representing the results in writing and analysis, laying bare the empirical bases and reasoning process for the conclusions drawn about the culture and its practices.⁴ The Rochester projects tend notably toward the use of “lite ethnography” as it is called in the unembarrassed parlance of the business people who want to get at marketing information as quickly and efficiently as possible. Even that marketing literature notes that ethnography generally means “participant observation over an extended period in the ‘field,’ [and] entails more than simple description,” but the point of the lite version is to mine information produced by consumers “to focus on what they feel is important about their brand experience,” and so shortcuts are justified.⁵ Basically, lite ethnography boils down to “watching customers as they select or use a product or service” and gleaning marketing and consumer-behavior insights from observation:

Now think about a Hummer, or a bottle of \$300-per-ounce perfume. Do we really need these items in order to continue thriving, even surviving, in our daily lives? They play more into our sense of self-worth from an outwardly-referenced point of view. And tapping into this sense of self-worth, or the more fundamental, unarticulated needs that we’re not even aware of, is where ethnography works very well.⁶

The Rochester approach is basically characterized by the combination of lite ethnography and the generationalism previously noted. There are brave words written about how library spaces and services are intelligently shaped and for what ends:

When students draw an ideal library space and the drawing includes a massage room, our response is not to run out and buy almond oil. We understand the massage room to represent the student's need to feel comfortable or to feel that s/he belongs in the space....Our aim is to understand how students work and how they might work better so that they can reach the standards set by the faculty and so that the university can work toward its mission....This, for us, is user-centered design (2007b, 82).

But the write-ups and interviews around the studies (particularly in "An Anthropologist in the Library") are quite open and frank about their methods and the desire to capture a fair share of the student market:

The driving force behind the study isn't simply curiosity about undergraduates....This is a type of consumer research, borrowed from the corporate world. Several years ago, Rochester was contemplating hiring a designer to rework some of its Web sites when [a new hire] offered a suggestion: Why not hire someone to study customers and their work environments, as Xerox had when he worked there...[basically to do] applied anthropology, the process of taking the methods of anthropology and using them in consumer studies and product design...? The study changed the way the library markets itself to students. The library was once merely a stop on the freshman-orientation tour. Now, after seeing how involved moms and dads are in homework, the library holds a breakfast for parents during orientation. "We can see from the drawings that they are so influential in the students' lives, and the students aren't ready to hear from us," Ms. Gibbons says. Parents should leave with the message that experts in the library can help students with research (Carlson 2007).

Those brave words above seem to ring a little hollow, so better order up that massage oil!

In sum, when you contrast the Rochester "intellectual approach" with that of Scott Bennett for example and his way of designing space around educational missions and outcomes,⁷ Rochester's approach is decidedly thin, anti-intellectual even. It looks more like the current "don't let expertise or even what you know get in the way" management faddishness than a serious stab at research to shape an educative institution for a long-range good.⁸ Truth be told, the Rochester approach isn't a new or unique: a thorough form of anthropological study and analysis of libraries has been done, and done well recently several times.⁹ The Rochester publications

represent a lot of publicity for the librarians doing the studies and for Rochester and I tend to think of them as a series properly titled “Studying the Studies of Students (Studying), Studying Faculty, All Their Combined Research, and Designing Library Spaces and Tools and Other Cool Stuff.” There are nuggets to glean from them, but use with caution – and a fully-charged b.s. detector.

Notes

- ¹ Gibbons, Susan. *The Academic Library and the Net Gen Student: Making the Connections*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2007 (hereinafter referred to as 2007a); Gibbons, Susan and Nancy F. Foster, eds. *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, A Division of the American Library Association, 2007 (hereinafter referred to as 2007b); Foster, Nancy F., et al., eds. *Scholarly Practice, Participatory Design and the Extensible Catalog*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, A Division of the American Library Association, 2011 (hereinafter referred to as 2011).
- ² Carlson, Scott. “An Anthropologist in the Library” August 17, 2007, p. A26 (quoted below as Carlson 2007). See also Carlson, Scott. “In the U. of Rochester’s Library, Students Ceaselessly Redesign Their Study Space” July 28, 2009 (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/buildings/in-the-u-of-rochesters-library-students-ceaselessly-redesign-their-study-space/7499>); Perry, Marc. “After Losing Users in Catalogs, Libraries Find Better Search Software” September 28, 2009, Technology Section; Howard, Jennifer. “New Forms of Reading and Publishing Take Center Stage at Ithaca Conference” September 21, 2011, Research Section. So, in a sense all this has “worked”: somebody’s reputation was made.
- ³ Buschman, John. “Talkin’ ‘bout My {Neoliberal} Generation: Three Theses” (http://libr.org/pl/PL29_summer2007.pdf).
- ⁴ Van Maanen, John. “Ethnography,” in *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2004. This represents a fairly typical one of any of a number of write ups on ethnographic methods and analyses.
- ⁵ Morais, Robert J. “Business Ethnography and the Discipline of Anthropology.” *Quirk’s Marketing Research Review* February 2009 (http://www.weinmanschnee.com/publications/pdf/Business_Ethnography.pdf).
- ⁶ Harriau, Phil. “Try Ethnography Lite!” *Quirk’s Marketing Research Review* December 2004 (<http://www.quirks.com/articles/a2004/20041208.aspx?searchID=31714124>).
- ⁷ Bennett, Scott. “Designing for Uncertainty.” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33.2 (2007): 165-179. (http://www.libraryspaceplanning.com/assets/resource/Designing_for_Uncertainty.pdf).
- ⁸ Taylor, Bill. “Don’t Let What You Know Limit What You Imagine” (http://blogs.hbr.org/taylor/2011/11/dont_let_what_you_know_limit_w.html).
- ⁹ Leckie, Gloria J., and Jeffrey Hopkins. “The Public Place Of Central Libraries: Findings From Toronto And Vancouver.” *Library Quarterly* 72.3 (2002): 326-373; Given, Lisa M., and Gloria J. Leckie. ““Sweeping” The Library: Mapping The Social Activity Space Of The Public Library.” *Library & Information Science Research* 25.4 (2003): 365-86; Leckie, Gloria J. “Desperately Seeking Citations: Uncovering Faculty Assumptions About The Undergraduate Research.” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 22.3 (1996): 201-209.

Copyright of Progressive Librarian is the property of Progressive Librarians Guild and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.