

CHAPTER 2.

THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER ETHNOGRAPHY LAB: FOSTERING A WAC COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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The 50th anniversary of writing across the curriculum (WAC) in 2020 motivated an exploration of the movement's historical foundations along with reflections on future directions. To best understand WAC's role in writing studies, it is important to consider how WAC comes into play in first-year writing instruction, how it promotes inclusiveness and access, and how it stimulates global collaboration (Palmquist et al., 2020, p. 5). One of WAC's important goals is to open the possibility for new types of interdisciplinary collaborative spaces (Palmquist et al., 2020, p. 6). A case in point of such a space is the University of Denver Ethnography Lab (DUEL), founded in 2019. As a collaborative ethnographic institute, DUEL is a rich site for WAC, especially given ethnography's interdisciplinary nature, commitment to social justice, and increasing value to writing studies as a scholarly method and pedagogical tool.

Initiated by anthropology professor Alejandro Cerón, DUEL seeks to serve as a catalyst for change, bringing together ethnographers from multiple disciplines and at various stages in their academic or public careers. As discussed in more detail below, DUEL members include faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates as well as community partners and interested faculty at other institutions. DUEL supports ethnographic research and writing through a range of outreach activities as well as through a center where writers can get feedback on various stages of their ethnographic work.

As a community of practice that employs ethnography in action, DUEL aligns both with WAC's commitment to social justice and public good and with the University of Denver's mission to serve these goals. Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte (2016) define ethnography in action through the emphasis on sustainable community-based interventions that contribute to positive change as defined by the communities themselves. Ethnography in action embodies a central mission of WAC, which is committed to serving as a force

for social change, “a force that involves both the recognition of past shortcomings and the promise of taking meaningful action” (Palmquist et al., 2020, p. 37). DUEL can support scholars who are working towards community-based interventions, including, for example, those who are conducting institutional ethnography, identified by Michelle La France (2019) as a productive method for programmatic, departmental, and university focused research. Overall, DUEL’s community of practice serves as a WAC resource to faculty in different disciplines who are pursuing issues of social justice in their fields.

Ethnography has become increasingly important to WAC practitioners as both a research method and a pedagogical tool, as can be seen in its growing role over the past decades. While Stephen M. North’s (1987) “Making of Knowledge in Composition” deemphasized the role of ethnography, the following decade saw a rapid growth in ethnography’s application to writing studies, as illustrated in the anthology *Voices and Visions: Refiguring Ethnography in Composition* (Kirklighter, 1997). In her seminal article “Ethnography in a Composition Course: From the Perspective of a Teacher Researcher” (1992), Beverly J. Moss explains how she used ethnographic methods to study her composition classroom while simultaneously assigning ethnographies to her students. This assignment fostered diversity by empowering students to incorporate their personal voice in a study of local communities. In “Putting Ethnographic Writing in Context,” Seth Kahn (2011) further elaborates on the benefits of ethnography for first-year composition, since it teaches students different forms of writing as they go through the process of collecting fieldnotes, transcribing interviews, and presenting their findings to a variety of scholarly and public audiences. In addition, Durba Chattaraj (2020) draws on transfer study research (Yancey et al., 2014) to argue that ethnography should be taught in composition courses because its broad-based understanding of evidence facilitates transfer of learning skills beyond the classroom. Incorporating multiple texts within itself—academic discourse, journalistic prose, the speech of interviewees, and the native discourses of the ethnographer’s own culture—ethnography helps promote inclusiveness, making this a fruitful method for countering racism. As emphasized by Charles Bazerman and colleagues (2005), it is particularly important to address “issues of race, class, and gender as they relate to the writing process and to the discourse communities which house writing” (p. 101).

Within this larger framework, our discussion below demonstrates the growing importance of ethnographic research and writing for WAC as well as the role that interdisciplinary labs such as DUEL can play in supporting a community of practice for ethnographic work. First, we’ll explain the foundation of DUEL under Cerón’s initiative, its mission and goals, and the way in which DUEL serves as a catalyst for change on the DU campus and beyond. Next, we’ll offer an

example of dissertation work about water rights in Ghana conducted by Dinko Hanaan Dinko through the Department of Geography and the Environment. Dinko's fieldwork in Ghana embodies ethnographic work for the public good conducted through a range of departments at DU. Finally, we'll illustrate the role of ethnography in research writing courses taught by Kamila Kinyon, who extends her teaching beyond the classroom through collaborations with DUEL. These examples highlight a few ways that DUEL supports WAC efforts and constitutes a new direction for interdisciplinary collaborations.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ETHNOGRAPHY LAB AS A CATALYST FOR STUDENT, FACULTY, AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

The prehistory of DUEL can be traced back to 2014 when Cerón started incorporating short ethnographic projects in several of his anthropology courses with the aim of combining experiential learning and community engagement. Following this approach, Cerón and his students created ethnographically informed documents for community partners on a number of different subjects. This made Cerón recognize the growing interest in ethnography from undergraduate and graduate students majoring in different disciplines. Conversations with those students offered the early motivation that led to DUEL. Subsequently, in 2015, Kinyon invited Cerón to share his research and writing about epidemiology in Guatemala in Conversations in the Disciplines (CID), an interdisciplinary annual roundtable event organized by the University Writing Program. At this event, several professors from different disciplines present their research and writing approaches to an audience of students enrolled in WRIT 1133, a research writing course that completes the program's two-quarter sequence. In participating in CID, Cerón learned about the advantages of integrating ethnographic projects into a first-year composition curriculum.

The initial concept of an ethnography lab was conceived in 2017 and refined in 2018 through informal conversations with a group of anthropology graduate students who helped flip the switch from inspiration to action. Cerón and two graduate students did a planning exercise that materialized into the initial draft of DUEL's vision, mission, and goals. They also identified websites of similar projects at other universities and reviewed relevant literature on teaching and applied anthropology (Copeland & Dengah, 2016; Schensul & LeCompte, 2016).

Although learning from other university-based ethnography labs was important, DUEL needed to be compatible with the teacher-scholar model characteristic of DU. Important to the DU College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, for example, is the goal for expanding experiential learning opportunities. Similarly,

the anthropology department's vision encourages publicly-engaged anthropology through its undergraduate and graduate programs. Moreover, DU promotes the teacher-scholar as espoused by Boyer et al.'s (2016) model aimed at weaving in the teaching and research facets of scholarly work (p. 83). Conceiving DUEL within these institutional realities meant that, through integration into curriculum, the lab would not need to depend on external grants for its basic functioning.

When DUEL was founded in 2019, the lab included 14 faculty members from across DU who used ethnography for their teaching or research. They were distributed in nine academic units including geography, journalism, sociology, music, education, languages, writing, international studies, and anthropology. Each of them would potentially have students attracted to ethnographic work. The materialization of DUEL was nurtured through dialogue among those 14 DU faculty members focusing on DUEL's purpose and nature.

DUEL aspires to be a catalyst for the multidisciplinary scholarship and learning of ethnography through the promotion of collaborations among faculty, students, and the broader community. DUEL works towards four goals: (1) facilitate interactions and collaborations among faculty who use ethnography in research or teaching; (2) offer a space where students interested in ethnography can develop their ideas and skills; (3) offer faculty and students an institutional home that helps nurture sustainable community collaborations; and (4) offer faculty and students the resources needed for carrying on ethnographic projects. Consequently, collaborations among faculty and students are a vehicle for cultivating ideas and skills, developing community collaborations, and sharing resources for ethnographic projects. Hence, DUEL is conceived as a network of practitioners of ethnography, and its activities are not bounded by specific courses or projects (McCormack et al., 2021).

DUEL's organization is reflected in key projects conducted during the 2020–2021 academic year. DUEL worked with five community partners, involving seven DU faculty from four departments, five students as research assistants, and 55 students through four courses. DU faculty participated, without extra funding, as part of their normal research-teaching load, while student research assistants were compensated through small internal grants or work-study awards. Community partners participated without extra funding, but small grants supported some project-related expenses. Cerón held regular weekly meetings with research assistants, while faculty and community partners met as needed or on a monthly schedule. As a result, DUEL has started to work on a few projects. Three of the projects are described below with the hope of showing how DUEL's four goals co-construct each other, how multiple modes of experiential learning are generated for students, and how this creates opportunities for students' engagement with different aspects of writing.

For example, three anthropology faculty collaborated with a group of epidemiologists in the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment (CDPHE) to find ways to address the misrepresentation and invisibilization of minoritized social groups in public health data. They met every three weeks and co-developed projects for visual anthropology and museum exhibit design courses. Students who took those classes critically analyzed public health data displayed in the CDPHE website, did short ethnographic observations in a Denver neighborhood, and made suggestions for how to represent different social groups in written reports and websites.

In a different example, faculty from Spanish, journalism, and anthropology are collaborating with a historian at History Colorado Center, the State's history museum, to document stories from minoritized social groups in Colorado. With a grant supporting a research assistant and paid internships, this project involves students taking classes by each of the three faculty and provides training in oral history interviewing, processing text and audio from interviews, and producing podcasts that synthesize those stories for presentation to broader audiences.

Finally, DUEL has been collaborating with Project Protect Food System Workers (PPFSW), a coalition organized in early 2020 to promote farmworkers' rights (Project Protect Food System Workers, 2021). DUEL is supporting PPFSW in collecting data about and stories of farmworkers that illuminate their contributions to society, the ways in which their work is undervalued, and the needs that arise as a result. This has led to DUEL's involvement processing and analyzing qualitative data collected by PPFSW's network. With the vision and expertise of Esteban Gómez, a DU professor who specializes in digital and visual anthropology, DUEL is now designing a project for organizing farmworkers' personal narratives and a virtual exhibit that will be part of PPFSW's website. Students taking Gómez's visual anthropology class designed a prototype for the exhibit, and research assistants are working on implementing the design. Students taking an ethnographic methods class are processing and analyzing narrative information to help create an online community archive. Two students have written their anthropology capstone theses as ethnographically-informed reports for PPFSW, one of which is published on the organization's website (Hyde & Neiss, 2021).

Through connecting individuals of unique skills, experience, and needs, DUEL is able to catalyze mutually beneficial collaborative relationships that otherwise may not have come into being or may have done so less smoothly. At the present moment, despite the challenges of COVID-19, DUEL continues to look towards the future and its potentialities as it learns from its experience thus far, as discussed in an article co-authored by a community partner, students, and faculty involved in DUEL's work (McCormack et al., 2021).

THE BENEFITS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODS IN WATER SECURITY RESEARCH

As a case in point of DUEL's capacity to stimulate productive collaboration, Dinko's involvement in the lab and interaction with Cerón influenced his approach to his dissertation work under the direction of Hanson Frimpong. In this section, Dinko discusses the utility of interdisciplinary methods in researching the spatial intersections of water insecurity and identity politics. In so doing, this section primarily focuses on methodology, not the findings of the overall dissertation, but rather the implications of certain findings for WAC.

Dinko's dissertation study aims at understanding the dynamics and lived experience of climate-induced water insecurity at the local level in Ghana's Sudan Savannah. The Sudan Savannah is the driest climate in Ghana with a distinctly short rainfall season followed by a prolonged period of drought (Dinko, Yaro, & Kusimi, 2019; Wossen & Berger, 2015). With livelihoods almost entirely dependent on agriculture and the natural environment, Ghanaians need access to irrigation water in order to survive the nine-month dry season. Indeed, the centrality of water to livelihood outcomes shaped postcolonial government policy. For instance, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (2017) notes that between 1960 and 2015, over 240 small gravity-driven dams had been constructed by the Ghanaian state to address agricultural water insecurity and enhance the incomes of smallholder farmers.

While dams are often financed and constructed by the state, the land is controlled by customary law. That is, while dam water is effectively a state property and comes directly under statutory laws with universal usufruct access rights, irrigated lands are owned and controlled by customary norms and practices. Effectively, those who desire to access water through the land must navigate a complex system of statutory and customary laws that co-govern land and water resources allocation (Kansanga, Arku, & Luginaah, 2019; Yaro, 2010). Hence, the process and struggle for gaining and maintaining access to irrigated water is spatially nested in differentiated power alignments, customary-statutory practices, and politically entangled in shifting alliances. Yet, water resources are often treated as a biophysical element devoid of historical, emotional, and political contest.

Given these inherent complexities, this dissertation project sought to investigate the spatial pattern of water access and how ingrained power structures and practices shape access rights outcomes for different social groups. Specifically, the project sought to answer the following key questions: (1) How do sociodemographic characteristics of people define the spatial organization of access to irrigation water in space and time? (2) What strategies do different social groups

adopt in negotiating access to water? (3) Why do some people succeed and others fail to gain access?

To answer these questions requires combining methodological, analytical, and writing strategies that span across different disciplinary barriers. Specifically, Dinko combines participatory drone mapping, drone-based photo-elicitation interviews, ethnography, and geospatial analysis to research water rights in semi-arid Ghana. Collectively, these interdisciplinary methods are called “geoethnographic.” An interdisciplinary approach provides a breadth of opportunities to examine in detail the flux, entanglements, and messiness of struggles and politics over critical water resources and how different social groups (men, women, migrants) negotiate, contest, and renegotiate water access in semi-arid Ghana. Through these methods, Dinko draws connections between climate change, water resource contestation, and water access outcomes given the vagueness inherent in the pluralistic governance system in context. By analyzing space-making through drone images of irrigated fields, this project explored the intersections of social identities and space-making and how these are politically and spatially entangled in historical structures of inequality. In adopting an interdisciplinary approach embedded in a political ecology theoretical framework, the goal is to write a dissertation that gives both the researcher and the researched an active voice by giving them more authority to challenge the status quo, and thus addressing concerns about power, control, and social justice for the public good.

Using combined ethnographic methods with novel drone participatory mapping empowered irrigators to be co-creators of space-making and its interpretation. Drone images of irrigation fields opened up a new opportunity for farmers to visualize how irrigation water insecurity and social identities permeate water outcomes. For the first time, farmers could draw a direct link between closeness to irrigation canals and access to water through observing the greenness of vegetation. Through drone-based photo-elicitation interviews, farmers reflected on the identities of irrigators and their proximity to dams and canals. By reflecting on the intersections of identity and location of their irrigation lands, farmers were leading the discussion on how water laws and ideational systems converge to shape differentiated water outcomes. The exclusive use of ethnography alone may not have elicited such discussions. Similarly, using drone images alone for spatial analysis would have likely missed the intersection of identity politics and water access on the ground.

Relatedly, combining ethnography with participatory drone mapping stirred up discussions about distributional water justice and inclusive water governance. Seeing spaces of water insecurity on the drone images jolted the minds of farmers to how salient identities disadvantage some while privileging others (Figure 2.1).

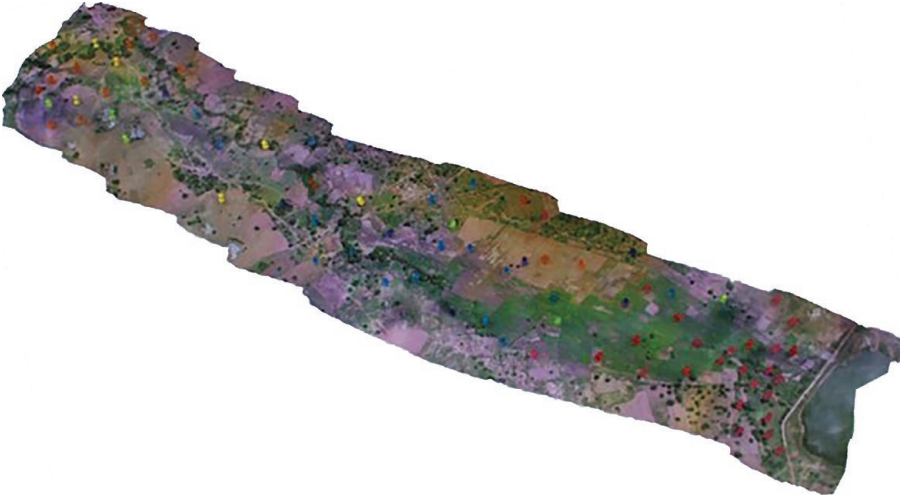


Figure 2.1. Results of community validation of drone map. The pins closest to the dam are primarily men with ties to either Chief Tindana, or their ancestors were part of the formation of the community. Pins in the middle: primarily women. Pins at the tail end: “Outsiders”; migrants but also people in the community with weak links to powerful people.

This image resulted in a more open discussion about how these taken-for-granted identities are reflected in the quality of life. For instance, during ethnographic interviews with chiefs and water association executives, gender did not seem to matter in water access. However, the participatory drone mapping indicated otherwise. Community-validated drone maps indicated women tended to have land farthest away from the dams and were less likely to get water in time to be home for household and familial duties. With drone maps revealing the gender dynamic in water access, chiefs and the male-dominated water users association executives were compelled to discuss water insecurity more honestly. Thus, there is a huge emancipatory potential in combining ethnography with spatial science analytical methods (for example, drone mapping).

Involvement with DUEL influenced Dinko’s use of interdisciplinary methods in his research while also helping create opportunities to share his research and writing with a broader network of audiences (from scholars in the field to undergraduates). The engagement with audiences from different disciplinary traditions helped refine and expand the initial methods and theorization toolbox for his project. Reciprocally, people at different levels in their own ethnographic work were able to inform their own approaches through Dinko’s work, including the first-year composition students who attended his presentation in the spring 2020 Conversations in the Disciplines event (discussed in the following section). In facilitating

interdisciplinary interactions like these among people working on ethnography, DUEL aligns with WAC's goal to open the possibility for new collaborative spaces.

THE ROLE OF ETHNOGRAPHY IN FIRST-YEAR RESEARCH WRITING COURSES

Since joining the DU Ethnography Lab in 2019, Kinyon has worked with DUEL members, including Cerón and Dinko, to support the work of students in the first-year writing sequence. Since the founding of the University Writing Program in 2006, ethnography has played an important role in the pedagogy of many faculty members, especially in the context of first-year research writing courses, which introduce students to qualitative, text based/interpretive, and quantitative research. From the early years of the program, many instructors gravitated towards ethnography as an engaging and productive method for teaching qualitative research and writing. This comes as no surprise, since the founding of the program came at a time when ethnography was gaining increasing attention in writing studies both as a form of research and as a pedagogical tool.

Kinyon has incorporated ethnography and autoethnography into her own classes since 2007. Initially working from Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's *Fieldworking*, she has taught her students methods for taking fieldnotes, conducting interviews, writing literature reviews relevant for ethnographies, and presenting research to different popular and scholarly audiences. Her teaching has been informed by approaches to ethnography discussed by Kahn (2011) and, more recently, by Chattaraj's (2020) ideas about connections between ethnography and writing transfer. Through collaborations with DUEL, Kinyon has been able to support student work through a range of resources and events, as discussed below.

In a Conversations in the Disciplines (CID) event during spring 2020, three DUEL members—Dinko, Kelly Fayard, and Alison Krögel—presented their ethnographic research and writing to an audience of first-year students. Representing ethnographic practice in geography, anthropology, and language departments respectively, they discussed the challenges of working with fieldnotes, interviews, quantitative data, and/or close readings to present their research to different disciplinary audiences. Students learned that there is not a single formula for ethnographic writing and that the forms that this writing takes differ in significant ways from one field to another. Students also became aware that issues of social justice, public good, and cultural understanding are important topics for ethnographic projects. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the event took place on Zoom and was recorded and archived on DUEL's website for future classroom use, becoming a valuable resource for future writing courses.

In addition, Kinyon used an internal grant to work with DUEL members on creating a set of ethnographic resources (archived on the DUEL Instructional Videos website) for students and faculty. This involved compiling bibliographies about ethnography and autoethnography as well as the creation of instructional and experiential videos for classroom or faculty use. For example, in “Doing Ethnography in Pandemic Times,” Kinyon interviews three professors about ways that their ethnographic research was altered in 2020–21. In another video, students are introduced to ethnographic positionality, including outsider, participant observer, and autoethnographic perspectives. Other videos by professors and students participating in DUEL include an explanation of IRB protocols as well as personal accounts of ethnographic work: the study of animal healthcare practices in Guatemala, tattoo parlors, music festivals, and food and meaning. DUEL is in the process of further expanding resources such as these for faculty and students.

Especially in recent years, Kinyon’s students have gravitated towards projects that reflect DU’s commitment to diversity and that align with WAC’s focus on community-engaged research and writing. Through ethnographic or autoethnographic methods, her students have examined topics such as the first-generation student experience, hybrid racial identities, and a range of physical and mental health issues. As DU has increasingly provided opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds—recruiting, for example, first-generation students and/or students of Latinx, Native American, African American, and other underrepresented racial backgrounds—many of her students have explored issues of social justice in their ethnographies. This emphasis aligns with larger shifts within WAC towards an activist stance aimed at the potential for change. Students leave her first-year research classes both with a solid knowledge of the writing skills that ethnographic work can provide and with an impetus to further explore how their own identities intersect with those of others. The collaboration between DUEL and the writing program has been instrumental in teaching undergraduates to effectively use ethnographic methodologies and to complete meaningful writing projects that foster social awareness. Given its success in supporting the work of faculty and students, especially as this relates to issues of community engagement, DUEL can potentially serve as a model for the establishment of WAC ethnography labs at other campuses.

CONCLUSION

Ethnographic methodologies are important for WAC, especially since WAC’s goals to foster community engagement and to serve social justice parallel current directions in applied anthropology. Serving as a catalyst for change, DUEL provides

support to a range of faculty members and students who are conducting ethnographic work for the public good. In multiple forms, ethnography can provide the studied subjects with access to needed resources. Cerón's study of epidemiology in Guatemala aims to provide access to medicine and healthcare; Dinko's dissertation work in Ghana aims to give people better access to clean water; and Kinyon's students' socially-engaged projects emphasize the importance of providing access to education and a better life for immigrants and first-generation students. While DUEL is centered at the University of Denver, the work of its members is having a broad impact. DUEL's experience may serve as an inspiration for other similar communities of practice, especially given the way that its approach offers multiple points of contact for individuals at different stages of their careers to get involved in ethnographic research that benefits the subjects of study.

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