

The Ethnography of the University Initiative

A decade of student research on the university

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Welcome to this special issue of *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*. As guest editors, we are delighted to be able to share the experiences of the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI, www.eui.uiuc.edu), a multi-disciplinary course-based initiative that fosters student research on their own universities and is housed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (U of I). EUI is at once a pedagogical approach, a teaching community and a digital archive. EUI also works as a research agenda committed to student engagement with university practice and policy – and thus to institutional critique. In this editorial introduction, we provide an overview of EUI's history, innovations, organisational structure and guiding values. We also introduce this issue's authors – faculty members, an administrator and a former student – all of whom have taught with EUI and have documented here the ways in which taking the university as a research subject transformed their courses and teaching, and in some cases, their programmes and learning.

Beyond pedagogical concerns, most articles in this issue address persistent problems of intolerance and exclusion in American higher education despite decades of policies, programmes and curricula aimed at fostering respect for racial, ethnic, religious and sexual diversity. This focus reflects both the themes of the writers' courses, but also the interests and passions of their students. Featured across these articles are students' research findings that document their discovery of the legacies of white privilege and racial segregation, and their efforts to grapple intellectually with received notions of difference.

EUI began over a decade ago at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (U.S.A.), when two anthropology faculty members (Nancy Abelman and the late Bill Kelleher) strategised ways to push students in their ethnography courses to more critical thinking. Reading yet another fieldwork-based paper on fraternity hazing practices, Nancy wondered whether student research and writing could improve if student projects did not start from



scratch each semester. Further, both Nancy and Bill were intrigued by the often-overlooked institutional backdrop against which students' ethnographic projects took shape. They asked themselves: What if student research papers built on one another in the way in which professional academic papers do? Would students better understand the research process if they could see examples of how data, such as field notes and interview transcripts, are processed and analysed, and then turned into drafts and revised for publication? They also asked, what if these novice researchers could be pushed to link their micro-level ethnographic findings further to the larger-scale forces that shape local contexts, such as the university?

What emerged from these questions was a pedagogical experiment in which a diverse community of academics interested in embedding a university focus into their courses drew on emerging new classroom and library technologies. The project began to take shape first during a year-long (2002–2003) Interdisciplinary Seminar hosted and funded by the U of I's Center for Advanced Studies. That Seminar both theorised the particular nature of the university as an ethnographic object and imagined the contours and character of a digital archive of student research. In the following year, Nancy and Bill taught a joint seminar on the university and seminar participant, Peter Mortensen, then Director of the Writing Program, integrated EUI-themed course sections into the first-year rhetoric programme. Shortly thereafter, EUI (then called EOTU for the Ethnography of the University) – although still a fledgling pedagogical and archival initiative – was commissioned by the Office of Chancellor Nancy Cantor to document the U of I's campus-wide Jubilee Commemoration of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* Decision outlawing racial segregation in public schools (see Ramos in this Issue for more on the U of I's Jubilee Commemoration). Funding for that project supported four undergraduate research interns and two graduate students. The report (Abelmann et al. 2007) went public along with policy recommendations and a companion website on the making of the report.¹ The success of these pilot teaching and research endeavours propelled EUI forward. In the early years, funding from a cross-campus interdisciplinary initiative enabled EUI to incentivise faculty to teach with the project. The faculty directors also made early efforts to include teachers from other nearby colleges and universities. In recent years, EUI has enjoyed the participation of academics teaching at five additional campuses, including the local Parkland Community College. As a teaching and learning community,



EUI holds yearly orientations for new faculty and meetings each semester during which instructors share course ideas and critique each other's syllabi.

From its outset, EUI teachers have shared a research focus on the university, employing both historical investigation through university archives and ethnographic research on the campus. Faculty members have also shared a desire to record students' research processes, and a commitment to preserving student work and making it publicly accessible.

Both to record and preserve student work, EUI has employed a variety of course management and archival software over the years. EUI continues to co-evolve with technological transformations that have provided coordination across campus units, over academic semesters, and via varied media. Course management platforms allow resources to be shared and courses to be linked across campus and even across institutions. Resource sharing has facilitated both the intellectual integration of the project and eased technical issues, such as compliance with federal research ethics guidelines through the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the management of students' intellectual property rights. These digital environments have supported faculty who had perhaps never taught about the university or used ethnographic methods in their own research to introduce these endeavours to their students. At the heart of EUI since the very beginning has been a basic research process template with prescribed fields in which students entered their data: from their initial questions to preliminary data to more refined questions, additional data and, finally, results and analysis or interpretation. The students' research template has included everything from notes on their background readings, field notes and interview transcripts, to preliminary findings, drafts, and a variety of final products. The template – which over time became customisable to fit teachers' particular course needs – both encouraged some consistency across EUI courses and archival entries and allowed students (and EUI) to transform pieces of their investigation into research process documents that could be archived along with any final products. These processual documents make the EUI archives a unique database of student learning, quite distinct from, for example, the disparate artefacts found in many programme assessment portfolios, which typically focus instead on the final writing and research products of individual students. Processual research documents mark points along the path of knowledge construction that can be analysed by future investigators (Hunter et al. 2008).

Over its ten-year existence, EUI has sponsored 156 courses and archived over 1,000 student projects in its public, online database, which is hosted by the U of I's digital repository, the Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship (IDEALS).² Only EUI work that students have agreed to share – through intellectual property permissions protocols – and that has fully observed IRB permissions makes its way to the IDEALS archives. Educating students on their intellectual property rights and maintaining documentation of student IRB permissions is a daunting administrative task, but one with many scholarly benefits.

EUI faculty members have found that when students know that their work will be 'published', they work and write differently. The stakes are higher for quality research and careful documentation when students know that future generations of students or the public at large might read their work. Indeed, students in EUI courses consistently refer to EUI work in IDEALS as 'published articles' rather than 'student papers'. The EUI collection is the largest in IDEALS and EUI projects are often among the most downloaded items from the archive. Further, EUI has worked hard to help faculty members call their students' attention to already published EUI research. Many EUI projects self-consciously engage and sometimes challenge the findings of earlier students. For those of us at EUI, this is the mark of success as students engage in that incremental conversation that is the scholarly endeavour. The EUI archives are also becoming a research repository for both EUI faculty and scholars at large. EUI faculty can, for example, build a body of student research that is shaped by their own intellectual commitments and that they and other researchers can in turn mine for substantive and pedagogical data (see, for instance, Hunter 2012). The articles in this issue, nearly all of which include citations to the IDEALS Archives, are cases in point. Scholars at large can also turn to the EUI archives for rich evidence of student research and learning: EUI looks forward to scholarship to come based on our archives – and hopes that this special issue will call attention to the riches therein.

Building an online, public archive of students' ethnographic research has posed challenges involving the ethical responsibilities of human subjects' research and IRB oversight. Because some student work will make its way to a public archive, EUI research is not covered by IRB exemptions for course-based research. Working closely with the U of I's IRB, EUI developed a protocol that would cover all affiliated courses with the agreement that EUI would provide training in human subjects research and IRB compliance to



affiliated professors and students. Additionally, each EUI student or research team has to file a research plan before any research is begun; remarkably the IRB office reviews these within a few days – and most often within a single day. Linked by a shared IRB agreement, EUI courses must observe certain limitations, among them an exclusive focus on the university as institution and research that is limited to the lawful activities of adults 18 years of age and over. EUI cannot, for example, support research on underage drinking or on the activities of 17-year-old students. Securing approval and maintaining IRB compliance for as many as 16 courses per semester is a significant administrative task.

Despite the administrative challenges, EUI's organisational infrastructure has been remarkably minimal. The co-directors are faculty volunteers. The day-to-day coordination of the project has been handled by one administrative coordinator or part-time graduate students or a combination of the two.³ EUI has, however, relied on the cooperation and buy-in of staff members in the university's libraries, archives and offices supporting online learning and digital technologies. Our funding has been pieced together from departmental contributions, small grants, and other sources of temporary funds. EUI has succeeded in securing some support because it has become a laboratory for piloting various teaching technologies (such as video and podcasting) and research initiatives. What sustains EUI is the enthusiasm of academics who continue to teach EUI courses. As the contributors in this special issue show, EUI has served as a platform for innovative pedagogy and for critical student engagement.

EUI challenges university practice and policy by the very nature of our inquiry. Student researchers put the university under the microscope; they prod, critique and then disseminate their findings. Such scrutiny rarely engenders enthusiasm from university administrations. A key component of EUI's endeavour has been to ask students to 'talk back' to the university through their work – to make recommendations not just for future research but also for university reform. EUI hopes that this exercise can lead students to critical engagement and reform with institutions in their lives beyond college.

EUI remains very much a work in progress, revealing the limits of college teaching and student research. The essays in this issue of *LATISS* both sing the praises of successful student research on the university and bemoan its limitations not only because of the particulars of the course-based platform but also because the dominant discourses that govern our university

experiences are difficult to discern and analyse even for faculty and experienced critics (see, for example, Davies and Petersen 2005 on the subjectivity of faculty adapting to neoliberal discourses within the academy). The pieces by Fortier, Kwon, Rana and Somerville in this issue provide rich examples of these limitations.

In the first article of this issue Siobhan Somerville describes her course on Queer Theory, which shows the limitations and dangers of various identity categories. Attempting to locate queer culture in university archives reveals not only the historical specificity of identity but also the invisibility and erasure of certain stories. Somerville provocatively describes her students' attempts to apply their newly acquired theoretical tools to their ethnographic endeavours. Junaid Rana explains the challenges of teaching students about Muslim America through students' various and multifaceted identities on campus. Likewise, Soo Ah Kwon laments that her students in a course on Asian American Youth often fall back on uncritical discourses of multiculturalism rather than confronting the hard inequalities of racism evidenced on campus.

While most of the authors are faculty who reflect on their teaching, some have written about EUI from the vantage of other positions they hold in the institution. Priscilla Fortier writes as a former University of Illinois McNair Scholars coordinator who mentored under-represented minority students. Seeing these programmes through her students' eyes, she reflects on how they simultaneously sustain persistent hopefulness and experience repeated disappointments. This research has reaffirmed for her that effective diversity programming can only occur when majority students are required to address the comforts of privilege. Writing as a student who was involved in EUI as an undergraduate and through her Ph.D., Teresa Ramos takes up similar issues in her article on the ways in which the university manages racial incidents. Ramos uncovers minority students' stories of racialisation and acts of resistance as well as the university's changing responses to racist incidents. She shows that today's students and administrators alike dodge accusations of racism by attributing racist incidents to other factors, among them drunkenness. Fortier and Ramos both find that EUI gives under-represented minority students purchase on the research mission of the university in ways that are meaningful for their own academic trajectories as well as for university reform.

Catherine Prendergast engages the issues of student research from another angle. Writing as the former Director of the U of I's freshman writing



programme (as well as a previous EUI Co-director), Prendergast recounts her ambitious effort to scale up EUI principles by using inquiry on academic research and writing as the basis for that programme. In so doing, Prendergast also reviews the fascinating parallels between EUI innovations and those in her own field of Writing Studies. A concluding essay, by historian of higher education and former EUI Co-director, Timothy Reese Cain, discusses EUI in relation to the history of undergraduate research in higher education.

EUI begins its second decade bereft of co-founder, William Francis Keller (1950–2013), to whom this issue is dedicated. Bill’s entire research and teaching career embodied EUI’s most lofty calling for research that matters and communicates broadly, and for pedagogy that is engaged and respectful of students as peer intellectuals and researchers. He is sorely missed.



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Notes

1. The companion website and full report of the Ethnography of the Brown v. Board of Education Jubilee Commemoration is available at: <http://www.eui.illinois.edu/archives/ebc/index.htm>
2. The EUI Collection within the IDEALS repository can be found at <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/755>
3. EUI has always relied on many hands and minds. Currently, the authors are joined as Co-directors by Sharon Irish, Adjunct Lecturer and Project Coordinator, Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences and Lecturer in the School of Architecture and Merinda Hensley, Assistant Professor in the University Library, both at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The project is blessed with a skilful coordinator, Karen Rodriguez. See the EUI website for a complete list of current and former staff, internal and external advisory board members, and affiliated faculty, <http://www.eui.illinois.edu/people>. EUI is indebted to them all.

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