Integrating VOICES: Facilitative Ethnography as a Tool for Engaged Scholarship
Abstract

Although many practice-oriented and ethical frameworks for conducting intervention-oriented engaged scholarship exist, none of them seem to explicate the particular research methods or group or organizational facilitations and/or interventions that can be utilized to conduct engaged scholarship. To fill this gap, this essay presents a methodological approach, named facilitative ethnography, through which engaged scholars employ ethnographic practices to observe and develop a rich, nuanced understanding of the communicative behavior within and constitutive of groups and organizations, intervene in communication practices using group facilitation processes to promote change or development for the group or organization and its members, and report their findings through traditional scholarly outlets and with relevant practitioner communities through three research stages. This essay explicates how a facilitative ethnographic research approach is grounded in intervention-oriented applied communication scholarship, and is different from, yet draws on concepts and practices of, traditional ethnography and critical ethnography in regard to site selection, researcher conduct, the particular methods utilized for description, facilitation, and assessment, and dissemination of research findings. In addition, to illustrate facilitative ethnographic practices in communication engaged scholarship, this essay includes examples from a facilitative ethnographic case study with the top management team of an evangelical church, and discusses how this method can be used to enhance disciplinary knowledge, benefit participants, and extend facilitation practice. In all, this essay seeks to carve out space for a new facilitative ethnography approach in between the poles of traditional ethnography and critical ethnography and explains how the approach can be used by engaged scholars.
Integrating VOICES: Facilitative Ethnography as a Tool for Engaged Scholarship

Since its emergence as a formal discipline in the early 20th century, the communication discipline has been grounded in practical application of knowledge, such as helping people to become better public speakers or to engage in democratic group decision making, although the direct applicability of communication scholarship to practice often has been repressed in favor of discussions about conceptual/theoretical, epistemological, and methodological issues (Craig, 1989). Recently, however, Craig (1989, 1995) and Barge (2001; see also Barge & Craig, in press) cast the communication field as one that not only describes and interprets social action but also as a practical discipline that offers important insights and applications to “improve the lives of people and [enhance] their capacities for action” (Barge, p. 6).

Seeking to improve people’s lives and capacities for action is the fundamental goal of applied communication research, which “sets out to contribute to knowledge by answering a real, pragmatic, social question or by solving a real pragmatic, social problem” (Cissna, 1982, p. iv). Through applied research, communication scholars assist persons, groups, organizations, societies, and nations to face their real-world challenges. The growth of such work, especially over the past 40 years (see the essays in Frey & Cissna, in press), has resulted in the institutionalization of applied communication research in the communication discipline, with a division in the National Communication Association (and in other communication associations) and a journal (Journal of Applied Communication Research) devoted to such scholarship (see, e.g., Cissna, Eadie, & Hickson, in press).

As applied communication scholars started studying real-world issues and social problems, they moved out of the laboratory (where “basic communication research” designed to test propositions derived from theory was conducted) and into the field—natural sites where
people interact. Not surprisingly, many applied communication scholars gravitated to business organizations, because of the significance of those organizations for how people earn a living in Western societies (see Seibold, Lemus, Ballard, & Myers, in press). The movement by applied communication researchers into organizations was fueled, in part, by the framing of applied communication scholarship as a form of one-way communication consulting during the 1980s and 1990s, conducted largely with sponsoring for-profit organizations (see Frey & SunWolf, in press), highlighted by Plax’s (1991) advocacy of a “consultancy model for conducting applied communication inquiry” (p. 60). Over time, however, the relationship between applied researchers and organizational stakeholders has significantly changed. Although the consultancy approach privileged the applied communication researcher as “an intervener coming into an organization to alter its communication” (Browning & Hawes, 1991, p. 47) through the one-way transmission or translation of organizational communication knowledge into organizational practice (see Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Petronio, 1999), the recent conceptualization of engaged organizational communication scholarship (see, e.g. Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005; and the articles in the special forum in a recent Journal of Applied Communication Research edited by Barge, Simpson, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008) favors a reflexive and collaborative working relationship between scholars, practitioners, and other organizational stakeholders (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Cheney, Wilhelmsson, & Zorn, 2002; Simpson & Seibold, 2008). Defined by Van de Ven and Johnson (2006, p. 803) as a “collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty in the world,” engaged scholarship represents a revitalization of applied organizational communication scholarship that is consistent with broader calls for
increased “scholarship of engagement” in higher education (Boyer, 1991; 1996), which aims to deepen the public aspects of academic scholarship as academics not only apply and translate scholarship to public issues and audiences but also employ their own resources in working for public good and generating knowledge with widespread public import.

However, although many practice-oriented and ethical frameworks for conducting intervention-oriented engaged scholarship exist (see, e.g. Simpson & Seibold, 2008; Cheney, 2008; Cheney, et al., 2002), none of them seem to explicate the particular research methods or group or organizational facilitations/interventions that can be utilized to conduct engaged scholarship. Although both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to conduct applied communication scholarship (for reviews of such research, see Ellingson, in press; Query et al., in press), it seems that the qualitative method of ethnography is particularly fitting for engaged scholars, who do not just look upon, but immerse themselves in, real-world groups and organizations, and work closely and learn with group and organizational stakeholders (Barge et al., 2008; Seibold, 2005). However, existing ethnographic research approaches do not fit the bill for both describing and intervening in group and organizational communication practices. To fill this gap, this essay presents an alternative form, named facilitative ethnography, through which engaged scholars observe and describe sites and the communicative behavior within and constitutive of them, and then intervene in communication practices to promote change or development for the group or organization and its members. To this end, I first describe the observation—intervention continuum in applied communication scholarship, situating engaged scholarship on this continuum. Second, I draw connections between the poles of this continuum and the current methodological frameworks of ethnography and critical ethnography, and suggest the development of facilitative ethnography. Third, I explore, in particular, the goals and
practices of facilitative ethnography in regard to site selection, researcher conduct and relationship building, particular methods utilized for description, facilitation, and assessment, and dissemination of research findings, illustrating these practices along the way with examples from a facilitative ethnographic case study with the leadership team of a church facing significant growth-related challenges. In all, this essay seeks to carve out space for a new facilitative ethnography approach in between the poles of traditional ethnography and critical ethnography, and explore how the approach can be used by engaged scholars.

Connecting Applied Communication Scholarship and Ethnographic Research Methods

In large measure, sub-discipline of applied communication research has been constituted by the debates regarding the relative importance of basic versus applied research, theory versus application, scholarly rigor versus practical relevance, and observation versus intervention in such research (Frey & Sunwolf, in press). While many of the aforementioned debates have been resolved as scholars have recognized that the issues are not either/or constructions but as both/and necessities, such as in the case of research being both rigorous and relevant, one debate—that of observation versus intervention—continues to generate significant discussion in the field, highlighted by the recent calls for increased engaged and difference-making scholarship in the communication discipline (e.g., Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Cheney et al., 2002; Frey, in press; Simpson & Seibold, 2008; Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005).

The Observation—Intervention for Social Justice Continuum

Engaged scholars situate themselves squarely on the intervention end of the observation–intervention continuum in applied communication scholarship identified by Frey and SunWolf (in press), which represents a debate that continues, “between applied communication scholars who observe how people manage pragmatic communication issues and those who intervene to
facilitate change, engaging, in the most extreme case, in communication activism to promote social justice” (p. 36). Frey and SunWolf suggested that on the “minimal definitional end of the applied communication scholarship continuum, researchers observe people confronting pragmatic communication issues to describe, interpret, explain, and, in some cases, critique what occurs for the purpose of enlightening other scholars” (p. 36). Frey and Carragee (2007, p. 6) suggested that from an observational third-person-perspective, “researchers stand outside the stream of human events and observe, describe, interpret, explain, and … (in applied communication scholarship) offer suggestions for what or should occur.” Frey and Sunwolf (in press, p. 90) suggested that these types of “scholars are supposed to be, and most likely were trained to be, spectators whose work is best done by looking at and contemplating what occurs without trying to affect it.” However, Petronio (1999, p. 88), among others, encouraged researchers to “take the knowledge discovered through research or theory and interpret it for everyday use,” thereby engaging in translational scholarship in which, according to O’Hair (2000, p. 165), “conceivable and sensible implications for practice” are offered. Translational communication scholars often “include in their written reports recommendations for practitioners and/or people affected by the communication issue to influence subsequent practice” (Frey & SunWolf, in press, p. 36), and write articles in practitioner-oriented journals and books for practitioner and general public audiences.

However, researchers who promote translational scholarship do not situate themselves on the intervention end of the applied communication research continuum and conduct “first-person-perspective research” (Frey & Carragee, 2007, p. 6). Scholars who conduct first-person-perspective research do not only observe, describe, and interpret/explain communicative behavior and provide recommendations for practice, but they also take the extra step of
intervening in the sites in which they work, acting on behalf of and with, for example, community members, practitioners, and other stakeholders. This intervention-oriented research most clearly constitutes engaged scholarship (see, e.g., Cheney et al., 2002; Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005; Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), meaning that engaged communication scholars go further than simply observing and describing communication in practical situations, applying communication theory and research, and/or translating scholarship into practice. Instead, engaged communication scholars immerse themselves in sites such as communities, groups, and organizations for extended periods of time, collaboratively develop and test theory with site members and practitioners, employ passion and dedication in their work, and intervene into discourses and thereby, participate in creating social reality for multiple stakeholders (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Frey, in press; Seibold, 2005; Simpson & Seibold, 2008; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). As such, engaged scholarship responds to Frey’s (2000) assertion that the real challenge in applied communication research is not whether to put communication resources into practice, as that is what is done in a practical discipline such as communication (Craig, 1989), or what to put into practice (communication knowledge and skills), but who should put those resources into practice. Accordingly, engaged scholars put “their communication knowledge and skills into practice” (Frey, 2000, p. 179) not only by observing interaction but also by intervening into communicative practices through a variety of engaged research methods.

However, Frey and Sunwolf (in press) suggested that at the furthest end of the continuum stand scholars who conduct intervention-oriented research for social justice, which involves “engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced” (Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996, p.
As Frey, Pearce, et al. (1996) explained, scholars operating from this perspective take on an activist orientation:

> It is not enough merely to demonstrate or bemoan the fact that some people lack the minimal necessities of life, that others are used regularly against their will and against the interests by others for their pleasure or profit, and that some are defined as “outside” the economic, political, or social system because of race, creed, lifestyle, or medical condition…. A social justice sensibility entails a moral imperative to act as effectively as we can to do something about sustained inequalities. (p. 111)

As such, this form of applied communication scholarship has also been termed *communication activism*, through which “communication scholars [immerse] themselves in the stream of human life, taking direct vigorous action in support of or opposition to a controversial issue for the purpose of promoting social change and justice” (Frey & Carragee, 2007, p. 10). In all, scholars working in various places along this continuum, from those strictly observing and describing communication phenomena and offering suggestions for practice, to those translating their research findings into practical guides, to those intervening with people through engaged scholarship, to those working for and on behalf of those underprivileged and oppressed, have contributed much to advance applied scholarship in the practical discipline of communication.

**Ethnography and Critical Ethnography: Serving Observation and Intervention for Social Justice**

This continuum from observation to intervention for social justice in applied communication research is mirrored in the qualitative methodological practices and purposes of ethnography. While ethnographers simply observe and describe groups of people, positioning themselves in a place similar to applied communication researchers on the observation end,
critical ethnographers situate themselves on the intervention for social justice end. On the one
eend of the continuum, ethnographers, employing participant–observation and in-depth
interviews, examine “the patterned interactions and significant symbols of specific cultural
groups to identify the cultural norms (rules) that direct their behaviors and the meanings people
ascibe to each other’s behaviors” (Frey et al., 1991, p. 229), to create a “social scientific
description of a people and the cultural basis of their peoplehood” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p.
40; see also, e.g. Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001; Berg, 2001; Denzin &
Lincoln, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Potter, 1996). In so doing, ethnography offers a
particularly useful qualitative methodology for engaged communication scholars because it (a)
involves immersion in the research site to study people in their natural contexts (Frey, Botan, &
Kreps, 2000), (b) requires researchers to develop an active participatory relationship with actors
in the site studied (Gold, 1958), (c) makes use of both research participants’ (emic) and
researchers’ (etic) perspectives (Potter, 1996), and (d) results in “thick description” of the site
(Geertz, 1973). Through ethnography, communication researchers explore nuanced meanings
created and sustained through communication, by “being there and writing about what one sees,
hears, feels, smells, and tastes there” (Ellingson, in press, p. 129). However, although Ellingson
(in press, p. 129) suggested that “applied communication ethnographers seek to be there in
various sites for the purpose of learning about and assisting in the development, change, or
improvement of that site or other related sites,” knowing exactly how ethnographers intervene in
the sites they study is elusive, as intervention is not a clearly articulated goal of ethnography. In
this perspective, there are no explicit practical applications offered by researchers to members of
the site. Hence, through thick description of research sites, ethnography is useful for applied
communication scholarship that describes communicative behavior and then offers suggestions
for practice, but it is not very useful, in and of itself, for applied communication research that not only describes but also intervenes in communication practices, such as engaged scholarship.

On the other end of the continuum stand critical ethnographers, who critique cultural norms, power structures, and institutions, and promote social justice and change through their work (see, e.g., Conquergood, 1991; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993). Operating from a critical ethnographic perspective, Ashcraft (1999) suggested that her research “reflect[s] a critical, participatory bent” and “seeks knowledge of social action in the service of social change” (p. 249). Conquergood’s (1994, p. 24) study of youth gangs in Chicago, as just one noteworthy example of critical ethnography, employed “ethnographic research methods that are intensely participative and critically engaged,” to attempt to alter public views of gang members and thereby directly alter social policy. For these researchers, change through intervention is a clearly stated objective; however, it is typically conducted in groups and communities that are often underrepresented, underprivileged, or otherwise oppressed, “often involves attention to the overt and hidden ways in which power operates to privilege some people and oppress others” (Ellingson, in press, p. 132), and is grounded in critical theory. However, as Craig (1989) argued, critical theory’s exclusive focus on power relations and ideological critique ignores the ways that “communicative practices make universalistic claims on us quite apart from their role in any particular social order” (p. 110). As such, Craig and Muller (2007, p. 59) suggested that through a practical theory perspective, “ordinary practical questions about communication can legitimately be addressed without constant attention to questions of power and ideology in society;” and therefore advocated an “approach that begins with everyday practices and applies the insights of critical theory when relevant.” Therefore, although critical ethnography advocates for and demands intervention, it primarily does so by
seeking to release oppression and rebalance power structures while largely ignoring regular, everyday, communication challenges and struggles.

**Introducing Facilitative Ethnography**

As explicated in the previous section, traditional ethnography neither requires nor provides tools for intervention, and critical ethnography promotes intervention, but focuses solely on issues of power and oppression, and therefore overtly seeks social justice. Although some intervention work situated on the applied communication continuum is not necessarily grounded in a social justice sensibility and fits clearly in line with the goals of engaged scholarship, as described above, in the realm of ethnographic practices, a more centrist position lacks. Consequently, a middle-of-the-road ethnographic approach is needed, one that observes and describes the site and the communicative behavior within and constitutive of the site (drawing from ethnography) AND demands intervention in communication practices (drawing from critical ethnography) without overtly focusing on issues of power and, therefore, social justice. Hence, researchers need a type of ethnography that promotes intervention into everyday practical communication challenges, or what can be termed *facilitative ethnography*. *Facilitative ethnography* is a scholarly process that involves researchers (a) first employing ethnographic practices to develop a rich, nuanced understanding of the communicative behavior engaged in at a particular site; (b) then developing and implementing, based on that understanding, a unique program of communication facilitation, which is evaluated for its effectiveness in relation to group- or organizationally defined goals, as well as other outcomes; all of which is (c) finally reported in traditional scholarly outlets, as well as in relevant practitioner communities. Facilitative ethnography, thus, provides communication researchers with an approach and process by which to conduct engaged applied organizational communication scholarship.
Facilitative ethnographers not only immerse themselves in a site to provide rich
descriptions of communicative practices and offer insights and suggestions for the improvement,
development, and/or change of those communicative practices (Ellingson, in press) but they also
go one step further to assist, whenever possible, the members of the site studied to implement
that change, development, or improvement through group facilitation (for reviews on group
facilitation, see, e.g., Frey, 1995a; 2006a, Sunwolf, 2002; Sunwolf & Frey, 2005; Sunwolf &
Seibold, 1999). Thus, this approach to engaged scholarship is termed *facilitative ethnography*
because ethnographic methods are employed in the service of applied communication
scholarship, particularly through the investigation and facilitation of group interaction processes
to support group, community, organizational, or societal development and change, and to
enhance the lives of members of those groups, communities, organizations, and societies. The
following sections explicate facilitative ethnography more fully by comparing and contrasting it
to traditional and critical forms of ethnography as regard the purposes and prime targets for
engagement through facilitative ethnography, the ways that engaged scholars enter, work in, and
build and maintain relationships in their research sites, the integration of various methods
utilized for description, facilitation, and assessment, and the reporting and disseminating of
research findings. In addition, this section contains several illustrations of how the facilitative
ethnographic principles were put into practice in the author’s recent engaged research study
spanning over two-and-a-half years with the top management team of an evangelical suburban
church with approximately 2500 regular attendees, hereafter referred to as FLC (a pseudonym).

**Purposes for and Targets of Facilitative Ethnography**

As stated above, typically, ethnography is concerned with creating detailed descriptions
of cultures. As noted by Trujillo (1992), “Ethnographic methods require researchers to immerse
themselves in the field for an extended period of time in order to gain a detailed understanding of how members interpret their culture” (p. 352). In contrast, critical ethnography involves “an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Madison, 2005), typically with those who are most marginalized or oppressed in society. Facilitative ethnography, in conducting engaged communication scholarship, in contrast, seeks detailed explanations of a particular group or organization and serves to facilitate change, improvement, and/or development in group and organizational communicative practices through interventions with members in the site, while it also attends to issues of power and privilege by helping people find their voices and express themselves through participation and representation. In the FLC study, the facilitative ethnographer set out to assist the team in reaching its goals regarding effective leadership of the church while he also worked to develop legitimate, participative teamwork among the leadership team. Moreover, by exposing the hidden realities of group and organizational life that might oppress people (sometimes albeit unknowingly or unintentionally), this work can serve the purposes of liberation and individual empowerment by drawing attention to communicative micro practices and the work they do that is not immediately noticed or acknowledged by site members (Ellingson, in press). For example, by first uncovering and identifying individualistic and unproductive communicative behaviors through immersion and rich participant–observation and in-depth interviews, and then encouraging collaborative and participative forms of working through group facilitation, facilitative ethnographers can draw attention to issues of representation and inequality, and offer opportunities for representation and participation of less “powerful” or marginalized persons. For example, with FLC, the researcher was asked by the church’s senior leader to help establish a productive executive team, but in the descriptive stage, the researcher identified several harmful interactional norms, such as
extraordinary reliance upon and deference to the senior leader by the other executive team members, an understanding of communication as nothing more information transfer, a culture that de-emphasized planning, and a lack of structures to assimilate new information, and helped all of the team members understand how these practices marginalized certain team members while negatively affecting organizational performance. Thus, in essence, all research, including that done within a facilitative ethnographic approach, is critical, but facilitative ethnography does not necessarily require an a priori commitment to critical theory and/or the targeted investigation of systems of domination and oppression. Instead, the goals of facilitative ethnography are to enable group, organizational, or community members to reach their various individual and collective goals by enhancing communication practices, and in so doing, enhance their lives and the lives of others.

Because facilitative ethnography focuses on improving communication in groups and organizations, facilitative ethnographers privilege sites where their work can contribute or be used to make a difference. As Becker (1995) stated, “The major question most of us face in our lives is not whether our research should be useful; it is, rather, what it should be useful for and for whom it should be useful” (p. 102). Although many sites might be interesting to study and accessible to researchers (the primary qualifications necessary for those coming from a ethnographic perspective), facilitative ethnographers are clear about whom and what their research is useful for—to help people reach their communication goals and promote personal and group or organizational change or improvement. Therefore, groups and organizations prime for facilitative ethnography are those in which people in the site need and/or desire such assistance rather than groups and organizations in which researchers see inequality or other issues of domination and oppression, which are typical targets for critical ethnographers. For instance,
FLC was selected as a site for facilitative ethnography because of the significant problems facing the executive team as it managed significant challenges arising from significant church growth, such as many more weekly attendees, the launch of 2 additional campuses, and an increasing desire among the pastoral staff to encourage growth in spiritual maturity among congregants, as well as the senior pastor’s (and other pastor’s) willingness to receive help to reach their goals. As such, the FLC executive team was a prime target for facilitative ethnography because of the practical challenges it was facing, not because a researcher thought their team dynamics, were, for instance, characterized by problematic power imbalances, or some other interesting disciplinary issue. Thus, in essence, facilitative ethnographers find their projects in the problems, dilemmas, and challenges that people face in everyday group and organizational life, and engage the sites in which those challenges and issues are constituted and managed.

**Entering Sites: Researcher Roles and Relationships**

Once a site is selected, facilitative ethnographers must establish high levels of trust and respect in their relationships with research participants, so that researchers might garner openness and receptivity to the facilitative intervention, and help the improvement or change to be instilled into the daily operating practices and organizational realities of the site (Frey & SunWolf, in press; Sunwolf & Frey, 2005). As such, facilitative ethnography attends to the ethical considerations of engaged scholarship explicated by Simpson and Seibold (2008): (a) engaging only in projects that researchers have the expertise to be of assistance, (b) reflecting on work to ensure that no harm is done and remedying any harm that may have occurred, (c) encouraging transparency about processes and intended outcomes, (d) noticing and addressing potential power dynamics when assuming the role of outside “expert” and inviting feedback from and engagement with organizational members, and (e) striving for positive relationships
that hold personal and professional integrity paramount. By affirming and practicing in alignment with these ethical commitments, engaged scholars move into and begin work in a site by developing solid relationships of trust, thereby forming the basis for co-creation and collaboration throughout the engagement.

Because facilitative ethnographers must build a strong sense of trust with group and organizational members and stakeholders, they make apparent their values as they engage a site. Given that facilitative intervention is part of the engagement process, it is axiomatic that participants in a site know that scholars are there as researchers/facilitators. Therefore, even though traditional and critical ethnographers, theoretically, could adopt any of Gold’s (1958) roles of complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer, as it is not necessarily a requirement that they engage directly with members of the site, facilitative ethnographers are unable to take the roles of complete participant or complete observer, because those orientations require that actors in a site not know the manifest purpose of the research. Instead, facilitative ethnographers must assume either a participant-as-observer role, in which researchers observe from a perspective of increasing participation, or an observer-as-participant role, in which observation is primary with minimal participation. Although both approaches might be used, the participant-as-observer role is most relevant to facilitative ethnography, as it promotes researchers engaging in increased levels of activity within the site, which helps them to develop the fullest perspective of the practical issues confronting the group or organization. In addition, by taking this role, researchers “gradually become useful as time goes on, so as to be included in increasingly complex or interesting areas of social life” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 147). By becoming practically useful in the site, facilitative ethnographers accustom organizational members to their involvement and contributions, which pays off later as
the project moves into the intervention/facilitation stage. At FLC, the researcher quickly became useful in the site, even before the facilitation stage, conducting congregational focus groups to gather data for future decision making, contributing substantively to the teaching team meetings by suggesting particular interpretations for bible passages and possible sermon illustrations, and developing an agenda for weekly meetings, and then managing and facilitating those meetings each week.

As such, facilitative ethnographers understand that they become very involved in the site and recognize that their involvement in the site participates in an ongoing construction of meaning and organizational reality. Although many ethnographers take a similar approach, some assume meanings to be stable (Deetz, 1994; Putnam, 1983) and, thereby, operate as though they are looking at an organization or group as a container that they can peer into, and not actively engage with. However, whether performing traditional ethnography or facilitative ethnography, researchers must realize that they are not a “blank slate” or completely “objective” observers; whether through direct participation in a site during observation or through interpretation, researchers act (from particular contexts) and into the context they are studying. Critical ethnographers clearly acknowledge this issue, and view what they bring into a site as very important, as this theoretical and/or ideological orientation forms the basis from which they do their work. Therefore, facilitative ethnographers draw from this strength of critical ethnography. Simply put, facilitative ethnographers recognize that “research is a creative, social act, and the images of the world we create have important consequences for how human beings think about themselves” (Eisenberg, 1986, p. 96). Consequently, it is essential that facilitative ethnographers discuss their presuppositions and values with research participants to explain the rationale for and the importance of the suggestions for practice or intervention. For instance, at FLC, the
facilitative ethnographer made clear his scholarly interests in and commitments to collaboration and discipleship (Christian spiritual formation), proposing that his research findings and suggestions for practices to target during the facilitation stage might be affected by these commitments. However, he attempted to only encourage collaboration work practices and thoughtfulness to a discipleship process after the team members themselves indicated their desire to pursue those objectives.

**Particular Methods for Description, Facilitation, and Assessment**

After entering a site, the first task of engaged scholars employing a framework of facilitative ethnography is to use traditional ethnographic practices to develop a rich, nuanced understanding of the communicative behavior in that site by examining the “ordinary, undramatic communication behavior that is usually taken for granted, messages people exchange almost unconsciously” (Frey et al., 1991, p. 234). Specifically, facilitative ethnographers could employ a host of interpretive methods, such as participant–observation, interviews, taking copious field notes, coding and categorizing data, building grounded theory, and other procedures, to develop a rich explanation of the interactions that constitute and operate within the organization under investigation (for reviews and instructions regarding use of these particular methods for these purposes, see, e.g., Ellingson, in press; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). These methods are the same as those used by ethnographers or critical ethnographers, and are primarily informed by an interpretive epistemological paradigm that seeks to discover the meanings that are being constituted and shared by members of a particular group, organization, or community (Frey et al., 1991). As mentioned previously, these meanings are explored both through *emic* perspectives, those of the participants in the site, and *etic* perspectives, those of the researcher, which are informed by the researcher’s saturation in theory and practical experience
For example, the researcher spent 5 months simply studying the communication practices of the FLC executive team, attending meetings, observing typical office interaction, and interviewing members of the team as well as other staff members, in order to develop a strong, nuanced, understanding of the team and the context within which it worked. In sum, facilitative ethnographers inductively produce “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of ordinary, everyday communicative practices, which provide a rich data set from which to interpret and analyze communicative behavior, and then intervene in those communication practices.

After the first stage of description, interpretation, and analysis, facilitative ethnographers use the data collected and findings developed to craft a personalized program of facilitation/intervention in collaboration with practitioners in the second stage of engagement. At this second stage, differences between ethnographers and critical ethnographers and facilitative ethnographers become apparent, as facilitative ethnographers might employ particular facilitation techniques, albeit organized and adapted to meet the specific needs of the group or organization being studied, in a decidedly deductive manner, and evaluate the program’s effectiveness, and other outcomes, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Here, facilitative ethnographers take advantage of numerous facilitation tools that have been developed by a host of applied communication scholars in response to the “difficulties and dilemmas [of group work by creating] specific discussion, decision-making, and problem-solving techniques” under the assumption that “group communication will be enhanced and more effective group decisions and solutions will result” (Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999, p. 398). Sunwolf and Seibold (1999), Sunwolf (2002), and Sunwolf and Frey (2005) reviewed and synthesized empirical research about the development and use of various facilitation techniques, identifying approximately 75 techniques for facilitating task group communication to (a) support goals of structuring communication
through the use, for example, agendas and parliamentary procedure; (b) analyze the nature of
tasks, issues, or problems, using, for instance, devil’s advocacy and stepladder techniques; (c)
create innovation through procedures, such as brainstorming and idea writing; and (d) reach
agreement regarding decisions or solutions to address particular issues, problems, and tasks,
through, for instance, various voting procedures and decision rules. In addition, Sunwolf and
Frey (2005) reviewed a handful of techniques to facilitate relational communication during group
formation, development of diverse groups, expression of social support in groups, and
management of group conflict.

All of these techniques might be utilized by facilitative ethnographers as part of an
overall program of intervention, as engaged scholars work closely with practitioners to develop
and execute interventions, consistent with the collaborative nature of engaged scholarship. By
engaging

participants as much as possible in the formulation and development of the study itself ... [the]
deeper engagement with the organization acts as a check on the credibility of [the
scholar’s] findings and a way to stimulate [the scholar] to translate [his/her] findings into
something usable. (Cheney et al., 2002, p. 98)

In this developmental process, facilitative ethnographers approach their studies firmly grounded
in the ideals of practical theory (Barge, 2001; Barge & Craig, in press; Craig, 1989, 1995),
seeking what works in particular situations, applying various theories that inform and make sense
of the collected data, and cultivating communicative praxis in response to communication
problems or challenges. Since (engaged) scholars are grounded in theory, their contributions are
different than those that other practitioners bring (Simpson & Seibold, 2008) and help to provide
a more comprehensive understanding of the situation and the challenges therein. By drawing on
theoretical and conceptual expertise and previous experience, and working collaboratively with practitioners, facilitative ethnographers develop and implement intervention programs that hold great promise for individuals, groups, organizations, and the communities they serve.

In the FLC study, the researcher proposed, developed, and implemented a 3-month original facilitation program to help the leadership team move toward its goals. This intervention consisted, generally, of eight steps enacted over four months:

A. Collaborative preparation (by the researcher and the church’s senior pastor) of a facilitation plan customized to respond to the FLC executive team’s communication challenges and organizational goals.

B. Data gathering and staff preparation for in-depth reflection on spiritual maturity and how local churches encourage it.

C. Presentation of research findings and basic teamwork training.

D. Establishing as an executive team spiritual maturity qualities as a target for all FLC programs and activities.

E. Identifying and mapping processes of how people move toward spiritual maturity through involvement in FLC’s ministry programs and activities.

F. Determining future direction, strategy, and goals, based on the established spiritual maturity qualities, for the coming year among all FLC ministries and services.

G. Identifying and understanding forces that drive and restrict the executive team from enacting change within and outside the team.

H. Documenting, disseminating the products from this overall facilitation plan and integrating the plan into organizational practice.
The FLC facilitation program was grounded in Schein’s (1969) model of process consultation; popular, recent, and well-regarded church growth and disciple-making literature from the Evangelical community; and group and team facilitation techniques, processes, and case studies (see, e.g., Frey, 1995b; 2006b; Ghais, 2005; Milburn, Kenefick, & Lambert, 2006; Sunwolf & Frey, 2005; Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999; Wheelan & Furbur, 2006). Specifically, the researcher employed elements of or modified versions of the Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff, 2002; Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974), force field analysis (Lewin, 1951, 1958), agendas (Milburn et al., 2006; Plott & Levine, 1978); group development assessment (Buzaglo & Wheelan, 1999; Wheelan & Furbur, 2006), sense-making (Gribas & Sims, 2006), team training (Cooley, 1994; Glaser, 1994; Marks, Zaccaro, & Mathieu, 2000; Parrish-Sprowl, 2006; Seibold, 1995), and presence and activity of a facilitator (Kuk, 2000; Kwok, Ma, & Vogel, 2003; Offner, Kramer, & Winter, 1996; Seibold, 1995) in a multifaceted, long-term program of organizational intervention/facilitation.

Following intervention, facilitative ethnographers return (if they ever left) to the site to investigate the impacts of the intervention. Facilitative ethnographers seeking to intervene in sites should plan for extended duration of study, not just “drop off” suggestions for practice or quickly facilitate an intervention, and then be on their way to another investigation. Instead, following ethnographic calls for thick description of research sites, researchers should stay involved in the group or organization, and investigate the results of their facilitation practices with the same investment and rigor they employed in the first stage of description and interpretation of the site. Although this follow-up study might utilize different philosophies (perhaps a deductive analysis of the results of the facilitation) and methods (perhaps quantitative methods in association with continuing qualitative work), simply pulling out after making
suggestions or intervening is antithetical to engaged scholarship and, therefore, facilitative ethnography.

During this assessment, both qualitative and quantitative procedures can be employed to understand how the intervention contributed (or did not), for instance, to fulfilling group or organizational goals, making team processes more effective, and developing individual members. By conducting additional in-depth interviews and engaging in more participant–observation (ethnographic methods), facilitative ethnographers provide rich analyses of the impacts of facilitations/interventions in regard to a number of intended and unintended outcomes. In addition, especially in organizational contexts with quantitatively measured organizational goals and outcomes, engaged scholars likely will use numerical measurements to assess some of the organization’s most relevant indicators of success and performance in regard to the organization’s goals (or of the facilitation itself). As an example, Wheelan and Furbur (2006), in their study of the customer service unit within a large insurance company moving to a team-based organization, not only studied the effects of their facilitation program on group development but also assessed the effects on team performance via quantitative analysis of customers’ responses. No matter what assessment techniques researchers use, because facilitative ethnographers facilitate changes in practice, they should pay particular attention to triangulating their data via the use of multiple methods and conducting member checks via interviews throughout the process to harvest participants’ reactions, commentaries, and critiques (Sarri & Sarri, 1992) and to take every precaution to be sure that their action in the site is productive and not harmful (Frey, 1998; Simpson & Seibold, 2008). In the FLC study, after the conclusion of the multi-faceted facilitation program, the researcher went back to the weekly team meetings and observed interaction, conducted interviews with the executive team members, and collected
responses from an evaluation of the facilitation program and post-intervention teamwork questionnaire (this questionnaire was also administered in stage 1, before the intervention), synthesizing all of this data to develop a robust assessment of the facilitation program. Whereas interpretations made by ethnographers may not be so important to those who are studied, often because the results are only published in an academic journal and not read by many, if any, practitioners, interpretations always are important when actual practitioners rely on them, such as in facilitative ethnography. Eisenberg (1986), as noted above, acknowledged that the interpretations that researchers “create” have important implications for those being studied, which becomes even more important as subsequent intervention and change directly impact the group of people being studied. At the end of the engagement at FLC, the executive team possessed a strategic plan for the coming year and a path to implement it, had planned all of their events and activities for the coming year, had processed through staffing changes necessary to achieve the plan and prepare the team for future growth and progress. In addition, the researcher offered several suggestions for changes in organizational structure and team member job responsibilities, which held the potential, if adopted, to dramatically change life for the church and the executive team members. As such, the researcher carefully and thoughtfully interrogated his suggestions to ensure that they were based on accurate interpretations of the team’s practices in line with the church’s goals, and, in so doing, sought to not harm the church or the team members, but to benefit them. Thus, by doing all they can to ensure that their interpretations are accurate and correspond to the nature of the site, lead to positive outcomes, and do not lead to additional confusion or poorer performance, facilitative ethnographers not only avoid doing harm but also do some good (Frey, 1998).

**Reporting and Disseminating Findings**
Finally, facilitative ethnographers not only use their findings to influence the practices of the members (through facilitation) of the sites studied but they also, as appropriate, make their findings accessible to other practitioners operating in similar contexts (a practice that is limited in other forms of qualitative research, but not prohibited) and within the scholarly academic communities of which they are a part. Although critical ethnographers’ work seeks to directly benefit the members of the sites with whom they work, many of the results from such studies are only disseminated in the academic community, with hopes that someone, somewhere, will read the report and be urged to do something about it. Thus, although the research desires to make change, the research reports often collect more dust on library shelves than accolades for actually making a difference in the group, organization, or community studied. This issue is similarly experienced by ethnographers, whose primary audience is the academic community, with reports sometimes being disseminated to those in the community studied.

For facilitative ethnographers, however, it is essential that the research makes a difference for individuals, groups, organizations, or communities through direct intervention, as well as in practitioner and academic communities. To do this, facilitative ethnographers report their findings through, for example, publications in journals and scholarly books, and presentations at colloquia and conferences (such as this paper, arising from the FLC study), in order to inform academic community members about particular groups, organizations, and communities, and to spur on further study and action. Furthermore, facilitative ethnographers translate their scholarship to practice and reach relevant practitioner communities using a variety of translational practices, such as offering communication training, writing books or articles in trade magazines and journals, making documentary films, and serving as commentators or on various media shows (Frey, in press). In all, connections between researcher and site
participants, researcher and broader practitioner community, and researcher and academic community are encouraged, if not essential, for the research to have its fullest effect by serving the purposes of development, improvement, and change that enhances the lives of site members, members of similar sites, practitioners, and other researchers.

Conclusion

In this essay, I explicated the goals, practices, and commitments of facilitative ethnography as a tool for engaged scholarship, largely to identify and articulate a fresh methodological approach by which to conduct engaged scholarship. Because traditional and critical ethnography lack in providing a coherent framework to conduct intervention-oriented applied communication research regarding everyday communication challenges and without an overt focus on issues of power and oppression, a new approach is needed. As such, facilitative ethnography provides engaged scholars with a framework through which they can observe and describe the site and the communicative behavior within and constitutive of the site, facilitate and intervene into communication practices, evaluate the various effects of that intervention, and contribute to practitioner and scholarly communities through the dissemination of research findings, such as demonstrated by the facilitative ethnographic study of FLC. I trust that this essay will help communication researchers and practitioners to respond to the great needs and challenges of society through facilitative ethnography, and facilitate the advancement of engaged scholarship in the communication discipline.
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