OBSERVATION 1 – WRITEUP AND REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

PART 1: WRITEUP

The object of my mini-study was looking at the effect of live transcription on collecting qualitative research data. When participants can see their words being written out on a computer screen (by a trained typist), how do they react and what are their perceptions? (As it turns out, they don't react very much at all – human beings speaking words to you are far more interesting than those same words being typed.)

My first observation takes place on a late Tuesday afternoon, halfway through the 3rd meeting of an advanced graduate class on qualitative research methods in the Education department of a research university. I am a student in the class, and we are practicing interviews – how to conduct them, how to build rapport with our participants, how to move things along, how to structure and adapt questions on the fly... all of the unteachable aspects of the art we are supposed to learn. It is late January and there has been a cold snap, so thick coats are draped over the backs of many chairs and piled in empty seats.

We've just finished the first practice interview, the professor and a grad student chatting in the middle of the room about graduate school work-life balance while the remaining 26 students listened quietly in a circle that enclosed them, each of us sitting in individual chairs with miniscule tabletops attached to a little arm cantilevered out from the chair's side; they are the sort of chairs you line up in rows and rows for exam-taking during finals for massive lab classes, and they make loud grating, screeching noises whenever they are dragged across the floor.

Right now is one such time – a number of things are happening simultaneously. The next subject (S) and interviewer (I) have volunteered themselves and been selected, and are walking to their seats; the professor and the student from the first interview are moving to take their places around the circle, I am walking up to place the transcription laptop between the new subject and interviewee (the screen between them, facing sideways so they both can read it), and the *entire darn circle* is scooting around with a mighty screeching noise, coming around to "my side" so they can

see the screen, turning the circle into a lumpy crescent cluster. Only one person remains on what has now become the "back" of the room, the side that can't see the screen; I've turned a theatre-in-the-round into a theatre-with-a-front. Chairs are still being scudded across the floor as the interview begins, the transcriber seated in a back corner and typing on her own laptop as the subject and interviewer begin to speak.

"So you are talking to me about the balance between life and doctoral work," the interviewer says over the screech of chairs. "What have you given up?"

"I have given things up," replies the subject, eyes fixed on the interviewer. "I don't go swimming as much, things like that – my typical self-care. I have also given up connections with some of my family due to the alienating nature of it. I'm a first generation student. They don't understand. As far as they can tell, all I do is read a lot and write."

They are focused on each other, ignoring the scraping of the chairs, the probing of our eyes, the listening of our ears. They hold each other's eyes; we have been told how important it is to have rapport, how much eye contact matters for that. The interviewer holds a pen loosely in her right hand, resting it on a piece of paper.

"Have you had explicit discussions about that?" the interviewer asks.

"Yes," says the subject. "In some portions it has gone better. In their view, people do work that you can see produced in the world. My family doesn't see producing ideas in the same way. There's just alienation that goes along with that."

They proceed through their conversation, holding each other's gaze – and then they start to flicker off to to other things, keeping the rapport taut between them. The interviewer glances down to take a quick note on her paper; the eye contact is momentarily broken, but the connection remains and the conversation is not interrupted. The subject has no pen, no piece of paper – and then it happens. I see the subject's eyes flick over to the screen mid-sentence, then just as quickly flick back. The rapport holds, the conversation flows on – but let us let their conversation continue and flick back ourselves to the moment of that glance for just a moment.

The glance was a quick motion of the eyes only, not a turning of the head, not a moving of the body. It was the sort of look that one might give a clock on the wall, a "please don't notice me" glance meant to check in on the time – except in this case, the information displayed would not have been the time, but the data of the conversation itself. Instead of "what time is it?" the glance could be a "where in the conversation are we?" glance.

Afterwards, the interviewer (I) and subject (S) of the mock interview were asked to reflectively debrief. An excerpt from my fieldnotes (which are paraphrases, not verbatim):

When asked how they reacted to the screen:
I: ignore!
S: watching screen while asking questions

I believe S meant that "when I was being spoken to by I, I was not looking at the screen; I was looking at I. When I was asking questions and therefore not being spoken to by I, *then* I was looking at the screen." It was possible that S remembered the rapport-building briefing from earlier in the class during the actual interview, and was explaining it in the debrief as well: "I didn't want to break rapport by breaking eye contact, so I *only* watched the screen when eye contact was not being made with me because I was asking questions."

My assertion is that visible realtime transcription is not a rapport-breaking distraction from qualitative fieldwork. Both subject and interviewer ignored the screen in favor of each other – human beings speaking words to you are far more interesting than those same words being typed. Even when the text was being looked at, as in this brief glance by the subject, the glance served to *enhance* the in-person connection. Instead of interrupting the conversation and pulling the glancer out of it, perhaps it actually helped her stay more in it by providing a navigational marker, a double-check of bearings, a way to confirm that what she was hearing was what was really being said.

Even initially disconfirming instances seem to reinforce this pattern in a different way. Here is a fieldnote excerpt from when people *did* look at the screen when there was an in-person interaction in front of them to be engaged in.

[S and I are] mostly looking at each other, but I see S quickly glance at screen mid-sentence. I is not looking at screen at all. (hard to tell if S is gancing [sic] at screen or not! I seems to be really trying hard to avoid looking at the screen.)

Aside from pointing out the impossibility of tracking the eye motions of all participants at all times ("hard to tell...") this fieldnotes excerpt points out an instance of a person – S – attending to text on the screen when there is a person – I – directly speaking to her. The glance was a quick motion of the eyes only, and lasted less than a second – it wasn't a large turn meant to interrupt the conversation, but rather the sort of look that one might give a child on the sidelines or a clock on the wall to make sure the child was sleeping or the time for the meeting was not running out. This was also done in the middle of a fairly long question being posed by I, meaning that I had been speaking uninterrupted for a little while.

I therefore interpret S's actions as being a quick navigational check-in – "am I following the conversation correctly? Where are we at?" that *helped* her attend more to the conversation at hand with I, rather than a break from it – which indicates that the "People trump text, but text trumps silence" pattern may need stretching and further development in order to fit instances like this one.

One important piece of context is that being visibly transcribed was a new experience to both S and I – as far as I know, they had never watched their spoken words immediately come out as text before, and so the novelty of the experience may have been a factor. S's glance could have been an "am I following this conversation?" glance, but it could also be a "I want to use the *new and interesting thing* to see whether I'm following this conversation" glance – the functionality of checking-in providing an excuse to briefly play with something new in the environment, the choice to blend both streams so that they aren't overwhelming, to resolve the dilemma of how to split one's attention between text and person by using one's attention to the text in order to pay more attention to the person.

PART 2: REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

I'm definitely feeling the wisdom of "do more with less data" right now. Even if I've only captured one of the 3 practice interviews done in class, and captured it roughly and imperfectly, a preliminary analysis on even a *tiny* part of that collected data has expanded into 4 pages. It will be difficult to integrate this all into my final data story while keeping to the 5-page limit.

One of the things I *didn't* capture and write about in my fieldnotes or in the writeup above, but which seems pertinent to mention *somewhere*, is that I was the interviewer for the 3rd interview, which was live-transcribed as well. That experience shaped my perception of the interview I ultimately analyzed, which was between two other students, (S)ubject and (I)nterviewer. While writing up assertions and warrants, I kept cross-checking it against my own experience: "if I put myself in I's shoes and replay that interaction between S and I, does my assertion make sense? Could I imagine thinking or feeling that way?"

This is useful, but also potentially problematic, so I also tried to remain conscious that I *was* cross-checking it against my own lived experience, and that S and I saw the world a different way. Perhaps I should have been more forthright about my experiences/biases/lens in my writeup; I didn't mention anywhere in there that I had also been an interviewer during that class session, but it seemed like a less important thing to include if I wanted to focus on the data story and that one assertion (first developed for my midterm). It's a choice I know I made.

If this were my dissertation, I'd want to go back and member-check my assertions with the participants, since my analysis is entirely my own (heavily biased) speculation and I'd like to see how my expressions of what happened in my head match up with their expressions of what happened in theirs. It won't make my analysis more "true" in the forensic sense, but that triangulation would make for a (more) co-constructed truth that expresses more standpoints than my solitary, limited one.