

SESSION 1 – REFLECTING OUR ROLES, SKILLS AND ETHICS
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**Taking the Driver's Seat: Sustaining Critical Enquiry While
Becoming a Legitimate Corporate Decision-Maker**

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Staying relevant (to the business) is at the heart of career-advancement and (increasingly) job-security, particularly, in a business unit. It embodies a number of different meanings to the different players in corporate—from supporting product definition to creating strategic plans to making the appropriate business decisions. Rather surprisingly, though, we find EPIC talking about it with a certain discomfort, particularly when it comes to affect our identities as social researchers. On the other hand, we, in the industry, have little choice but to “play the game” and find ways whereby we can best utilize our knowledge, experiences, skills, our unique perspective to endow us an edge—creating interesting possibilities to stay relevant. This paper investigates our own trajectories in the past few years in a product group at Intel where we suddenly found ourselves increasingly more involved with decision-making, taking actions that would ultimately affect the course of the business and our own careers. Unwittingly or not, this shift has become part of a strategy for negotiating relevance in ever changing business environments.

“...This close touch of the fantastic element of hope for transformative knowledge and the severe check and stimulus of sustained critical enquiry are jointly the ground of any believable claim to objectivity or rationality not riddled with breath-taking denials and repressions.”
Donna J. Haraway (1991:185)

INTRODUCTION

To create meaningful products and services, we must do more than conduct ethnographic research that represents the fields of users and uses. We must change the processes by which such users and uses are defined and touched by corporations. This means going beyond research to play more powerful and extensive roles in business decision-making. It also means subjecting ourselves to the same critical enquiry we apply to the field. Without this extra step, we are simply translators, re-presenters, of “othered” realities. We would be simply “taking **care** of business” (traditional gender implications intended). In contrast, our goal is no less than to become a *legitimate* player, one able to

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

change that business, to make its way of doing business more meaningful, not just its products and services. The legitimization of our business role is thus no less than our strategy for staying relevant in the corporate environment, shaping and being shaped by ever changing business demands, expectations, meanings, and needs.

Looking back through the rearview mirror and drawing on specific examples from our work, we (ethnographic researchers and practitioners) simultaneously see ourselves as what we once were in and for the corporate—exotic social researchers with barely legitimate work methods and obscure means of delivering our results—and what we are increasingly becoming—decision makers in the corporate business environment. No longer simply researchers, we are invited by our colleagues to contribute as product and business strategists, as dealmakers, and as corporate narrators. We have found ourselves in the driver's seat, so to speak, and frankly wondering how and when we got here.

It is telling that we find ourselves now, in this specific historical moment, ensconced between the roles of trained critical ethnographers and business decision-makers. Business as usual no longer works—our relevance is no longer 'measured' by the quality (and number) of field-reports alone. As researchers (in fact, as legitimate researchers) we've been asked to act more, demonstrating more and more the impact of our work on the business. We are asked to perform according to the dominant corporate ethos, namely, shorter-term focus and oriented toward facilitating and supporting product success (i.e. sales volume and higher profit margins). We thus find ourselves in a somewhat difficult position, attempting to reconcile this dialectic (alas, often felt as schizophrenic) relationship between our interpretive take on everyday 'realities' (be they of our own business practices, 'markets' we set out to investigate, or society in general) and corporate understanding of these (by means of its naturalized notions of technology adoption, market developments, business goals, consumption, and the like). We have little hope to resolve that. Instead, as we look back and reflect on the trajectory leading to this, we see ourselves carving new paths, engaging in different practices, and performing different identities. So, the question that plagues our career (and identity) as corporate ethnographers remains—as we increasingly demonstrate greater internal and external relevance of our work, what will be left of our inner revolutionary or at least dubious academic spirit?

In the following pages, we review our path from back seat ethnographer to driver's seat business and product strategist. Not surprising, we find the history of EPIC conferences and the hot button topics of the last few years as a litmus test for the changing roles and values of corporate ethnography. We note recurring themes pertaining to the relevance and impact of ethnographic practice in corporations alongside with debates of our identities as corporate researchers. We witness the gradual re-positioning and re-purposing of ethnographers as innovators and marketing experts. These rich exchanges of experiences demonstrate at least a struggle toward a better understanding of our roles, practices, values, and relevancies in and for the business and the research community at large, as we mature. We then critically review our own progress at Intel, in particular, our beginnings as researchers to current roles

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

spanning that of strategic planner, project/product manager, salespeople, product deployment specialists and beyond. In a quick review of these roles, we reveal that we are no longer merely ‘informants’ of outside ‘realities’ to inform design or business decisions, but increasingly are putting stakes in the ground and requiring our colleagues and managers to change, as we are asked to change as well.

Feminists have long called for women to move beyond the recognition of gender objectification to the strategic construction of actionable identities, be they Donna Haraway’s (1991) cyborgs or Audre Lord’s (1984) sister outsider. The feminist objective is high – no less than social change. In this paper, we bare our emergent roles as corporate ethnographers (the reification of our work and its values) – our consciousness-raising project. We then also call for the less lofty goal of changing the lived landscapes of not only those we research but also those with whom we work.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE TO ETHNOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE

Over the last few years, these authors have witnessed a shift in how we, as ethnographers in the industry, are evaluated by those inside corporations. At the outset, our value was tied to our research practices, and so we struggled (and still struggle) to validate our research findings and translate them into actionable knowledge as well as to reconcile the critical purview of our own doings to corporate expectations toward our work “deliverables.” Meanwhile, we also have been handed new responsibilities that reach far beyond our value as practicing researchers. Indeed, more than research practitioners, we are increasingly valued for a unique and uniquely actionable knowledge of the world (spanning users to markets to businesses). Our disciplinary perspective on “the users¹” (i.e. ordinary people) and their increased participation in markets gained currency in product, market and business strategy. As a result, our research peers and we are being “promoted” to strategic planners, business innovation leads, market strategists, and even general managers.

To track this arc of our corporate careers, we review some of reflexive debates around our positionality within corporations that took place at EPIC. We then trace our careers and those of our ethnographic colleagues at Intel. What emerges is a shift from corporate ethnography as a research method and practice to ethnographers as delivering insight and knowledge with strategic corporate value. The more we can understand the politics of knowledge (creation and dissemination) within corporations and the scope, limits, and privileges of ethnographic knowledge relative to other forms of corporate ‘knowledge,’ the more we can legitimize our practices (research and otherwise) in the corporate environment.

¹ Noteworthy, besides all critical debates relative to the meanings (and prejudices) embodied in “the user” in the technology industry, the figure of “the user” is a critical one that now endows legitimacy and power (political and otherwise) to researchers’ voices.

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

EPIC became in part a site of our collective posturing and browbeating over our own corporate careers. We have witnessed a major intellectual and practical growth of ethnographic practices in industry – from an initial debate, in an almost manifesto fashion as Nafus and Anderson (2006) put it, about ethnographic theory versus practice (Baba 2005) to a critical positionality of our work relative to the business in response to anthropology canons (Cefkin 2006) to the unease about our epistemic claims of knowing and revealing “the real people” (Nafus and Anderson 2006) to John Sherry’s direct assertion that “we produce not theory but rather actionable insights for particular products and services” (2007:23). As we take a closer look, we can trace this trajectory of topics and concerns that shows the ongoing transformations of our values in the corporation.

In 2006, we struggled for relevance and intimated that we needed to put uneasy stakes in the ground with claims of truth and more “real” representations in order to gain credence in the corporate environment. In this moment of the consolidation of an ethnographic project (Cefkin 2006) in the industry, the debate thus ranged from the use of different modalities of representations to the claims of special relationship to “real people in the real world.” Such claims, which “we ourselves have created to persuade others to grant us positions that historically have seemed implausible” (Nafus & Anderson 2006:244), have contributed such that ethnography became a relevant and more legitimate practice in organizations as well as part of their repertoire of “caring about” and understanding “the user.” We had to stake a claim about how we, as ethnographers, not only had the skills and expertise to do our research but also to represent those findings in a way that made our grounds-up knowledge better than that of our colleagues. We thus found ourselves arguing that our representations were “truer” or “real-er”. Indeed, we risked arguing for a certain authenticity to our representations, when compared with the slimmer slices of everyday life afforded by traditional market research.

In retrospect, we’ve learned that ethnographic research not only situates people’s lives, preferences, and practices in the same systems in which our businesses and clients operate; it also has a longer shelf life than traditional market research. Demographic driven segmentations only work as long as the same people inhabit the same demographic. Similarly, product driven market analyses only work to the extent that the people charged with buying these products see the world in those terms—they rarely do. Ethnographic research offers a view of daily practices that can distinguish between what will be relevant now (such as, Chinese middle school student’s favorite social networking site) versus what will change at a much slower rate (such as, parent’s feelings about the importance of schooling for their young children.) In addition, being immersed in people’s everyday lives and collectives also allows us a flexibility to adapt to the questions being asked, and these questions change far more frequently than we wish.

Not surprisingly, in 2007, the EPIC theme was “being heard.” Gone were the concerns over being recognized as legitimate researchers. In their stead were fears of being seen but not heard. The theme of representations and their politics surely re-emerged. We remained

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

deeply concerned with whose voices were represented and how, even if our voices remained relatively unheard. Nafus et al (2007) debated the limits of our design representations and embodiments that clarified voices and lives from people's daily entanglements. They also unpacked the politics of ethnographic representation that voiced only certain social, political, economic, and cultural manifestations but left others silent. Significantly, these more epistemic debates about (ethnographic, design, business) representations (and their roles as "boundary objects," mediating research and business) helped shift our attention to our employers' and clients' everyday practices and politics. As Cefkin (2007) suggests, we must pay greater attention to the performative practices of business (sales and marketing) meetings in order to gain deeper insights on the meanings of business representations. These meetings then act as sites of corporate meaning making through the interplay of localized (legitimized) market experiences, corporate global strategies, market data, and power relations. To a certain extent, 2007 marked a shift in our ethnographic gaze toward our own corporate practices.

By 2008, many of us were no longer merely researchers. Indeed, some of us had been 'promoted' to strategic planners, product innovators, and worse (gasp) management. Not surprising the hot topics shifted from being recognized and being heard to how poorly our ethnographic expertise had prepared us to act as managers and run businesses. A great deal of submissions reflected and rehashed on the position of ethnographic work within organizations – some offering frameworks to turn ethnographic results more relevant and impactful to their clients or companies (Flynn and Lovejoy 2008; Granka et al. 2008); some analyzing the ways in which companies positioned the work of ethnographers internally or outside as means of demonstrating a firm's innovation or simply marketing itself (de Paula and Empinotti 2008). These rich exchanges of experiences demonstrated one trajectory in the development of this community. In particular, as ethnographers working in product groups and business units (as opposed to separate research units), we were no longer merely 'informants' of outside 'realities' to inform design or business decisions, but increasingly being asked (often placed in positions) to make and, consequently, be accountable for important business decisions.

Here then is the arc of change. We, these authors, remain valuable, we believe, to the corporation as researchers. We have also emerged as valued assets for strategic thinking about users, markets and businesses. On the one hand, our ability to sift through the rich practices of everyday life allowed us to also act nimbly in rapidly changing corporate environment. On the other, we actively pursued internal and external legitimacy, deliberately positioning our work and ourselves according to business needs and interests—maintaining this manifest relevance. However, to retain our emerging positions of authority in the corporation, we must answer the following questions: What are the parameters of our knowledge? What kinds of power are we endowed with this knowledge? Where do our ethnographic vision and the knowledge it generates meet the limits of its validity? We intend to tackle these questions in the following pages.

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

CASE STUDIES OF ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE: FROM USER RESEARCH TO STRATEGIC PLANNING

Next, we examine our own work practices to track an evolution from design ethnographers (Salvador et al. 1999) for product development to business, market, and technology strategists for the larger business units. The underlying theme remains that of the dialectic relationship between our deliberate efforts to stay relevance relevant and an expanded corporate recognition of and expectation for the applicability of our knowledge beyond research practice to inform corporate actions. In the following three case studies, we highlight discrete steps in this process: (1) the shift from exploratory product exploration to defining product strategy, (2) the shift from conducting to performing user research to differentiate business value, and (3) the shift from applying our expertise to the lives of users to that of the lives of markets and businesses so as to inform not only product but now also market and business strategy.

To ground the following case studies, we give a quick history of our business unit, the Emerging Markets Platform Group (EMPG) at Intel. All three of the three authors work as research scientists in EMPG. For the first two years, EMPG set out to explore new ideas and design locally relevant, new-to-Intel products. At the core of their charter was ethnographic research. One by one, each PDC start creating its own local and localized solutions, each inspired by insights from the field. The challenge came when taking these solutions to market. Intel measures success in terms of volume sales. Local solutions, by definition, cannot achieve volumes typically recognized by Intel as a corporation. As our locally viable solutions were repeatedly stamped out by Intel's predilection towards volume sales, we realized we had to re-organize. By 2008, business decision-making was centralized and the PDCs devolved into ecosystem enabling and business development sites.

Not surprising, our careers followed suit. As ethnographers, we shifted focus from deep local knowledge to that of global trends. From 2005 through 2007, we worked in close concert with local industrial designers, engineers, and product developers. By 2008, we operated as a central research and definition unit charged with catalyzing and owning the definition of EMPG's global product roadmap. Our purview now spans from design ethnography to foundational product, market, and business strategy.

From Product Research to Product Strategy

In this first case study, we detail how we took the product definition lead out of the engineers' hands and used our ethnographic analysis to argue for a revamped product strategy. What started as a product refresh emerged as a product strategy that anticipated where computing in the classroom was headed.

For computer engineers the refresh of a product typically means hardware update and/or upgrade charged with fixing specific problems in the existing product. In mid 2006,

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

things were going according to plan with the refresh of a purpose-built education netbook. The PRC-based engineering team kicked off the product-refresh process. Ethnographers were pulled into the engineering meetings by management.

As it turned out, we did not agree to a simple product refresh, but felt we had to redesign the product from the ground up. We had to step up and clearly pick this fight. Over the phone we raised our “revolutionary flags” of innovation and carried slogans of methodological purity. We believed that the engineering team was not making the right decision. We argued that we needed to revisit the underlying premises of the project, understand more broadly the various meanings of education worldwide, analyze the feedback from the ongoing school pilots, and procure newer and more effective technological solutions for the product rather than relying on solely on the typical course of action of the IT industry.

Against us was the relentless tick-and-tock of the semiconductor industry (a.k.a. Moore’s Law), which determines Intel’s product roadmaps and timelines. In a management level decision, we reached compromise: namely, we, researchers, were given time to explore the education domain and come up with a more innovative solution. In the meanwhile, engineers would continue to define a device refresh. We set the path for 1.5 (refresh) and 2.0 (redesign) versions of the original product. Also, we unwittingly set the course of our ethnographic practices.

At the point that we opposed the engineering ‘natural’ course of action, we no longer just played our typical role of information providers, in this case being the procurement of information (aka user needs) that ideally supported the engineering team’s design decisions. Instead, we assumed more responsibility over the product as a device in the hands of students and as part of Intel longer-term business strategy. We no longer simply argued on behalf of the end-users, but also on behalf of our business unit. We opened a new space of work engagements and entanglements and assumed the role of product strategy.

By challenging the typical development cadence, we risked delaying the roadmap and subsequent product release. We then had to justify our disruption. To do so, we asked for time. Our instincts told us that a simple refresh was not good enough for the users and our business and that the risk to Intel’s business should we go forward with the wrong product was too high. So we asked for time to gather more grounded knowledge of what was happening in schools in the emerging markets, in the classrooms, in the administrators’ offices, in the halls of those supplying schools with their technology solutions and beyond. Management asked us to translate a re-invigorated knowledge of the education domain into a new product design as well as redefine the product development process so that technology driven refresh cycles did not happen again. It was at this point that we unwittingly found ourselves shifting from the back seat to the driver’s seat for EMPG’s product definition.

Our analyses pointed us to a complex network of actors, artifacts, politics, and economics that we then had to translate into relevant technology, design, and business

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

actions. Working closely with industrial designers we crafted these insights into design concepts and eventually material artifacts. Flexibility was our main design concept to manifest the diversity of education systems worldwide. Our ethnographic stories about the various meanings and values of education—enacted through the pictures of sites, artifacts, and participants as well as their quotes—legitimized and sustained the idea of a technological and business flexibility necessary to address education needs worldwide. On the one hand, a product would need to operate in and support a wide range of socio-economic-technological-political environments—from environmental conditions (such as, room temperature, humidity, handling, power supply, safety, and what have you) to local teaching and learning practices to national and local curriculum to local image of modernity and progress.

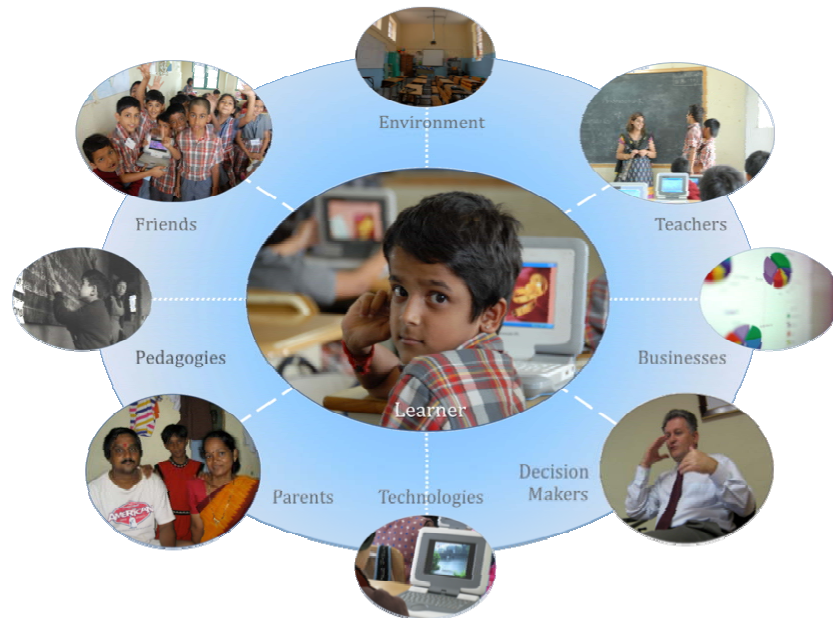


FIGURE 1 Learner-centered framework that guided the design of the next generation of Intel powered classmate PC

From our ethnographic stories, we created frameworks, or visual representations that depicted and summarized the complex relationships among actors and artifacts. These served to ground the design and business decisions in grounded, “real” data. These frameworks were not scientific models against which our designs could be validated. They were, instead, rhetorical devices to remind designers and engineers of who and what would be impacted by their design and engineering decisions. Frameworks (such as Figure 1) convey certain values (e.g., the learner placed at the center showing that we were designing primarily for student populations, in particular, young kids), relationships (i.e., all elements linked to a central one), settings, and actors. We used these frameworks to create a context

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

that told diverse stories about the field and succinctly grounded the ongoing conversations and decisions in our situated knowledge. We thus followed Wakeford's (2006) observation about the use of PowerPoint to present ethnographic findings that renders legitimacy to ethnographic practices as produced evidence of both the on-the-ground work and of the existence of an analysis. These traces of ethnographic thick description served as rhetorical devices, drawing on tropes of authentic knowledge and aesthetics to convey stories behind the images – our own relationships with and experiences in the field. The young Indian student at the center (Figure 1) powerfully reminded us for whom we are designing this technology and at the same time seduced us (Tunstall 2006), placing us in a relatively uneasy position of becoming responsible for the future of that “Indian boy.”

In making the case for a deeper understanding of the education systems worldwide, we also created a space for ethnography to play a more central role in product definition. We had to occupy a strategic (power) place in the organization in order to ensure and maintain the legitimacy and relevance of our work. We forcefully used our situated knowledge of the field to claim that we had the knowledge and the right vantage point to define our next educational product.

From Product Strategy to Business Deal-Making

In the case of our research for the Intel-powered classmate PC, we grounded our claims to product and market knowledge in research practice. We made claims of more accurate knowledge of how children would use our products as well as how education officials would evaluate our projects by bringing research to play a more central role in product development. However, we also saw that the value of our research extended beyond product definition and design to point our product roadmap in a more impactful direction.

In the following example, the value of our research once again is extended beyond the actual research practice to become the currency with which to close a deal with the Chinese Ministry of Information Industry (MII). That we had unique ethnographically grounded knowledge of how PRC rural residents valued computing and could demonstrate it on the ground persuaded the MII to partner with our company to develop computers for the Chinese rural market. In this case, we had conducted extensive ethnographic research in the Chinese countryside. However, it was simply the demonstration of that knowledge with MII officials at our side that convinced the MII to entrust our company in partnership with another China-based manufacturer to build computers for farmers in China.

In early 2006, the PRC MII released its five-year rural informatization plan. The goal was to bridge the urban-rural digital divide and bring digital technology to rural Chinese in order to enhance their economy and lives. From Intel's point of view, the rural Chinese represented a huge, untapped market in the PRC. As a result, we welcomed an opportunity to work with the PRC MII on this project. To demonstrate our commitment, Intel signed long-term memorandum of understanding (MOU) with MII that expressed a commitment

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

to assist local PC manufacturers to develop new solutions specifically for this five-year program. However, the competition for access to the rural market was intense. In order to solidify our business relationship with the MII, Intel needed to demonstrate its knowledge of what rural residents needed from computers as well as our expertise to translate that knowledge into relevant, working solutions. Intel worked closely with the PRC MII and EMPG to propose a joint research project to understand the needs for technologies from rural people in China. A joint MII and EMPG team was quickly built, including us, the ethnographic researchers, who had a leg up on the research question as we had been conducting such research for over a year.

Not surprising, we had to negotiate what counted as “research.” For the MII officials, “research” meant talking to different levels of officials in rural areas to understand what problems rural residents were facing and what needs and desires those had. It did not include talking to those rural residents. This “research” consisted of a series of formal meetings where rural officials came and gave reports and then afterwards drank and dined together. When we suggested that we should spend time talking to rural residents themselves, one official responded, “They [rural residents] knew nothing about technologies, we decide.” The more we pushed for more “ethnographic-style” research, the more the power dynamic emerged. We compromised and agreed to have both meetings with rural officials and then take the MII officials out to the field. While we proposed ethnographic-style fieldwork, we were clear that the fieldwork was more of a demonstration of our knowledge.

During those two weeks in villages and towns in Henan province, we attended long meetings listening to government reports as well as went out to talk to rural residents. Sometimes we even managed to persuade the MII officials to accompany us on the latter trips. During our fieldwork, we sat with villagers in their homes, talked to them about their lives and concerns and drilled down on questions about their children, their health and their futures. When the MII officials joined us, they fought against the rigor of our work. Many, at the beginning, pushed us to shorten the interviews or ask the villagers to come to them. We resisted and by the end, many of the officials saw the value of our work. In the words of one official, “It’s my first time to go deep into villages and talk with real villagers in a research project. I think now I understand how you guys do research and it helps.”

What they witnessed in the field was not simply what farmers wanted, but how we in EMPG could take that knowledge and turn it into relevant digital products for those farmers. The value of this knowledge was exponential. It not only meant that our company could be entrusted to design relevant products to deliver on the central government’s rural informatization plan but also they would be saved from having to do this work themselves, in particular heading down to villages and sweating out hours talking to the people who would benefit most from these products.

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

It also helped that we conducted the same fieldwork on them, the officials. For those two weeks in the field, we worked and lived alongside the MII officials. We attended the same meetings, dined together every meal, and talked far beyond the agenda at hand. We saw how they made decisions, how those decisions might, or more likely might not, take into account the rural residents' needs and desires. We evangelized our ethnographic expertise and applied it all at the same time. The result was a very solid business relationship where we demonstrated a value they did not have (grounded knowledge of rural residents' computing needs) and tailored our business contracts towards them as we now understood them.

After this joint research, relationships between the MII and Intel in general improved. Memorandums of understanding were produced and signed by both parties and we collaborated with others to produce a government-subsidized personal computer for rural Chinese. In this case, our roles as ethnographers went far beyond that of our research. Indeed, our role was more performative and symbolic. We demonstrated the kind of knowledge that ethnographic research generates and it was this demonstration that clenched the trust of the Chinese government that we, Intel, would be the right partners in their plans to bridge the urban-rural digital divide. As ethnographers, we deliberately positioned our knowledge and ourselves in ways that created trust and grounded authority relative to rural China, shifting our role from pure researchers to valuable chips in business deal-making.

From Product to Market to Business Strategy

As our business unit increasingly recognized the symbolic value of our research (and put it to work to clench business deals and even bolster our corporate differentiation), we began to identify significant gaps in the kinds of knowledge our research had typically generated. These gaps were most glaring in terms of market and business strategy. Some of these gaps pointed to legitimate boundaries of our expertise. Others represented new frontiers for us to explore. From our perspective by working from the ground up, we saw the mismatch between existing data sources on our markets and the industries and organizations that had to make sense of our product. In short, we realized that we had key information to inform our group's market and business strategies.

When it comes to new markets, this data simply does not exist or what does is rarely consistent or reliable. We had to start from scratch. Here the ethnographic practice shines (or put it more bluntly, it has a "competitive advantage.") Given the right focus, we as ethnographers can unpack the grounded values of a product in a market and understand who values that product or service, how, when and why. The point here is to define these values in terms of all those willing to purchase the product or service, from our customers to their customers (the end-users), and the "job done" by that purchase (Christenson et al 2006). At its core, the question is a business one. The best method for answering it is ethnographic, we argued.

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

To be fair, to arrive at this market segmentation, we relied on a diverse body of research, from quantitative studies to industry analysis to user assessment studies to ethnographic studies. Ethnographic analysis was but one contributor. However, when it came to clustering this diverse body of knowledge into market segments, we relied most heavily on grounded data. Ethnographic research defines how people evaluate their lives and the products they acquire, use, discard and not. The symbolic values of a product are on par with what might be considered the “real” or use values of that same product. Ethnographic analysis allows us to answer in the terms of all those involved, what is being purchased when a particular product or service is considered, acquired, consumed and used. In short, we are privy to the symbolic values of products endowed by people in their everyday affairs (and decision-makings), not one projected by our product roadmaps or industry analysis.

This ability to represent deeper knowledge about people’s everyday lives—consequently acting as a knowledgeable representative of them in our organization—granted us certain authority, which in turn helped to legitimize our knowledge and narratives as well as to reposition our roles within the group. The market segmentation we developed, as we argued for a more legitimate representation of the ‘market,’ continues to provide a language that guides our business group strategy in terms of how we focus our current and future market activities. It also has gained traction to do the same for other Intel business units that target schools around the world. With this, we found ourselves joining a strategic planning team chartered with streamlining strategy and innovation.

The shift from product definition to strategic planning posed more challenges than that of segmenting a global market. At Intel, strategic planning is a catch-all phrase that spans partnering and influencing strategic deliverables throughout the company. It requires a combination of business acumen, organization savvy, networking capabilities, and expertise in certain technical areas. We were a bit over our heads in terms of the business acumen and technical savvy. Thankfully, there were others on the team to fill those roles. Where we gained legitimacy was in providing the knowledge (by means of a set of rich ‘real’ stories and a language to legitimately talk about “real people, real needs”) with which to vet business concepts in terms of their value to all who might touch it (from our customers to theirs) as well as frank understanding of where to start to substantiate the competitive landscape in which any such business must play. For new businesses and new markets, a grounded understanding of where the competition lies and how it is configured is critical. It rarely can be found in traditional market and industry analysis. Instead, it requires grounded instincts, in short, the kind of knowledge that open-ended ethnographic research builds.

CONCLUSION: ETHNOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE IN THE CORPORATION

Construing ethnography in industry as a project, as Melissa Cefkin suggested in 2006, allows us to more fully appreciate the evolving nature of our endeavors. The aforementioned cases illustrate the ways in which our ethnographic project has continuously transformed as the result of our interactions with the field and the corporation. By grounding our representations of the field and translating these into business ready data, we bolstered our claims to a unique and powerful corporate knowledge. Over time, we constructed a case for ethnography practices in the corporation and that case pushed us towards new roles and new challenges, each with more business responsibility than we had encountered before. Ethnography became more than an ensemble of methods and practices in our organization, but a fuller project that introduced a legitimate way of generating product, market and business knowledge.

Such a project was (and still is) about constructing and sustaining knowledge and knowledge positions—means whereby we maintained our relevance. First of all, our notion of knowledge here is both a performative and practical one, not necessarily a step of knowing somewhere between data and wisdom, as commonly construed. Our ethnographic encounters and experiences with/in the field ground and situate what we know (and feel) about those who we are interested in knowing more about and their realities. Such a situated knowing, to borrow from feminist epistemologists, reflects particular standpoints relative to the subject, comprised of gender differences, our positioning relative to the people we study and the corporate, our (socio-economic-cultural) background and political stances as well as theirs. And, it is necessarily embodied. Our knowing is grounded in experiencing the world (and the field) with and through our bodies. One of the hallmarks of ethnography is to be able to locate what we know in extremely rich and grounded accounts of people's everyday (social, political, economic, cultural, material) realities that, in turn, grants us a rich measure of authenticity and interpretive flexibility. Nevertheless, such an ethnographic knowing is of little, or even no, value if not appropriately performed and enacted in the meeting rooms. The transformation of our work practices, as aforementioned, did not happen by chance, we deliberately changed and adjusted them to match the ongoing changes in our organization. We can think of our alleged success as an active process of legitimizing our work by mobilizing the appropriate 'stakeholders,' creating enough interestment (Callon 1986) to sustain our relevance, and becoming the local knower (power issues implied). In this process, we changed ourselves while changing the organization of which we are part.

As result, we were placed (or maybe "displaced") in a different "discourse regime," as Foucault would put it. The practices and disciplines governing the ways in which we make use of our ethnographic knowing changed once we started to interact more intimately with the corporate discourses and practices. We still struggle to resituate and ground our claims to knowledge in representations, languages, and discourses that mediate the realities we witness and the corporation within which we work. We have deliberately made ourselves relevant in

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

this new position and have been rewarded with what appears to be promotions and advancement up the so-called corporate ladder.

In these new positions, then, we must re-evaluate our claims to knowledge, their limits, their opportunities, and their embodiments. We must not be seduced by the power of our progress, the apparent value and breadth of our knowledge practices, and the like. Yet, at the same time, we must also learn to exercise our newfound authority to hope for change of our business, people we touch, and ultimately ourselves. As we narrate our own trajectory within this business unit—from simply “informants” to product and business strategists to dealmakers—we come to realize the profound transformations in our ethnographic doing and knowing over the past few years as we struggle for legitimacy and relevance. We reached and experienced new forms of ethnography that the “founding fathers” of this discipline would have never imaged—we are definitely over the theory versus practice debate as we continue to create theory with our practices. Our acute and often critical look at things (most important, ourselves) has given us an edge that enables us to stay relevant, at least for the moment.

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Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

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