9-23: Defining Cognitive Ethnography

*Here we just reviewed some of the basic points made in class.*

*Breaking it down:*

Ethno → "of a people" (group, culture)  
Graphy → "to write"

Cognition → active engagement with an environment; treated as "visible events"

*Cognitive Ethnography:* A detailed description of particular people in engagement with a particular context, in accordance with organizing principles of cognitive activity (examples: landing an airplane, making a sandwich, tutoring...etc)

The boundaries of "cognition"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRADITIONAL</th>
<th>DISTRIBUTED</th>
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<td>:: limited to human brain</td>
<td>:: includes social, cultural and ecological levels of cognition</td>
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9-28: My Cognition

*For this lecture, pay close attention to the dialectic example…this is KEY to project 1, in that you must pay close attention to how the environment constrains the individual’s activity, just as the individual shapes his/her environment.*

(1) Embedded rules in the structure of the environment are not arbitrary, but usually culturally-specific or dependent. Some examples include:

:: color associations (color of lines - yellow/black warning)
:: broken and solid arrows on road

(2) *Dialectic relationship:* Environment imposes structure, and you also impose structure, which you use to assess your environment. Some examples of this deal with ecological perception, a perspective on studying perception that focuses on how the person interacts with their environment.

:: Texture gradient created by broken lines and perceiver moving through environment  
   – Perceiver can assess environment in terms of his/her distance from objects (rate of acceleration of a texture gradient is directly related to your velocity)

(3) *Task relevance* will be a guiding factor in our descriptions: The task shapes what one pays attention to – situated seeing?
Project 1: Peering through the “Cognitoscope”

Assignment Overview
This is just a condensed version of the P1 description given out in class.

Part 1: The Cognitive Diary
Notice and make a list of at least 15 cognitive activities in your daily life.

Part 2: Your Pass at Cognitive Ethnography
Give a detailed (4pg) description of an activity from Part 1 that is simple, part of a routine, and involves engagement with the environment. Be sure to focus on AFFECT, ATTENTION, and ACTION by discussing:

:: knowledge required for the task
:: dialectical relationship with environment (ex from class: lanes on freeway)
:: evidence of routinization
:: evidence for online adaptation

General Tips:
:: Don’t go too low-level….but not too high either…be reasonable in scope
:: Use pictures and diagrams...(as evidence)

Some examples: feeding a pet, putting in contacts, doing laundry, making a shopping list, setting an alarm clock, commuting, packing a backpack, etc.

Excerpt from “Catching the Gotham Subway”

All we did here was go through each paragraph from my old project (I took this class almost 2 years ago) and highlight anything that we could classify as AFFECT, ATTENTION, or ACTION. We also took note of anything that needed improvement. For example, in the first phrase that is highlighted, I could have gotten more specific by saying exactly HOW I got my Metro card ready…what do you think I could have done differently in the second highlighted phrase?

I then take a look at my Metro card, and notice the bottom line that reads: “Insert this way/This side facing you”. As I approach the entrance area, I get my Metro card ready so as to slide it easily through. First I make sure that the entrance is available by checking for the mini-screen that says “ready”, and then I proceed to swipe the card through. Once I have done that, the mini-screen automatically reads “go”. I enter the other side of the station and look at the signs above, in search of the 4, 5 or 6 lines, going north or “uptown”. To my left, I notice the green circled numbers with the word Uptown adjacent to them, and so I take off in that direction. This in turn directs me to a staircase that I must descend to get to the lower level. After completing a series of steps of navigation through the layout of the station, I reach the platform from which I will depart. On this platform, I notice another map of the subway system. Just to be sure that I can take any of the 3 lines, I look at the map in search of my route, and confirm that this is the case.

Next thing I know, I hear the sound of the subway making its way towards the station. I get up and walk towards the edge of the platform to notice the number 6 on the upper right hand side of train. As the train speeds pass me until it comes to a halt, I read the sign on the side of the window to reconfirm that it’s the right train. The doors open, and I walk in, looking for a seat, but unfortunately, unlucky at the time. However, as I stand holding on to the rails above me, I notice the route tracker map (Toolbox F). On this route map, the light blinks for the next stop, 28th street. I also notice just how many more stops I have left from to arrive to my final destination, 110th street. Before I let the idea of that distance overwhelm me, I suddenly remember that I’m on an express train. So I just keep my eyes on the blinking lights to make sure I know where I am on that route.

Remember to keep things simple, to choose the scope of cognitive activity that you can describe in enough detail to focus on AFFECT, ATTENTION, and ACTION…remember to stay out of the head – we are looking at DISTRIBUTED cognition, not the traditional sense of it! Good luck, and if you have any more questions, feel free to email me.