Tracing Mediated Action through the World: Understanding the Enduring Consequences of Acting with Inscriptions

Attuned to the dispersed, complexly mediated, and richly laminated histories of semiotic action in the world, the theoretical perspectives that address mediated discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; Hutchins, 1995; Latour, 2005; Prior & Schaffner, 2011; Scollon, 2001; Wertch, 1991) have been instrumental in illuminating the profound heterogeneity and heterochronicity driving the continual becoming of people, practices, and social worlds. But while Writing Studies has started to orient toward following histories across time, space, and representational media, we’ve been somewhat reluctant to examine various kinds of inscriptions and inscriptional practices upon which those perspectives were developed. My presentation argues for increased theoretical and methodological attention to everyday inscriptions and inscriptional practices (Latour, 1990) and the enduring consequences they have for the ongoing production of selves and societies. Based on a longitudinal case study, my analysis traces one co-researcher’s use of a variety of everyday inscriptions in ways that weave together his engagements with religion, popular culture, and disciplinary science and, ultimately, shape his ways of being in the world as a veterinarian and church leader. If, as Witte (1992) suggests, “to study writing is, over and above all else, to study acts of making meaning that are mediated through ‘texts,’” (p. 237), then we need to take seriously the full range of textualities that saturate people’s lives.