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LAB NOTES: WRITE-UP OF AN EXPERIMENT IN COLLABORATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

In the spring of 2006, we began an experiment in collaborative anthropology. There was a dual impetus to our efforts: a desire to deal head-on with inadequacies in our academic environment; and a strong feeling that the classic norms of qualitative inquiry needed to become contemporary. Collaboration struck us as potentially key to both. The core of our group comprised members from the disciplines of socio-cultural and medical anthropology, medicine, law, and sociology. Although mostly affiliated with UC Berkeley, one student commuted from Stanford. Another participated via speakerphone and web cam from Yale Law School. A senior anthropology librarian and the director of the molecular biology research institute where our meeting were held often sat in.

What are the actual practices of intellectual co-laboring? We had some successful experiences, magic moments when thought seemed shared, an insight captured and made tangible. We were also cognizant of consistent challenges: groups were too large, students were competitive rather than genuinely cooperative, and the work accomplished seemed to evaporate at the end. We wanted to create a space where intense intellectual synergy could take place on shared problems. We hoped that sharing our fieldwork would facilitate concept-work. We wanted to speed up in order to understand what was happening in the world, as it happened. Over the course of the semester we designed a protocol for a graduate seminar around these goals. Our attempt was to turn the existing obstacles into our guidelines.

We were also handicapped by the socialization of graduate school: students are trained to perform rhetorical thrusts and parries. The seminar provides a space to compete and posture for the professor. And the performances show what one already knows. Such performances move a group away from thinking new thoughts or focusing on a chosen topic. They also compound the variation in participation styles between students who think out loud or to themselves, who are assertive or are reserved.

Collaborative thinking, we decided, would require a very different environment. Yet despite these constraints, past seminars had allowed moments of discussion that went beyond reproduction and performance to breakthroughs. Sometimes these moments built upon each other throughout the semester and we ended up feeling that indeed we had attained something – extracted conceptual tools from Nikolas Luhmann's denser texts, or defined the limits of Foucault's biopower and biopolitics as explanations for today's events. More frequently, the breakthroughs were too tenuous; as we grasped them they evaporated and the semester ended. We wanted to develop a way to work in a relatively large group, to learn the skills of cooperative thinking while retaining the ability to critique, and to capture the results of our labor.

For each challenge we developed a corresponding response, mixing small innovations, with proven approaches such as close textual reading and reflective awareness of group processes. We were vigilant about grounding these techniques in fieldwork participants had engaged in so as to make the discussions focused and practice oriented. What we wanted to do would involve work on ourselves: training in procedures, and re-training in how to approach the classroom experience. We were not starting from scratch, of course. Workshops and conferences have similar problems and aspirations, but their models would equally need to be reconfigured.

We drew a parallel to laboratory experiments. In the textbook version, one begins with a question, formulates a hypothesis, then tests it by adapting or inventing techniques and practicing them. With a certain irony, we nicknamed our experiment the "labinar," lab plus seminar.[1] From the beginning, we understood the "labinar" as an experiment in venue construction and form. We understood it as an intervention into pedagogic practice, as well as anthropological inquiry. Our reasoning was that the world is different than it was when the standards of qualitative human or social science became codified in the heyday of traditional anthropological fieldwork. Even multi-sited ethnography, obviously necessary for many phenomena, is limited by what a single individual can manage intellectually, logistically and interpretively. Since we advocated field sites being chosen according to the problem, there were severe limitations to the traditional practice of the individual anthropologist. Further, we wanted to work on what was potentially emergent instead of the search for holistic systems either as objects in the world or an academic construction. Yet anthropology still follows the disciplinary model of the lone researcher, toiling for years to produce a definitive statement on a specific group or phenomenon.

We were of course all engaged in our own specific research projects. We wanted to conduct an experiment in which we put together all of our work in order to discover whether or not they shared a common problem. The field sites and topics represented in our group were, in a sense, aleatory. We took this diversity as a necessary substrate: our hypothesis was that the problems, as defined by our subjects and in our analyses, might together indicate identifiable shape, a problematization.

In this light, we began with a text from Michel Foucault, in which he sketches the term "problematization."

[T]he analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and 'silent,' out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions. The history of thought, understood in this way, is the history of the way people begin to take care of something, of the way they become anxious about this or that–for example, about madness, about crime, about sex, about themselves, or about truth.[2]

First we took up Foucault's text as an exercise in *explication de texte*, close reading. We wanted, in our lab-seminar, to study problematization in real-time. The next step was to examine our own work by using Luhmann's distinction between first and second order observation. Observation, for Luhmann was both to notice in a disciplined sense and to register significance. First-order observations tell us *what* is happening. Second-order observations shift frames so as to tell us *how* the first order observations are made. Second-order observations mark criteria and distinctions, assumptions and the limits of categories. Neither type of observation is privileged: they have different objects and provide different kinds of information. The distinction proved useful for the labinar on two levels. We wanted to understand the way that our subjects understood, classified, and categorized their own problems. Our primary data were their first and second-order observations, which we would observe, mark and order. We considered this to be the basic work of anthropologists. It would also serve a second purpose. If there were indeed an emerging problematization, our mode of inquiry would stand a chance of identifying it.

Drawing on the Anthropology Research Collaboratory (ARC), and previous seminars, we began with the premise that there were major changes occurring in relation to "security." Transformations in the U.S. government such as the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, responsible for both natural disaster preparation and counterterrorism measures, or the description of SARS and avian flu as issues of biosecurity indicated that conceivably disparate elements were being understood as linked. We intended to see if a re-problematization of security could be discerned by examining our projects for common problems.

PROTOCOL

Paul Rabinow and a small group of students who had taken classes together for several years, wanted to transform the graduate seminar into a different venue that would facilitate our goals. We planned to spend the semester intensely focused on fieldwork and developing concepts that would help us make sense of what we were finding in the field. With students in different stages of graduate work, we wanted to both analyze the work that they had done and think about how to improve the design for future projects.

In 2006, thirty students shopping multiple courses showed up to the first semester meeting. We declared that the criteria for entrance were familiarity with a repertoire of concepts and an active research project; about half the students returned. Then we requested help from an improbable source, a specialist at the research and consultation firm Global Business Network. He held a Berkeley PhD, was familiar with some of the readings, and was willing to help. We asked the following questions:

- What are the different models for how a meeting is run? Which model makes the most sense for the kind of thought we want to foster? What is the director's role? Literally, we asked, "where should he sit?"

- What kinds of roles/ positions are there in a meeting? How should these be divided among participants? By experience, by personality, by volunteers? Should they rotate or be set for the semester?
- What are some proven ways of structuring time in a three-hour meeting? Is there an optimum division? Are there activities that are always best done before break? After break?
- What is the best way to structure a large group? What kinds of participation are there? Are subgroups useful? How would subgroups relate to the whole, in terms of labor, reporting back?
- What are the best techniques for producing a useful record of the meeting? For preserving ideas that come up?

The answers we received, we later realized, were up-to-date training methods honed in high tech industry.

Up to this point, conceptualizing and planning a different kind of seminar had taken place on the sidelines of other conversations and through email exchanges. Realizing that we were going to constantly reevaluate and adjust the setup, we wanted to establish a time and space for informal conversations, and a system for making decisions about the seminar. Yet, as this was to be an experiment in what types of interactions a specific form might engender, we needed not just to talk about the experiment but also to conduct it, to do work and discover and evaluate if the forms were productive.

We came up with several solutions and implemented all of them. One was creating a specialized committee that met weekly to calibrate the seminar in a continuous second-order fashion. After the meeting with GBN, who approved the idea of a committee and suggested that we orient and name it the “design group,” we convened and spent several hours of frenzied protocol planning for differentiated time, designated roles and small break-out groups. Finally we decided to set aside time at the end of each session for the group as a whole to make second-order observations, discussing how the particular session had gone as well as the overall progression, and designated specific weeks in the semester to synthesis and modification of our practices.

We carried out this attention to micropractices in another way. We were accustomed to seminars in three-hour blocks, and had considered them something like a blank white sheet upon which we were free to draw out our ideas. We switched instead to structuring our time with neatly defined beginnings and ends. In the same way that a deadline for a project or paper obliges productivity, we tested if structuring our time would force us to make explicit and agree on an insight, which we could then refine.

We knew we needed to counteract the tendency for classroom behavior to revolve around Rabinow's approval. Previous semesters and our first week's attempt at a roundtable approach had made it clear that student-professor relations needed to be modified. Again reverting to the level of micropractices, he moved to a chair placed outside the circle in the back of the room. This effectively shifted the balance of attention, and also elicited humorous student contortions to glimpse his facial expressions during the discussion.

We further attempted to destabilize the regular balance of power by separating out the procedural tasks of running a classroom. We began the semester with a timekeeper, a facilitator and a "concept tracker," but after a week or two, it became clear that the facilitator needed control over the time, in order to make calculated judgments as to when to cut things off and when to let them run their course. As well, the temporality of these chores was different than that of the group's conceptual work. We were losing the contributions of too many participants to aspects of a too rigid form. The first plan was to rotate roles. With weekly reprogramming, however it was impossible to keep track of what was supposed to happen unless one was in the design group. Hence, these duties were consolidated for the rest of semester.

We had to figure out how to order the proceedings when we met as a large group without defaulting to the traditional "seminar mode." A surprisingly powerful tool turned out to be using a distinction between clarifying and expository questions. The first was signaled with a finger in the air, and was limited to, "is this what you mean?" or "can you clarify this point?" The second served to state an opinion or address broader issues, and was signaled with a hand, two fingers or catching the facilitator's eye to enter the line to make comments. The whole process might seem trivial, but openly indicating the kind of question or comment was important for a number of reasons. On the practical side, everyone could hear the points of clarification while they were formulating their thoughts. Confusion about factual matters could be taken care of before we entered into a different kind of discussion, and we were more likely to all be talking about the same thing. More fundamentally, the act of evaluating one's contribution, reinforced of course by the group's response (since it became obvious when a question was not really clarifying), was an integral part of training ourselves in how to think of the discussion collaboratively. A comment might request a point of information, or it might offer insight. We learned to consider before asking if a question would take the group in a useful direction.

Dealing with the size of the group brought out several facets of the experiment, and the work we were doing on ourselves. Between four and six participants seemed to be the critical point where people could easily speak in turn and be productive. Large group interaction was the core, but we wanted to maximize everyone's contribution by accepting their participation styles. We tried to provide a different kind of interaction by going into small groups for a period of each class. These were chosen by counting off. Then, in circles of four or five, we discussed, depending on the week, projects or concepts. In project sessions, the people whose work was being examined were in different groups. In concept sessions, the groups drew on the collective research of the projects. The idea was a back and forth movement to constantly refine our conceptual tools to our inquiry.

As the semester progressed, we settled upon three concept clusters to use as a filter on our data. These were: (1) the figure of the human & humanitarianism; (2) biopower & the social; (3) preparedness & insurance. After a break-out session, one person from each group would give a summary, and we continued with the discussion. The shyer students still held back during this time, but the fairly successful idea was that their thoughts could come out in the smaller groups, and then be shared by the designated reporter.

The third issue was how to preserve its results in an ongoing manner without that process interrupting the labor itself, or becoming too onerous. We established a rotating note-taker position. The person had the right to interrupt and say "can you repeat that?" or "is this what you meant?" Having a designated note-taker let everyone else concentrate on the discussion, and also guarantee a shared record that would suffice to give someone who wasn't there an idea of what happened. These notes were posted online. We also made digital audio recordings of the sessions with the idea that we could go back to them if it seemed that something useful had been said, and the exact phrasing was relevant, although regular transcription would have required too much time and labor, or resources. We used the university instructional technology platform to store the notes and the audio recordings with the intention of creating an archive. The platform however was phased out and the documents were only retained by students.

Each student wrote a "reaction" paragraph, which could include reflections on form, on projects, on problematization. It could also be a place for complaints or venting. The task was required but the choice of topic was open. The previous week's notes were read as a summary at the beginning of class, to put us all on the same page to begin again.

We had chosen specifically to look at the problems presented in the data from everyone's fieldwork. We designed the protocol, however, with an eye to future seminars, undergraduate lecture classes and sections. We wanted the format to be adaptable to other matters that might be addressed collectively, and envisioned using it for courses on the development of dissertation projects, analysis of fieldwork or texts.

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[1] Coined by student Adrian McIntyre

[2] Michel Foucault, M. The Essential Foucault. New York, The New Press.