

On the Fly, On the Wall: Eliciting Possibility from Corporate Impossibility

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Introduction

Anthropologists famously go to the source of action in order to engage with people in their day-to-day lives. Being on location and deeply immersed in a local context over long periods of time – what has often been described as “deep hanging out” (see, for instance, Clifford 1997) – have marked the ethnographic project. Within academia, cultural depth and breadth marks the ethnographer’s ability to “prove” that one knows the site and has captured the experiences of one’s informants adequately, and is measured in both length of time spent in the field and the number and intensity of encounters with informants. This doctrine is frequently incompatible with the scale and tempos of commercial, applied projects, where the lifespan of projects from project inception to completion can be measured in weeks. Yet the broader appeal of ethnographic work in industry has been recognized as providing intimate and synthetic studies of people in order to deliver insights and explanatory frameworks about people’s behavior, which are then used as a basis for design, marketing, and business decisions. However, the study of people in their local context is only one aspect of ethnographic work in industry settings. Research is embedded in a dynamic set-up of circumstances and negotiations that influence what can be studied, how it is studied, the nature of analysis and the output. In exploring the “ethnographies of the possible” in a corporate setting, we look broadly at arrangements that make and re-make the possible and the valuable.

We have been exploring the value of participation and collaboration as methods of research and analysis, inspired by our work together in a series of seven-week innovation “labs” in the food

industry, The “lab” project was initiated by a global food company that sought to explore healthy food and service concepts for families. The project combined the people and interests of the global entity, and people and interests of the various brand entities in each country. The first two labs ran for 7 consecutive weeks and moved between two countries.

In this paper we look at the emergence of a specific metaphor and icon during a series of planned collaborative activities, and consider how the process that emerged symbiotically with the metaphor was partially set in motion by the tasks, partially supported by the introduction of materials, and partially dependent upon the perspectives and interests of those involved. We look at how the materials, the people, and the flow that set the conditions for the emergence of such metaphors were the result of an openness of the process, but also had high stakes and therefore great risks, not just to us as participants but to the success of the project itself. The interdependency and the performative nature of the arrangement supported a dynamic performance that we see as a form of “ethnography of the possible.” In many respects, it is a performance for those present even as it is an organically generated intellectual relationship that emerged spontaneously and unexpectedly.

And finally, we reflect on our roles as two forms of “design anthropology” practices. In the case of the expert facilitator or “ethnodramaturg,” the role was to “provide occasions for performance.” For the case of the consulting anthropologist with area expertise, the design anthropology practice role was much different because it was responsive to a different set of conditions and catalyzing agents, including that of the ethnodramaturg.

Innovation Labs For Healthy Living

The project was structured so that for each lab, a core research team worked in several locations in two countries, while carrying out distinct yet overlapping stages of consumer research, analysis, co-creation with consumer-users and stakeholders, express prototyping, and consumer evaluation of prototypes and concepts. The results were intended to feed into both the country-level innovation pipeline (in the short-term and long-term), and to contribute to the global-level

pipeline. A key question for the project was what insights could “travel” across particular regional contexts and potentially be mobilized for a potential global consumer. At every stage, the core team sought to, or was asked to, invite, incorporate, and engage stakeholders into the process (more than 110 participants in a seven-week period).

The dynamic qualities of these activities and the constantly emerging social relations that were forged, even if for only a few hours, have been productive for considering what, precisely, we were doing, both individually and together, as anthropological researchers. In turn, our shared work has suggested critical questions about our stance and dance in relation to one another, the interactions made possible and emerging out of the material, social, and spatial aspects of the collaborative set-up, and how roles and authority were (re)negotiated in this process. In describing and analyzing this project, we join other writers who have been exploring how we, as anthropologists, depart from the ethnographic processes into which we have been indoctrinated and mix, match, loosen, reject, and re-interpret our unfolding roles and how our co-constructed roles match the ideal roles we see for ourselves. Ultimately, we arrive at a different form of participating in and producing the unfolding of future possibilities.

Transforming ethnographic work

Ethnographic work for design and business purposes commonly ties the role of the person to the phase of work, such as the ethnographer or the ethnographic team conducting ethnographic research and the design team moving from research to concept. The division of labor between research and its application puts strong emphasis upon how the research outcomes are represented and presented. Wakeford (2006) explores how the normalization of PowerPoint software for representing data in corporate ethnography masks the analytic work of ethnographers. While she finds ethnographic presentations using PowerPoint can be “thick” sociomaterial social events, the separation of the ethnographer and the material format of representation turn PowerPoint presentations into rather “thin” knowledge transfer devices. She challenges ethnographers to find ways to extend the relationship between the ethnographer and the material.

A key issue for anthropologists working in the corporate environment is how to deal with the inherent “messiness” of ethnographic data and insights. While ethnographic richness and contradiction is privileged in academic anthropology, both as a practical reality of “thick description” (Geertz 1977) and as a theoretical model (e.g., Tsing 2004), it can be problematic in corporate settings ruled by reductive models of presentation such as executive summaries, bullet points, and one-page business plans. The trick, as ethnographers working in the corporate world have noted, is to push back against such reductive logics in ways that make complexity a productive part of the process (e.g., Darrouzet, Wild, and Wilkerson 2009; Flynn 2009).

Brun-Cotton offers possibilities for engaging complexity and foregrounding it as an explicit task for anthropologists (2009). By highlighting how ethnographers in industrial projects are challenged to focus both on “recipient design” when representing their work for diverse audiences that often include informants, various stakeholders, and colleagues, as well as on the representations must be crafted for these myriad potential audiences as the results are passed around the industrial setting (Brun-Cotton 2009), she presents the anthropologist as an ontological choreographer who performs various “dances” that the interactions with each of the audiences represent. The researcher holds the responsibility of producing results and stories in different ways to different audiences. For Brun-Cotton, the dance also refers to the challenges inherent in communicating with multiple people who are positioned differently.

The challenges inherent in the division of labor between research and design have given rise to a variety of techniques for less simplified, experiential communication of results. Most notably, “the workshop” has emerged as an important format for combining research and design, and especially in relation to research for design. For instance, the “bridging workshops” introduced by Karasti (2001) were intended to replicate, at least to some degree, the research experience for design practitioners and represent a form of organizing research for the design team. As Karasti writes:

it reflects the participant observer's inside-outside view by making visible both the multiple partial views and situated locations of practitioners from within the actual

practice (emic) as well as it integrates an overall account of work as it is edited according to the fieldworker's outside, analytic and synthesized view (etic). Furthermore, it embodies the two perspectives of observation and intervention in which the fieldworker engages by including clips meaningful from the point of view of both practice and design. (Karasti 2001: 217) 1

Nafus and anderson (2009) depict a much more porous and fluid form of ethnographic delivery in their work at Intel. By focusing on the role of project rooms and the social configuration of the rooms, the practices of writing on the walls, speaking about the writing, and the use of visual material, Nafus and anderson argue that this institutionalized format of working anthropologically, departs from the single author model of knowledge production: “*working through project rooms, rather than individually authored texts, de-centers the self as the technology or knowledge production*” (Nafus and anderson 2009: 139).

More significantly, project rooms and the forms of brainstorming engendered by these spaces are themselves institutionalized practices of making things new:

Project rooms are places where people who have different levels of engagement and different disciplinary commitments dip in and out of a research effort. This instability usually seems to lead in a certain direction. It has a theme of sorts. Knowledge does not just circulate, but is consistently made to appear as if it were new, regardless of its origins (Nafus and anderson 2009: 139).

At Intel, the walls and materials of the project room introduce a collaborative form of engagement that “de-centers” and democratizes authority of ethnographic output. Rather than acting as authoritative sources, mediators of real world facts, or carriers of insights about others,

1 While Karasti developed a video collage format to support this re-enactment, there have been a wide variety of material formats and activities developed by design researchers to support introducing representations of “the users” or use situations in a way to be handled, analyzed and negotiated by others.

the ethnographer becomes one voice among many who are making claims of meaning, identifying connections, patterns and negotiating possibilities. The propensity for discovery and the identification of newness appears to be part and parcel to the pressures of innovation within organizations such as Intel. In this case, the bits and pieces of fieldwork material can be viewed as triggers for interaction, exploring through the frames of the participants, instead of complete single authored stories about human life. Working collaboratively, such as in project rooms, puts different constraints on work practices familiar to the anthropologists.

However, the way of working depicted at Intel raises questions about whether the working practices such as writing on walls, is the result of “creating locally appropriate” tools for engaging ethnographically, or if they are compromises holding true to specific model of ethnographic work. As Nafus and Anderson note, as multiple participants work across and through the multiple milieus of the walls, legitimacy of materials and authority becomes increasingly contested. They write that “just as the actors shift, so do the props. It’s never clear what ethnographic knowledge is speaking to” (2009: 139). At the same time, even as the walls and other material props of the project rooms pull people together into common threads, they also produce a narrowing of those threads and that possibility: “a contained world is still seen as a knowable world, and therefore can be managed” (2009: 148). Consequently, there is a potential paradox of both an endless possibility and a contained set of possibilities. As a result, even the most purposeful modes of corporate ethnographic work that result from experimentation on formats, materials and collaborative events can appear to be a compromise of an ideal born in the academy.

Gatt and Ingold (2013) distinguish between the descriptive practice of anthropology-by-means-of-ethnography, in contrast to “anthropology-by-means-of-design” as a practice of correspondence”. Participant observation, rather than ethnography, they argue, is a form of apprenticeship responsive to the unfolding of other peoples’ lives, while at the same time active in the unfolding. Participant observation is “...founded in a willingness to both listen and respond—that is, to correspond—to what others have to tell us” (pp. 147). As Renato Rosaldo (1989), Michael Jackson (2013), Anna Tsing (2004), and Karen Barad (2003) have argued in

different ways, ethnographic work is always emergent and contingent upon dynamic processes that arise from shifting collaborations and interactions.

As a collaborative project

In contrast to an individual researcher holding responsibility for conducting ethnographic research and designing the output, transforming the process into a collaborative design project restructures accountability and delegates responsibility to the templates and formats that individuals, teams, and groups are asked to follow, as well as the flow of activities that combine and invite to or block people from performing, and the facilitation along the way. The role of preparing the formats, team make-up, and flow is more akin to Turner's ethnodramaturg (Turner 1982: 100). It is a director role of putting working activities in motion through concrete instructions, with a clear goal and concrete ending to the activity. However, the concreteness of the ending can be challenged by the very argument of this paper.

While this role of ethnodramaturg or ontological choreographer has analogues in team-based research in academic settings, this is not the usual mode of research for academic anthropologists. Although participatory and participatory-action research are envisioned as possibilities for sharing power and allowing subjects to shape the research agenda, these models in fact merely flip the researcher-researched relationship rather than reconfiguring the entire set of relationships among participants and the methods. Managing others most typically falls under the category of supervisory "administrative" work rather than being understood as part of collaborative research by peers. As a result, control, oversight, responsibility, and authority are born individually rather than shared.

At the same time, it is similar to responsive modes of teaching, in that it introduces new ways of working to people who can see what the results may be. Experimental modes of teaching privilege scripted modes of work that are publicly presented and performed as unscripted, dynamic, spontaneous, and generative. Instructors carefully guide student work and interactions through directed activities that are intended both to facilitate open-ended and innovative thinking

while also keeping students on-track and integrating their ideas and responses into a cohesive narrative.

The innovation labs, as they were introduced, were not physical places, but rather a construct created by the organizers, defined by time, focus, working methods and participants, as well as connected to location. The organization and reproduction of the lab structure were supported by a number of documents and people in various leadership roles, such as the overall leadership team. The labs involved global members of a large international organization, local members from the international organization's regional office, and many other individuals who worked in branding, consultancy organizations for design, advertising, research, semiotics, Zmet, and emotional engineering/surveying, as well as locally contracted designers and illustrators, local and international chefs, and translators. The size of the project and the nature of the project made it quite unique for all of the participants, a common theme during small talk.

Adding to the mystique of working in the lab, the way each participant was contracted to work in the lab and by whom, for how long, under what conditions, and for what purposes was not clearly communicated. The structure was not explicitly or visibly supported in a systematic, coherent or unified manner. Rather, documents and materials were used intermittently over the seven weeks, and leadership roles and participants were constantly in flux. The result was that the structure of the lab, the sequence of stages, the formats used, and types of presentations, discussions, and activities were based partially on plans and partially on emergent form. It was under these conditions that we met and worked together, entering the project under very different circumstances.

In the lab set-up, however, once a project starts, and we are “in the mix of activities”, both the temporal conditions and the degree of intensity are unique. And while they may resemble the activities used in more academic ethnographic projects, they depart from them in significant ways. The urgency of timely collaborative project work constitutes the way of working with others, the material formats, and the roles that we play. The labs were defined by perpetual action and predominately collaborative activity. There were not many dedicated spaces or moments for individual reflection. When individual reflection happened, it occurred in “made-

up” spaces, such as when an individual walked around the room with a packet of sticky notes or left the room on an extended bathroom or coffee break.

Who we are

We both work as professional anthropologists with PhDs. Brendon holds an MA in anthropology from the United States and a PhD in User-Centered Design from Denmark. We have both conducted long-term individual fieldwork in our respective field sites, published, taught, and navigated the gauntlet of applying for and receiving funding for our work. We share interests in material culture and experimental methods, among other topics. Yet our post-PhD career paths have diverged, so that one of us works as a senior researcher in an experimental IT and design research institute in Sweden, and one of us is a tenured professor of anthropology in an American research university. In some respects these divergent paths have disciplined us into very different literatures, methodological approaches, writing styles, and audiences. Yet at the same time, as we discovered in our work together, and as we will discuss here, those differences are not necessarily as sharp as might be expected.

Roles

As an academically based scholar, Melissa’s experiences have been based primarily in independent research in which she relied on her own insights, hunches, skills, and knowledge to collect, interpret, and present her data. While methodological, theoretical, and ethical reasons inspired her to work closely and interactively with her informants to elicit their perspectives and experiences and to capture their experiences in ways that remained true to their perspectives, the responsibility for documenting and communicating that work was ultimately hers. Thus while Melissa’s interests and approaches were similar to those of Brendon, her role has conventionally been that of responsible authority – all data were filtered through and mediated by her experiences and positionality. Brendon, on the other hand, has spent the last eleven years working in relation to design work, with emphasis on exploring formats and arrangements for issues or conflicts to be raised and addressed in collaborative project work. As an organizer of collaborative activities, Brendon’s interest often lies in supporting the development of coherent

stories that are complex and grounded in and incorporated the perspective of people (often termed users or consumers), and other interests. The formats and activities that he introduces in collaborative project work often seek to provoke people to summarize different aspects of what they see as valuable and the possibilities they had been working on together in a way that synthesized. There were three main purposes of this: (1) to introduce the person's value into the discussion through hearing and seeing their perspective on what took place, and (2) to practice complex story telling, and (3) to "curate" multiple individual perspectives into collaborative expressions.

Our first encounter was through a voice Skype call with Brendon sitting in a room of consultants in Moscow, and Melissa sitting at home in California. We both remember this as a challenging meeting, as the project manager at the time was deeply skeptical of Melissa's potential contribution to the project. We first started working together face-to-face during the analysis period in Stockholm, then more intensively in the rooms of a large restaurant, hired out and closed to patrons for two weeks to accommodate 50 plus people during "co-creation week".

Melissa's formal role was that of a consulting "food anthropologist." Hired directly by the large transnational food corporation behind the project, Melissa was brought in to provide factual knowledge about Russian food cultures. Initially, her primary task was to create a detailed cultural overview to help the research teams decode and interpret their data. Her task was not to conduct ethnographic research. Over the course of the project, however, her role evolved to include providing deeper and broader knowledge about Russia more generally; interpreting the data provided by the semiotics and emotional engineering consulting agencies; and interacting with the Russian research subjects and other local Russian team members (frequently in Russian and not through the paid translators). Melissa participated for only two weeks in Russia, and then again in a subsequent project in Brazil.

In general terms we found ourselves working in labs defined by perpetual action and predominantly collaborative activity. There were few dedicated spaces or moments for individual reflection. When individual reflection happened, it occurred in "made-up" spaces, such as when

an individual walked around the room with a packet of sticky notes or left the room on an extended bathroom or coffee break. The shift from a task-based division of labor to that of performing continuously in the presence of others shifts the nature of work in terms of what is desirable and what is possible. In the lab format there was a core team working together throughout the seven weeks, and other people or teams who would spend periods of time with the group, come in and out, or deliver in different “research streams”. In many instances, different stakeholders from the hiring company who dropped in for an hour or so had the potential to move, challenge, or even redirect the process and findings based on their own interests and understandings.

Taking home with you:

As an example of our collaborative work, here we focus on week five of the lab, just after returning from the analysis period in Stockholm, with our “co-design briefs” in hand. On day two of the co-creation week, there was a morning session focusing on consumers and an afternoon with stakeholders and experts. In the morning; there were three simultaneous consumer workshops, each room with 6-8 consumers that had been previously interviewed 3 weeks before. After engaging them in boundary work, eliciting categories, and a co-creation activity in which they were guided through a process to build metaphoric constructs that held their ideals in relation to eating food outside the home, there was a collaborative design activity with consumers and “experts” exploring new service concepts. Mixed in with the 6 consumers were chefs, food experts, brand experts and researchers. Brendon was responsible for the overall schedule and facilitated one of the workshops in the room that held the *out of home breakfast* brief and the *my own creation* brief. Melissa joined the collaborative design workshop with the consumers as an expert, sitting with two consumers, a local chef, an industrial designer, and a local culture expert. Once the session ended, we organized the output of the workshop for a session with a number of other stakeholders in the same room to discuss the output of the co-creation. In the morning, some of them had been part of a discussion with the emotional engineering group and now joined us. At the end of that 2-3 hour activity, as facilitator, Brendon asked to make a video summary – a 13-minute video that has a total of four speakers. The video

moves from wall to wall each with someone ready to explain that section of the material. Before starting to film, Brendon had asked and encouraged the participants to decide who would speak about what and where. Brendon begins the video:

“So now we’re back in the workshop of *out of home second breakfast* brief and *my own creation*, and today we had a set of activities with consumers and experts, and we focused on the out of home service, in many respects, and also touched on *my own creation* through doing that.” He then points the camera toward the next person, who begins introducing two concepts that came from one of the collaborative design sessions. Next, Melissa introduces the concept from the group she was part of, and then someone else introduces the concepts from the third group.

The making of a metaphor

The main project’s responsible manager and project organizer, Herald, was in the room with us during the afternoon. Herald was often the focal point of the discussions, both because he frequently took charge of the conversations, leading them in directions that interested him, and because other participants deferred to him and directed their presentations to him. During this discussion when we were talking about the out-of-home second breakfast and the picnic mobile a consumer had created during the co-creation activity, the concept of “Taking home with you” arose. Once the phrase was stated, Brendon drew a body with a house as a head on a Post-It note. The phrase and the drawn metaphor emerged spontaneously: we had never discussed or planned to identify metaphors. Herald became enthralled by the metaphor and icon. He attributed the identification of the metaphor and the value of the entire process to Brendon’s expertise in co-creation. Herald was able to now tell a coherent story of moving from consumer research to analysis and co-creation to surface powerful metaphors and the accompanying design principles.

We see three consequences of this: First, Herald formally recognized Brendon as an expert in Co-creation, and in many respects acknowledged and affirmed his expert role in the project. Second, Herald’s enthusiasm for what he attributed to be Brendon’s technique of creating a visible metaphor became the standard by which Herald evaluated the progress and outcomes of

the other workshop groups. When the other groups did not come up with a metaphor or other working technique, they received strong criticism and their ideas were not given the same consideration. And third, the metaphor became established and codified as a key component of the design briefs. Even to the extent that a team of illustrators were contracted to participate in the same stage of the lab in Brazil.

The unanticipated success of the metaphor illuminates the extent to which spontaneity and contingency exist within these projects, both as the practical reality of the give and take flows of the research and analysis processes, but also as critical inspiration for both insights and techniques for interpretation and innovation. Because both the phrase and the drawing were unplanned and seemingly on the spur of the moment, they disrupted the otherwise scripted nature of the discussion's format and the methods we had been using. Yet to what extent was the creation of the metaphor truly random, or was it an outcome of a different mode of ethnographic work?

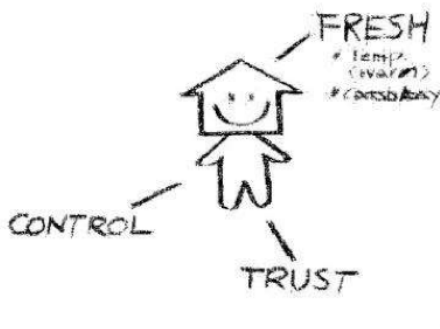


Fig. 1 Icon representing “taking home with” you metaphor

In many respects, the creation of the “Take home with you” metaphor showed that despite the fact that our work was highly scripted, with various tasks defined by instructions, tailored to participants and assigned to specific individuals who were responsible for leading the activities and generating output in forms predetermined by Herald and his team, much of the real work of generating insights occurred in these seemingly unscripted, spontaneous moments. Was this as a result of the constrained nature of the activities preceding them, or despite them? Just as curious

is that the temporal confusion of these moments makes it difficult to recall precisely when these moments of apparent spontaneity occurred: were they part of a chronological series of events building from introductory exercises to more comprehensive and synthetic resolutions, or did they occur repeatedly as part of a give-and-take, recurrent looping between materials as participants raised ideas and returned to previous ideas.

Another example is that of the anthropology briefings that Melissa did at various moments during the project, especially that week. The original anthropology brief was written in response to a set of questions generated by Herald and his project managers. While Melissa provided answers to those questions, she also took the initiative to refine and expand the questions, providing further information to contextualize or even challenge the assumptions within the questions. She was then added to the schedule to make a formal presentation, following the formal presentations made by the other “expert consultants.”

Yet whereas the other presentations were “finished” in that their findings were presented as absolute “conclusions,” the anthropology brief was more open-ended and highlighted contradictions, paradoxes, and unknowns – in other words, the ethnographic messiness of everyday life. The anthropology presentations generated further conversation and discussion among participants, including possibilities by the local team to question and challenge the conclusions made by the other expert consultants – especially the semiotics and Z-met groups. These discussions digressed far from the intended scripts but opened up spaces for new insights and directions, and even for new methods. Much as the spontaneous metaphor creation led to a new method that became a staple for the remaining projects, so too did the anthropology briefs become a new tool.

In many respects, the lab activities seemed to be governed by principles of “adhocracy” in which seemingly contingent and spontaneous events generated new data, insights, and practices (Dunn 2012). Especially as we worked through the ideation and co-creation activities, the scripted portions of our work frequently gave way to improvisational activities as we moved quickly and fluidly between roles, materials, and goals. Above all, this flexibility became a form of performance that required us to deploy skills of improvisation and persuasion.

What was especially noteworthy about these interactions was the constant negotiation of spontaneity against structure, and the need to produce business-appropriate insights against an anthropological commitment to recognize and work with messy data. At different moments, we found ourselves working together and working against one another. But in those interactions, there emerged intriguing possibilities and impossibilities, some anticipated and others not.

Eliciting possibility

Possibility and impossibility are not about design concepts and use fit alone, but rather how the puzzle of multiple research streams, organizations, leaders, and sites can be incorporated into meaningful dialogue. In Russia, the research team was asked to absorb the extensive research streams of Zmet and semiotic research. Slide “decks” of 150 slides were presented to us, with a quick query “Can you join the semiotic download?” often unaccompanied by any further elaboration of what the purpose was meant to be. However, once asked to plan for this type of research integration, Brendon developed a format of activity that connected the representations, the people, and the research themes. When the Zmet team arrived in to the project room in Brazil, rather than rely upon an extended presentation about their findings, we asked the team to locate their research findings on our material on the walls. They then presented their findings through the examples they found on the walls. When we were creating themes, we made mini printouts of the Zmet and other research PowerPoint slides, and asked the teams to populate the themes with their own material.

As the expert consultant on the region and topic, Melissa was pulled into conversations to make sense of and explain confusing data through insights about the cultural context. Initially those moments occurred when members of the research team were working through data, but they became more frequent during the “share out” exercises at the end of sessions. One of her roles became that of pulling together disparate ideas and reframing them into coherent narratives, often taking the creative metaphors, such as those that Brendon designed, and fleshing them out with ethnographic insights. The materials Melissa worked with ranged from storyboards, Post-It notes, fragments of scribbled data, and remembered conversations. Melissa did not so much

retell vignettes as she provided a “back story” in terms of historical context, cultural significance, and connection to larger theoretical issues. Brendon, on the other hand, sought out Melissa at key moments to curtail over simplifications or cases of imposing strong frames on local behavior, in ways that his knowledge of Russia, his use of theory or his position as organizer did not allow.

The “off the cuff” nature of these narrations highlighted the precarity and indeterminacy of the project, especially as Melissa was sometimes asked to make a presentation without warning for a video camera or for a corporate executive who dropped in for a visit. As Melissa had not expected to fulfill this role, she did not have prior training or any notion of what to do. Yet in many ways these encounters resembled her experiences in the classroom. When teaching, she is always prepared for any kind of question or comment, no matter how vague, unclear, or off topic. As a teacher, her job is to take what students throw at her, rework it, reinterpret it, neaten it up, and return it to them in an accessible and authoritative way. Thus without realizing it during these lab moments, she automatically went into “professor mode,” which enabled her to respond to high-ranking corporate executives without feeling flustered or constrained to follow things their way.

At the same time, Melissa’s background as an academic researcher and teacher was a hindrance, both ethically and practically. Because her commitment was first and foremost to the research subjects, it was at times difficult to “give up” on the ideas and experiences of the subjects or to homogenize and sanitize their perspectives into a neat package for a sound bite. She also initially found the very different time frame challenging, as the need to work through materials in a highly compressed time period seemed to violate the integrity of the data. Yet the different temporal mode seemed (to Melissa at least) to be productive for Brendon, with his interest in capturing the dynamic nature of people’s experiences and finding ways to represent in their collaborative and complex forms.

Within the precarious, indeterminate, and always fluid nature of the lab encounters, we found ourselves forging an intriguing partnership that allowed us cooperatively to open up additional possibilities. Even when our starting points and reference points were vastly different (especially since Melissa had never worked in a corporate environment before and was not responsible for

an entire team, and Brendon was pushed to the center of an overwhelming organizational task with countless surprises), we found ourselves intuitively anticipating the other's ideas and language and, perhaps more importantly, engaging with one another outside the scripted roles assigned to us. There was something about our shared anthropological training – the shared language, intellectual genealogies, and approaches – that enabled us to translate disparate materials, ideas, and corporate expectations into a working milieu. The lab was an intersubjective space, or as Jackson would put it a state of being that exists “between one and one another” (2012) marked by the interplay between the self and the other, between acting and being acted upon. But at the same time it was a space marked by indeterminacy in the sense described by Friedrich (1986) as “the processes by which individuals integrate knowledge, perceptions, and emotions in some creative way ... in order that they may enter into new mental states or new relations with their milieus.” In other words, as much as the lab space was a scripted, overdetermined space, it was also an immensely dynamic state of being - a place of great opportunity.

This dynamic state of being produced possibilities, especially open-ended, forward-moving insights. It also required new tools and techniques for apprehending data and insights on the move. Because the methods and tools devised by the other “expert agencies” were geared at generating quantitative interpretations that could be easily reproduced, replicated, and proven, they were not necessarily amenable to the more dynamic “on the fly” nature that was the reality of the project. Every time a new stakeholder entered the project, the data and insights could shift, thus threatening the stability of quantitative-based models. Only the anthropological approaches were inherently flexible and able to accommodate change.

Implications and further thoughts

What, then, can we take away from this project, our shared work, and our respective experiences? What might this type of collaborative partnership reveal or inspire for future ethnographic work in both corporate and academic settings? As we are still thinking through these possibilities, this section is not meant to be exhaustive but rather an initial set of thoughts.

First, our experiences with this project highlighted the inherently translational aspects of this type of collaborative ethnography. In every instance and at every moment, we were both translating across languages, concepts, methods, data, modes of representation, and professional standing. We each brought our own respective languages and expertise – terminological, representational, ethical – but through a shared sense of the ethnographic project, including both what ethnographic work has been in the past and what its potential might be, we were able to engage one another in a dialectic in which through negotiation we reached a shared understanding (Bakhtin 1981, Habermas 1984). From that shared understanding we were able to move forward together as partners who, to a certain degree, were able to anticipate the other's next steps or were able to make sense of those next steps and quickly align with them and support them. One of Herald's working phrases was instructive for this: rather than framing his critiques of data or approaches as differences of opinion, Herald repeatedly began his comments, suggestions, and absolute directives with the phrase "To build on that." This sense of adding to is also evident in the improvisational acting game of building a story with "Yes and." In many ways, the two of us were engaged in an improv dynamic of taking another's work and moving it forward.

That shared understanding and cooperative dynamic was only possible because of a shared trust that we had forged. Thus a second insight is that trust building, both implicit and explicit, is essential to this kind of work. Yet that kind of trust is not always possible or even predictable. Certainly the critical imperative within academic work can easily lend itself to disruptive and preventative modes of scholarship, rather than more productive ethos of cooperation. In many ways we were fortunate that we were able to forge quickly a harmonious relationship so that even when we did not anticipate the other's next moves or, more importantly, when we disagreed, we were able to continue working together without impeding the dynamic. In that respect, the design orientation of the project was essential because it required us to put the needs of the group and the larger project ahead of our own personal interests. It became clear that not everyone in our larger project was capable of doing this. In fact, the outside experts from the Zomet, semiotics, and emotional engineering were much more wedded to their ideas and refused to budge, even when other participants and stakeholders were skeptical or provided data to refute

their claims. In fact, the semiotics group was eliminated from future projects, largely because they could not respond to the dynamic nature of the data and interpretations.

Third, the materiality of the project, both in terms of the intended outcomes of the project and in terms of how the data and interpretations were documented and represented through practice-based methods and models of presentation, was likely enhanced by the fact that we were both trained in different forms of practice theory. Although we came at practice theory from different orientations – one a more theoretical use of practice theory, the other a more applied engagement – we shared a common frame of reference to think about how culture, human dispositions, materiality, and activity were related as ways of being in the world and knowing the world. At the same time, we were each able to draw on our experiences in different ways to play our very different roles, albeit, in relation to one another.

Fourth, our collaborative work was enhanced by our different roles and positions as “experts” in the process. We could each draw on our respective assignments and the expectations played on us in different ways – Brendon as a team leader with oversight over many of the pieces and a desire to introduce and explore new forms and formats of collaborative production, Melissa as a topical expert who could be drawn into different conversations and streams of work as needed. Together, we could move around the various rooms and constituencies and use our positions to speak on issues with authority. Again, the particular professional rapport we established was crucial because we each worked to bolster one another, not compete with or minimize the other’s contributions.

Collectively, these experiences highlight the extent to which anthropology as a method and repository of knowledge is fruitful for corporate-based research, not just in terms of providing a useful framework for rethinking culture and cultural processes, but also in terms of modeling a type of research and interpretation that is oriented to emergent and dynamic streams of data. Anthropology itself is a contingent exercise that is always in the mode of navigating difference, contradiction, and the unexpected. In addition, the scalar orientation of anthropology allows for possibilities to navigate and contextualize multiple layers of meaning, from the macroscopic to the microscopic, in order to identify and pull out cultural patterns that recur at multiple levels.

At the same time, these experiences provide opportunities for rethinking academic anthropology. On the one hand, this sort of cooperative engagement is an excellent model for collaborative research and interpretation, especially to encourage work that is more oriented to partnership rather than independent researchers working alongside one another on a shared project. It also allows for new ways of devising methods on the fly in response to changing circumstances, a useful skill for any fieldworking anthropologist. On the other hand, the dynamic nature of this project, as well as the need to communicate data, concepts, and interpretations in material form, is instructive for devising innovative pedagogies that take students out of a traditional lecturing-passive listening model and into a more active engagement with materials.

Ultimately, these experiences suggest ways in which the constraints of our respective professional fields, and that of the corporate environment in which we worked, can be productively turned into possibilities. It is finding ways to be comfortable with, and even creative with limits and unknowns.

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