Tutoring Reflections

It will be useful to include the assignments themselves in order to contextualize the sessions described below. The submission deadlines are:

Essay 1 – October 25; Essay 2 – November 8.

Essay 1: *Some argue that the role of ethnography is "to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange." Explain what the phrase means. Do you agree? Why or why not? Answer this question with reference to at least three of the materials addressed in class thus far.*

Essay 2: *Evans-Pritchard writes in the ethnographic present. He essentially places the Nuer outside of history, making his book a partial account. Other works, however, place the Nuer in historical context. How does placing ethnographic subjects in history enrich our understanding of the Nuer and the ethnographic project?*

October 4, 2005

I met with Cole for my very first tutoring session under the auspices of ASSC-3110. With all the cautions and concerns raised by my peers in my mind, I was worried that perhaps he wanted simply to have me go over the paper and fix it up, or otherwise misinterpret my role vis-à-vis his class. To my surprise, I was thrilled to find a student who had a fairly good conceptual grasp of the material who wanted help structuring his paper both aesthetically and formally.

I began by having him explain to me what he had written without looking at the essay in front of him. I immediately found that, though he had the capacity to understand his thesis statement and the material required to prove it, he had great difficulty articulating concisely what the assignment required of him. We took a step back and discussed his introduction itself, speculating on whether he introduced his topic in the most effective way possible. Before being able to get far with this approach, however, it became clear that we would have to set the tone for the paper. Though Cole was a third-year anthropology student, it struck me that he did didn't clearly understand what the project of anthropology was, making a paper about ethnography particularly problematic. So we set about trying to construct definitions for these concepts that he could use to contextualize his argument both explicitly (through a definitions section) and implicitly (through frequent reference to key terms throughout the paper).

Having advised him on the value of a strong introduction and clearly defined terms, I read over his paper (there were an alarming number of spelling errors that I deferred to our next session). The assignment was comparative, and he had decided to divide his body into three sections following the three films he viewed. I made sure to stress that, though this approach was a valid strategy for argumentation, it relied strongly on pretext and required frequent references to his thesis and key terms. I also suggested other strategies, making it clear that these were not necessarily 'better' or 'more correct'; he seemed to appreciate this.

The last thing we discussed regarding his specific assignment was the aesthetic aspect, or the ways in which his paper reflected his nascent 'voice'. I made some suggestions on how to restructure the introduction, and he seemed to latch onto the notion of a grand-metaphor or allegory that would inform his entire argument. As a follow-up, I stressed *ad nauseum* that the changes he would be making to this

particular paper were small steps towards developing a formalized approach to writing, and that he should start writing assignments with a more critical eye to his method. We agreed that we would meet for the next assignment before any writing had taken place, so I could follow his method myself. Finally, I ended by giving him some anecdotal experiences of my own regarding the writing process, and even gave him a copy of my 'How I Write' handout to show him how formalized his method could become with more practice.

Cole was very grateful for the time we spent on his paper, and I was thrilled that he said the session was extremely helpful. I look forward to working with him throughout the semester, as it will help me just as much in adapting my tutoring style to SOSA papers.

October 21, 2005

After a somewhat dry spell, things have picked up with the imminent deadline for the re-write essays. I was fortunate to schedule a one-on-one session for today in addition to a two-hour writing workshop. I'll discuss each in turn.

Collice met me in the Killam lobby at noon, roughly an hour before my workshop was scheduled. We found a quiet area and delved right into her paper. Following my default approach, I asked her to summarize her argument so I could see how mature her ideas were in her own mind. Though she touched upon a few aspects of the question, it was evident from her paraphrase that she hadn't framed her argument properly, thus excluding key elements. Our first action, then, was to deconstruct the question itself to make it clear what was missing from her response. As was typical for this assignment, she had placed a heavy emphasis on unpacking the notion of "making the strange familiar" and not enough on the familiar / strange; in addition, she did not seem to have a strong grasp of the concept of ethnography, making an argument about its role problematic.

As the former element was linked more to content, I decided to start by clarifying the notion of ethnography for her and extolling the virtues of defining terms within an essay, something that a surprising amount of students had neglected. I proposed to her that making her definitions explicit would strongly help her argument and her understanding, and we spent some time after defining ethnography listing the terms in her paper that would merit a one or two-line definition: strange, familiar, anthropology, culture. This helped her greatly: before our session she had thought that anthropology and ethnography were synonymous!

While we were on the topic of meta-level elements in an essay, I directed our discussion from the definitions to the introduction, which she claimed she 'tacked on' at the end of her paper. This troubled me: there was no thesis statement, a very weak description of what would follow in her argument and absolutely no context. Though I am sensitive to writing approaches that frame the introduction as an "afterthought", Collice's approach didn't strike me as mature or developed as much as a meandering and unreflective, *ad hoc* method. I advised her to start paying close attention to herself when writing an essay so she could recognize patterns in her behaviour and someday formalize them. Bringing the discussion back to her paper, I outlined what I contend are the three key elements of a solid introduction: the framing of a problem, the thesis as a response, and the methodology. In passing, I made the statement that part of one's motivation in writing an introduction – or a paper itself – should be to demonstrate to the reader why one's argument is worthwhile or pertinent. She latched very strongly onto this idea, and even wrote it down for future reference.

Having dealt enough with the meta-level for now, we moved on to her content. I outright debunked the myth that any terms or phrases were off limits in a formal essay, if used correctly. We then brainstormed some ideas for the part of her essay she had neglected, namely the familiar / strange. This proved extremely helpful for her, and after a few abstract examples she was able to draw out a few from the course material on her own. Capitalizing on the momentum, I brought these examples back to ethnography to consolidate her newfound understanding of the concept. I tried to give her a range of perspectives on ethnography so that she wouldn't be "boxed in", so I introduced various schools of thought to show how they each framed ethnography, such as structuralism, interpretation, literary criticism etc. This led nicely to the notion of a thesis argued negatively - in this case, by arguing that other ways of understanding the role of ethnography are somehow less accurate than the strange / familiar and familiar / strange conception. In turn, this led to an analysis of her conclusion; my advice there was to make it clear what she had just argued by summarizing her points and emphasizing how they proved her thesis.

What came up throughout the session, and particularly towards the end, distressed me considerably. At one point in our discussion, I asked her what parts of her paper she felt the most proud of. Despite having spent considerable time writing it, she couldn't think of anything that stood out, or that was worth keeping. When we concluded, Collice thought back to all the things we had talked about and, in a half-joking manner, said she was going to rewrite the essay from scratch. Her lack of self-confidence really disappointed me, especially because she had the capacity to grasp everything we discussed. I was grateful for her appreciation – she said she wished she had come to me sooner and couldn't thank me enough. I responded by advising her to see either Karen or me immediately when the second assignment was passed out so we could develop her approach holistically. I sincerely hope that with the help I can offer Collice, she will begin to take more pride in her writing and approach future assignments with more self-confidence.

I went directly from the session with Collice to the SOSA department fishbowl to prepare for the workshop. Arakua (a particularly keen student) was waiting outside from the outset, and for the first 15-20 minutes we talked about standards in the SOSA department and the apparent 'revolt' in the previous class. She seemed moderately concerned with her grade and her general performance in the class, so I did what I could to mollify and assuage her worries. This wasn't forced at all: it was clear very early on that Arakua was an extremely bright girl. I would introduce abstract concepts in the course of the workshop and she would immediately find tangible examples that illustrated them perfectly. This boded well.

I had decided to break the workshop into two phases: the first was a "mock write-up", where I would guide the students through the thought processes involved in the pre-textual and textual phases of their assignment, from deconstruction and interpretation of the question to the development of a thesis and its formal argumentation. I would devote the remaining time to addressing general questions about points from the lecture and particular questions about individual essays.

The first point I made about the assignment was a distinction between types of academic argumentation. I classified the essay topic as something requiring 'weak argumentation' as opposed to strong, because the emphasis was on description and understanding rather than proving a point. I didn't think much of this, but it seemed to help Arakua frame her approach greatly. At this point, I was still hoping more students would show up so I took a break from my outline and gave Arakua my spiel on the three elements of a good introduction and the importance of definitions. We discussed the weaknesses the teacher's assistant had found in her paper, particularly in her introduction. She had, to my surprise, included a definition of ethnography in

her first paragraph; however, the definition she provided was a textbook description that framed it outside the terms of the question. We worked on developing a definition of ethnography in terms of its *role* in order to improve the flow of the introduction. By the time we started unpacking the strange / familiar and familiar / strange notions that dealt with her essay's body, Brian had walked in. I finished up our discussion and greeted him.

I'm happy with what happened next: rather than have Arakua sit through everything we had talked about again as I explained it to Brian, I decided to have Arakua try and summarize the discussion for him: this would serve to consolidate her understanding of what we had talked about and offer Brian the basic ideas upon which I could then build. I felt this sort of collaboration helped de-formalize the session and established a peer connection between the two students. Also, I really needed to use the bathroom.

I returned just as Arakua was finishing up, so then I had Brian review what he had heard so I could gauge just how well both students had grasped the points I had made. I explained the examples we had covered just once more, and then continued with my original plan for the lecture. I introduced the notion of 'signposts' that serve to add structure to the body of the argument: phrases like "we are now at the point where…" or "before moving on, we must" or "we have seen that…" that, while not enhancing the argument with information, reinforce the division and structure of argumentation in the reader's mind. In my opinion, this is perhaps the most useful remark I could make about the body of an essay without touching on content. The other concept I made a point of imparting for the body was the notion of 'pretext', or the necessary observations and comments that must be made before one can speak about one's sources or evidence. This figured prominently in our follow-up discussion; both Arakua and Brian were fascinated with the distinction I made about their content.

The final section of my lecture was on the conclusion. In my experience, this is the strongest part of most students' essays: by the time they reach it their ideas have matured enough to be summarized in an articulate manner. Being aware of this, I was careful to draw out the similarities between one's introduction, thesis and their conclusion with the hope that the students would revise the former after considering the latter. I also encouraged them to move beyond their local, limited thesis to more general implications of their argument – in line with my widely held belief that part of writing an essay is convincing your reader that your thesis is worthwhile. I ended by generalizing what I had talked about in terms of essay structure by emphasizing that the way I outlined was just one of many. I explained briefly the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning as reflected in the structure of an argument, and stressed that there are manifold ways of structuring a paper; the process I took them through was not the gospel.

The follow-up portion of the workshop was fairly straightforward. Brian asked how I would go about providing definitions without seeming disjointed. I replied by making reference to definitions as pretext, i.e. making the definitions relevant to the context of the argument and only providing explanations for necessary concepts. Arakua pursued this by asking how that would play out logistically. In turn, I asked her how she thought this could be accomplished – she suggested perhaps including definitions in-line, i.e. clarifying concepts when they are first invoked. This was a viable strategy, but I cautioned her that in order to pull it off she would have to re-structure her content to avoid redundancy. During this time, Brian had been thinking about pretext in a more general sense; that is to say, pretext relating to the actual sources from which his evidence would be provided: drawing out the ethnographic elements of films or documentaries, offering synopses of books, etc. It didn't make sense to him to lump all of this in a monolithic definitions section, and conversely, he

felt that approaching it in-line would be too confusing. I suggested a middle ground, by providing pretext about the *kinds* of examples he would be looking at (for example, all those under the "strange / familiar" and then those under "familiar / strange"): perhaps giving pretext that unpacked each ethnographic process, including all the ways it could be construed. This would break his argument up into two major blocks - one for each process – under which further subdivisions could give examples of the different senses in which each process could be understood. Finally, Arakua asked me to clarify what I meant by 'senses' of the strange being made familiar and vice-versa. To reply effectively, I would have to talk about anthropological theory rather than writing strategies, but I felt it was necessary for Arakua's understanding to provide a concrete example. In what I felt to be an extremely effective explanation, I selected an example from one of their movies where a group of Czechs decided to dress up and live as Native Americans to reject the values of their Communist society. I then drew a chart:

S/F or F/s	Subject / Ethnographer	Object
F/S	New Native Americans	Czechs
S/F	Czechs	Old Native Americans
F/S	Czechs	New Native Americans
F/S	New Native Americans	Old Native Americans
S/F	New Native Americans	Czechs

Using this as an aid, I helped both of them understand the various senses in which the strange could become familiar and the familiar strange by asking them to explain each perspective on this particularly rich example. They scribbled it down furiously after they realized the value of it.

We ended on a very high note, moving the conversation from writing to SOSA to university life in general. I felt in my element the entire time, and I was thrilled that they both got so much out of the session. I plugged myself again, encouraging them to see me before starting next time, and they were on their way. As an afterthought, it strikes me that the more rapport I build with students over the course of a session, the friendlier, more comfortable and more open they become. I'm glad that it comes so effortlessly most of the time.

October 24, 2005

After a weekend in Gagetown and a particularly taxing day of classes, I was looking forward to the sessions I had scheduled with Patrick and Adam in the evening. The rewrite of the first essay was due the next day, so I didn't have any lofty expectations going in. My goal was to impress them enough to make them *want* to actively seek me out before beginning their future assignments. I developed an *ad hoc* strategy to achieve this end, and I feel optimistic about the outcomes.

I will remember Patrick as the student who fought me every step of the way. He had a keen analytical mind owing to the philosophy courses he had taken in first year, and a tremendous amount of energy conveyed through a particularly chatty personality. We covered a lot of ground during our session, but it felt like an uphill battle the entire time: while Patrick had a keen mind, his perspectives and attitudes towards the essay topic and his writing abilities were very narrow. However, we did seem to hit it off pretty well; I detected a genuine thirst for knowledge, and it was easy to get led off track by his peripatetic questioning.

I warned Patrick that I might not be able to do much for him with such an imminent submission deadline, but assured him that I would do everything I could in the time we had. I tried teasing out his argument by asking him to summarize his paper for me, but it was clear right from the outset that this wasn't going to work: his summary was confusing because he had made the question entirely too complex. If one can speak of a 'level' of thought at which the assignment was supposed to be interpreted (and for which it was designed), Patrick was thinking far beyond the amount he needed to; this led him take for granted – as an assumption – the type of mentality he was trying to explain surrounding ethnography. He couldn't fathom the idea that someone writing in the early 20th century could think differently about an African tribe because he was so liberal-minded and culturally sensitive himself. Bringing him down to the right 'level' was perhaps the biggest challenge I faced.

To his credit, Patrick had perhaps the most mature ideas about how to interpret the question: his examples, though they were all the same, described a very complex process in which ethnography achieved both goals simultaneously. The notion had crossed my mind, but I hadn't expected any students in the class to come up with that sort of example. I helped him hone down those examples, but I felt compelled to draw out the examples from the text that illustrated one process or the other individually. This proved problematic because he over-thought them all. I felt it would be a shame for such a strong student to perform poorly on a paper because he thought too hard, so we spent the lion's share of the session on content and theory instead of writing. Patrick's problem wasn't about expressing his ideas at all; this simplified my task in one sense, but it made it just as complex in another: I was dealing with a student that was grappling with new concepts on-the-fly. I wasn't uncomfortable teaching anthropological theory, but I exerted quite a bit of energy helping him understand the simpler concepts.

Beyond this, there was nothing very remarkable about our session: he was an extremely apt thinker and I think we expressed an unspoken mutual respect for each other. After I had finished my usual routine with his conclusion, we ended the session with me skimming over his paper and pointing out places where the rhetoric was disjointed or the structure started breaking down. I did this in a hurry as a favour to him, because my next student had arrived and was waiting.

There was very little that I actually fixed, myself, in Patrick's paper; I marked flags where he should concentrate his efforts and left it up to him to pick his own phrasing. He had a lot of work ahead of him if he was going to make all the changes that he wanted to; he was extremely grateful, as all students have been to date, and assured me that the next time he got an essay he'd contact me from the outset. We'll see how that goes.

After the trying session I had had with Patrick, with so much stubbornness and energy to contend with, Adam was a welcome change of pace. Perhaps I was worn down, or tired, but it felt very relaxing talking with him before we got to work. I value rapport-building, and both of us seemed to be very sociable; he was from Toronto, a few intersections away from where I grew up, went to a high school I had frequented on several occasions, and seemed like a very down-to-earth young man.

He also had a good grasp of the concepts, so much so that I was genuinely impressed. Of all the students I had asked to define ethnography for me, he offered the most concise, complete and accurate. I sensed from then on that this session would be more about essay structuring and writing theory than content, which was a tremendous relief; there's only so much anthropological theory one can take in the run of a day.

I can summarize our session with just a few key points: we spent a considerable amount of time on his introduction, after I gave him my song and dance about the

three elements; we talked about pretext, but only briefly about definitions; I encouraged him to try and include signposts in his body, but I hardly even glanced at his content; finally, for his conclusion, I encouraged him to move to more general statements about his thesis just as I had during the writing workshop.

Specifically, I was pleased at how our discussion of his introduction went. He had set up the problem very well, and came very close to articulating a viable thesis, but had no methodology. After a few general remarks about the logical flow of an introduction, he decided *himself* to restructure the sentences and add a few more to make for a stronger introduction. The only point at which I had any direct influence on his paper was with his thesis, which I pretty much implanted into his mind. I feel bad about this, ethically, but he was just so painfully close to the perfect thesis that I'm certain he would be able to develop his own next time. As for his methodology, I asked him think about the structure of his body critically and decide whether the structure could be optimized; if not, describing how he would argue his thesis in the introduction would be that much easier.

The session I had with Adam was one of the easiest, most effortless ones to date. At the same time, I felt that the help I offered would significantly improve his paper: simple things like signposts and a solid introduction go a long way with teachers' assistants. I concluded by listing the parts of his essay that we had addressed and the courses of action that we had decided upon; honestly, nothing was left ambiguous: it was the most straightforward resolution to a tutoring session that I've had yet, and I think we both felt good about it. I'd be interested to know how he does on the re-write.

The strategy I used for these two sessions, with the deadline less than a day away, was to do as much as I could for their paper in the form it was while straying off every now and then to talk about general principles of good writing. It was a pragmatic balance between what needed to be done immediately to raise the mark significantly, while instilling a new consciousness and awareness in the student about his writing process. There's only so much one can do as a tutor when the paper won't change significantly; in this case, the best advice I can offer the student is to come back with a fresh assignment and a blank sheet of paper.

October 31, 2005

I had my first repeat student today, much to my delight. Patrick booked an appointment the day the new assignment was handed out (via the website, I might add), making him the keenest student yet. We spent the first ten or fifteen minutes talking about all sorts of things unrelated to the assignment, which I felt really consolidated whatever rapport was carried over from the previous session.

My first remark to him about the assignment was how difficult I thought the question was for second year students; I hoped to inspire him to rise to the challenge by openly stating this. I was pleased to see he had already jotted a few ideas down on paper, and somewhat excited at the prospect of helping a student through an entire SOSA paper for the first time at Dalhousie. I asked him to recall what we had discussed during our previous session about the three elements of a good introduction (which he remembered!). The idea was to could come up with a thesis a) deductively by determining the problem, and b) inductively by structuring a methodology out of the ideas he wanted to argue. We arrived at said thesis half an hour later, and it was an excruciating process for both of us (we admitted it, openly), but it was done. Working from this thesis, I directed us towards the methodology and spent a good part of the rest of the session teasing the steps of argumentation out of him.

The idea was to create an outline that flowed logically from one point to the next, so that his ideas built upon each other rather than being presented in a disjointed manner. The difficulty was getting Patrick to determine what should come before or after what. I tried to steer him in the right direction without being overbearing, but I think by that point in the session we both had headaches: the noise of the Killam atrium combined with the time we spent coming up with a thesis had worn us both out. By the end of the session, we had all the stages of his argument hammered out but not arranged, a strong thesis and problem and a list of the key concepts that would need to be fleshed out as pretext. It was a good foundation, but Patrick didn't realize this at the time; he had the mid-semester jitters and anxiety which invariably come in the second year of studies. He thanked me and assured me that he would type up a draft with what we had discussed and try to reach me again to go over it. This seemed like the best strategy at the time; I wished him luck and assured him that when he looked at what he had written down with a clear mind the paper would write itself. I'm confident that he will do well – in time, perhaps up to the standards he sets for himself in other disciplines.

November 3, 2005

Hilary had absolutely no idea how to approach the new assignment. In contrast to Patrick (the first actual brainstorming session to date), she had tried to think about the question, got nowhere and had given up. This was clear by the fifth minute: her entire demeanour was resigned and passive, as if she expected me to transmit discrete blocks of information that would stack up to a paper with little to no effort. I had already given one presentation that day and was in no mood to lecture to an audience again, so I forced her to engage the material by reducing the question to first principles – I mean *really* breaking it down.

The most basic unit of analysis for the question was the notion of 'history'. I asked her to provide a definition for this term, seeing it as something that all students could define in some capacity. Hilary resisted, so I moved from history to the notion of time; still nothing. I was beginning to sense that she didn't take well to abstract notions, and so I decided to try a different strategy (I'll address this below).

Hilary was worried that she hadn't read enough of the Hutchinson text (the diachronic ethnographer) to have a good enough foil for Evans-Pritchard's synchronic approach. From a conversation with Dr. Dubois, and the description of the early part of the book Patrick provided me with, I assured her that she had covered more than enough material to write something worthwhile. The problem was that Hilary's approach to learning emphasized the centrality of archival information, while overlooking the themes that emerge from within said information. I had to find a way to help her read Hutchinson without looking for discrete facts to compare to Evans-Pritchard; much of the difference between these two anthropologists' methodologies was in the way they wrote and, to a lesser extent, what they wrote about.

I noticed that she had written down something about the continuous present, so I thought it was fair game to flesh this idea out. I presented her a hypothetical example of the dilemma a synchronic anthropologist faces: "Two weeks from now, some guy is going to decide to wear his shirts and pants inside out. Everyone's going to copy him and soon it'll be fashionable to turn your clothes inside out. So everyone's walking around with messed up clothes, and an anthropologist from somewhere else decides to come into Dal and study us. How would he explain the inside-out clothing, if he was like Evans-Pritchard?" Hilary responded, "Um, I guess he'd just say that we wear our clothes inside out. He wouldn't really try to explain it." She hit the nail right on the head: the synchronic methodology doesn't lend itself

to explanations or searches for the origins of things. The hypothetical anthropologist would claim that Dalhousie students have always worn their clothes inside-out.

"So, how can we tie this into the idea of history?" After some hemming and hawing, Hilary arrived at the conclusion (somewhat independently) that Hutchinson's explanations of cultural artefacts represented the element of history in her ethnography. It was around this time that we agreed on a description of history as a "search for origins" and a "quest for understanding". But now that we had a common ground at the fundamental level of analysis for this question, I tried my utmost to expand her understanding of history so she could return to the text and draw out her own examples.

All told, there were two other 'senses' of history in ethnography that I tried to introduce to Hilary: the first was the idea of an ethnography itself as an historical document that must be interpreted in its own context by the reader, the second was (in my opinion) the critical distinction between static and dynamic cultures. Very quickly, I went over ideas she should have been exposed to in her first year course to make sure we "spoke the same language" when invoking certain idioms. The effort was mainly to show how Evans-Pritchard might espouse a structural-functionalist or even structuralist view of culture so that we could explore the methodological implications vis-à-vis culture; I would then use this as a foil for Hutchinson. Conceptually, this worked very well.

With these ideas in place, I felt Hilary could reconsider the question with an eye to developing an actual thesis. I gave her my song-and-dance about the elements of an introduction, emphasizing primarily the posing of a problem to help her frame her thesis as a response. I rattled off one or two sequences of sentences that would build up to a thesis to help her see concretely what "posing a problem" entailed, had her write down the sequence of points and arrange them in an order she felt was logical, and then extrapolate from this sequence to arrive at her thesis. This involved a lot of writing, and was almost painful, but concluded with two sentences in the middle of her second sheet of paper enclosed by a double border in highlighter and pen.

The rest of the session was a piece of cake: one a thesis is developed, it becomes very easy to draw up the steps needed to prove it. We arranged all the concepts that we mapped out earlier (which she wrote down avidly) to elicit a logical progression of thought that affirmed her thesis statement. A few words on possible conclusions, and we called it a day. Hilary thanked me profusely for helping her understand the question, something she claimed she wouldn't have been able to do on her own. I advised her to draw more conscious parallels between her daily life and her studies in anthropology to help her contextualize abstract ideas in a concrete manner, in line with the learning style that worked best for her. We set up an appointment for Monday evening, giving her the weekend to come up with a penultimate draft.

Looking back, I'd affectionately call this session the 'hour of metaphors'. Hilary's problem wasn't a lack of understanding or an unwillingness to engage the material. Rather, she just didn't readily see the relations between what she framed as an academic matter and her non-academic experiences. Sensing this, I adapted my strategy as best I could to accommodate her learning style and help her overcome her difficulty. I tried throughout the session to give her examples from her day to day life as an actor in the North American culture to help her think about the question differently, as well as from the text when it was relevant (the two Civil Wars Hutchinson writes about, the fallacy in reasoning Evans-Pritchard would have faced trying to explain the clay guns children made, etc.). These generated the best responses and the most frantic scribbling, which I can only assume indicated a sudden realization or epiphany she would later incorporate into her paper.

I went directly downstairs from my session with Hilary to meet with Patrick again. Patrick had contacted me yesterday with a rough draft of his essay, so I already had a game plan outlined in my head; after two sessions, I had a pretty good knowledge of what would and wouldn't work with him.

Patrick, bless his heart, had taken my advice much too literally. The first two pages of his argument read almost painfully, because I could see exactly why he chose to write what he did: I saw a problem, a thesis and a methodology. I saw definitions. I didn't see anything *relevant*. The biggest weakness – in fact, the only pressing weakness in the whole paper – was Patrick's entire introduction. As I read further along, his paper became much more lucid, continuous and readable. His argument had a definite form and structure, his turns of phrase were entirely his own, and his conclusion ended very emphatically. I had almost nothing to say about the entire remainder of his paper, but the first two pages needed a serious overhaul.

I started by apologizing for misleading him: his strict adherence to the advice I had given him in the previous session was entirely my fault. The problem he posed, "whether or not history should be incorporated into ethnographic studies is an issue of debate," was awkward and academically incorrect; it seemed as if he had chosen to make a real debate where none actually existed in order to conform to the notion of a "problem". It is not, in fact, an issue of debate that historical analysis enhances ethnography; I clarified this for him. The sentences from his opening statement leading up to his thesis meandered and read very awkwardly; there was no flow of ideas, and each statement seemed to come from an entirely different direction. His thesis was well-stated, but he had only paid lip-service to the methodology. Though Patrick had provided definitions for key terms, he had chosen to define intuitive terms like "culture" and "society" that really didn't need any clarification in the context of the question. His definition of "history" was technically accurate, but much of what he said was irrelevant to the question again. Finally, he chose to define "ethnographic subjects", "ethnographic project" and "ethnographic present." These definitions were clumsy, explicit and discontinuous.

It would prove to be quite a challenge to address these problems without having Patrick lose faith in me or become disillusioned with my advice. I shouldn't lose sight of the fact that his body and conclusion were bang-on. I was very impressed with all aspects of his paper except for his introduction, and I made sure to tell him this at the outset. Patrick took my criticisms very well, after I took care to explain exactly what the problems were. He didn't seem frustrated or offended, but he did challenge me every now and then in specific instances. I suspect that this was because he actually cared about my opinion of his work, and didn't want me to think that he had missed the boat altogether; he would explain certain phrases or reasoning strategies to emphasize that he actually understood the concepts and recalled my advice. I took care not to slight him, as I cared equally about maintaining the mutual respect we had for each other. We re-worked his introduction in this context of negotiation.

Patrick was a bit disappointed that I recommended he get rid of some of the terms he had defined. He was concerned about length; I assured him that the contextual definitions for select terms he would be including would make up for the text he deleted. Furthermore, I planned to persuade him to add three or four sentences to his conclusion so that he could move from a limited thesis to observations about its more general application.

What I had thought would be a daunting feat proved to be much easier than I had anticipated. Patrick's introduction had almost all the ideas he needed. The problem was, two sentences towards the end should have gone at the beginning, three from the beginning should have been pushed down, and one should have followed his thesis. We added very little new text to his introduction, although I'd be curious to know how long it took him to decipher all the arrows he drew all over his

first page when he got home. We spent the rest of the session working on choosing key terms from the body of his essay and providing contextual definitions for them, as well as enhancing his conclusion. What he said about history and the ethnographic project was excellent, but I advised him not to stop there. He could generalize his conclusion quit easily and end with some comments about the utility of historically-informed anthropological thought in day-to-day cultural interactions. Patrick loved it.

Three times throughout the session, I found myself holding back tips because they weren't Patrick's own style. This made me realize how tricky editing a paper can actually be versus brainstorming one. I felt much more constrained in our interaction than I did during the open-ended brainstorming session, because in this case I was actually witnessing my advice directly changing words on the paper. Perhaps I hold too much stock in the law of causality; after all, Patrick *was* acting as mediator between my advice and the content of his paper: food for thought for my next session with Hilary.

November 4, 2005

I've decided I really enjoy working with Adam:

Me: "Ok, let's try something. Ask me why I'm wearing this hoodie. Every time I answer, I want you to ask, "Why?" ok?"
Adam: [*chuckling*] "Alright. Why are you wearing that hoodie?"
Me: "Because it means a lot to me"
Adam: "Why?"
Me: "Because I got it as a gift from a group of friends in Poli Sci at UNB in my second year at St. Thomas."
Adam: "Why?"
Me: "Because we really hit it off, and I'm proud to show my relationship to them and the university."
Adam: "Why?"
Me: "Ok, that's enough. You see what just happened? The more you try to understand something, the further back in time you have to go. That's pretty much the difference we're talking about here between Evans-Pritchard and Hutchinson. The first one only asks 'Why?' once."

This exchange happened somewhere in the middle of our session, but out of everything we talked about it was the most memorable. It may not seem like much, particularly because the subject matter is anthropological theory rather than writing practice, but symbolically it addresses many of the tutoring issues I feel most strongly about; as such, I thought I'd break from convention and frame this log entry around the above discussion.

I contend that the most important thing a student can have while writing a paper is a direct interest in the material; this is fairly intuitive. When I'm talking a student through an abstract concept, or answering various questions about an idea I present to them, I always take care to demonstrate the highest enthusiasm and energy I can muster. I feel it's important to show that it's possible to get animated over something as remote as, say, a tribe in Africa, and that it's always possible to apply what one learns about anything directly to one's lifestyle. With Adam this isn't challenging at all. He is always receptive, cheerful and willing to put as much into our sessions as I do. When we were talking about the role of historical inquiry in ethnography, I could have simply explained to him that the synchronic approach by its very nature cannot account for the origins of cultural practices. This wouldn't have

been engaging, and it would have felt extremely alien in nature and tone when measured against to the relationship we had negotiated to date.

I had explained to Adam earlier on in this session that he might want to try thinking of himself as a "student" at university, as he was in second year and beginning to make decisions about his courses that would significantly influence his academic career. What I meant by this cryptic remark was that there were a set of attitudes that I feel students should have if they are serious about their education: values like a sensitivity to the application of concepts they encounter in their daily lives, a serious commitment to their discipline as an extension of their world-view, etc. With an impression of a student like the one above, I would necessarily view my role as a facilitator for the acquisition of these values. The above exchange made the notion of historical inquiry tangible and real to Adam in a way that a clinical explanation couldn't have.

Another element that emerges in the above interaction is the dynamic of exchange; I always try for a dialectic approach with the more vocal of my students. I start with a claim. The student takes the claim and adds something to our shared understanding of it by contesting, augmenting or otherwise considering it. I build on this broader understanding, refine the claim and pass it back to the interlocutor, and so forth. Just as the conclusions reached through dialectic inquiry are meant to stand independent of the premises from whence they came, the final understanding we both have of the claim may take a wholly different character from its progenitor. This is exemplified in the above exchange: with each "why?" that Adam asks, both he and I challenge and reconsider the original statement. This same sort of dialectic helped Adam arrive at his thesis statement for this paper (I've tried to recreate it as faithfully as possible):

Me: "Alright, pretend I'm Dr. Dubois. I'm asking you how the idea of history helps us understand the Nuer and ethnography. What does it bring to the table that wasn't there before?"
Adam: "Well, it helps you understand their culture…"
Me: "How does it do that?"
Adam: "It explains things that couldn't be explained before."
Me: "What is it about history that helps it do that?"
Adam: "It gives you causes for cultural practices instead of just assuming that they always did things that way."
Me: "So somehow change is an important part of history?"
Adam: "Well, yeah."
Me: "So how does someone using historical methods look at culture."
Adam: "…"
Me: "Do they see culture as something that stays the same or not?"
Adam: "No, culture changes."
Me: "So in terms of our understanding of culture, how does history help ethnography?"
Adam: "History helps ethnography by explaining culture better because it gives causes for things and sees culture as something that changes."
Me: [*playfully*] "Say that again."
Adam: [*smiling*] "History helps ethnography… by giving causes for things and seeing culture as something that changes"
Me: "Again?"
Adam: [*grinning*] "History helps ethnography by giving us causes for things and viewing culture as something that changes."
Me: "Write that down. That's your thesis."

The final perspective on this exchange emphasizes its verbal nature. As I was addressing the notion of diachronic method with Adam, it was only after the final understanding had been reached that he wrote down anything. This was partly because I didn't let him. I cautioned him directly that writing something down more often than not boxes the writer into a certain construction. While we were negotiating the thesis, I hid all the notes he had made about static and dynamic cultures, the nature of history etc. I refused to let him write the thesis down until he had it the way he wanted in his mind. This is not to say that I'm absolutely opposed to writing thoughts down; the reason it took such a central position in our session was because I noticed Adam looking down at what he had written over and over again when he tried to come up with new sentences. He initially wanted to respond to the thesis by writing "Placing ethnographic subjects in history enriches our understanding of the ethnographic project by…" and it took everything I had to convince him to reword the question clause in his response.

Initial constructions generally don't change once they are written down, no matter how inefficiently they express an idea. Adam understood what I was trying to do, and later on in the session I noticed him not looking down to his notes as much as he had before. When we started brainstorming a structure for his argument, *then* we returned to the ideas he had written down to try and arrange them in a logical sequence. Hey, sometimes writing helps.

Adam left with a very good idea of what he was going to write. He said he would try and finish a draft by Monday so we could meet again, and I advised him to email me if he was able to. At any rate, if Adam's paper gets marked down it won't because he didn't understand the concepts. Our session was very productive in the end, and I'm confident he'll do well with a little help from his notes.

November 7, 2005

I think it's important to mention that I spent today exhausted and in serious physical pain. I spent the entire weekend in CFB Camp Aldershot training with my unit, where I got very little sleep and had to endure intense physical exertion. Couple this with being in class all day until my tutoring sessions, and things suddenly come into focus; I had started nodding off while still standing in the Killam atrium waiting for Hilary, but I was determined not to show it once she arrived. In the meantime, Adam walked through by chance and asked if I had the time to go over his draft with him. As my session with Hilary was imminent, I told him to come back in an hour; I couldn't see Hilary's session lasting much longer than that, as it was simply going over a final draft.

Hilary arrived with a surprise: she had brought her laptop. Fortunately, she had a hard copy of the essay for me to point things out on as well; however, while I would point to a section of her argument on the paper, having the laptop allowed her to make direct changes to her paper with relative ease. This helped our session along wonderfully: not held back by the action-response of passing a paper back and forth between us as the markings accumulated, she was able to replace text, insert comments inline and move sentences around with no problem. In effect, by the time we finished, she had her final draft saved on her computer; all she had to do was print it off when she got home.

The laptop was particularly useful for Hilary, as the main problem with her paper was her tone. Many times, her usage of words made statements far too strong, too simplistic or just plain awkward. It was normally just a matter of tweaking a sentence, making sure to explain why a certain term was inappropriate. I had read her draft before our session, and aside from small concerns here and there about

tone her argument was remarkably solid. I was impressed that someone who had virtually given up on a question was able to come around as fully as she had.

I had the most fun helping her overcome the obscurities in her writing. Every two sentences or so, I would point to a phrase whose meaning I couldn't determine and ask her what it meant. If the phrase was two or three words long, her explanations were six or seven, and more lucid by *far*:

Me: "So what do you mean here when you say 'previous ways of life'?"
Hilary: "The way they used to live before."
Me: "Write that instead."
Hilary: [*smiles and types away*]

I must have done that seven or eight times. It probably added half a page to her essay, but at the same time clarified everything she wrote. Her conclusion ended a bit abruptly, so we negotiated two more sentences that provided a better resolution, and we were done.

The proofreading session with Hilary was relatively painless. It seems also that I overcame the concern I had with Patrick; I was worried that the ideas I would present as an editor of the penultimate draft would directly influence the student's writing. By asking Hilary what she *herself* meant by a phrase, I didn't have to get involved in the politics of ownership. What Hilary edited was replaced by her own words; all I needed to do was prompt her. I felt pretty good about this, though it didn't occur to me at the time – probably because I was so tired.

* * *

I was starting to fall asleep in my chair as I started my on-the-fly session with Adam. He noticed my state and asked me what was wrong; I explained how I had arrived at my present condition and he expressed his sympathies. That took a load off. As Adam hadn't expected to run into me in time to meet tomorrow's deadline, he had looked to one of his friends to edit his paper. She had done an extremely thorough job; the problem was that she had done it on the draft that Adam presented to me. In addition to reading his original paper, I had to wade through markings in a thick blue pen all over the paper. First, I tried reading it over while completely ignoring the markings. This didn't work, as I was noticing errors that had actually been addressed by his peer. Next, I tried reading it *with* the markings. This didn't work either, as I contested some of her advice to him. It was a real problem.

I voiced my frustration to Adam: it was going to be next to impossible to provide him with any advice that wouldn't be confusing to him afterwards. I told him I'd try nevertheless, but that my efforts would be limited because I would have to focus on structure rather than content. He said he understood, so I pressed on. Adam's ideas were clear; I was pleased that he had got as much as he did out of our brainstorming session, and that he had retained it enough to express the concepts lucidly over the weekend; however, he hadn't paid much attention to the structure of his argument. I went through is paper and made a few technical markings here and there. Towards the end, I noticed that one issue he addressed remained unresolved: he had discussed Evans-Pritchard's research methods, but didn't draw a contrast with Hutchinson before moving to his conclusion, leaving his second-most important point one-sided. I drew his attention to this and explained why it would be fitting to include a reference to Hutchinson, perhaps even through three or four sentences. Beyond this, I couldn't make any other changes to his paper without tearing my hair out grappling with the editor's comments.

At this point (and I can't even recall how it happened) we both arrived at the conclusion that we should take a two-hour break. I would rest my mind a bit and he would go home, make the changes his friend had recommended, add the content I had recommended and print off a clean copy. It was as much Adam's suggestion as mine, and I wish I could remember how we built the consensus as it would probably be worthwhile to comment on. Anyway, we agreed to meet at 9pm with a clean mind and a clean paper.

* * *

I can't underscore how much of a difference it made to read a clean draft. Strengths and weaknesses that were obscured in the previous copy surfaced. I no longer felt like I was wading through paragraphs trying to understand their meanings. I could actually help Adam revise his paper.

I had encouraged Adam to think consciously about how he was going to structure his paper in our brainstorming session. We discussed the merits of lumping all the important terms into a definitions section versus introducing ideas in-line, as well as the pros and cons of dividing paragraphs by author versus theme. As I looked closer at Adam's essay's body, I became very excited as I saw the potential for a very novel structure, something akin to this:

Theme

1. Practical problem with Evans-Pritchard's method
2. Theoretical analogy that introduces a synchronic term
3. Theoretical (diachronic) foil of this analogy that is found in Hutchinson
4. Resolution of practical problem from Evans-Pritchard's method in Hutchinson

Adam's paper addressed three themes, and each segment of the argument approximated the above model. The only thing missing was an explicit statement about his methodology in his introduction, and the signposts that would affirm the integrity of his argument's structure to the reader. I pointed this synthetic structure out to Adam, and he was amazed that his writing actually had a form he hadn't consciously worked towards.

The lion's share of our time was spent drawing out this structure and rounding it out. Where a converse was missing, we'd discuss how best to address it while maintaining continuity. If a concept wasn't explicitly introduced, I used my recursive method to help him hone down a two or three-sentence description into a succinct, concise sentence. If it wasn't invoked as a foil, Adam made a mark on the page. If a problem didn't come across as a practical concern, we would stop and discuss the character of its practical manifestation. We went on in this fashion until the entire body conformed to the above structure. Then we addressed this structure in the introduction, so the instructor would know to expect a certain line of reasoning over and over in Adam's methodology.

Just as I had done with Patrick, I advised Adam to generalize his conclusion. Since his thesis emphasized the utility of historical inquiry in our understanding of culture, I recommended he end by speculating about how an informed understanding of culture as a dynamic process might help not just anthropologists, but cultural actors in general.

We finished the session around 10pm, but Adam stayed around and we talked for a while before either of us got up. It was nice to hear some of his aspirations and goals as a university student and to be able to offer some input towards them in an

informal, social setting. One of the most important things that a student tutor can do is help another student challenge the student-teacher role binary. The less a teacher is seen as an authority figure and more as an individual with whom one can relate, the more receptive and open a student will be in the learning process. Of all the students I've had to date, I think my exchanges with Adam provide the best evidence for this claim.

January 25

I met with Karen for the first time in the New Year, to plan our first collaborative session since the beginning of the practicum (and not by lack of effort in the past). We had met with Dr. Gardiner Barber earlier this week to make ourselves available and to try and integrate our services into her overall vision for the course. She seemed very eager to make use of us, and suggested a host of possibilities that we could explore throughout the semester; the first of these was a clinic on note taking.

It was only after we sat down to brainstorm ideas for this workshop that we realized how little we really had to say about the practice of taking notes. For me, it was actually a bit embarrassing, as I explained to Karen rather sheepishly that I had virtually stopped taking notes in class after my second year; I wouldn't even be practicing what I preached. Karen seemed a bit apprehensive herself, partly because she hadn't reflected on her own note taking practices before, but mostly because the idea of an open-ended workshop was new and unfamiliar. Our complementary concerns gave us the ability to help each other out: I was comfortable with the idea of moderating an open discussion, and Karen was intimately familiar with taking notes. Our combined skills would prove adequate for the task at hand, which was comforting.

We started general, and experimented with different notions of *why* students take notes; the answer, of course, was the fairly trivial and intuitive, "because the student deems the material important." We put a positive spin on it, however, and decided that our overarching thesis should emphasize the subjectivity of note taking; we would convey to the students at the clinic that there was indeed no 'right' way to take notes. What the clinic would help students achieve, then, was an increased awareness of their own organizational patterns. But this in the abstract would hardly be useful to a student, nor would it fill a whole 90 minutes; so we kept on thinking.

I really liked the idea of doing a mock write-up with the students, where either Karen or I would give a five-minute lecture and have the students write notes, and then compare their structures. We agreed to integrate this activity into the session in two ways. We would open with an on-the-fly write-up between Karen and I, with Karen lecturing and me writing on the whiteboard. Towards the end of the session, I'd give another 5-minute lecture for the students, where they could experimentally apply what they had learned in the clinic.

As for substance, to maintain the collaborative atmosphere we would discuss our own note taking habits, and then go around the room and ask each student to give us a trick or skill that helps them take notes more effectively. This would be the 'hook' for the session, in my opinion: real students sharing real, practical advice.

Karen and I soon realized that we had plenty to work with, and plenty to drive our point home. The final outline for our session would take us from an introduction and exposition, to a mock write-up, to a reflection and deconstruction, to collaboration among students, to a second write-up and follow-up discussion in pairs, and finally our conclusion. We both left feeling confident and excited about the clinic. (Unfortunately, nobody showed up.)

January 30

Catherine and I had volunteered to give two writing talks to engineering and science students in academic residence clusters today and tomorrow. Though we had both been very busy right through the weekend, we had agreed on a general approach to this talk: Catherine would frame the discussion by describing the ways in which science and arts papers differed, and I would conclude by arguing for their fundamental similarity. So both of us knew basically what we would be saying and when we would be saying it, but the details were left up to us – which was fortunate, as I had just over an hour or so before the first talk to come up with my outline.

As I used to be a science student with every intention of graduating with a BSc, I had some ideas about the headspace these students would be in, and what would frustrate them most about their arts classes. Arts classes - and the arts evaluation schema in general – come across as wishy-washy, nebulous and subjective when contrasted with objective, "rational" and methodical science classes. I took this as the first principle, and built my outline around it.

As I expected a decent turnout, I felt we should make some effort to get to know our audience. After the introduction and just before our outline, I wanted to ask which disciplines were represented in the room, so I could adopt their discourse and provide relevant examples for my bit.

We would present our main theme as bridging the disciplinary gap between arts and sciences. Catherine granted me a few minutes of introductory conversation with the audience before she would frame the problem, so I thought of ways to engage them from the outset. I decided to start with an anecdote: I would describe to the audience the feelings that I would have towards an arts class if I were a pure math student: impatience, annoyance, and an overall defeatist attitude because there was no "right answer," nor clear way to score 100%. I would ask for a show of hands to see whether most people in the class felt this way and, taking this as a starting point, ask the students what their main grievances towards their respective arts classes were. We would write these down on the flipchart, so that they would remain visible throughout our discussion.

At this point I would defer to Catherine, trusting that she had prepared her remarks as I had. When we met prior to the session, I was thrilled that she had decided to add some anecdotal remarks about her (science masters students) roommates' experiences in higher-level writing, which would dovetail beautifully into my discussion about the similarities between writing in the humanities and sciences.

I had three points that I wanted to make abundantly clear to the students. First, "you make the paper what you want." The student can choose how to structure it, what to argue, and how to argue it: within the constraints of any assignment, there is infinite freedom.

Second, "the onus is on you, when you write your paper, to define your terms." This addressed ambiguity and vagueness in writing; I wanted to make it clear to the students that as long as they define their terms before writing about them, disagreements in perceived meanings between instructors and students could be minimized. Even if the instructor understands the term differently, he / she is bound (within reason) to adopt the student's definition if it is made explicit.

My final point concerned structure. Science students may think that the format of an English essay is entirely alien to them, and that there is no readily available approach to structuring an argument. I intended on relating the structure of an arts paper to the scientific method known so well to anyone who has done a lab write-up:

Introduction = purpose / problem / HYPOTHESIS / materials / method
Body = observations
Conclusion = conclusion

It's a bit corny, but it works and it's clear. Naturally, I would qualify these remarks on structure by stating that they aren't absolute, and that there are dozens of ways to arrange an argument. The important thing, however, was to see that the scientific method need not restrict itself to the sciences.

At this point, Catherine and I would be finished our content and ready to do a wrap-up. We would return to the flipchart with the list of grievances against arts classes and see whether our remarks had addressed and resolved them (hopefully, they had). If there were any that hadn't been touched on in our discussion, this would be where we would try to respond to them. Next, we would ask if there were any questions; if not, there were a few that I wanted to leave the audience with for consideration. I was ambivalent about including them, because their relevance is somewhat oblique to the discussion, but I felt that the assumptions in the questions would offer science students a new perspective – by relating them to the material we discussed in the prior discussion, they might see their arts assignments in a different light. The questions were:

1) Do you feel as if you're making a case for something, or that you have a reason when you write an arts essay?
2) Do you ever get impatient during a lab, and try to be a bit creative?
3) Do you ever feel proud of your work?

March 6

Up to our old, manipulative tricks again, Karen and I made a point of visiting the class last week and standing by either exit in an attempt to corral students into signing up for appointments on their way out. We fared pretty well. Today alone, I had three appointments lined up, consecutively. I planned to do my best to convince these three to schedule return sessions, so I'd have more to do than I did throughout January and February (almost nothing).

* * *

Brayden Ford was a friend of Adam Zelikowitz (of past repute), which was definitely a vote of confidence for me. He was also from out of province, in his second year, and the two shared the same interests. However, I sensed that Brayden was a tad more cavalier and disinterested in his studies at this point in his undergraduate career. I felt the best thing to do would be to talk with him in a very friendly and outgoing manner, but at a level he wouldn't be accustomed to (or expect) outside of class. At the very least, this would challenge his perceptions - and perhaps understandings - of how undergraduates could relate to their work.

To that end, we jumped right into it. Brayden had not yet chosen a topic, and had hoped to have a brainstorming session with me to make some ideas clearer. He was torn between two questions, of the nine that were assigned. (As an aside, these questions were extremely stimulating and open-ended. After a quick glance through them I became very excited at the prospect of helping students understand these concepts.)

Brayden would respond to either "What are the various benefits and constraints involved in the ethnographic study of power?" or "Is *Threads* an ethnography of power? Why or why not?" To set the tone for the rest of the session, I gave him a quick run-down deconstruction of each question. What this helped to do was produce a list of assumptions in the questions themselves, which would need to be addressed in his response. For example, no response to the second question would be complete

without a summary or synopsis of *Threads*, a definition of ethnography and a definition of power. So Brayden would need to think about what ethnographic elements exist inside the book, and whether these elements have to do with the theme of power, or some other category. After comparing the two "burdens of proof," Brayden decided to go with this question; the other one required far more involvement with the course material than he was willing to commit.

We spent the lion's share of the session mapping out Brayden's thoughts on the ethnography *Threads*, to determine whether he actually felt it was an ethnography of power or not. What I did to help was provide a list of objective criteria that he could build on, or pick and choose from, in making his decision. I asked him to give me a synopsis of the book, to see which themes he felt were the most prominent. With his constant talk of factories, labour unions, sweatshops and the plight of workers in the Third World, it seemed as if Brayden was much more concerned with the notion of political economy than power. But I couldn't just tell him that – he needed to realize that this was his interest on his own.

I tried to steer him towards this conclusion by asking him to describe what makes an ethnography an ethnography. In a moment of epiphany, I asked him to recall the paper he had to write last semester, wherein ethnography was described as making "the strange familiar and the familiar strange". What was being made strange in *Threads*: labour, or power? This got him thinking in the right direction. After I was reasonably certain that he wanted to go with political economy, I introduced a few conceptual tools, like the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, the basic contradiction of capitalism, the notion of class, and of course, globalization and neo-liberalism. These would help him identify and explain the prominent themes that he had found in the book: the exploitation of Third World workers in sweatshops, the outsourcing of labour from the U.S. overseas, the transition to a service-based, post-industrial economy in the First World, etc. Of course, we didn't have the time to go too far in-depth into any of these concepts, but I made sure that he wrote them down so he could research them later. What was important was that he understood that the political-economy approach focused on power *only incidentally*, and so the ethnography was not about power *per se*, but rather about labour.

So at this point, Brayden had established that *Threads* is, indeed, not an ethnography of power. However, to fully argue this, it would first be necessary to prove that it was, in fact, an ethnography. We spent the last part of the brainstorming session making a list of things to look for in texts that identify them as ethnographic; we touched on methodology, theoretical alignment, sources, units of analysis (primarily groups)… really more than I can recall. I suggested that Brayden finish reading the ethnography and reflect on which elements could be found in the text, and to what extent they informed it.

Having covered the important concepts and theories with Brayden, I spent the last part of our session (no more than ten minutes – he was becoming noticeably drained) discussing possible structures for his essay. I gave him my song and dance routine about the introduction and definitions sections (which I had alluded to earlier in the session), and at the end summarized which steps he needed to take from here. Given the tremendous amount of information I was throwing at him, I felt it was a solid conclusion. At the very least, I hope that the intensity of the discussion opened his mind a bit as to how involved writing an essay could actually be. He left looking rather pensive.

* * *

Brayden and I finished half an hour earlier than I expected, so I had some time to relax and reflect before Adam arrived. I was feeling rather high-strung for whatever reason, and the Atrium was much more crowded and noisy than usual. After about twenty minutes with Adam, it became clear that he was similarly out-of-it. Neither of us was thinking very clearly, and it eased the situation quite a bit when I finally told Adam how I felt. He agreed that we weren't being as effective as we normally were, but insisted that he wanted to continue, at least until he had chosen a topic and written down some concepts to investigate on his own.

Adam was in the same boat as Brayden; he wasn't sure which topic to go with, and had narrowed it down to the same two questions (this would be a theme with future students as well). The difference was, because Adam and I knew each other fairly well at this point, I didn't have to spend much time on the fundamentals anymore. Even at the level of theory, many of the terms that I would have had to explain to Brayden (or to Sara, or many of the students from first semester) were already familiar to Adam. Also, I sensed that he had come to anticipate my teaching method at this point because we had worked together so often. For example, he deconstructed both questions himself, without any prompting from me; he was able to tell me precisely what the "burden of proof" would be for both questions: what needed to be defined, what needed to be determined, etc. This was great to see, but after this initial success our communication channel began to erode.

Adam was, in the truest sense, ambivalent about the questions. This was further complicated because he wasn't sure whether his argument for the benefits / constraints question would be allowed, as he wanted to base it exclusively on *Threads*. As we were both uncertain, I advised him to run his idea by the instructor and see whether it was acceptable. In the meantime, we would discuss "Is *Threads* an ethnography of power? Why or why not?"

I asked Adam to tell me about the book, as I wanted to see what themes he had picked out. There were two things I was looking for in his description: whether he genuinely saw the text as an ethnography (even though it does not conform to the traditional notion of a local, self-contained cultural system), and whether he portrayed the people under study primarily as powerful / oppressed, or through some other frame. Much like Brayden, Adam focused heavily on issues of labour in his description. I took care to point out to him that he was using the classifications of "worker" and "businessman" when referring to ethnographic subjects. If this was the way he saw things, and the way that Collins described her subjects, then how could it be an ethnography of power? If power was indeed the primary unit of analysis, Collins would have emphasized this dimension in her subjects. In fact, many of the opinions Adam echoed to me, and many of the themes that he described in the book, indicated an emphasis on political economy, with an almost Marxist method. I voiced my thoughts on the matter, and proceeded to describe to him what "political economy" was, returning again to idioms like globalization, post-industrialism, post-Fordism, neo-liberalism, trade unionism etc. A great deal of our time was spent explaining these concepts, which I felt were critical to his understanding of how he viewed *Threads*.

What was lacking in Adam's description of *Threads* was any mention of distinctly ethnographic elements. I asked him to recall his definition of ethnography from his first essay: a description of culture. It was just as important to establish that *Threads* was an ethnography as it was to ascertain the nature of the ethnography. Did it fit? I suppose the way in which I asked the question was unclear, as Adam had no response. I explained to him that he could make a case for *Threads* based on the claim that even though the ethnography occurs in a global setting (with subjects in

Virginia, New York and Southeast Asia), the social network that is investigated is a coherent, self-contained cultural system. However, this sort of reasoning depends on the political-economic assumption that material, productive relations inform the political, cultural and ideological dimensions of the social system. And this doesn't put power at the forefront of analysis.

This was about as much theory as Adam could take – I could see his eyes starting to glaze over, and I'm fairly certain I wasn't as clear as I could have been when I explained all of this to him. On the positive side, even if he didn't decide to pursue "Is *Threads* an ethnography of power?" he had now acquired some familiarity with concepts that would be as important to the opportunities / constraints question.

We decided to call it quits for the day. I summarized what we had gone over quickly, and repeated to him what he needed to do at this point. He would go and pitch his idea to his instructor, read through a few of the other sources that were assigned, and come up with an action plan for our next meeting. As for me, I would take a Tylenol and find a quiet corner of the library to sit in until Meredith arrived.

* * *

I was extremely impressed by Meredith. She was a second-year SOSA student who, like me, was a veteran of the King's Foundation Year Program. Furthermore, she came with an already completed draft. Also, this draft was on her laptop. Her familiarity with theory from King's (which I assumed she had because of her grade in the course), meant I didn't have to spend much time discussing concepts or explaining ideas, or even translating idioms: we both spoke the same language. Coupled with the fact that she had a completed essay, I couldn't have asked for a brighter or more prepared student; this was good, as I was beginning to lose my voice after two hours of tutoring.

While we were getting acquainted, Meredith told me her story of academic hardship at Dalhousie, particularly in essay writing in the social sciences. As is typical of most King's students, she was marked down for making sweeping generalizations using highly abstract concepts without any concrete grounding, or without enough evidence to support the claim. She was also criticized for introducing ideas from theorists with very tenuous relationships to the topic at hand (e.g. the King's favourite, Hegel). I made a point of reading her draft with these considerations in mind.

Meredith had chosen to respond to "What are the various opportunities and constraints involved in the ethnographic study of power?" To date, she had done so the most thoroughly, by considering not only a wider variety of sources than either Brayden or Adam, but also by considering a deeper layer of the question. What Adam hadn't considered, and what I had to intimate in my discussion with him, is that there was a reflexive element to the question: while anthropologists may choose to study power as their primary unit of analysis, they also take care (especially nowadays) to take into account their own "power" as a foreign observer. Meredith was particularly astute in recalling the colonialist focus of Evans-Pritchard's Nuer ethnography in the early 20th century. Anthropology has turned its lens reflexively onto itself since then: field workers are aware that their sheer presence changes things, and that their work cannot be divorced from greater political implications; who knows if the CIA may use a particular ethnography to help operatives infiltrate a culture? This *has* happened in the past.

Meredith had the beginnings of this idea in her essay already, but had articulated it in a very circuitous, indirect manner. The problem was, she hadn't made a distinction between the outward study of power as a unit of analysis, and the introspective study of power that comes about from a reflexive awareness of one's

actions in the field. I identified this theme in her writing, and made sure that it was what she was trying to say; then I suggested she make the distinction more overt. I did this myself by using the common objective / subjective dichotomy, while stressing that she was under no obligation to use the same words if she could think of better ones. I proposed that she view external relations of power (i.e. "studying up" in the language of the sources) as objective power, in distinction from the reflexive self-awareness of power, or subjective power. Thus, on top of examining the opportunities and constraints of focusing on power in an ethnography, her essay would also examine, separately, the opportunities and constraints an ethnographer faces *as such*. To this end, we spent the rest of our time restructuring her essay to reflect this basic division; the end result was much clearer.

It was refreshing to be able to use a different set of idioms with a student. Beyond drawing out the distinction between objective and subjective study, I really felt that Meredith got a lot out of our casual digressions from her essay to more general theoretical discussion. I helped tie some relatively new concepts from the course to more familiar notions from FYP, and took special care to point out every general statement that was lacking in evidence. I wish someone had done all that for me when I was in second year.

March 9

I had arranged to meet with Adam right after I got out of my last class today, and we ended up talking for just under over an hour until I absolutely *had* to leave for work. The time flew by.

The session was much more focused, relaxed and clear than the one before it, particularly because Adam had in fact done some reading and reflecting on his own, and because relatively early on he committed to one question over the other: "What are the various opportunities and constraints associated with the ethnographic study of power?" We got right down to business, and begun trying to create a list of opportunities related to the study of power to contrast with a list of constraints.

I started by asking Adam what an ethnography of power would be like. This was almost familiar territory, as last session I had mentioned that the way in which subjects would be identified was by their possession or lack of power. At a system level, the anthropologist would be concerned with mapping out the power dynamic, and the power relations, across all parts of the network. Finally, the category of power would be at the forefront of the analysis, where more conventional ethnographies would emphasize kinship, religion, identity, class, etc… I asked Adam whether he could think of any advantages to a model like this. In the end, we could only come up with one opportunity; fortunately, it was far-reaching in scope. Placing the emphasis on power allows ethnographers to uncover relationships that may not be readily identified under a different frame. Essentially, the scope of the analysis is sometimes so limited that the most suitable category *is* power. This is the same sort of argument that postmodern anthropologists put forward against grand-narrative theories: their universal scope requires that certain cultural dimensions be overlooked.

It proved much easier to find constraints to this approach. After our discussion last session had sunk in, Adam began to understand the implications of political economy in practice. The only connection I needed to make for him was between power dynamics and the economic base upon which they depend. Part of Adam's argument would explain that power relations could be reduced to more primary, material relations, which would allow ethnographers to better understand the phenomena they observe. The evidence for this came straight from *Threads*: the laid-off workers in the closed Virginia textile plant and the sweatshop workers in

Southeast Asia were powerless because they relied on their labour power to earn wages. Conversely, the powerful agents in this social network owed their power to the fact that they owned capital. Had Collins attempted to focus on power as the primary unit of analysis, these relationships may have been entirely overlooked.

It turned out that Adam could not pass in a response to this question that only considered a single text, and so we turned to the other assigned readings to see whether they could contribute to the argument. Here's where the real fun came in. We examined *When Georges Woke Up Laughing* from the perspective of power, and realized that in Georges' situation, power was defined by the ability to control one's lot in life. The protagonist of the ethnography, a lower-class Haitian, acquires this power by becoming a transnational sojourner to America. In this case, the political-economic approach is ill-equipped to explain Georges' ability to transform his lot: power is no longer tied to the possession of capital, as our protagonist lacked any such capital at the outset. Here, it is necessary to consider other factors that contributed to his success. To this end, I introduced two key concepts to Adam that had helped me explain similar ethnographic and historical phenomena: Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of social and cultural capital. These two concepts describe, respectively, one's membership in certain social networks and one's habitus as resources to be exploited. In Georges' case, he had strong connections through his family to people with the means to get him a visa, to help him find an apartment in New York, and to set up a business upon his arrival. Furthermore, he had the necessary ambition, drive and attitude he would need to achieve his ends – cultural values that he gained through unique socializing experiences. These two resources – neither of which were economic – helped George acquire economic capital (and by extension, power) upon his return to Haiti.

By examining a different text, we were thus able to come up with another advantage to the study of power for its own sake. I was concerned, though, that invoking Bourdieu in his essay might land Adam in hot water. As luck would have it, Christine (the TA leader) happened to walk by just then. I had Adam explain his understanding of social and cultural capital, and ask whether it would be appropriate to include it in his analysis. Christine was fine with it.

The final point came from a short article titled "Studying Up." The article advocated taking ethnography straight to the powerful, rather than confining fieldwork to the underrepresented or the plebeian; it is important to study the unique culture of business magnates, celebrities and political leaders in order to understand more fully their interactions with the rest of the world. This was a groundbreaking idea when it was published, and provided us with one last opportunity that we could cite in favour of the ethnographic study of power: without identifying someone as powerful (regardless of the reasons behind their power), this kind of inquiry would never have crossed the minds of anthropologists. The dimension of power thus contributes to the body of anthropological knowledge.

At this point, I needed to get going or risk being penalized for showing up late for work at the armouries. I was concerned that we still hadn't arrived at a thesis, but Adam assured me that he would work on it himself, and arrange to meet once more before he passed in his essay. I was willing to trust him on this one.

March 14

I don't recall having ever done as much brainstorming with a particular student, for a particular essay, as I did with Adam over the past two weeks. We did an hour on the 6th, and almost an hour and a half on the 9th, and had hardly written anything down content-wise at the end of it all! And yet here he was, sitting across the table from me with a complete draft. And it required almost no revision.

As I read over his essay, three things became clear: 1) Adam understood, *completely*, everything that we had discussed in our previous sessions, 2) he had found a style and a method for writing essays that worked for him and produced very clear, intelligent and insightful work, and 3) he would be able to do this on his own from now on, without any help from me.

Adam had managed, without any help, to come up with a thesis for an expository essay. His introduction, though it was worded somewhat awkwardly, had a very clearly stated point of departure, thesis, and methodology. He had included a definitions section, and switched from one text to another in the body seamlessly. Though our session lasted for just under two hours, I made very few suggestions for changes to his draft. Adam was at a point now where he could focus on improving the finer points of his writing: parallel structure, tense agreement and tone. And this is what we addressed.

We finished talking about the essay about an hour and fifteen minutes into the session, discussed anthropological theory and academics in general for another half hour, and wound down our final session as friends. I told him that he should be proud of his improvement over the course of the year, and assured him that he could get along fine from this point without a writing tutor. We pledged to keep in touch, thanked each other and parted ways. And it felt great.

* * *

Sara was a Norwegian, Jewish second-year student from a small town in Ontario, who took classes at NSCAD and thoroughly enjoyed living on the East Coast. She was also very difficult to track down. We had scheduled an appointment (she used the site!) for 4pm today. Apparently, we were both in the Killam Atrium at the same time, but neither of us recognized each other. Several emails later, we rescheduled for 11pm the same evening.

Sara, like many other students before her, wasn't sure which essay topic she wanted to explore. For her, it was a toss-up between "What are the various benefits and constraints involved in the ethnographic study of power?" and (I forget the precise wording) an analysis of structure-centric and agency-centric modes of analysis in *When Georges Woke Up Laughing* and *Threads*. Rather than taking the methodical approach and deconstructing the questions for Sara like I did with Brayden, I left the session much more open-ended, and let Sara guide the discussion completely for the first part. Regarding the first question, she really didn't understand what was being asked of her. I explained to her what it meant for something to be an ethnographic benefit or constraint: essentially, something that enhances or hinders, in whatever capacity, effective ethnographic analysis. She seemed to understand what this meant, and I could tell by the look on her face that she realized how much work would be involved in trying to find and organize substance for such a largely-expository essay.

I must confess something. I *could* have given her more encouragement and support at this point and helped her pursue the first question. I chose not to. She still seemed ambivalent as to which question she would respond to, and I suggested very strongly that she go with the second one, largely because I felt I could help her much more effectively with it. I *wanted* her to look at issues of structure and agency in her essay, and so I'm somewhat guilty of manipulation or coercion to this end. However, I still feel that I made the right decision in retrospect, and that it was in fact in Sara's best interest to choose this topic. I say this with a degree of confidence, because it became clear that Sara's knowledge of anthropological theory, like many other SOSA undergraduates, was extremely limited. By writing a paper about structure and agency, it would be necessary to understand the theoretical

underpinnings of each concept, and both are tied to completely different schools of thought. By writing this paper, I was able to teach Sara the invaluable distinction between structuralism and postmodernism, as well as to make her aware of the current, prominent theoretical debates in anthropology. By extension, Sara would be able to reflect on these schools of thought and perhaps come to understand how she approaches the study of culture, and society, herself.

In order to describe the notion of "social structure," I described the structuralist epistemology to Sara: in its most essential form, this is a very top-down view of society that ascribes great significance to abstract institutions over and above the individuals that create or act upon them. I gave her some examples of social structures from North American culture: the state structure, the institution of marriage, the family, the economy etc., and explained how a structuralist anthropologist views any given individual as determined by these structures. To help with the explanation of the theory, I used the classical linguistic metaphor Levi Strauss himself used from de Saussure's *Course on General Linguistics*: the individual words in a sentence (in our case, "The dog is brown.") have no meaning unless they are placed in the context of grammatical relations. Thus, individuals within a society are similarly determined by the "grammar" of their culture. This made things very clear for Sara.

Before I explained the notion of agency, I needed to introduce the postmodernist school of thought, and what better way to do that then by examining the critique of structuralism as it was advanced by theorists at the time? I described the problems contemporary theorists have with Levi Strauss' theory – its inability to account for social change, and its 'silencing' of individual voices – and then explained the solution that postmodern theorists proposed: giving the *individuals* agency, and starting with local, individual narratives to construct indigenous and native views of particular cultures.

Now, we could finally look at how this all came into play in two very different ethnographies. With a little nudging and prompting, Sara began to pick up on methodological themes in *Threads* and *When Georges Woke Up Laughing* that indicated a certain theoretical alignment. With Collins' emphasis on global networks of trade, collective action, and the lack of agency among sweatshop workers in the Third World, it was clear that she had a much more structuralist methodology than Schiller & Fouron, who were describing a very real story of an individual's life in Haiti, and his ability to change his lot. This second ethnography epitomized the postmodern ideal that individuals are not necessarily determined by their circumstances.

Sara could recognize this, but she couldn't yet articulate it as clearly as I just did above. She needed to digest all the information we had exchanged, and the library was closing, so we called it a night. I offered to meet with her before she passed in her paper to make sure she was on the right track. We briefly discussed how she would go about structuring her essay, and she told me she would have a draft ready before she got in touch with me again. She admitted that she had never been exposed to these theories before (the SOSA department's policy is to hold off on theory until fourth year, even though this holds students back to a great extent), and she expressed that she was glad to know the actual concepts behind the vague, indeterminate ideas that informed the course. I was thrilled, as I always am, to help students express themselves more clearly, and was excited to see what she came up with in her draft.

March 15

Sara took me up on my offer to have a quick session before she passed her essay in. She had her ideas down, but wanted first and foremost to make sure she understood what structure and agency were in the abstract. She did, in fact, grasp their meanings; however, her usage was conspicuously awkward – it didn't follow standard anthropological discourse. One does not, for example, say that a structure has agency. While it is technically true (in that under structuralism the structures determine the individuals), it only confuses the issue to state it this way. I made sure to clarify this usage for her beyond a shadow of doubt. After this was established, I asked Sara on a whim whether she subscribed to one system over another. She was leaning towards structuralism herself, claiming that it just made sense that people operate under certain bounds and within certain social contexts. However, she wasn't convinced (as most people aren't) that structures determine everything, and asked me what my response was to the debate that I had painted for her between the two schools. I explained that I was a structural symbolist myself, describing it as a sort of marriage between the two schools. She was intrigued by this new addition to the scene, and asked me to explain the theory to her. At this point, I needed to be responsible and bring us back on track, as the library would close in fifteen minutes. I gave her the names of some theorists, as well as some key concepts that she could look into on her own, and returned to the task at hand.

What remained was simply to build a structure for Sara's argument. I offered her the same suggestions I do for all my students: to have a clearly articulated thesis, that responds to a problem, and that entails a particular methodology. Sara was going to argue that *Threads* benefited from a structuralist approach, as the nature of the inquiry compelled the ethnographer to deal with abstract units and institutions as agents; and conversely, that *When Georges Woke Up Laughing*, as an exemplary story of human agency, needed to build its analysis around the lived experience of a single individual. Thus, her greater argument would be that the efficacy of structure-centric or agency-centric analysis depends upon the task at hand, and that neither is inherently more useful than the other. Working backwards, her problem would be the debate between structuralists and postmodernists in contemporary anthropology. Working forwards, her methodology would entail describing what she meant by structure and agency, and demonstrating through a synopsis of both texts that they indeed called for different emphases.

And all of this in fifteen minutes.

March 28

It's kind of funny, what looks to be my final tutoring session for the academic year is back with the first student I ever had. I met with Cole in early October to help him revise a draft for the first SOSA-2001 paper. He had expressed to me back then that he had little confidence in himself as an essay writer, but his manner and his engagement back then indicated a bright, well-spoken and good intentioned third year student. The only difference now was that he had a haircut.

Cole had emailed me to ask for help with a different class; it was still in the SOSA department, but the course focused on healthcare issues. We exchanged pleasantries and got caught up with each other, and before even discussing the essay question he reminded me of the "How I Write" handout I had given him in October to help him critically analyze his own writing habits. He had found it useful but had lost it, so I gave him the link to the document on my site. It's good to have a web space.

The assignment Cole was seeking help on was a 3-page expository essay that was to examine two different positions on health care. The instructor had passed out

several readings and shown various movies that gave distinct perspectives on the issue. Some were for the welfare state, and some vehemently against it. Some accused the government Medicare system of corruption and inefficiency, and others cautioned against the partisan and classist notion of two-tiered, privatized healthcare.

Cole said that he had no idea how to structure this sort of essay, and was primarily concerned with finding an adequate frame of reference for it. I suggested he group the various stances according to their positions on the political spectrum, as it seemed like the most cohesive framework. To my surprise, Cole was unfamiliar with it. I couldn't in good conscience let that go by unaddressed, as such a basic dichotomy is tremendously useful for a much wider array of topics than simply healthcare; so I spent the next twenty minutes or so explaining the left, right and centre ideologies and tying them to examples from Canada (Liberals, Conservatives, New Democrats) and the United States (Democrats / Republicans). I made sure to avoid concrete examples of the ideology in practice, as I wanted to see if Cole could provide those with regard to Medicare. He caught on fairly quickly: the Liberals are for the status-quo, and defend the welfare state with its heavy bureaucracy but equal access for all; whereas the Conservatives endorse privatization and maintain that the free-market principle increases efficiency and effectiveness for everybody.

What remained conceptually was to list all the claims made in the sources, and then to group them according to their political ideology. This took an equally long time, as I forced Cole to explain the ideas in the sources recursively so that they would be clearer in his mind. This seemed to work, as he began to latch on to particular phrases and expressions in his descriptions, and use less and less diverse terms to describe essentially similar ideals. We reached a point where Cole could start from the abstract descriptions of political ideologies and classify any stance, claim or proposal from his sources as left, right or centrist. Now we could move on.

I wish I could reproduce the sheet that we worked with, because everything that Cole needed to complete his essay was represented on it. When we finally got around to discussing structure, Cole surprised me be quoting the very same principles I described to him in October: "So, how do I make this into a problem, and what's my methodology?" He remembered the three elements of an effective introduction that I had advised him to follow almost a year ago. I was grinning as we came up with a thesis, and worked backwards to determine the "problem" and forwards to map out the methodology. To be sure, it was a short paper and there was very little room for elaboration; this made the structure all the more critical, as there would be very little flesh in the piece to distract from the skeleton. The greatest asset I believe I gave Cole was a visual representation of his argument, after he had come up with the methodology he would follow to defend his case. I drew an extended sheet of paper down the length of the paper and broke it up into blocks, each of them corresponding to a particular step in his methodology. This visual layout was just what he needed; once it was completed, I could sense a change in his demeanour as his confidence swelled. Capitalizing on the momentum, I made sure to point out that what I had just drawn was nothing special, and that it was based entirely on something he had mapped out; he could do this again on his own if he really needed to.

So we concluded on a high note. Cole was extremely thankful and appreciative, and I was happy to see that he had the confidence that his attitude towards academic study merited. I just hope he hangs onto it.