

**Observation / Participant Observation:
One-on-One Tutoring Program**

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Out of the transition from one cultural framework to another emerges a conflicting set of ideals that compete for dominance in the communal consciousness. This competition manifests itself differently in different institutions, ranging from contradictory policy changes and resource allocation, to compartmentalized public and private beliefs, to (in the case of education) mutually incompatible ideals and attitudes. Those members of the community opposing change seek to perpetuate the old ideals by filling the gaps in the new framework, largely through the work of voluntary enterprises. As part of a greater anthropological study, I founded one such enterprise concerned with the promotion of positive learning attitudes in youth who, because of changes in the education system's priorities, may no longer be directly exposed to these ideals. For the purposes of observation and participant observation, I focused on the volunteer work that members of this enterprise undertook, and attempted to do this work myself, respectively. What follows describes in some detail my hypothesis, methodology, response to practical problems, observations as both observer and participant, and finally my own reflections on the study.

As implied above, I hypothesize that the prevalent attitudes regarding the nature and role of education are in conflict with the ideals traditionally emphasized by the school system. The former has students compartmentalize and essentialize particular subjects, and restrict the set of skills learned in each to itself, whereas the latter promotes translation across disciplines and an organic approach to learning that extends beyond the classroom (taking an active role in acculturating the youth). The purpose of my enterprise, in these terms, is to discourage essentialization and bring down all the boundaries that changing attitudes may throw up (age, role, subject, etc.). I expected to find a pattern in the learning problems I encountered that reflected the tension between traditional ideals and external social pressures.

My hypothesis informed all my actions from the founding of the organization and throughout the entire planning phase: volunteers were trained to contextualize

learning problems in terms of this tension, the proposal to the school highlighted the benefits in this same context, and the programme was designed to work most efficiently based on a set of corollary assumptions.¹ My methodology, then, presupposed a particular model in the school itself that accounted for the students' academic difficulties, their causes, relationships between themselves and their teachers, and various other factors that would influence my study.

My role as an observer was twofold: first, as the head of an organization that had made no practical concessions yet, I would look for immediately apparent practical problems relating to administration; second, I would observe my tutors' efforts to adapt their approaches based on these difficulties. To help me in my observation, I requested that my tutors fill out post-session questionnaires asking them what their most striking impressions were, and whether they were successful in applying the approach I had recommended during the planning phase.² As a participant, my task was again twofold: as an active administrator, I would confront these problems and try to maintain the organization's ideals by changing small details in the programme to accommodate my misconceptions; as a tutor, I would experience what a regular volunteer goes through in the run of a session, including the adjustments and adaptations that must be made to the organization's ideals to help them fit the practical implementation.

To understand the practical problems that I faced as administrator and tutor, it is first necessary to describe the way I expected the programme to run in the planning phase. In ideal circumstances, I wanted students to sign up of their own volition, on a first-come, first-served basis. This would imply that the students were having genuine problems and were avidly seeking help (i.e. they came for a reason). As the school offered limited extra-help to its students, I also expected the programme to

¹ For evidence see accompanying documents, particularly the highlighted passages.

² See 'Post-session Questionnaire'

run independently from any existing services and be regarded as a focus for after-school academic activities. In a word, I expected the school to take the same attitude to its students as I did, and act accordingly to promote interest in the student body.

I was wrong on all counts. The guidance counsellor at the school assured me with absolute conviction that no student would sign up for a service like this on their own, and that the only way to keep them after school was by informing their parents and having them enforce their child's commitment. Alternatively, school officials hoped to "corral" students who were waiting for an extracurricular activity (e.g. team practice, band, etc.) in with these other students. From the outset, then, instead of having genuinely interested students, the tutors and administrators of the organization (I was a passive observer for the inaugural session) were confronted with largely indifferent and even impatient charges. As for the organization becoming the nucleus and primary focus for extra-help / academic activity, there was another distinct problem: faculty members who provided extra-help to students already had a system that they expected the volunteers to integrate themselves into and supplement. These sessions usually took the character of a lesson that the teacher delivered, and then followed up with the students; this greatly marginalized the tutors' role, and was not what the volunteers expected at all. Lastly, it was clear from the responses I was given by the administration that they had not done enough advertising and promotion among students; when I tried to ensure a number of students consistently greater than the number of volunteers, officials opted instead to notify parents directly. All this evidence clearly indicates an attitude quite different from the one that my volunteers and I initially demonstrated.

During my observation, I left the administration of the group to the vice-president and the guidance counsellor to work out, and took a passive role myself. What became immediately apparent was the need to understand the dynamic

between the school and the group, adapt the programme so it would integrate more easily into the existing model, and negotiate the relationship between the volunteers and the school officials clearly and directly. What I sensed was an atmosphere of disappointment coming from the tutors, but without a definite object they could express it to. This was because of a communications breakdown between both sides: not enough effort had been made to clearly establish to the school officials exactly what the tutors expected to see and do upon arriving. The guidance counsellor took the opportunity to have a brief meeting with the tutors, where she communicated her expectations based on what she understood our motivations to be. As the volunteers now had both attitudes in mind and recognized a clear contradiction on several terms, they became somewhat tense and braced themselves for whatever changes ended up being made to the mechanics of each session. As I was merely observing during this first session, it proceeded the way the school officials expected it to, and volunteers were placed in classrooms with a teacher and a small group of students.

As I observed volunteers working with students, their efforts to adapt their approach were very plainly evident. As the volunteers had not yet established a rapport with the students, in most cases the teachers undermined their presence. More outgoing tutors attempted to wrest some control from the teachers and communicate their expectations implicitly. A large number of tutors did next to nothing; in fact, three volunteers made it very clear through their questionnaire sheets that their role in the session was marginalized, and expected the executive committee to appeal to the school officials on their behalf.

These observations, both as passive administrator and tutor, greatly helped me prepare for my participant observation. In my capacity as administrator, I met with the school officials to follow up the first session and make sure the group's intents and expectations were made clear. I was assured that my concerns would be

expressed to the faculty, and adequate measures would be taken to increase both the volunteers' roles and presences among the students. I also made sure to have a brief meeting with all the tutors before introducing them to the officials; I discussed what happened with the previous session and explained what I had done since then to make sure the organization's aims would not be compromised. I also tried to make the transition to an already existing system more palatable by highlighting the benefits of these changes, and the dynamic in the room was much more positive because of it. The comments I received on the questionnaire sheets were much more enthusiastic and descriptive than the first session's, and generally demonstrated an active involvement with the students.

Finally, as a tutor – and knowing fully what to expect from observing other tutors, working with the administration, and understanding where the students came from – I was able to conduct myself in the manner best suited for the session. I was paired with a young girl in the sixth grade, who was having difficulty with spelling. The work was fairly trivial, as I had expected it to be, and we finished early. Rather than simply moving on or leaving, I asked her about the various assignments she had been working on for other classes, and found she was more than eager to show me her work. We discussed each assignment, speculated about the significance of the questions each teacher asked, and I made an effort to relate her course material to similar work at the university level. This sparked her interest, and the discussion turned to post-secondary education, just as I had hoped it ultimately would in every case. It was fairly simple to hold her attention, as she was waiting for her basketball team's practice to start and had nothing else to do; what I had initially thought would be a big problem really worked to my advantage. I sensed that other volunteers in the same room had finished early themselves, and had taken the same opportunity I had to promote the value of education, just as they had been encouraged to do in the preparation phase. This lead me to conclude that the

theoretical grounding I had given to the volunteers was clear enough that their adaptation to a system that did not fully complement it was a fairly straightforward matter. Having watched the guidance counsellor pair students and tutors up, I noticed a huge variety in the sort of students that had shown up and their perceived roles in the school. Not enough research has been done for me to make any general statements about which students' outlooks are the most malleable and positive vis-à-vis the organization's aims; however, if my hypothesis is true, the model student will be one who feels comfortable around students of any age (generally the older children), has a genuine enthusiasm for at least one subject, and comes from a middle-class family. This can be narrowed further to students in the French-immersion program, supposedly the 'best and brightest', who have thus been exposed to a greater volume of schoolwork, consequently prompting them to adopt a healthy attitude toward learning. In terms of my hypothesis, these specific characteristics are the best outward evidence of model students because they indicate adaptability and open-mindedness: i.e. they do not essentialize their subjects, nor do they readily throw up un-scaleable boundaries between age groups, subjects, social relationships, etc. This malleability is perhaps the best indicator of potential, and seems to match the general demographic of students who come to these sessions (to my relief).

It has become clear to me that each problem does not necessarily have only one solution with one particular set of variables. I was expecting the enterprise to work best only if the corollaries to my hypothesis were met, but I have seen and achieved results in a completely foreign system. This is perhaps the most striking lesson I've learned from passive and active observation. Taking a passive role after having set out a list of presuppositions helped me figure out what worked and what failed, and these conclusions were invaluable to my work as a participant. In turn, the conclusions I drew from my participant observation potentially affirmed my

hypothesis, but extended it beyond a mere tension between attitudes and ideals in a theoretical realm to a more concrete, practical setting. Lastly, this extended, practical hypothesis opened a door to a vast number of possibilities that I had previously either dismissed or not considered altogether. I have a better direction and a more pragmatic understanding of what I will be up against in my greater anthropological study. The progressive approach of observation, participation, and finally innovation has become an invaluable part of my project, not merely a sideshow or a digression.