

On knitting and goats

Education, not learning, in one family

by

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What if social scientists concerned with “education” took seriously the word “education”? What if they came to wonder whether it might make sense, to account for what we see around the world as we observe human beings making their world together in all sort of conditions, to postulate the reality of a separate kind of human activity, education, that is not to be reduced to other kinds, and particularly not to “learning”? What if anthropologists, as the social scientists who have been most concerned with the products of change, “cultures,” focused on the process of change, leaving aside the usual concerns with, precisely, these products.

It is not that it has not made sense for cultural anthropologists to concern themselves with people “learning” the “rules” of “their” culture, or internalizing its values. It is, rather, that it prevented anthropologists from focusing on people seeking to make sense of puzzling conditions, exploring possibilities, constructing institutions, and then contesting earlier constructions. It prevented them from thinking about *education* as a plausible paradigm for accounting with their observations.

Let us assume that, as the first generation of work in cultural anthropology came to a close, it made sense to write, as Margaret Mead did, that “culture” refers to “the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively *learned*”

by each generation” (my emphasis. 1937: 17), or, as Kroeber and Kluckhohn did, that culture consists of patterns “acquired and transmitted” (1952: 357).

Let us understand why, fifty years ago, culture remains defined–en passant–as (???)

Let us celebrate the moment when, in the late 1960s, it began to make sense for cognitive and developmental psychologists, the guardians of learning theories, to face the interactional, social, structuring of all learning. Let us applaud all those whom Michael Cole brought together and who have made it necessary to look for “learning” in tailor shops, supermarkets, families, and even classrooms—that is in all the settings and moments of everyday life that do not advertise themselves as having to do with “learning,” or at least not in the institutional discourses of the School and Psychology that control political activity about learning—including research.

But let us now worry that an attachment with the word “learning” will prevent the necessary next steps that might allow anthropologists, and particularly anthropologists “of education,” to affirm the distinctiveness of their own discourse.

The word “learning” can, of course, be taken as a word about action rather than a word about a (future) state (that of “knowing”). Still, in English, it belongs to a paradigm of connotations that will take the research conversation away from emerging cultural worlds and back to the psychological worlds of stabilized personal consequences. Most versions of current culture theories emphasize the productive activity of humanity (human beings together) with historical patterns that are less the “context” of action than its conditions, positively and, too often, negatively. Recently, and with a group of colleagues (forth), I have argued that “educa-

tion” might be a better word for the joint activity that produces massive change both at the personal and collective levels. “Education” should focus our attention on the deliberative acts that make new human beings who get to speak *particular* languages out of *other* particular languages. A focus on education should focus our attention on that which distinguishes humanity: the making of differences, that is of *differance*, biological, ecological, and *historical* conditions. In other words, it is getting clearer that what anthropologists have talked about as culture is not to be presented as a state that requires learning about itself. Culture, rather, is the temporary product of a collective history of joint action that is continuing even as we speak and write. By this definition, culture is about the induced ignorance and uncertainty that leads to deliberation.

Here, I intend to illustrate what might be gained by adopting this perspective. I do so by looking at two moments in one family’s life. The first moment could be dismissed as, at most, an ephemeral occasion for the “informal” learning of a minor skill. The second could be dismissed for not being “about learning” in any of the usual senses. I will show that, so to dismiss these moments would not do justice to the complexity of the activities that, in the literature on “situated learning,” did count as learning, but that I now propose to approach in a broader framework.

If culture is about the making of powerful moments in history that then become consequential for future generations, then we should see this construction even in the fleeting moments when parents and children spend time teaching each other about such mundane things as, say, knitting, or visiting the neighbor’s goats. It is easy to argue that, when a national polity

debates how to deal with new immigrants challenging earlier agreements (Gershon), or when it continues to make even more complex its health practices (Stratton), it is precisely involved in culture production—that is in making further differences with older differences that produce new uncertainties, if not new forms of “symbolic violence,” on those who move into this polity, or who fall sick. At such times we can see political struggles proceed through collective deliberations. In the often acrimonious debates much emerges in discourse (what is happening? what should be done?), and even more in the discourses about the first discourses (who should speak? with what authority?). Observers can then trace the historical rise of an awareness of an ignorance of new realities, advocacy for possible futures, debates, proposals for policies, and the writing of new institutions. If this is a general process in the evolution of all human polities across time, then it should be possible also to observe it in the details of everyday life.

In this spirit, I present the case of a young girl (“Kate”), her Father, Mother, Grandmother (and possibly Brother) as together, they make a routine familial event in the late 20th century: videotaping familial events (knitting instruction and introduction of neighbor’s goats).¹ It would be in the spirit of all work on learning to make the girl the “subject” of the investigation. While working with the tape, many would focus on the girl’s full body (her hands, arms, tongue, eyes), as well as all the mental matters involved not only in knitting and introducing animals, but also in handling her grandmother, father, and brother. Others, particularly in the tradition of the new learning theorists, would notice the extent to which the girl’s acts only make

¹ I am deliberately placing in a footnote the fact that “I” am the cameraman, that the girl and her brother are “my” children, that the Grandmother is “my” mother, and that the location is the Varenne’s vacation home in Southern France. In the analysis I am also capitalizing “Father,” “Mother,” etc., to emphasis that I am concerned with actors in statuses rather than persons in their subjectivities.

sense in terms of historical patterns and political organization. They would focus on the arbitrariness of the forms used (the languages or the knitting style). Or they would focus on the power issues involved in placing the girl in a particular place within the family and, eventually, within her peers—given the “symbolic capital” she may be acquiring.

I build on all this, also seek to notice the work all are doing as the patterns and their - political organization evolve—are least in the detail of everyone’s work even as this work may also maintain both. It is not so much the case that the girl is getting a particular cultural practice (French knitting) “in” her. She is not being “en-cultured,” and even less “in-culcated.” She is struggling (though in this case it seems more like “playing”) with the possibilities inherent in needles, wool, instructions about how to handle them, and, more important, with the new possibilities emerging as she masters one sub-skill and faces the next one. All this is also true of her immediate consociates, is making a difference in the history of the family that day, a difference that was amplified as it was video-taped, and that will be further amplified by this very paper. I will present the cases, instead, as cases of “education” and emphasize that all participants, not only the girl, but also the adults, are being transformed in ways they could not predict at the beginning of the sequence.

The two cases

The two cases are built with video-taped sequences ostensibly made for “familial” purposes. That is, the tapes were not made for “research” purposes though the relatively long shots bespeak the familiarity of the cameraman with the strictures of videotaping for interactional

research . As will be discussed in some detail, all participants, including the Cameraman/Father were displaying themselves to each other as family members though, again, the status of the Father as university professor was very much part of the indefinite number of matters what were available for elaboration (though most were not). In this presentation I mostly mention those matters that were specifically elaborated in speech and body at the time and for the particular purpose at hand. How to hold a knitting needle is an instance of something the participants elaborated. That the woman with the girl is her Grandmother is something that they did not elaborate. The latter might, or might not, have been be relevant at the time, but is relevant, in the time of this paper, as it allows presenting this case as an instance of “family education” (rather than, say, schooling).

The first sequence is specifically identified by Grandmother, after four minutes of continuous videotaping as “*la leçon de tricot*”—the knitting lesson. The second sequence is not so labeled but is triggered by some statement by Father to which daughter responds, in the first few seconds of the tape, by explaining that it might not be possible to see all the animals “because they always run around.” Still, at that moment, both Kate and Father are moving, in their bodies, towards the animals. The two sequences are quite different from each other in terms of the dominant speech acts. In the first there are mostly instructions by Grandmother that are enacted by granddaughter and sometimes briefly echoed (GM: “you do this”; Kate: [does this while saying] “this”). In the second sequences there are mostly explanations by daughter that are then acknowledged by Father (D: “because they ...”; F: “yeah”). In the first case one sees the classic organization of an adult instructing a child. In the second one sees the less well-document

organization of a child teaching an adult something that the adult does not seem to know (specifically that it might not be possible to film the neighbor's goats and sheep as they often hide when strangers approach).

The cases could be presented as classical cases of learning embedded in a routine familial context. In the first we would see a girl learning how to knit in a particular historical (cultural) style. In the second we would see evidence that the girl has learned much about goats both through her interactions with a local farmer and through her own observations. This is plausible enough but does not tell much about what was also going on. It may be the case that at the end of the sequences, daughter and Father know more about knitting or goats than they knew at the beginning. But there is also evidence that what both discover the extent of their ignorance about knitting, goats, and interpersonal relationships. In both cases, the displays of learning are driven by some-task-to-be-accomplished, in the future, a task that no participant can be sure will in fact be accomplished even as all appear to collaborate so that it can be accomplished. It has always been easy to assume that collective tasks can be started, if not completed, only when there is some initial "sharing" (of knowledge, conditions, awareness of context, or whatever). But one can just as easily assume that the task is made necessary by the discovery of an imbalance: granddaughters who do not how to sew, Fathers who sometimes make strange requests. The initial "knowledge" may thus be more of an awareness of some ignorance publicized and, in these two cases, acknowledged: both granddaughter and Father take the instruction and build on it. The initial event may even be approached as a "status passage" into a temporary "polity of practice."

The sewing lesson: Two bodies in motion

Eight-year old Kate had been introduced to knitting in her school, but the tape was done during summer vacation time, many weeks later. On the morning of the taping, Kate initiated the knitting at a time when Grandmother happened to be present; “knitting with grandma,” or even just “knitting,” was not part of a regular event and, as far as I remember, this is the last time Kate ever knitted. The taped sequence starts well into the event. I will be focusing solely on two bodies in this discussion. They are not quite the only “participants” in the scene. How they constituted themselves as a duo within a trio within a quatuor will be discussed later. For current purposes, the two bodies have been holding the position for a while and stay in what amounts to one positioning throughout. What I want to emphasize, however, is the continual movement of the two as they changed what had to be done next in order to remain within the constituted frame.

Grandmother’s knitting instruction included both general statements (“hold the needle like a pencil”) and ongoing evaluations of the physical movements Kate was making with her hands (“don’t do it that way!” or “you are getting it!”). The latter was done totally deictically and thus required a joint monitoring of both bodies by each participant. It is also the case, and this is most interesting, that the instructions were changing in parallel to the changes in Kate’s knitting. This is essential. Grandmother is not giving Kate the kind of “learning lesson” made famous in Mehan’s work (1979). They are not involved in a Question/Answer/Evaluation sequence. At every stage, Grandmother is tailoring her next utterance as acknowledgment of

learning, hypothesis about new ignorance, instruction about clearing this new ignorance--while at the same time encouraging Kate along. In brief, one can distinguish four moments within the sequence:

- a. Discursive instruction;
- b. Monitored performance;
- c. Discursive evaluation;
- d. Changed discursive instruction;

These moments might eventually be formalized into a model for a different kind of “lesson,” but I will not pursue this here. What is essential here is that every moments involves work by *both* participants. What this work consists of shifts as the sequence proceeds and thus requires of both participants that they monitor the shifting position of the other. Furthermore, the systematicity of the interaction does not consist of homoeostatic returns to an initial state, but rather to a new type of uncertainty requiring further change . [Not correction but instruction forward]

1) Discursive Instruction:

I label “discursive” a form of instructional speech act that specifies actions and objects, as well as uses explanatory clauses. This is speech which, when fully elaborated could become a lesson plan, lecture, a manual or a textbook. For example, at one moment (00:00:00 to 00:00:09), Grandmother recites four steps involved in knitting: “*piquer,*” “*passer,*” “*reprendre l’aiguille comme si c’était un crayon,*” “*faire tomber.*” This is the full instructional sequence for the sequence (curriculum? lesson plan?).

Kate	Grandmother	Father	Brother
00:00:00..... .....	..... .....	
00:00:01.....	tu piques		
00:00:02.....	tu passes ton		
00:00:03.....	fil . Tu reprends		
	ton		
00:00:04.....	aiguille comme si c'était		
00:00:05.....	un crayon		
00:00:08.....	tu fais tomber		
00:00:09..... .....	..... ..voila		

One should suspect that task of sewing, in its full embodiment, can be subdivided into many other steps than those brought forth here.² It has to be the case that they are “arbitrary” as Saussure and Lévi-Strauss meant the word. But they are, factually, in *this* site, the steps that the participants orient themselves to as they label the sub-tasks in parallel to their performance. This is very evident for the following two or three minutes as Kate knits and Grandmother monitors.

2) Monitored Performance

Repeatedly, Kate’s movements are prefigured, performed, monitored, and echoed. For example:

00:00:17..... Pique	tu piques.....
00:00:18..... .....	..... tu laches
00:00:19 lache.....	..... .....
00:00:20..... .....	..... .....
00:00:21.....	attention la oui tu tu
00:00:22..... ok.	passes.....
00:00:23..... .....	..... .....

Or, in a different display of the event for second 17:

GM: [as she stares intently at Kate’s movements] *Tu piiiiques*
 Kate: [as she begins what will count as “piquer”] *piiiiques*

² People who have learned sewing in a different tradition have sometimes expressed doubt, when looking at this sequence that “holding the needle like a pencil” is actually a helpful analogy.

Note that, as Kate is approaching the third step (“lacher”), Grandmother makes a warning (“*attention, la*”) accompanied by a physical movement of her hand that moves the string. This is immediately followed by acknowledgments, first by Grandmother (“*oui*” sec. 21) and by Kate (“*ok*” sec. 22). This sub-sub-sequence is not accompanied by any change in Kate’s hand movements. Both warnings and acknowledgments are integral though distinct parts of the overall sequence. At the times when they are performed, nothing novel is being introduced. The task is progressing.

3) Discursive evaluation

There is also a third type of speech acts that balances the initial instructional statements. They take the shape of an overall evaluation and make explicit what remained fully deictic during the monitoring of the performance.

00:01:28	.....	.....	et voila	.....	Oh
00:01:29	.....	.....	mais dit tu	as vu	
00:01:30	.....	.....	ca va bien	maintenant	
00:01:31	.....	.....	eh ...	ca va	
00:01:32	.....	Eeheh	beaucoup	mieux	....
00:01:33	.....	.....	.....	Hein!	
00:01:34	.....	*****	ca va pas	mieux?	...

Grandmother states that “things are getting better;” Kate acknowledges the evaluation with a little laugh; both proceed with monitored performance until things are marked for change.

4) Changed instruction

The most interesting moment for me in this sequence is what happens after Kate and Grandmother have gotten through several variations on monitoring (specific instructing, warning, acknowledging warning, giving overall evaluations). Kate has reached a major juncture in this

kind of knitting: all the wool has been transferred from one needle to the next, and it is now time to restart. This is greeted by Grandmother announcing that “this is more difficult”:

00:03:11 Alors ça c'est plus difficile
00:03:12 parce que elle ne tient pas
00:03:13 beaucoup toute seule

In other words, the satisfactory performance of one sub-skill does not close the sequence but rather opens the participants to a movement into a new sequence that is not just a repetition of the earlier one. Kate’s possible “learning” now obliges her to face a new level of ignorance

All about goats (sheep, rabbits, and one dog): Two bodies searching for each other

The sequence about the neighbor’s animals was taped within a few days of the knitting sequence. There were two, and perhaps three, participants—the exact number raises the same analytic questions raised earlier and to be discussed in detail later in the paper. “What” the sequence is about, as well as it involves, is the analytic addressed here. Let it just be said at the outset that the taping is not the recording of an event but rather the event itself. The newly available-for-familial-tasks technology was the material out of which a new kind of familial event was constituted “taping the children for familial use.” This is something that belongs to a family’s history and is only now, through this paper, shifted to a different general frame—“re-search in education.”³

³ The relevant contrast here is with research taping of, say, classroom or homework that has also served in my work and that of my closer colleagues (McDermott ...; Varenne ...; Mullooly ...).

Mostly, Father (behind the invisible video camera) and daughter walk to the neighbor's farm buildings. They move from the basement where the goats are kept, to the basement where the sheep are kept, to the outbuildings where the rabbits are kept. The camera pans between Kate and the animals. Father is invisible. He is heard and the shifts in camera focus can stand as evidence of the direction of his gaze. The video record starts with Father and daughter leaving the familial yard and closes about ten minutes later when Kate runs back to the yard after a specific request to do so. "This" is a familial performance (in the sense that Bateson wrote about the message "this is play"). It is multiply framed. It is also improvised.

I mention "improvisation" here to stress that the sequence was not scripted. It was maintained as something like "videotaping Kate and the animals" throughout and it will be clear that all behavior by the participants is oriented to *this*. But much of the embodiments of this orientation, including the speech, proceeds through a search for what exactly to include in the sequence. Both statements and questions by each participant reveal differentiated ignorance about what that might be, given what has already been done. This is clearest at moments of transition when Kate questions whether what Father is asking can be done. It is also noticeable in Father's behavior as he adapts to the tack to the task Kate is taking. Specifically, Kate takes *this* moment as an occasion to "teach Father about goats, sheep and rabbits," both in general and in particular. Father had not requested warnings or explanations but he does not mention these as problematic. Rather he orients to these as, in his speech, he falls into the same tack. Though the status of Father comes with the authority to ask Children to perform certain tasks, in this case the authority to frame the task further than he had, possibly, planned is transferred to the child.

Father accepts *this* as the frame within the frame (within the many other frames that one can imagine) and improvises with it. Here is one instance:

oh don't ever put	.....	.....
anything	.....	.....
near him ....	.....	Pourquoi?
.... Because she will	.....	.....
nibble it all off	.....	.....
and then xxx	.....	.....
you always have to be	.....	.....
careful with him		

Here, Kate volunteers something like a warning or instruction about a particular goat. Father asks for explanation. Kate complies as the expert. *This* is “teaching Father while videotaping.” What *this* is not about, in so far as no one ever orients to it, is Kate’s learning, or even the testing of what she has learned.

Naming what *this* is about for *this* paper should in fact be rewritten more carefully. The summary description makes sense because it closely mirrors words that the participants used. The description also makes sense because it reflects the questions the two are asking about the relationship between the proposal words (“let’s videotape animals”) and the possibility that future experience will correspond to these words (“there will be no animals to videotape”). I should thus write that “teaching Father while videotaping” is *most probably* what *this* is since these are the matters about which questions are being asked. It could also be written that “videotaping the animals” is what *this* is what *will have been* if all the work of the participants is successful, if the goats do not run away, if Father does not change his mind, if Kate does not lose interest, or if any of the many other things that could happen, precisely do not happen. What, exactly, *is* at issue, at the time of the event, is a small puzzle. The action is not applying

knowledge but figuring out what other forms of knowledge might have to be developed in order to complete the sequence with only minimal trouble. Figuring *this* out requires continual reorientation, a re-orientation written *with* (rather than “in”) the body of all participants (even Mother who had to have been following the videotaping, actually had to orient her voice to carry her request across the street). All are using available material including, arguably, for the adults, their authority to ask a child to perform a task, as well as, for the child, her experience with goats, sheep and their behavior (as well as her experience with her parents...).

But getting at such moments is not obvious because 1) what “videotaping the animals” is to involve requires more specification; 2) the task, or at least part of it, may be undoable; 3) and, anyway, the task, or at least part of it, may not be necessary; 3)

1) What are to do next, actually ?

As mentioned earlier, the videotape starts with Kate moving determinedly towards the goats’ house with Father, just as determinedly following her while pointing the camera at her. What we are to do next had to have been settled earlier but the question is reopened “on camera” at the end of the goats sequence. Father announces that “we are now going to go see the sheep,” Kate turns towards Father (and away from the sheep) with an explanation that “they always run off” and, possibly that this is not the best thing to do next. Before Father can respond, however, something else happens which opens a third possibility about what to do next: Mother calls from across the street with a specific request that “a picture of Fanny [the dog]” be taken. Kate and Father (as indicated by the movements of the camera) turn first towards the voice, and then towards the dog. Kate moves towards the dog (and further away from the sheep) as Father calls

back (to mother? Kate? Both?) that a picture has already been taken. In effect, Father has denied mother's request, though acknowledging the authority to make it. What was thus "done next" after the visit to the goats, is a response to Mother's request.

This response, eventually, can be taken as a kind of parenthesis, since Father then reintroduces the matter of the sheep with a specific request that they go to the sheep ("show me the sheep") while specifying "even if they run away" (sec. 2:30 to 2:33) The last comment, of course, acknowledges Kate's information, even as it challenges her interpretation of the impact this should have on what to do next. Kate handles all this without bringing any of what some might imagine could have been transformed this exchange into a conflict. Father and daughter now move together towards the sheep. They are *both* at work making the videotape, even in the face of reasonable challenges.

2) What if the task cannot be performed?

But to will something is not to make it happen. Twice during the sequence, Kate points out that what she is actually doing at the moment may not produce what Father is expecting. After all, it is not enough for the human beings to cooperate for the task to be accomplished. One also needs the cooperation of the animals. Interestingly, Kate's skepticism is phrased in such a way as to produce the statement/question/explanation sequence that is commonly associated with the relationship between expert and respectful ignorant audience that has granted the expert the authority to teach it about some hitherto obscure aspect of reality.

Father did not specifically request the taped visit to the goats be an occasions for explanations about goats. Kate does not make a specific request about Father's intention either.

But, together, they settle what is to be the subsidiary task of this sequence in the first few seconds:

00:00:05	.... I may	.....	.....
00:00:06	not be able to find	.....	.....
00:00:07	the baby goat	.....	.....
00:00:08	.....	.....	.....
00:00:09	.....	.. Non? .....	.....
00:00:10	. No .. Cause they	.....	.....
00:00:11	always run around .	.....	.....

It is not clear that Kate’s initial statement is a warning or an explanation of future disappointment, but the Father’s questioning response is taken as a request for expert explanation: Father does not know, Kate knows, Kate is to get Father to know. Knowledge about goats is made the most local of issues within the familial videotaping frame. That knowledge-about-goats would be the issue was not “known” at the beginning of the sequence but it is something that becomes better established as almost a “rule” as the sequence progresses. Whether this is indeed “the rule” is actually checked explicitly at least twice by Kate. The first may be a challenge. The second is an explanation of why Kate may, briefly, have gotten out of the teaching-as-expert frame.

3) “Anyway,” this task may be unnecessary

00:01:40	..... Anyway	.....	.....
00:01:41	these are all the goats	.....	.....
00:01:42	as you know .....	.....	.....

Kate’s “anyway [...] as you know” is interesting because it specifically labels knowledge as something at issue and appears to imply that Father actually knows that these are actually all the goats. But, when one looks at what its own sequencing, the statement may also have been an opening to closing the goat sequence, or a search for what next to teach, or any number of other

things. The statement is made about fourteen seconds of silence and is immediately followed by two short sub-sequences. First Kate continues her expert introduction of the goats by explaining how to recognize “Bibi.” Then she enters in a kind of dance with one goat as she tries to pet it. This involves some hand movements and a series of “hello” that conclude with an interesting mention of “play” that is not only an explanation (“what I always do”) but a framing of what just happened *as* “play,” something that is thereby distinguished from everything else that is happened and that involves instructions/warnings and explanations (“not play”). Then Kate returns to the overall frame with the sequence quoted earlier (sec. 1:56 to 2:01).

On learning, ignorance and figuring it all out

Interestingly, the only occasion when “knowledge” is brought out as an issue to consider during the goats sequence is the comment by Kate: “as you [Father] know” (sec. 1:42). This is not developed. In *this* paper, knowledge is brought out as an issue only because of the power of the concern with learning that is typical of work not only in child development, but also in cultural anthropology, and now much critical sociology. Most of the literature in these fields would now expect me to speculate about what Kate is “learning” that might “stay with her” and make a difference on her success in school, and her life career. I will not repeat here earlier critiques of theories of inculcation as the foundations of political incorporation (McDermott and Varenne ; Varenne and McDermott 1998). I want to develop here more recent programmatic work (Varenne et al, forth) where the emphasis is put on the active ignorance that produces changed actions, local frames, and even political organization.

Analytically, the important step here is to focus on the uncertainty as a fundamental property of each moment in the interaction. The point is not to try and hypothesize what the participants “must have known” to do what they did, but to notice that they are actually involved in finding out what they will have done. For example, the statement “the knitting lesson” came at the *end* of the sequence and thereby constituted, though only for a moment, what had been happening, *retrospectively* and for the current participants.⁴ This is not enough to justify using those words by one of the participants as that which did happen then for *this* current purpose (an academic paper). We must preserve the experience of our own ignorance, and of our attempts to move beyond this ignorance. This is, I argue, the same experience that the people we write about go through as they make something that has never quite happened the way it is happening, and that will never happen again that way, precisely because that which has happened, including all the labels that which happened might get to carry, has, indeed, happened in the history of the polity in question. None of *this* is a matter of reversible time.

As mentioned elsewhere (Varenne et al. forth), I am building here on three theoretical developments, two well-known though not necessarily in the perspective I am pushing here, and one much less well-known. The first is Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology to the extent that he has criticized social theories building on learning and has, instead, focused on the methods people use to figure out what may be happening at *this* time, for local ends and purposes. The second is Lave and Wenger’s model of “communities of practice,” rephrased as “polities of practice” to

⁴ Actually it would be plausible to argue that the statement is addressed to Father behind the camera and is a kind of hypothesis about his intent, an hypothesis that cross-references many classical paintings of such lessons (e.g. Fragonard’s “The Piano Lesson,” Vermeer’s or Manet’s “Music Lesson,” Renoir’s “Guitar Lesson,” etc.).

emphasize the multiple political asymmetries built into the model as well as the continuing movements through the many positions any particular polity might constitute for itself. The third development remains essentially a matter of philosophical critique as expressed in Rancière's presentation of the revolutionary French pedagogue Jacquetot (). In this work we are challenged to consider that the best, and perhaps simply the most common, master may be the "ignorant" though intimately concerned master. The prototype of such a master would be the parents of a first born who are discovering what children are all about, in the detail of their interaction, who work at shaping the child in various ways and for various purposes without any particular or well-articulated knowledge of developmental psychology, or even their goals, and who have to deal continually with the resistance of a child who may still be experimenting with the linguistic or cultural forms that might be common sense elsewhere, but will never do in their own polity.

Work, movement, ignorance, these are precisely the matters that may be most powerful in accounting for such events as I explore in this paper. Continually the participants can be seen seeking what to do next, challenging each other with new possibilities, working at making something even in the face of uncertainty and actually attempting to figure out who each other is to be, at any moment. This may be the most fundamental uncertainty. It may be useful to spend some more time on this as it links the case to the most difficult question in the social sciences: who is to count as a "participant" in any polity?

The earlier analysis of the knitting sequence focused solely on Kate and Grandmother dancing together. There were however two other persons in the room with them: Father aiming a video camera at them, and Elder Brother doing something that was not recorded. Father never



speaks though he changes the position of his body as he approaches the pair in the first seconds of the recorded sequence, places himself across a table from them and facing them, all the while aiming a large video camera at them, with the red recording light on. He zooms in and out.

He never speaks and he is never addressed—at least as far as *knitting* is concerned. The closest sign that he is there is a fleeting glance by Kate of less than one second duration (at . Interestingly, this occurs within the first overall evaluation of Kate’s progress. Grandmother has laughter in her voice and smiles; Kate smiles and looks at her father. Arguably this glance is as much “confirmation of doing well” as it is “noticing we are being videotaped.” A somewhat more ambiguous sign is Grandmother’s “the sewing lesson.” It does not exactly move knitting instruction but makes complete sense as a title for the video taped sequence *as* distinct performance worthy of being preserved for familial history. As for Elder Brother, he is only heard not very loudly whistling, dropping balls and stomping around the room. He never addresses the three persons around the table and he is never addressed or mentioned by any of them.

Given all this it makes sense to say that Elder Brother is not a participant in the performance/lesson; and that Father is a participant in the performance but not the lesson. The room does have four participants who arrange themselves into three simultaneous polities each constituted by the work all perform to maintain their distinction. Eventually, some knitting and knitting instruction get done, a familial video tape gets done, a summer morning gets done. Each, it would be easy to say in the language I am struggling against, “have different rules” and

the participants “know” them as they “use” them to reach trouble-free completion. As many have pointed out, the language of rules and knowledge in fact hides the complexity of the work that is summarized as a matter of rules. Knitting instruction itself was revealed as a complex matter that involved continual shifting in speech and body, as well as a systematic movement away from what was known to what was *to be* known, in the future.

Much the same analysis could be made of the shifting and embedded participatory fields in the goats sequence. In that case, Father was of course directly implicated in what was set up as performance and then was made as, also, an occasion for teaching about the animals. But Mother did intervene, and her request was considered before it was dismissed. Her intervention implies that she was monitoring the taping, as she must also have been monitoring the activities of the other children in other parts of what was a larger participatory field with multiple activities taking place in various spaces. But her interaction, at the moment when it occurred, was as unexpected as it made sense.

And so was Father transforming knitting instruction into a familial performance. That is, when Kate and Grandmother noticed that Father was videotaping, through their bodies, they made it make sense by practically maintaining their positioning and not mentioning the videotaping. I would take the initial maintenance as a kind of “hypothesis about what was to happen and what we should do about it” that each may have phrased differently but that they resolved interactionally by, precisely, not mentioning the videotaping. They “found out” what was happening though, again, they might have phrased it differently. Actually, only Grand-

mother did phrase the event when she titled it “The Knitting Lesson.” Father and Kate just participated in such a way as not to trigger trouble.

A return to education

It may seem a stretch to focus so closely at the vicissitudes of everyday life when one’s concerns are with “education.” And yet, it has been a common sense of much research on schooling for more than thirty years that “family background” is most powerful in shaping the career of students in school. How this might proceed remains something of a mystery though the most influential of theories have all proceeded through the hypothesis that, in some way, matters learned “at home” somehow make it easier for students to do well in school. It may be that parents teach certain matters (e.g. reading) before they are to learn them in school, thereby getting a “headstart.” It may be, and this is the most fateful of hypotheses, that parents shape children in their very ways of being (talking, moving, etc.) so that some children are more attuned to the ways of being school personnel expect of children, while others are less attuned. There are many versions of this, from Bernstein to Bourdieu to ..., but they all, in one way or another imply that matters are *learned* at home that can then be transported to school and that make school more common sensical to some children and not to others.

These approaches that my colleague Ray McDermott and I criticized as the “culture as difference” explanation for human behavior (McDermott and Varenne 1997; Varenne and McDermott 1998; McDermott and Varenne forth). My goal now is to explicate further what we meant by “culture *as* disability,” by revisiting the issue of education in families on the way to

revisiting education in schools. It is undeniable that schools continually produce a particular form of measured failure that discriminates some human beings among others. This discrimination advertises itself through a call to inner properties of the child, whether these are biological, or a matter of early experiences. This has deep political roots in Euro-American political philosophy. These are precisely the roots that, as social scientists, we cannot simply assume. What if, as I have kept asking, human beings, including children, are less shaped than shaping, less knowledgeable than in search of knowledge?

These questions guided the current analysis. This analysis, theoretically and methodologically, builds on various well established generalizations from work in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Human action is work in uncertainty. Human beings must find out what they are doing as they do it. This work constitutes the very social facts that they cannot escape. They do all this together, and this work can be extremely damaging for particular people when, precisely, it is “successful.” To generalize one particularly poignant piece by Garfinkel, nothing can be more consequential for one’s life than having been demonstrated, after extensive work by all the institutions and their representatives involved, that one is indeed, and has always been, incapable of doing work in a particular genre.

What I have been doing here is recasting this work of discovery as a fundamentally educational work that can recast a certain way of generalizing what we observe when as, educational researchers, we look at the people about whom we are to say something. So, I am *not* saying that the five people who appear in this paper do not do what they are doing “because” they “know” how to be American and French in a hamlet of Southern France. The people, it is

more useful to say, are making a life through the continuing discovery of what can be placed within this life. The lowering cost of a new technology makes it available for the making of familial scenes that were still quite “new” when these sequences were videotaped. Knitting is similarly new. The goats are new (for Kate certainly who was discovering the animals that summer in a more personal way than she had earlier summers). Kate-with-the-goats is new for the parents. And, as she grows older and requests are made of her that had never been made before, her parents are new for Kate. For all, what worked last summer, last week, yesterday, cannot quite be counted to work unless one conducts a separate investigation of whether it might work, or how it might have to be modified, given the very fact that yesterday did occur. If we can see Grandmother both congratulate and then challenge Kate within a few minutes of interaction, how much more should we expect to see such shifts in longer sequences that involve more people, more machines, more conditions, when all these things are themselves changing and creating new troubles, as well as new opportunities.

It would of course be a major error to fall back to an interpretation of “education” as a solely individual process. Like society, education does proceed *through* separate constitutive actions, but conditions, materials, constructions, and so forth, are fully social. To talk about education in this matter is to tie it closely with the social, as, so to speak, that way of approaching

the social that emphasizes what leads to change in the organization of the social. If social theory, as well as culture theory, must, eventually emphasize homeostasis, even when the authors are fully aware of the limitations of this account of systematicity, educational theory must emphasize that which produce social and cultural change, not as an automatic matter as 19th century theories of social evolution did, nor as the altogether random process of borrowing and patching the Boasians appear to have postulated, but as the inevitable but unpredictable result of the deliberate seeking for what to do next given new ignorance that I believe it will be easy to notice in all contexts of human life, whether it is familial video-taping, building a family life, a school system, or national policies about immigration.

There is no evaluation in the school sense here, no "failure"—though we can imagine any number of familial trouble arising. What there is a continuing acknowledgment that something was, or was not, done that allows for moving on to something else.