

The Constitution of the Subject – Spring 2020

Self-Reflection Document

Intended as a board book, for future generations, to give them signposts or tips to guide them on their path.

What did we do?

Janneke: we explored subjective experience through the lenses of Embodiment, Language, Play, and Time. Later, we decided that the subjective experience is not only these things, but can also be things that are very dear to individuals in our course.

Or: First thing was trying to find a path to go down and instead finding many of them. Then an attempt to see where and how they intersect and finding that they do in many places and in far too many ways. Finally, we tried to find those intersections that we have the capability, energy and interest in putting ourselves at. Between all of these we spent a lot of time failing to walk and using a lot of metaphors.

TJ: We met again and again, trying our best to fit long meetings into our busy UCU schedules and wrap our heads around what we'd be doing next semester. We had a big cloud of ideas and weren't even able to parse most of the particulars to figure out how we could fit them together or synthesize into some main structure. We ended up able to at least categorize the most important/frequent topics into headings, which may have been premature or too late - there's no way to tell, especially when you're doing it. It felt too diffuse; so we trimmed it down. We had no idea what we were doing; so we opened up the discussion again and got lost. Try as best as you can to follow *the rhythm of the group* and spend time figuring out what *that* is and then do what feels right for you as a group.

Emma: We were impatient, and ambitious without truly listening to each other. What we did, in the end, was write up a lesson plan of loosely connected, vaguely theorized and bound together. It felt rushed. It felt haphazard, sometimes. We were disconnected, yet hopeful, and we pushed through until we couldn't push any longer, after which we had to pick up the pieces and drag them across the finish line.

Gummi: We struggled to find symphony amongst ourselves and create common understanding for what we were doing. We wanted to look at the 'constitution of the subject' through various lenses but failed to acknowledge the most skewed lens of them all: our own unique way of seeing things - which was amplified by the fact that we were very different kinds of people. We did indeed study subjectivity through various lenses, but I would say the insights were slightly scattered and coherency was often missing.

Lynn: We did not put enough thought into what should have been thought through and later try to salvage it by thinking too much. It is important to clarify certain things right from the get-go. Right from the beginning our plan was a little bit messy, we tried to fit a lot of things into one course and fabricated a somewhat arbitrary connection. This came forward

halfway through the course when we realized that the expectations were different for different people and things did not really make sense. In the end, we found a way to power through, but it felt like an awkward compromise and no one was fully satisfied. I think we should have been more open at the beginning, maybe more pragmatic and definitely more prepared so we could realistically anticipate what we were getting into instead of being idealistic.

Maria: We talked and listened a lot *together*, understanding on the way we have to learn how to talk and listen *to each other*. However, on the way some got hurt, and some became disenchanted. And so failure became a repetitive stopover in our course; but it is one from which, on our symposium, we emerged spontaneously coordinated. This says a lot about failure. If I were to sum up our 'doing' in this course, I would bring to your mind the image of different limbs of a body. When looked individually, they all have their voice and language. But still, they form a body, right? I mean, didn't we start our journey discussing what humanity was to us? A gem picked up on the way? Try things. As best you'll fail, at worst you'll fail.

Gideon: What we did was one big piece of theater; all of us for whatever reason had a kind of script in mind – was it going to be an abstract, Brechtian or Kids play (e.g. a academic course with readings and discussions and lectures or something more personal and artistic and experimental); we all thought we knew how the play would look like but we realized quickly that what we had expected our lines to be was not the same as what all the other actors had prepared. In retrospect there were too many voices and too many wildly different expectations and voices and too little bringing it all together. We made the best out of the situation and there is little point in what ifs – in the end we made a chaotic play but one that is beautiful in its own chaos.

What did we need?

Janneke: We needed space, a listening ear, and set expectations. I would say that at the beginning of the course it would have been very useful to set our expectations straight. Should the course be experimental or academics focussed? Will there be many readings? What is the subject, concretely.

Or: We needed to understand what all us came here for. We needed to feel that we are making this course, not merely attending it. We needed to understand that different goals don't imply different means (and vice versa).

TJ: We needed to have the chance to all express ourselves in the ways that made us feel most heard; and we needed the rest of the group to hear us and listen to us. We would have benefited from a chance to discover this before needing to make overarching decisions but it was made difficult by people being on exchange, being UCU students, and some of us not having a strong sense of self-expression in such a horizontal forum where your input (or lack thereof) directly affects the outcome of any related situation.

Emma: We needed the patience and courage to speak our mind and listen honestly and carefully to each other, and create a collective vision we were all happy to work with each other to achieve.

Gummi: I think we needed to take more time in the initial phases to build a safe and understanding environment with the group. Perhaps even while designing the content; already start 'understanding' each other better to build rapport and at least a little more united vision.

Lynn: I agree with Gummi. We should have taken a longer time to prepare the syllabus, the content, the structure, the group dynamic, I feel like if we had laid all the things on the table right at the beginning, we could have avoided some disappointments. And once the disappointments came, we needed - once again - more clarity, more honesty and better listening skill.

Dylan (Adi): We could have used more time to really focus is on what we wanted to teach/learn, it felt as though we jumped in blind thus somewhat missing out on how the interconnectedness (or lack thereof) of the many subjects we wanted to talk on really could be leaned on. I also strongly agree with what TJ has said regarding this.

Maria: I would have needed us to concentrate our efforts on the side of what institutes movement, of instituting movement, rather than continuing with an already instituted movement. I use the term institute from institution because we needed to acknowledge that our group started from an institutionalized ground, the academic one, and this is not without implications. To resonate with my inner politics, I would have needed to partake in an institution (and our group, I thought initially, can be a living instance of that, this is why I am linking the macro with the micro) as always solidary of an emancipatory perspective which must also have a practical and performative and critical effect. Through both actions *and* theories, we might have discovered another becoming of our group.

Gideon: I think we needed a vision and a project - something that everyone belived in and wanted; we all signed up with a love for the process of building something together but we forgot to look at what we want to build.

What were we surprised by?

Janneke: I was surprised by all the different expectations people had of the course. I think that we found out during the course that we cannot simply play by ear, as many people interpret things differently.

Or: We were surprised by the chasmic discrepancies in the ways we ended up experiencing the course. We were surprised by how no one ended up particularly satisfied with how things unfolded.

TJ: I was surprised by how much people differed in willingness of self-expression. It is my experience that, when given the opportunity to speak about my inner world, desires, emotions, and reactions to a given situation, I am always more than willing to speak my mind. When it comes to academics, I feel UCU students are already in the right gear to speak their mind or at least feel comfortable being asked for their opinion. However, some of us in this course were more prepared for it to be emotionally intense in an explicit way, and others were not. Because we have such different communication and expression styles, and did not have a chance to communicate them to each other, we preemptively seemed to decide that we were never going to understand each other so the best thing to do was just fight for our corner until we got our way or the course ended. Since we have 9 different ways of doing things, that didn't exactly pan out. So, when things went wrong, those of us more readily able to express our feelings did just that; and the response we got was being shut down because it "wasn't academic enough" and "wasn't the course anymore," when in fact to us it was the course we signed up for. It took us a while to realize we were none of us going to be happy with the course, and in the end just settled with what it would be, which was tense and uncomfortable, but we did it and we stuck with it and I guess things turned out some way that is not 100% horrible. So that's good.

Emma: Ultimately, I was surprised that I wasn't the only one that felt that they had tuned themselves out, and became another person with a role they were never comfortable or happy with. That nobody was really comfortable surprised me, it felt as though someone owned what was constructed, but nobody really did. We were all *not having a good time*, and nobody really said anything.

Gummi: Similar to what has been said: I felt a little surprised that everyone was experiencing similar emotions regarding comfort in the group.

Lynn: I was surprised at how much some people were willing to invest in the course, emotionally. I have never seen such desire to make something work. And I was kind of surprised - but also not really - that even through all this effort, there were parts that we could not fix. I was surprised how empathetic some people can be, and others not. And I was surprised at how different people value different things - for some people it was professionalism and for others comfort and I was surprised to find myself standing at both ends which prompted serious self-reflection.

Dylan (Adi): I was surprised by how entirely unsafe (as in safe space for conversations and opening up) I felt in the group, and how much I let that affect me personally, ultimately forcing me to take huge steps away from involvement (and again, refer to TJ's words here.)

Maria: I was surprised by the links we fail to make and the gaps we succeeded to build. Odd methodology. My biggest surprise remains the flowing of the symposium, in which gaps became meaningful bridges.

Gideon: I think the thing that surprised me was the range of ways of being people had. Of how different people's needs were, how emotionally intense and raw it became – I was

surprised by how wild it all was ; I early thought about dropping out because I perceived a lack of unity in the group and course but I had severely underestimated that but somehow that was what made it the most interesting. I was surprised at how invested I got – I was at so many points frustrated but somehow it was not something that I could step away from. I was surprised by the whole thing.

What did we do when things went wrong?

Janneke: We tried to find a compromise. Even though we could not please everyone in the course, an active attempt was made at doing the least damage to anyone in the course.

Or: We Stopped. Things went wrong and it took awhile for everyone to even understand that they did, let alone alone. Following that we spent a long time attempting to make the group dynamics the first priority.

TJ: We tried to talk about it, but some people didn't want to talk. Some of us felt that we'd talk it out and it'd be fine; others felt that *the talking itself* was the problem. What some saw as a solution, others saw as a problem. We didn't have enough mutual understanding and trust to enable whoever was uncomfortable in any given moment to 1) admit that to themselves, 2) communicate that to the group in such a way as the group understands it, and 3) challenge themselves to be changed by the situation. Everything was frustrating to at least one person, always, which meant everything was always a little bit frustrating because at least 1/9th of the group wasn't engaged or supported by the material and/or the group.

Emma: We pulled and pushed, and opened up about (not) wanting to open. We closed up, broke down, and talked it out until half of us were sick of talking, and the other half was still left unheard. But we tried. What really happened when things went wrong is that we all tried to listen as far as we could, say as much as we could, and stepped out when we couldn't anymore. Such was life, sucky but we tried.

Gummi: We stopped and reflected on what had happened, how we felt and how we could move forward. We should have done that earlier because it became hard (impossible) to move forward so that everyone would be happy.

Lynn: In my opinion, we crumbled. We all hid in our cocoon of what we think is right and what should be done and we acted defensively. Suddenly everything was tense and I don't blame us. That is what people do in intense situations. It is not right, but it is the natural reaction. That meant that it was all the more difficult to find a way to listen to each other. When people are put in a difficult situation, they enclose themselves and it is all the more difficult to have an open discussion because everyone felt attacked.

Dylan (Adi): basically what had been said above. I think each person dealt with it in their own way and so the cohesiveness of "we" was just not to be found.

Maria: Emma's metaphor of pushing-and-pulling expresses it all to me. I will only add that this pushing-and-pulling was only speech-based, which may have reduced our possibility of exchanges.

Gideon: It really felt like pulling a string on a shirt and the more you pull the more the shirt starts to lose its structure and you see that there was nothing there to begin with. We talked and listed yet few felt like they could talk or that they were not being listened to.

What things went alright?

Janneke: I think we did have some great times and learning moments. Some classes were very thought-provoking. We did some things related to embodiment that engaged all of class.

Or: Many things. We gave room for expression on a level that would not have been possible in many academic structures. We kept going and trying and I think it paid off in some way or another for each of us.

TJ: We showed up as best we could. We didn't pull together, but we limped through until the end. I often felt like I was dragging a big weight somewhere it didn't want to go, so I'd feel tempted to just drop it and say "it can get wherever *it* wants to go, I'm no longer responsible for its direction," but that's a cop-out and the very thing I was frustrated with others for seeming to do. Don't give up on it; it lives on your energy. Give it the energy you want to get out of it, it will pay dividends. I did another one of these courses in 2019 and HOLY CRAP did the dynamics flow amazingly. It can happen. Just listen to each other and *don't stop giving it your energy*. If everyone did that, it would literally just stop happening. If only one person does it, it 1) puts more responsibility on others' shoulders, and 2) sends a signal to others in the group that it's something that's okay to do with this course, not giving it your all. Above all, be honest with yourself and listen to others when they are honest to you. Play to your strengths, but don't refuse to try something because you "know" it'll be a bad time; ask the group to help you through this challenge to your comfort zone and pull yourself through. Show up. Be present. Care.

Emma: This happened especially when we acknowledged when things went wrong; we listened and spoke truth. We gave room for different approaches and were honest with annoyances, and powered through. I believe what truly went most alright was that we ended together, having gone through a fucky experience, but still together.

Gummi: We showed up. We tried. We did things. We learned from all of this.

Lynn: There were some really good classes, some friendships have been built and definitely a lot of thought was put into the course - whatever type of thought it was. In the end it is something we have been through and it was an experience we can learn from. Hopefully, it will not make us harden.

Maria: When we expressed in our own voices and through our own projected narratives, like on the symposium, *some one thing* was created, and it felt good. Walking with our own feet, yet on the same rhythm: it did happen!

Gideon: there is a part of me that wants to go with Janneke and say that in some classes we learned something; that we learned cool things that I will take with me but the truth is I can get that in a lot of places. I think the beauty lied in what can best be expressed in a Richard Linklater Quote: "I believe if there's any kind of God it wouldn't be in any of us, not you or me but just this little space in between. If there's any kind of magic in this world it must be in the attempt of understanding someone sharing something".