05 2007

From Knowledge of Self-Management to the Self-Management of Knowledge

Cátedra experimental sobre producción de subjetividad

Translated by Maribel Casas-Cortés and Sebastian Cobarrubias

What and for What

The **Experimental University**[1] is a project that various students, researchers and professors engaged in social movements have been working on for some time in the city of Rosario, Argentina. It is an attempt to produce a constituent form of university activism or "militancy". We propose to go beyond the critique of the decomposition of the public university and the emergent marketized university. In this sense the experimental university would prefigure a non-state public university, a model of university that is alternative to the market/corporate university.

For 2006 we built a path that paused along the different mechanisms/dispositifs of contemporary subjectivity production: Work, the State, the Market, Communication, the University. And through these, within these, against these, beyond these, the processes of self-organization, the mechanisms of self-alteration/

transformation of life that produce times and spaces of autonomy in which we can decide how we would want to live.

From this process of constructing an experience of self-organization on managing university knowledge, we also advanced in elaborating a common horizon of composition with other processes of self-organization being developed by social movements that focus on constructing new forms of subjective experience and processes of community production.

Self-management and levels of participation

The general decisions within this initiative are taken by the Assembly of Problematization, Elaboration, Organization and Management. This assembly is in charge of the general coordination of the project, its political and institutional relationships, financing and outreach for the space. It works through weekly meetings focused on evaluation, registration, discussion as well as (self) critique and reflection on the different events taking place.

The process of self-education[2] is organized around five work-units which take place chronologically, a theme by month. The units are the following: Work and subjectivity production, State and subjectivity production, Market and subjectivity production, Communication and subjectivity production, University and subjectivity production. Each unit is defined by the Autonomous Elaboration Teams. These teams define contents, bibliography, visiting speakers and the pedagogical guides of the encounters. The emerging elaborations are shared in the space of the assembly.

The self-organizing processes constitute the transversal axis that shoots through each of the five units: work self-management,

political self-management, economic self-management, communicative self-management, self-management of theoretical practice. The "university" also has two transversal spaces: a space of research and pedagogical formation, and a space focused on days destined for book presentations and reflections to be defined as we move forward.

Participation in the "university" is open to anyone, and to all its activities, under the premise of what we call "previous agreements", in accordance with criteria that have been defined earlier. The requirement implies engaging with the definitions that are being elaborated in the group, as well as collaborating in the carrying out of the tasks that each part of the "university" is focused on. In summary, the participation is open to every person under the sole condition of their own desire –sustained by practice- of engaging in the experience of the "university".

Subjectivity production … some hypotheses

The following hypotheses constitute our point of departure:

1. Subjectivity means culturally constructed ways of life

2. It is unknown how process of subjectivity, self-management, and self-education come into being, nor how much they are able to do. This is why we come up with the idea of the "university" in order to experience them.

Our common denominator is the desire of transforming the conditions in which we live in. We resist by inventing other ways of living within and from spaces that we inhabit on a daily basis (university, workspace, etc.). Then, if subjectivity means ways of living, our questions point directly to the production of

contemporary subjectivity: how are ways of life constructed nowadays? That it is to say, how do the contemporary mechanisms of subjectivity production work? What generic procedures are able to produce singular/unique formations from within the concrete experiences of our lives? What blocs of knowledge and what domains of power affect our lives from without, affecting the ways that we become?

Self-education in (state-run) public universities

The decision to create a space for self-education responds to a concrete problem that we have been facing: the need to develop mechanisms of thought inside the state-run university. If we need something like this it is because we can't find it within the current configuration of the university.

The **Experimental University** is a hypothesis that tries to materialize/create effective procedures for the self-management of knowledge in the context of the hegemony of market dynamics and the decadence of the state-run university. Of course the state-run university is not excluded. Rather we try to link ourselves with this 'form' but in a new way, based on a constituent critique. In any case, rather than confronting or ignoring the state-run university, those of us that are participating in the experience propose to inhabit it but from the basis of a self-managed project.

Multiple examples and experiences of 'free universities/classes/departments' have existed within the state-run university. Nonetheless, in the case of the **Experimental University** we are experimenting with a different path. Whereas other free universities were designed to develop, induce, and convince, *others*; the decision here is to create a space where we can form/educate

ourselves. This situation does not exclude the presence of other people who do not form part of the assembly that manages the project. On the contrary, the mechanism of self-education erases the distance that can at times be generated between organizers/militants and external attendees. The very notion of external agent is dissolved, insofar that what we are trying to construct is a plane of immanence to achieve collective production. There is no longer an academic public to conquer or to fill with skills but rather a composition of singularities that inhabit that same plane of immanence **for self-education.** The project is also distinguishable from the type of workshops that occur within political organizations, since we don't 'educate-ourselves' in order to know more or to transmit a particular knowledge but rather to produce ourselves *in the common-public space* that we are creating/materializing.

Pedagogical experimentation

We sustain that that the creation of a space for self-education that seeks to experiment with new forms of acquiring, sharing, and producing knowledges and new forms of collective thought, should necessarily experiment not only at the level of the contents themselves but also at the level of the pedagogical mechanisms that are proposed. This is to say: the work dynamics and relationships generated between subjects amongst themselves, and, between these and the knowledges that are placed on the table.

Knowledge presents itself as an integral component of our lives. Our goal/challenge is to make this knowledge a useful instrument rather than a theoretical institution. The idea of knowledge-as-instrument or conceptual-tool demands the accompaniment of new modes of carrying out education and formation in order to exist.

For this reason we have often dedicated ourselves to the search for pedagogical paths that are especially suited for this work. From this perspective we consider methodology as an instrument of production (of thought, of strategies, of questioning).

If we explore methodologies that are alternative to academic-lecture like explanations, it is because we believe that where explanation predominates- so does a type of purely declarative knowledge. This type of knowledge is difficult to reuse in a concrete situation given that, from the start, the theory used is not understood as a conceptual tool that can act in a concrete situation but rather as conceptual knowledge that must be learned in order to be archived.

We believe that the university should be constituted as a space that facilitates collective thinking and reflection about life in common. For us, the function of the university resides in helping to think through society's problems starting form available knowledges and producing new, mobile knowledges that provide solutions, proposals or ways of enacting them.

Compositions with the "outside"

In considering the relationship between the **Experimental University** with the "outside", something clearly imposes itself on us:
it impossible to reduce "the outside" to a logic. "Outside" is not *a thing* but rather *they are* a multiplicity of institutions, movements, tendencies. More than an outside, what exists is a pile of multireferential, polysemic and unnamed "possibles". In addition, if an *outside* does not exist, then, strictly speaking, neither does an *inside*. The space is defined by its movement and the movements of

others. These multiple modulations might be able to locate their basis in a certain notion of university: as an open, mobile, connective, and not a self-referential space.

After we discovered the existence of numerous contacts with which we use different tools each time, we can signal, *a grosso moddo* those which can be understood as the most transited paths that lead towards (or to a relationship with) the **Experimental University:**

-The Experiment and the University

Many of the comments we have received mention the fact that we are constructing this space in the institutional territory of the university. Not on the "inside of" nor "in the framework of". This strange coexistence surprises many because the typical political gesture is not the encampment but the exodus. As distinct from many other projects that have emigrated form the university, the "Experimental University" remains. It is not an ideological matter, neither is it a haphazard decision. This encampment responds to a certain availability of resources.

On the other hand, this "university" is thought of as a space to invent mechanisms of production and interchanges of knowledges. In this regard, the project not only distances itself from, but also re-signifies and combines practices and knowledges produced within both the state-ruin and private university. For example: many of the texts we work with have that very origin (the university), nonetheless, we don't disregard them because of their origin, rather it depends on the productive, or unproductive, that a text is for us, that we discriminate amongst them. In this sense, a university is not so much a grouping of texts, but rather a way of proceeding to read/engage those same texts. The gamble we make

is for a relational reading, to raise our heads and eyes while reading in order to form productive connections between what we are reading and the rest of our experiences. The gamble is a political one.

-Participants/students

When the **Experimental University** was formed, the first space of visibility that was generated was its public presentation. The form that presentation took was quite a surprise for local academic customs: dim lights, glasses of wine, minimal-techno music, dialogs and not monologues, the absence of chairs as well as a central presenters' table; and all of this in a university classroom. This was strange for those who awaited a classical '**free classroom**", that normally does not go beyond the inclusion of certain contents that are often excluded form the syllabi of institutional **classes/ lectures**, but at the same time follows the exact same dynamics of those more institutional lectures. Our gamble here, has not only to do with the content but also with the practices involved.

The **Experimental University** has one of its most relevant moments of visibility during the regular meetings every Friday: the encounter/meetings of the work unit. In this space we encounter the first experience of a prolonged relationship with others. Here we can find various and unexpected modes of encounter: there are those who "limit" themselves to following up with the readings, those who try to connect the subject matter being read with their own ideas and elaborations- in this way enriching the discussion, and those who over time come to form part of the organization of the space. These figures need not be exclusive nor progressive.

-Guests

It is possible to say that our "invitation policy" always works in relation to what is being discussed in the units/modules. Our encounters with guests are used then as (other) occasions for thought. On different occasions we have asked ourselves whether or not we were reproducing a type of 'transmission' logic linked to academic cultures: presenter-audience; monopoly of speech-monopoly of listening. Nonetheless, we believe that after going through our 'modular' experience, both those who were called originally to 'speak' as well as those called to 'listen' can no longer occupy those pre-assigned roles nor do they desire to. The resulting dynamic is tighter and more dialogical.

-Co-research

Alongside union representatives from a call center in the city we have begun some long-term work. We could say that, in terms of collective compositions, this is the first one that aims to be a long-term relationship. Everything started after we made an invitation to those union delegates to give us a report of their work experiences in the framework of our most recent module dealing with work. After a series of exchanges that developed into the **Experimental University** writing a text to be published in the bulletin that those delegates were planning on printing, we found ourselves currently in the initial stages of a militant research project that we have jointly agreed to keep afloat. The idea is to problematize our practices, in other words to interrogate them (both political practices as well as research ones) in such a way that we can produce multiple approaches that at the same time facilitate multiple strategies of intervention.

Problems in the course of the experience

Expected or unexpected, predictable or not, discussing from the basis of the problems that have emerged during the experience has contributed to reinforcing a degree of maturing of our process of experimental self-management.

1. Modularization and fragmentation: the difficulty of sustaining general decisions

A politics of 'happenings', a politics of experimentation cannot exist without a dedication to the care and promotion of the *events* that tighten its constituent praxis (even if constituent of itself). This ethical position recognizes, and anticipates, that its practice does not contain a pre-ordained logic or methodology. Its method and even that carrying out of different projects can only be achieved through constant self-reflection that, in the face of what's happening at that moment, will always lead to new methods. It is this very ethic which demands that we muster all our *potentials and virtualities* through pedagogical mechanisms, experimental vocabularies, working groups, and techniques that we can use in order to keep ourselves and eachother in check. When all of these begin to take shape, we begin to enter the sphere of questions and answers, in the space of tensions and problematics.

To be sure, a political practice of this nature is not without its consequences. The tensions that emerge demand an effort of balancing and reflecting without which the experimentation in the group would be weakened. For these cases the **Experimental University** has constituted an assembly space where we work weekly on emergent events *and precise* analysis that question and disturb, when they don't directly mobilize, our experiences.

A problem that we encountered as our experience developed was that new people began to join the **Experimental University** through the modules and/or the assembly, who were not aware of previous decisions made collectively by the group, or the work that we had done during the first months of existence. Confronted with this situation, we had to deal with the first tensions around a basic agreement that we had on how to participate in the **Experimental University**: participation is open to all who desire and are able to dedicate themselves to the experimentation of the group. That tension was produced amidst the ethical recognition of radical alterity, of that fortuitous and anonymous 'other' as a potential source of problems and for this very reason a fundamental part of the experimentation. Additionally we recognized that the events that happened and continue to happen do so from and in the very same experimentation. Each event had its own relative importance and history and played a role in the development of the group, but were often underestimated by those who did not participate in them, who arrived later to the group and did not know about what came before. From that first tension we developed a reformulation of how we invite participation in the groups. We advise potential participants that "participation in the **Experimental University** is open in all aspects *based on previous group agreements*, and conforming to the criteria constituted by the instances that compose that aspect of the group..."

Would this condition have been possible without the tension that we emerged from the lived process of experimentation? Didn't the reformulation bring us back to the very question of subjectivity-in-formation? Don't we find ourselves before a subjectification process that maintains the very space that configures and pushes it forward, with a permanent gesture of retrospective reflection as well as deconstruction and re-institution?

Situations such as these are not only recurrent in our ethical-political experimentation but fundamental. On the basis of this, the *tensions* (we call them that without hesitating) are a central, even if intimidating, element of our way of producing.

2. The traces of instituted university subjectiviy as obstacles to experimentation.

When we created the **Experimental University** we started from a presupposition: the state-run university does not produce a student subjectivity. It does not leave traces nor does it brand those taking the classes. Rather this university has become an institution that serves merely as a depository where people accumulate while searching for a diploma allowing them to better confront the labor market. Nonetheless, as the project began during the month of May, we recognized the difficulty of putting alternative pedagogical mechanisms into practice; practices that distanced themselves form the typical academic methods we had all gone through and suffered through during our transit through state-run formation/education.

During the encounters that we proposed, the figure of the "expert that explains" emerged with force, embodied by the coordinators of the mechanisms that were in play. Even if we used texts that the university normally excluded, the pedagogical operation based on explanation and the subjective effects among participants were identical to an official class: passivity; boredom, and hierarchization between "teachers" and "students".

At the same time that we confronted the figure of the "explaining teacher/expert", another sharp problem that we encountered was the lack of pedagogical mechanisms that were effective enough to avoid the proliferation of what we call "opinions". By opinion we

mean a pronouncement made in a collective space that does not subjectively affect/touch its interlocutor, that is to say that it generates dispersive rather than cohesive effects. The mass proliferation of mechanical, unconnected opinions about a wide variety of themes is an operation proper of the mass media scene. Rather than a citizenship right, the act of expressing an opinion about something is an automatic response promoted by the media. During the first encounters of the **Experimental University**, the absence or weakness of a pertinent pedagogic mechanism brought forth the apparition of all sorts of words, affirmations, pronouncements, that had little or nothing to do with the axis of study that was at hand. What are the effects of the "opinion-syndrome"?: confusion about the proposed objectives and a sensation of emptiness regardless of the amount of participation being achieved.

A series of diverse reflections after our discussions in the assemblies lead us to double our efforts to work on our methodological engineering. Finally, and not without due work, we are beginning to achieve pedagogical mechanisms that distance themselves effectively from the "teacher/expert that explains" and the mere "superposition of opinions". These mechanisms are allowing us to begin to reach a type of *thinking that is common, in the moment, and self-managed*.

3-Multiplicity without a synthesis: the end of the plenary form?

During our first encounters, the work *produced* by each sub-working group was placed in common towards the end of the encounter. We called that process of "socializing" each group's work *Plenary*. But after two months we began to notice the plenary was converting itself more into an *instance of exposition and opinion*

than into a *space of elaboration*. It became an opportunity to manifest ones agreement or disagreement with an author or to demonstrate how well-read one was, and not an *experience in the self-managed elaboration of conceptual tools*.

Thinking through the exhaustion of the Plenary has nonetheless placed another tension in our midst: during the last encounter of the module on the State as well as during the module on the Market, the coordinating groups proposed making a sort of balance of the work that had been done (pedagogic mechanisms, coordination styles, etc.). The productive results of these balances/ evaluations, that included intense debates, provoked another question, and on the same token another subjectivity: we could say that at this point (after four months of experimental activity and nine months existing as a '**university**'), the participants wanted to reflect on the work processes that can determine the most relevant modality to self-manage knowledge.

After discerning this characteristic it didn't take long for a question to arise: why should we understand the *plenary* as a *modality* of synthesis of what we've been working on in the discussion subgroups every Friday we meet? It so happens that we had inhabited this very mechanism of the plenary umpteen times during our militant experiences without the slightest bit of reflection. This type of space that we organized at the end of each encounter, and where very few productive elements emerged, began to disturb and finally 'kick-out' many people that were participating. At the same time it became an obstacle and a problem in thinking about the type of Common Public Space that we were trying to configure. After a series of collective discussions the problem became clearer: doing plenaries is not equivalent to drawing out common conclusions/results. For something 'common' to emerge, the experience of a path, the trajectory of an

entire project is necessary. A trajectory where problems emerge that will change and strengthen the composition of that same project. In summary, constitutive questions such as: “for what” “why”, “where”, “how”, would need to replicate themselves throughout the process, questions that reflect a multiplicity... without a totalizing synthesis.

www.catedrasubjetividad.com.ar |
producciondesubjetividad@gmail.com
Rosario, Argentina

---

[1] This same project was called the Experimental Chair on the Production of Subjectivity (CXPDS for its acronym in Spanish) up until very recently. We use the new name for the most part in this translation. The Original Spanish version, and other older texts by the group use the older name.

[2] We translate the term “autoformación” as self-education throughout this text. Given the content of the piece this seemed more appropriate than self-formation. Nonetheless, on occasion we use the duo education/formation in order to refer to other connotations of the word “formación” that are not implied by “education”.