

# OBJECT OF STUDY

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Summer 2015



## Center for Convivial Research & Autonomy

As a small collective dedicated to collective pedagogies, the CCRA currently claims a number of interconnected projects that weave together innovative, community-centered research, learning, and local capacity-building. The CCRA's investment in co-learning spaces generates critical analytical skills, research tools, facilitation techniques, and community service strategies able to address the intersections of environmental regeneration, community well-being, community safety, food sovereignty, and community health. For more info: [ccra@mitotedigital.org](mailto:ccra@mitotedigital.org)

At first glance what we generally refer to as an “object of study” appears relatively straightforward. The object of study usually stands in for the research focus often without any elaboration beyond suggesting an area of interest and topic. Not surprisingly, researchers are casual when talking about their object of study, if they examine it at all. For example, scholars are rarely concerned about the architecture of their object of study. The approach to the object of study underscores the political dimensions of knowledge production and the discursive boundaries of scholarly work. Left unexamined the object of study conceals the influences that inform a project and undermines the possibility of a more collective and strategic research effort.

Although it is fundamental to any investigation, the object of study is rarely, as Jorge Gonzalez warns, made explicit or carefully attended, making it less available as a collective research opportunity. Given that there has been too little attention to examining it as a specific research tool, it is not so readily apparent what exactly an

“object of study” is or does. It’s purpose, or how it works, is rarely developed beyond what is expected to be deduced from the success of the actual research. More to the point, the decisions in constructing the object of study in all its dimensions, what bell hooks calls the “motivated representations” escape critical analysis. Briefly, the approach to the object of study that we propose here is to treat it as a socially constructed tool to advance research. Drawing from the work of Jorge González, we argue that the object of study should be explicit and determined in order that discursive and epistemological boundaries can be exposed while at the same moment it can promote collective strategies and processes of knowledge production. A well constructed object of study should not only be transparent but also modular easily inviting comment and critique as well as encouraging collaboration. More importantly, the object of study provides a map of the investigation at all stages.

We approach the object of study as a convivial research tool. Thus, we treat

## Select Resources:

Jorge González, *Cultura(s) y Ciber\_Cultur@..(s) Incursiones no lineales entre Complejidad y Comunicación* (Mexico, DF: Universidad Iberoamericana Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, 2003);

Jorge González, coord. *Cibercultur@ e Iniciación en la Investigación* (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2007);

Wayne Booth, et. al., *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003);

Chris Hart, *Doing A Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination* (London: Sage Publications, 2003);

Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992).

it as a socially constructed “technology” that emerges through collaboration and works best when modular, transparent, strategic, and distributed. A carefully constructed object of study encourages greater participation by a community of researchers invested in co-generating knowledge that serves the strategic interests of a community of struggle. By insisting it be accessible, we recognize that a clearly articulated object of study can better serve a group generating research to address specific community needs.

As a whole, the object of study should manage a number of obligations required of the research process. Given that we propose the object of study for any given project be explicit, modular, collective, and strategic we suggest that it be treated as situated and emergent. Engaging an object of study should invite constant revision based on new insights that result from its careful examination and revision, as a consequence of new research and the impact of shifting contexts. It continuously evolves throughout the investigation, underscoring how a research agenda can shift in relation to changing conditions, new information, and the impact of competing interests. Thus, each component can be examined and modified as necessary. More importantly, the components should work together mutually reinforcing one another in order to construct a coherent *transdisciplinary* intervention. In short, the object of study is a diagnostic tool to reveal the progress or success of a project.

A comprehensive object of study should engage at least nine critical areas that are a necessary part of any investigation: *title, area of interest, topic, research question, practical problem, research problem, techniques, information produced, and glossary*. Taken together all nine of the components frame a research question, articulate a claim, facilitate strategies to co-produce knowledge, and archive new information through a variety of interconnected system(s) of information. Thus, a successful object of study articulates the

epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and social dimensions of engaged research. The components for any given object of study can be organized or grouped into three areas for greater analytical depth and methodological sophistication.

The first three components include 1) title; 2) area of interest; and 3) topic. These three portions of the object of study represent the discursive scaffold that precedes and informs the research project as a whole. Here we would note that the architecture for the project has two dimensions an epistemological framework that exists prior to the interest in the topic and the theoretical scaffold that emerges through the investigative process. A dominant discursive formation that informs the topic before hand can determine the formulations that emerge either in opposition or compliance. It is necessary to expose these early in the process. Thus, an explicit object of study should interrogate what Foucault called an “archive,” or the set of statements that determine what can or cannot be said about a topic. The purpose in excavating the discursive dimensions that might inform the investigation will be to uncover any potential epistemological obstacles that might undermine efforts to engage locally situated theoretical questions and knowledges. *How do we know what we know about our topic?*

The additional three elements are organized around the 4) practical problem; 5) research question; and 6) research problem. These three components invite the researcher(s) to engage the history of the topic by analyzing how it has been engaged by both popular “common sense” and scholarly debate. Critical interpretive work begins with the question(s) one asks about a specific problem or issue. It also requires an ability to refine the question(s) in dialogue with established knowledges, dominant or situated. The document that assesses how the topic has been managed by others is the literature review. This portion of the process should begin to critically evaluate how

arguments or previous interventions about the topic have been executed.

Any problem, as Wayne Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams remind us, states a condition and a cost, expressed as: *if x than y*. Practical problems name a universal condition with a general cost. Research can only partially address a practical problem –it cannot solve the entire condition. New research can only address key areas where the current knowledge is incomplete or flawed. Therefore a research problem names a condition related to the state or limits of a specific group’s knowledge. Our goal will be to state a problem worth investigating given the limits of current knowledge. *What has been said about the topic?*

The remaining three components include 7) technique; 8) information produced; and 9) glossary. These elements involve the methodology, or research strategy, that will be available in multiple interconnected systems of information. González defines “technique” as a “complex tool to formalize observations of information from an object observed.” First, we recognize that an observer can either be an obstacle or resource to any process of observation. Second, the observed is not a passive object but an active subject given that communities of struggle are always generating new information, archiving knowledges, and producing theoretical reflections about their condition. Since knowledge is a relation it is always co-generated or, as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela argue, it is autopoietic. Thus, we argue that observations must be systematic, collective, and explicit so that we can document the process of the co-generation of new knowledge. In other words, we must reveal the steps involved in what we choose to record in the observation and how we represent that which we observed. Consequently, we do not simply gather “data” or collect “evidence” assuming that what is received as data or presented as evidence is not already mediated or somehow determined by an established set of authorizing agents and forces. As an alternative Gonzalez proposes researchers construct a specific tool to observe the co-generation of new

knowledges. *How do we learn and understand more about the issue at hand?*

In constructing the object of study we recommend writing no more than one or two brief statements for each component. The components should work together as a coherent whole. The tool succeeds when the relationship between each component is clearly articulated as an individual component and in relation to the whole.

Thus, the completed object of study should be self-explanatory without needing to be narrated, justified, or explained. The justification of each component will be available in the systems of information that result from the research. As a tool, the object of study can map the significance of the intervention the project makes to date. The entire architecture of the intervention can, as González recommends, be “reversed engineered” and further elaborated through the specification of the claim, warrant, evidence, and qualification for greater clarity and focus.

### Object of Study Components:

1. **Title** announces an area of interest; points to a research question; suggests major claims.

2. **Area of Interest** states a research focus that reflects the struggles that define a community.

3. **Topic** describes a research focus specific enough to be investigated in the amount of time and with resources available.

4. **Practical Problem** states a condition in the world and experienced universally with a sufficient cost to require new knowledge towards its solution.

5. **Research Question** states a topic worthy of investigation by noting where or how the state of knowledge is somehow flawed or incomplete in such a way as to suggest the

significance of an answer relevant to a specific community.

6. **Research Problem** expresses a conceptual problem in relation to a larger practical problem. Although related to a practical problem, the solution of a research problem does not completely solve a practical problem.

7. **Technique** a “complex tool used to formalize” information co-generated between observer and observed.

8. **Information Produced** organizes the representation of observations and new knowledge archived through a system of Information.

9. **Glossary** introduces key concepts generated through the research process.

The Objects of Study form (see attached) enables you to write down a complete object of study to advance a research project. In order to save your entries you must sign the form. We also recommend that once the form has been saved rename the file. We suggest identifying it with a) your last name, b) shortened titled, and c) the current date. We recommend including the date when naming the file given that the object of study, including various components, will undergo multiple revisions and changes throughout the research and writing process.

The object of study strategy tool presented here was developed by Jorge González and his colleagues at the Laboratorio de Comunicación Compleja (LabCOMplej) <[http://computo.ceiich.unam.mx/labcomplex/labcc/c\\_labgf.html](http://computo.ceiich.unam.mx/labcomplex/labcc/c_labgf.html)>. The approach also draws from the work of Wayne C. Booth, et. al., *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) <<https://www.box.com/s/569nlpjhoea03difzph4>>. Each component has been modified from the original construction by González making use of the *The Craft of Research* as well as additional insights drawn from the work of the CCRA.

## UNI-TIERRA CALIFAS

Universidad de la Tierra Califas (UT Califas), one of the CCRA’s primary engagements, facilitates a number of interconnected spaces of co-learning that invite de-professionalized intellectuals, community-based scholars, and convivial learners to co-generate diverse knowledges and movement building resources from within community. The UT Califas “campus” extends Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca and Universidad de la Tierra Chiapas in Mexico to make possible strategic exchanges of local students whose community involvement and intellectual itineraries would benefit from travel and research between the Bay Area and other relevant global sites. Locally, UT Califas’ commitment to collective pedagogies regenerates community, facilitates intercultural and intergenerational dialogues, and reclaims local commons through an “architecture” that includes a Center for Appropriat(ed) Technologies, Language and Literacy Institute, Theses Clinic, Study Travel Jornadas, and a Democracy Ateneo. Taken together, these projects/spaces facilitate the sharing of a wide variety of strategic, community-oriented technologies, or convivial tools, in the areas of community service, grassroots research, and conjunctural analysis.

### LEARNING SPACES:

Democracy Ateneo  
2nd Saturday of the month  
@ Casa Vicky (17th St. & Julian St.)

Social Factory Ateneo  
4th Saturday of the month  
@ Obelisco (3411 E 12th St. Ste. 110)

for more info: [uni-tierra@mitotedigital.org](mailto:uni-tierra@mitotedigital.org)

Convivial Research &  
Insurgent Learning *taller*  
[cril.mitotedigital.org](http://cril.mitotedigital.org)

A web infrastructure designed to facilitate locally rooted participatory, action-oriented investigations generated in reflection and action spaces that regenerate community.

### ▪ **Title**

Announces an area of interest  
Points to a research question  
Suggests major/minor claims

### ▪ **Topic**

Describes a research focus specific enough to be investigated in the amount of time and resources available

### ▪ **Area of Interest**

States research focus that reflects the struggles that define a community

### ▪ **Research Problem**

Expresses a conceptual problem in relation to a larger practical problem

### ▪ **Research Question**

States a topic worthy of investigation by noting where or how the state of knowledge is somehow flawed or incomplete in such a way as to suggest the significance of an answer relevant to a specific community

### ▪ **Practical Problem**

States a condition in the world with a sufficient cost to require new knowledge for its solution

### ▪ **Technique**

A “complex tool used to formalize” information co-generated between observer and observed

### ▪ **Information Produced**

Representations of observations and new knowledge organized in a variety of systems

### ▪ **Glossary**

Introduces key concepts generated through the research