



Drifting with Claudio

Ole Hanseth¹

¹*Department of Informatics, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.*

Correspondence:

Ole Hanseth, Department of Informatics,
University of Oslo, PO Box 1080 Blindern,
Oslo N-0316, Norway.
Tel: +47-22-85-24-31;
Fax: +47-22-85-24-01;
E-mail: oleha@ifi.uio.no;
Url: www.ifi.uio.no/~oleha

European Journal of Information Systems
(2005) 14, 474–476.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.ejis.3000572

I first met Claudio in Oslo around 1980. Like so many others we met because of Kristen Nygaard. At this time Claudio spent some months at the University of Oslo as a visiting scholar doing research (together with Leslie Schneider) on the practical impacts of the ‘data agreements’ between the Norwegian trade unions and the employers’ association. At that time I was a masters student. I cannot remember that we talked to each other, but I remember his presence in the corridor – always very visible. Next time we met was 15 years later when Bo Dahlbom invited Claudio to Gothenburg to attend a seminar within a project I also was involved in. We met again a year later when Claudio was invited to spend the fall term in 1996 as Visiting Professor in Gothenburg.

Drift

During this stay Kristin Braa invited him to give a seminar in Oslo. Here he presented the main results from Groupware and Teamwork which had just been published. At the centre of his presentation was the concept of technological development as drift. I asked for a more careful definition of the concept. Claudio answered by saying that it meant ‘out of control’. This triggered a, partly rhetorical, follow-up question by commenting that technology-out-of-control was usually another term for technological determinism: was his concept of drifting deterministic and did he consider himself a technological determinist? How to understand technological development – how much control and how much drift? – had been at the centre of Claudio’s research up to that seminar and also at the centre of my interest. And this brief exchange of questions and answers was the starting point of a discussion continuing for more than 8 years. For a period we talked on the phone every day for about 1 h until less than 1 week before he died.

Loosely coupled co-drifting

Until we started collaborating Claudio and I had pretty different careers: He was an academic – I was a practitioner; he focused on social issues – I was developer/technician, etc. In spite of this fact, my interests overlapped with Claudio’s. While a master student I had followed Kristen Nygaard’s classes and had been convinced that software development was a social and political process just as much as it was a technical one. After graduating I started working at the Norwegian Computing Centre with the definition and implementation of programming languages as my main task. After some years my focus changed from compilers to the development of a broader range of tools supporting software development (that at the time were called ‘programming environments’). Developing such tools made it quite obvious that one had to understand what software development ‘really’ was – if it was social, and political as well as technical – what kind of support is ‘really’ needed? Kristen’s classes had triggered my curiosity relating to these issues, and when I came across some relevant and interesting stuff, I started reading it, trying to get a proper grasp of

Received: 27 September 2005
Revised: 28 September 2005
Accepted: 29 September 2005

these issues. Quite often such interesting stuff turned out to be written by Claudio.

A central theme was how software development work actually evolved and the problems with and limitations of structured methods. And if software development work does not evolve as anticipated by structured methods, how does it really happen? One source of literature was what could be called the critical software development literature. The second was the CSCW literature. The central theme here was the study of human collaborative work and how it could be supported by computer systems.

Claudio was an important person in both fields. Through a colleague I came across an early version of the formative context paper that was presented at and published in the proceedings from the IFIP 8.2 Working Conference on 'Systems Development for Human Progress' in Atlanta in 1987. First of all I found the case presented extremely illuminating. The case was the development of a new operating system by a major (at that time) European computer manufacturer. After some time management discovered that the project was delayed and overbudget. The paper then described a circular process where a more structured approach was decided on which again led to further delays, then the decision to go for an even more structured approach which led to even more delays and so on. Through the concept of formative context the paper explains the engineers' and managers' failures from drawing appropriate conclusions because of their narrow interpretation of what is happening and why. They are trapped by their belief in structured approaches. This explanation also made it easier to understand why it was so difficult to discuss the problem with these believers in structured approaches.

In this period, Claudio's research on transaction costs was also an important source that helped me with ideas about alternative models for understanding and organizing collaborative work.

During the 1980s both Claudio and myself started reading philosophy to get a proper understanding of the issues we were interested in. I think we both started with Heidegger. For my part, I continued reading Wittgenstein, Foucault, Feyerabend, etc. For me, the central issue was to understand the roles of rules and rule following – in software development, science, and other ordinary activities. Lucy Suchman's work on 'problems and procedures in the office work space' was important in that respect. This work brought me on a path that was different from Claudio's. Lucy's work drawing upon ethnomethodology made me curious. Among the works she referred to in this domain was Michael Lynch's ethnomethodological 'study of shop work and shop talk in a laboratory'. When reading this book I discovered I had entered a new field: Science Studies (which was about to change into Science and Technology Studies at that time). While reading this interesting stuff I was in 1988 (by accident) hired as consultant by Telenor's group on

'Telemedicine in Northern Norway' to help them work on standards for information exchange in health care. This was a new area for me. But it immediately appeared to be exciting, challenging and also pointing to what kind of practical and research-oriented issues would be important in the future. I joined a private company and worked on the development of standards and software for information exchange in health care until late 1992. I soon concluded that the development of networks for that kind of information exchange, including their standards, was what the future would be about. At the same time the approach taken by actors in this domain was the one dominating within telecommunication. And this approach was even more structured and narrowly technical than those within software development that we had been criticizing. So applying a critical software development/CSCW approach, founded on STS, to the analysis of work and information exchange in health care and the development of standards and networks supporting such information exchange appeared to be an interesting and highly relevant research agenda. This made me start writing research papers and which ended up as a thesis to be defended in Gothenburg in December 1996 with Claudio as a member of the committee. The main theme of the thesis was how information infrastructures and their standards resisted control and were outside the reach of structured approaches – how they were drifting. At this point Claudio and I had a good mix of shared and different knowledge and experiences for fruitful collaboration. We had a sufficiently shared background to be interested in more or less the same issues and to be able to communicate efficiently at the same time as our backgrounds were so different that each could add something to the other.

Tightly coupled co-drifting

Neither in Oslo nor in Gothenburg did we have any substantial discussion. But shortly after, when Claudio was back home in Italy, I received e-mails from him where he was telling me that he was reading my thesis more carefully than he had done before the defence, that he wanted to write a paper with me for a special issue of *IT & People* on Heidegger and IS, and that he wanted to collaborate on a project studying 'the dynamics of complex infrastructures in global organizations'.

This was shocking news. Of course, the possibility of collaborating with Claudio was just fantastic. But also frightening. But it turned out to be just fantastic. We started writing the paper on Gestell and infrastructures and, together with others, embarked on the case studies that led to the *From Control to Drift* book. We wrote some other papers and started yet another project along the same model, this time on the *Dual Risk of Integration* – influenced by Claudio also being affiliated with the CARR centre at LSE. This project will, hopefully, soon also lead to a book with the title *Risk, Complexity and ICT* to reflect the latest twists of our drifting research interests.

Our relationship was primarily professional. But we also soon became close friends. We spent much time on discussing issues related to our research. But we also spent just as much on preparing and enjoying food and wine, skiing in Norway, hiking in the Dolomites, attending concerts in Ferrara, etc.

It is obvious that Claudio has had huge influence on my research, but more than that: he has also had huge influence on my career as well as my whole life. But because our collaboration has been both broad and deep, it is very hard to point out exactly his influence. Our collaboration was all his initiative. When it all started it is quite obvious it had to be that way. A nobody like myself could never ask a star like Claudio if he would like to do some collaborative research with me. When we started collaborating it was on equal terms – at least after a short period. And it continued that way. That means that our collaboration was more defined around issues where Claudio assumed I could add something. And he also proposed various collaborative activities which I would have loved to do but didn't manage to. But, of course, I could not contribute in all areas of interest to Claudio. For instance, his late and very important work on moods and situatedness was done

without involving me at all, except for commenting on various drafts.

However, there are ways in which I can see that Claudio had huge influence. Most obvious he made my research much more visible in the international research community than what it otherwise would have been. He also made my academic life very enjoyable through our collaboration and formal and informal events he involved me in. And even if specific results cannot be pointed at, it is obvious that Claudio did have strong influence on my work through his intellectual capacity and strong personality. And I also believe that Claudio will have a substantial impact on my future work. Since he left us I have been thinking about one specific area where I will try to follow his lead: how to conceptualize important phenomena.

The main legacy of Claudio's research is the concepts he has spelled out for us: care, bricolage, drifting, hospitality, etc. This is also one way in which Claudio has been a really unique scholar. In my view, in the IS field there is a desperate need for conceptualization and theorizing. More of us should try to do similar things, and personally I see Claudio as a model I will try to replicate in this respect.

About the author

Ole Hanseth has worked at the Department of Informatics, University of Oslo since 1997, as Professor since 2000. He is also Visiting Professor at London School of

Economics. He work at the Norwegian Computing Centre from 1982 to 1997 except for 2 years (1990–1992) in the IT industry.