Claudio Ciborra: his life as a formative context

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I am pleased to be invited to join in this tribute to Claudio Ciborra, someone whose influence on me was early and continuous, while constantly developing new directions and insights. Our last meeting in person was at a conference I co-chaired for an IFIP Working Group in Ireland in 2004. I had insisted Claudio to come and give a panel. Indeed, I wanted him to be the keynote speaker. I actually had to demote him from my original keynote invitation to the panel chair owing to various disturbances between Claudio and other organizers. I wish I had not made that compromise. I always felt myself very close to him, I would have liked to say that our last event together was his keynote at my conference, and I was always surprised by what he had to say. Nonetheless, his presence was very notable. Indeed, we have it on video, and it plays back impeccably, even the more contentious parts. Claudio may have, sometimes, been carried away with feeling, but he never lost control of his diction.

The event itself was fraught with discontinuities and edgy diversity: It was held in a corporate campus behind the security entrance, so there was plenty of fuss about control. It combined people from the industry inexperienced with IFIP working groups, with academics, and it brought together a small tightly knit base community with both the industry environment and broader academic participation. I think this context is important to explain, because in the midst of all of this was Claudio as a friction and also a teacher. Even at the doctoral student panel, the afternoon before the conference, Claudio managed to get a rise out of a pretty steady set of known IS senior academics. There were two portions to his general arguments: one was a protest against seemingly all US-based research, and, in particular, those people who had disappointed him by going only halfway towards some intellectual standards he quite reasonably had. This part tended to be a little too personal. It may be that the U.S. academic community deserved some measure of chiding, but the targets were the very people who had done most to advance critical thinking in U.S. scholarship. The second part of the arguments had to do with bringing passion and compassion into the research. When Claudio interrupted John Leslie King's brilliant address on innovation at the edge of infrastructure (a keynote), he commented that John had dispassionately presented an event that needed an understanding of motives, to wit: the World Trade Centre bombing. The keynote and its ideas were indeed dramatic, and then Claudio's call to understand the motivation (mohteevayshion) of the actors was even more dramatic and daring. However, with a year gone by, and having seen the video replay of this critique, I realized that even in this somewhat outrageous (by conventional standards) commentary, Claudio left behind an important message: that we as academics have become too detached from our subject matter, and that without a full engagement we cannot understand anything. The panel he directed also was a call for deep context, advocacy and 'first, do no harm' for information systems (IS) research and applications.

I reviewed the video with the videographer, who was an outsider to the IS profession and to academia in general (we didn't succeed in boiling the

whole conference down into a rock video as hoped); and he had developed nicknames for people. He had footage of almost everything including breaks and events. Several shots showed Claudio with a very senior and a junior Italian colleague and a Greek colleague from LSE. This grouping was named 'the Family' by our videographer. (Please, no offence, it was so true as evident in the repeated takes of the same grouping.) Indeed this term enlightened me immediately about a terrible *faux pas* I had committed when I invited Claudio to a speaker's dinner in front of the senior colleague, without addressing them both at once, but rather addressing the senior colleague as an afterthought. This got me a cold stare from Claudio, a polite refusal and a realization that I had violated Claudio's deep sense of Italian courtesy. Since I, too, have a Latin background, I felt this as a real failing, so caught up with my self-important organizer role that I neglected the basic old world sense of respect.

So, I have, in addition to the lifetime legacy of concepts of bricolage, formative contexts, IS as organic 'drift' and pasted-up technology work and self-reflecting strategic IS, the strong recollection of the need for passion, compassion and courtesy above all other roles. (Was Claudio courteous to everyone all the time? No. But is there a place where courtesy is obligatory in the underlying social system? Yes.)

In terms of the particular contributions of Claudio as a scholar and person, nothing is more eloquent than the testimonials posted on the LSE website dedicated to his memory, which comprised at my last reading 13 web pages of heartfelt and candid tributes. Reading them I found myself envious that I had not been always at his side, that I had fewer vacations and drinks and home stays than others. And I thought I knew him so well! No, hundreds of people were 'close' to him in intellectual and personal ways. But like others, I was extremely fond of him. We always took some time to talk or have dinner at conferences. He visited my house in Palo Alto (so cluttered and hovel-like in comparison with his own elegant surroundings). We listened to Men at Work sing 'The Land Down Under'; we shopped together at Neiman Marcus. Hanging out with Claudio was such a pleasure; I only wish it could have been all the time.

I can say that his influence on me, my thinking and my career was equal to that of anyone, including his fortunate graduate students. I came into what is now the IS arena through a pure bricolage. I undertook a hermeneutical study of work group information contextualization as revealed in discourse, for my U.C. Berkeley doctoral dissertation. This approach was unheard of in the 1976–1980 time frame when I sat among the brilliant computer scientists at Xerox PARC. The outcome was duly ignored in the United States. The dissertation was never put on file at the PARC library. It was, however, taken to Scandinavia by a visiting scholar, who requested five copies.

Three years later, at another job, I received an invitation from Claudio to attend an IFIP 9.1 conference at Riva del Sole, Italy in 1982. I don't know how Claudio found the dissertation, whether through Kristin Nygaard or through UCLA, where he was visiting. At the time, I was unaware that my dissertation was even being read in Europe but Claudio recognized the fact that I had applied phenomenology and specifically Heideggerian phenomenology to a practical problem of understanding clerical work and its situated, problem-solving, pasted-up nature. I did not have a paper to present at the conference but Claudio had arranged that the conference would pay my way. After a longish journey by air and rail, and having slept through the day, I arrived at the conference reception. Inside the door were Kristen Nygaard and some other people from Oslo University and Aarhus University. I introduced myself and everyone seemed to know of me already. This was a Cinderella moment.

By the time I arrived at the conference, it was my birthday, and, after many years of diminishing hopes, it happens I was also pregnant. This was one of the high points of my life, a moment of emergence. Claudio situated me into a friendly community of scholars that developed my sense of worth and my career. I still have the notebook he gave me for my birthday hanging in my office – no notes in it, but a very New Wave and still trendy cover. Claudio helped me by recognizing what I was trying to do in my work, and at that point I think were early seekers in the same field of hermeneutic IS. I have cited him since in every paper. He provided me other opportunities, notably the chapter in his book on groupware.

In addition to the seminal thoughts he carried forward about transaction costs, the formative context that stays with me constantly in my work for a large corporation's information technology group involves the concepts of bricolage (which I see all around me as constitutive), and the key thinking about strategic IS strategy as a self-reflective activity. I have aggressively pursued this line of thinking in a recent work we did to assess Intel's own strategic needs to support global networks of collaboration.

By looking into ourselves, our own collective situation, analyzing the elements of 'how virtual we are', we discovered there was a lot we had sensed but didn't 'know' about our company. I conducted a quantitative study that had results both surprising in metrics and myth-shattering in conclusions. We will be building collaboration environments based on those and other research.

I expect to be operating for many more years from the strategic framework I learned from Claudio, not just for research but for action. This action as well reflects the matter of the 'heart' that so preoccupied him in the last years. By supplying a lightweight infrastructure for self-organizing global engineering communication networks, we feel we can lift the hearts and collectively engage the minds of our talented people who have been bricolaging away, sometimes in the semi-dark. We need those supports even more in a distributed workforce. So, the work goes on. Intel will be the better for Claudio Ciborra, in the right and passionate sense.

About the author

Eleanor Wynn received a Ph.D. in Linguistic Anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley. As a graduate student at Xerox PARC, she wrote a conversation analysis of clerical work which fit into the early studies of work practice in Scandinavia. Since then she has continually worked across the industry/academic boundary and presently works at Intel Corporation on social networks and innovation in distributed software engineering groups. She is the co-editor of *Information Technology & People*.