

# Example Assignment: Cognitive Diary

To help you calibrate for peer review.

August 23, 2015

## **1 OBSERVATIONS ON ORDERING FROM A MENU**

Sitting at a table in the restaurant, I turned my attention to the menu in front of me, picked it up, and opened it to the first page. I started perusing the first page and then proceeded to each successive page, taking note of the highlighted section labels that indicated the categories of dishes offered until I reached the end of the menu. I turned my attention to each of the other three diners in my party in turn and asked what they were considering ordering. The activity of sharing our preferences became a momentary activity configuration among the four of us. Each diner gave their response and I then focused on a particular section of the menu that contained the pasta dishes. I focused on pasta dishes containing seafood and other ingredients that I judged would pair well with the wine a friend had ordered. This is a complex judgment and I have little insight into how I do it. I concluded my examination of the dishes in the pasta section that met these criteria and then decided on the garlic pasta with prawns. Lastly, I closed the menu and returned it to the table in front of me.

## 2 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF OBSERVABLE PHENOMENA

Navigating through physical, social, and conceptual space (Hutchins, 1995) enabled me to arrive in the position of being a diner sitting at a table in a restaurant with a menu in front of me. In this case, the arena of the restaurant has a set of common restricted activities associated with it, but in relationship to my goals and actions it becomes a particular setting where I am a diner and the restaurant serves the specific function of providing me with a service relative to my experiences (Lave). This setting not only makes possible the activities I will engage in within the environment, but my activities within this environment will also generate and augment the setting itself (opening the menu makes this a different setting, for example).

Opening the menu and flipping through the pages are epistemic actions that give me access to information that was previously hidden (Kirsh, Maglio 1994). I did not set out to remember anything in particular, but I must have remembered that one of the sections of the menu contained pasta dishes. One can imagine how frustrating it would be for both the diner and the waiter if one tried to order item after item that was not present on the menu. The cognitive value of reading the menu is that it provides an easy way for me to constrain my behavior such that what I do is appropriate in the setting. The fact that there are many alternative dishes presents me with the cognitive problem of deciding what to order. The actions that followed my initial examination of the menu represent a dialectical approach of resolving the conflict between the target solution of ordering and receiving only a single dish from the menu. Asking what the other guests in my party were going to order, as well as focusing my attention on only a particular subset of dishes with certain ingredients are all forms of gap-closing problem solving that aid in this dialectical approach (Lave et al 1984). The highlighted category labels in the menu facilitated locating the PASTA DISHES section. There are also elements of memory involved when I get to a certain stage in examining my choices. It is beneficial to me if I can recall if I have had a particular food before and what my experience of that dish was. Such memories help me make decisions without having to actually try each dish in succession to know if I will like it or not. Once this decision had been made, I closed the menu as a way to manage my attention, as well as a non-verbal signal to the waiter

that I was ready to order.

In the end, I am inclined to believe that some personal preference played a large role in my decision of what to order, but many of the processes that lead to arriving at this final decision are hidden from me. Nonetheless, the other tactics employed by me within the setting provided a reliable means for greatly narrowing my options and deciding on a single dish. And they must have worked because the meal was delicious.

### **3 WORKS CITED**

Hutchins, E. (1996) *Cognition In The Wild*. Cambridge, London, MIT press.

Kirsh, D., & Maglio, P (1994) On Distinguishing Epistemic from Pragmatic Action. *Cognitive Science: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 4: pages 513-549

Jean Lave, Michael Murtaugh & Olivia e la Rocha (1984), "The Dialectic of Arithmetic in Grocery Shopping," *Everyday Cognition*. Harvard University Press, pp. 67-94.