Reflections on the process of observation…

This is a brief memo reflecting on my birth as an ethnographic researcher. Most of these are conscious thought that could not be recorded as comments in the observation because of the wisdom I have gained in hindsight. I divided experience into goals that had a checklist:

I. Make contact while being respectful and accommodating
II. Get there, and don’t stick out
III. Observe. Present.
IV. Reflect.

I. Make contact. Be respectful and accommodating.

In learning how to establish a rapport for introducing yourself to a site, it was stressed that we accommodate the site moreso than the site accommodating us. This should not cause any issue of contention since I think my nature is to be naturally accommodating, but with respect of time and deadlines of authority figures, balancing four schedules and a normal school day seemed a little more of a challenge than it might have otherwise been. We, as a group (I think), were anxious about getting into the school to observe. I don’t know if it is natural to wish ‘they would just do what we want and avail themselves to us,’ whether or not you act on those feelings or not. I placed myself on serious reprimand for those thoughts, and the group had tons of emails to perfectly align people so we could get in when we could. If I remember correctly, two group members would meet at some corner on campus, and another
group member was going to run out of class and jump into the moving car to get there by the teacher’s requested time. I was driving to the site from interview with no margin of tardiness. I realize this is part of the game that we play, but is this type of activity and researcher feeling documented anywhere? I have read only a few articles and not many field notes, but are these things documented anywhere? Is it ever questioned if these types of hoops influence subjectivity or lenses that observers have? I got there, but I got lost on the way, so I was in debate about how my late entrance into the classroom might disturb the order and the wallflower effect that the other group members might have established. Should I go in late or do I go on another day? Can I call one of my group members to see what they think? This was a large debate in my car driving around in East Palo Alto.

II. Get there. Don’t stick out.

Finally, I found the school, and decided to risk the disruption because if I went alone, I would have nothing to compare my observations to by way of a debrief. That would not be provide a robust description. Now that I have arrived at the school I must make myself not look like an outsider. Since I have come from an interview, I am in a suit. I change clothes in the car, but I am still not sure how to blend in as an adult. I almost wish that I had come to the school earlier to do some ‘scoping research,’ research where I would just go over and check out the scene, and see if the environment is formal and they wear uniforms or if it is casual. I guess I could have done that, but it was not required. (Maybe it was.) I still am not sure that I will not stick out and if the teacher has mentioned our presence to the class. Maybe I will look like a parent. I’m just nervous. I found the school office and they directed me to
the classroom. There was a chair waiting for me and nobody really paid me any attention. Maybe that is because I missed the awkward stare period I imagined. I try not to make noise as I get set up.

III. Observe. Everything.

As I decide how to set up my field notes, I look around the classroom and try to catch up on what is happening since talking to my other group members will break the “Do Not Disturb” rule. One of my goals as an observer is to do a Geertz “thick description” so I do not project my thoughts on the context. I draw sketches of the classroom and certain bulletin boards that I think will help me identify the students. The effort to do this type of documentation that will help me fill in holes later is taking away from the attention on observation of movements, interactions, and conversations. I come up with a label convention on site that I did not have before and wonder if I can maintain it through my notes since I just conceived it. You will see from the field notes, the convention changes with classroom changes. I really admit that there is some preparation work that should have been done that I did not respect to the extent that I should have, and this was a lesson that I have learned the hard way. In presentation, I retyped the field notes as best I could, and noted comments. I included diagrams because that is how I constructed the context in my mind.

IV. Reflect

Right after the observation, I had lecture that focused on identifying subjective lenses that I have as a researcher. I identified the Teacher, where I just wanted to run around and interact with the students and note classroom practices. I also identified the
Cheerleader, who always wants to encourage boys because of my familial involvement with male development activities. I am aware of more subjective I’s that I have, but I don’t think they directly relate to this topic of research. The two I identified might influence my analysis of the interview and conclusions about how I distribute causal links to findings. I do not yet know how, but the timing of the lecture is perfect to assist me in being cognizant of everything I should from the beginning of the process.