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Teaching Theory Anthropologically, Close to the Ground

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The teaching of anthropology often focuses on research methods. This is not surprising, for fieldwork is the most romantic aspect of the discipline but also quite challenging to learn. At my institution, a medium-sized liberal arts college in the American Middle West, anthropology students do indeed learn about research methods and undertake hands-on ethnographic projects. Not surprisingly, this course is one of the highlights of the major. Yet surveys of our majors also show that another, perhaps more homely course, anthropological theory, equally entrances them. Here I would like to reflect on why that might be the case, in search of insights both into the teaching of anthropology and of the place of theory in the discipline.

A course on anthropological theory raises questions on the status of the discipline. We might do well to ask how much 'anthropology' exists as a coherent thing, with a standard list of theoretical referents that every practitioner need be versed in. 'The Study of Man' has always been an ambitious undertaking, from biology and archaeology to language and culture. Just to take the last of these 'subfields,' cultural anthropology has lost its home in the exotic and has leaked into other domains of research and new intellectual discussions. Cornell anthropologist James Siegel once remarked that

> One asks anthropologists what students today must read in order to become anthropologists. They can always answer. But in ten years, their answers change. It is because ethnography is directed at doing away with books. Only by being there; only by hearing and by seeing can one find something one is not sure one is looking for. The aim of ethnography is commemorative but it is also to make previous books useless (1995:93).

Ethnography, both as a research methodology and a mode of writing, seems complexly vital to the discipline. What then are we to make of the status of theory in anthropology, a discipline that is apparently ever ready to do away with its past?

When I begin my course on Anthropological Theory, the initial question that I ask students, a basic anthropological question, is 'what is theory?' My interest is not to have them come up with a neat operational definition, but rather to have them start the semester by questioning the very premise of the course. Doing so helps them explore how anthropologists reason. Many anthropologists have written important statements about the place of theory in the field. In fact, I frequently get anthropological theory texts sent to me by publishers. They are nearly always solid books, full of excerpts of classic anthropological works, written by prominent people and organized in a logical chronological fashion (for example McGee and Warms, 2011; Moore 2012). Some range up to 600 pages in length. I myself learned from one of them in graduate school, the appropriately named *High Points In Anthropology*. Though I use these texts as references and marvel at their comprehensiveness, I could never imagine teaching them to undergraduates. Or perhaps I should say I could never imagine using them with *my* undergraduates, mostly sophomores who are new to many many things. For them, anthropology is emergent, a bit like a coat they are warily trying on for fit. Some of them might put on the discipline's formal attire later, but I don't sense a rush for them to do so earlier than necessary.

This essay is an opportunity to ask questions about how we teach anthropology, in particular how we teach undergraduates about the kinds of theories that anthropologists use. It is a playful attempt to see how the discipline plays with ideas and how we encourage young people to join us in the venture. I will give up a bit of my conclusion in advance, and admit that I want students to come to see that anthropological theory is a bit of an oxymoron, for anthropologists hesitate to bracket 'theory' from other parts of the discipline, like say 'research

methods' or 'data analysis.' Rather, I want them to consider anthropological theory as more of a style or a disposition, as John Law puts it 'a way of being in the world' (2004:10). And my impossibly lofty aim for the course is for them to forget what it was like to think and see the world before they took to studying anthropology…

But what could be more abstract than that? Undergraduates, and especially my (mostly) American undergraduates, tend to be wary of abstraction. When they sign up for their required theory course, that is what they fear they will run into. They fear the course will be their worst stereotype of philosophy, one with little of the immediacy and relevance that attracted them to declare anthropology (and not philosophy) as their major. So that is one of the constraints I face as I gingerly pass out the syllabus. To deal with these constraints, I seek alternative, more tangible metaphors of what I would argue theory is and what it can do for a 19 year old. One of my favorites is stolen from Clifford Geertz, whose 1973 manifesto on 'The Interpretation of Cultures' remains full of sharp insights. Geertz argues for

> the need for theory to stay rather closer to the ground than tends to be the case in sciences more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction. Only short flights of ratiocination tend to be effective in anthropology; longer ones tend to drift off into logical dreams, academic bemusements with formal symmetry (24).

Though I strive in the classroom for as much academic bemusement as possible, I like this image of remaining 'close to the ground.' Anthropology is an empirical discipline, after all. Thus this essay will also stay close to actual practice, and talk about anthropological theory as it is embodied in a classroom in rural Minnesota. I will talk about the readings I use, the syllabus I designed to organize those texts, the assignments I give students, and of course the concepts that we work through. By doing so I want my reader to imagine his or her students, wrestling with anthropology and theory in their own context. Perhaps then we might refine the discipline and our own pedagogical practice by sharing our sense of how to go about teaching this wonderfully messy aspect of anthropology.

In my search for good metaphors to describe theory, I was fortunate to find a book called *The Theory Toolbox* (2012). The book is perhaps an odd choice for an anthropology course, because it is written from a humanities perspective. The authors, both of whom teach literature, work through terms like 'author' and 'reader,' as well as airy concepts like 'subjectivity' and 'ideology.' These terms can be dry as dust, but the authors engage their undergraduate readers through illustrations drawn from popular media, and by writing in an informal manner. Students sometimes find the references to be dated (Beavis & Butthead?) and the banter off-putting (a danger when old people attempt to *connect*). Nevertheless, the book effectively communicates powerful ideas. Without knowing it, students get drawn into the world of characters like Foucault and Althusser. In fact one of the key concepts comes from the book's title. The authors argue, 'To paraphrase philosopher Gilles Deleuze, we're interested in theory as a toolbox of questions and concepts to be built and experimentally deployed rather than as a menu of methods to be chosen and mechanically applied' (8). They further describe theory as an 'angle of intervention' (7) and even more promisingly as a pledge to always be suspicious (6). Young people like the idea of being suspicious. It's a hermeneutic they practice often. This is what I am after when I encourage students to think of anthropological theory as a style of inquiry rather than a list of names to recognize.

Being good suspicious young people, my students need more. They press me to tell them what theory in fact *is*. So one of the anthropological ways to do this is to emphasize what anthropological theory is *not*. It helps that the anthropology program where I teach is a joint department with sociology. That gives me a handy foil for comparison, which is with our required course in sociological theory. My sociology colleagues give students a solid grounding in their discipline, one of course closely related to anthropology. At our institution sociological theory tends to be taught historically, sometimes stepping as far back as Ibn Khaldun. The syllabus features such luminaries as Marx, Weber, Simmel, Durkheim, Meade and the like. The historical chronology and the great names in the field are two modes of structure, while the third is the named theories: such concepts as structural functionalism, the looking glass self, and symbolic interactionism. This course structure is highly valuable to students and I am grateful that they have access to the concepts. The course also fits the history of sociology as a discipline, one that tends to be, as Benedict Anderson puts it, well at home in the bureaucratic state (1990:89). Sociological theory is perhaps more of a stable 'thing' than its unruly sibling.

A crucial issue for student learning anything is the 'framework problem.' Those experienced in a field of knowledge know how to make sense of new information in a way that novices don't, because they know how

and where to place it. One of the ways that I address this problem in teaching anthropological theory is through a very detailed syllabus (mine is 14 pages long). My inspiration for doing so came from a writing workshop I attended several years ago. One of the presenters argued that we too often assume our students know why we want them to do what we have planned for them. But students only rarely know our aims, so I include in my syllabus such things as a preview to each reading, an explanation for how the assignments fit together, and some thoughts on why I am excited to teach the course and what I hope they will learn from it. Such a syllabus serves several latent functions. It tells students that their instructor is prepared for the semester, and that they should be prepared for a well-integrated experience (not everything need be a mess!). The emphasis is on excitement rather than punishment, for I like to focus more on what they will be able to do rather than on the penalties they will pay for potential crimes against the course. This suggests that our class is more an exercise in intellectual play than a requirement to be endured. It sets a tone that I hope to extend throughout the semester.

In comparison to sociology, my syllabus is not organized in a chronology, nor are exemplary figures emphasized. Instead I begin with a series of concepts like 'disorientation' and 'space' and 'time' and 'language.' I take as my inspiration (and use as a text) a lovely book by anthropologist Carole Delaney (2011). What is so delightful about Delaney's text is that she wrote it organically, from her experience teaching an introductory anthropology course at Stanford University. The course asks students to enter the discipline not through such standard textbook fare as 'bands, tribes, chiefdoms and states' or 'religion and kinship' but rather through critical reflection on their life as students. This turns the framework problem into an asset, given that young people are new to the oddities of academia as well as the eccentricities of their 'home' institution. Perhaps due to the caliber of students Delaney teaches, her book is not written in the gaudy style of many textbooks, replete as they are with bold-faced terms and attention-grabbing color. Delaney is mindful of her students but challenges them to take in sophisticated anthropological concepts and ethnographic examples. Many students who thought they had previously been introduced to anthropology find they learn a lot in *Investigating Culture*.

I also strive to show students these ideas in use, by assigning articles from leading journals like *Cultural Anthropology* and *American Ethnologist*. For example I pair Delaney's chapter on space with a piece by Lorna Rhodes on conversation in maximum-security prisons (2005). I have used a famous article Jose Limon on barbecue and class structure in South Texas to explore ideas of authorship and meaning (1989), and an essay by Greta Schull on machine gambling in Las Vegas to think about embodiment (2013). Such essays show the concepts that Delaney describes, while also revealing to students the breadth of anthropological puzzles and research settings (not only the tropical islands they expected). They also allow us to look at the ways that anthropological knowledge is communicated in professional spheres and how academic authority gets cultivated amongst practitioners.

Ideally this early foray into anthropology's capacity to disorient makes students uncertain what they gain in a class on anthropological theory. But any novice anthropologist should learn to become comfortable getting lost. Indeed I want students to question their grasp of how language communicates, and how kinship systems structure relations, as well as how meaning gets embedded in humble places like a professor's clothing and their cafeteria's food (I have been known to wear my academic regalia to class for them to puzzle over). As anthropology ideally does, such a process pushes students to wonder about their surroundings and the categories that conventionally organize and explain them. The poet Mary Oliver put it well (and I put it on the top of my syllabus): 'To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work' (1994:8).

Students begin to see that this process of disorientation and attentiveness is the start of anthropological analysis. If there is any phrase that my undergraduates take away from the course, it is that anthropology makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange (they charmingly think I coined that saying). Students learn that culture is like a language, a domain intimately familiar (the mother tongue) and yet profoundly strange (the foreign idiom). One of the best ways to explore this rendering of the culture concept is through a rudimentary analysis of language. 'Culture is like a language' is a good heuristic, and as Edward Hall rather mysteriously put it, culture is a language that communicates through silence (1973). Therefore we spend considerable time exploring how silence communicates. For a literal sense of this, we read Keith Basso's sharp 1970 essay on 'Silence Amongst the Apache.' Basso's analysis of 1960s Apache language practices argues that refraining from speech indexes uncertain social situations and proper respect for relationships. In a more metaphorical sense of silence, we read A.L. Becker's powerful essay 'Silences Across Languages' (1992). Becker introduces the important role of memory in communication, forming what he calls the 'prior text.' He claims every speech act echoes some kind of prior text. For example if one has never encountered the phrase 'seek and ye shall find' in English, they will not recognize it as an adage in the language. Becker argues that language is always a complex combination of the

novel and the familiar, a dynamic act of languaging rather than the iteration of a fixed code. This detour into silence helps students see that culture is a process, not a thing, and that one has to also listen for what is not being said. In such a manner we constantly make and remake culture together.

If anthropology's big idea is the culture concept, language is of course only one way to exemplify it. Another word that does fine work in teaching anthropological theory is 'ideology.' Nealon and Giroux's book defines as 'what you think before you think and act' (99). To show the power of this claim, one of the exercises we do in class is to list together our sense of St. Olaf ideology. Students come up with a set of statements that reflects our institution's mission, such things as the beauty of the liberal arts, the value of international travel, and the importance of sustainability. We then turn this around and reflect on how difficult it is to think the opposite of such things. I have students practice saying, 'international travel dulls the mind' and 'nothing beats not recycling.' Ideology pushes us to certain kinds of public claims and not others (though of course many Americans are wary of international travel and consume vast quantities of the earth's bounty). Each semester a particularly sharp student will note that those things that are truly ideological are less accessible than we are suggesting. 'Deep ideology' is (nearly!) impossible to think, for example creating a bonfire of $20 bills on the commons or coming to class naked. Such exercises offer a glimmer of how cultural dynamics shape our sense of the possible.

During this initial period of estrangement, it is also helpful for theory students to be estranged a bit from anthropology. It is contrary to my purposes to teach the history of the discipline, but our readings hint at anthropology's past. I assign Jeremy MacClancy's introductory essay to his volume *Exotic No More* (2002), which shows students what Michel Rolph Trouillot meant by anthropology occupying the 'savage slot' (1991). We discuss the term 'exotic' and the idea of 'studying up.' We even question whether a discipline that was in fact 'exotic no more' would need to make such a claim in a book title. I pair MacClancy with an obscure essay from 1937 by Alexander Goldenweiser titled 'How Anthropologists Work.' Students are surprised that Goldenweiser readily uses terms like 'primitive' and 'White Man' and states that the good ethnographer has the natives 'fall in love' with him (55). A few weeks later anthropology's colonial origins come up again when students read Evans Pritchard's 'Introductory' from *The Nuer* (1940). The students puzzle over E-P's insistence that Africans carry his luggage and grimace at his harsh descriptions of Nuer intransigence. Their outrage grows as we discuss what it meant to do ethnographic research on the subject of political structures in the midst of a colonial war. Full of righteous indignation at anthropology's sordid past, students are encouraged to wonder how this arrogant White Man wrote such powerful, lasting anthropological work. Recognizing and accounting for difference has always had, they learn, a complicated politics.

Though I don't focus my course on 'big names,' the students feel gratified each time they come across a reference to Evans-Pritchard and feel like they have gained a bit of anthropology's 'prior text.' What they once passed over in silence now communicates. Another name we frequently encounter in our readings is Clifford Geertz. To explain his contribution to anthropology a bit more, I have students read his seminal essay on thick description. Though they uniformly dislike the essay and plead that they learn little from it, I counter that Geertz's name comes up everywhere in American anthropology (their protests reaffirm my conviction that 19 year old anthropology majors have little stomach for capital T theory, or for that matter the meandering essayist). To help them grasp a bit more of Geertz's angle of intervention and place his persona and work in anthropology's development, I have students read Shelly Errington's eulogy for Geertz (2007). She in fact does a thick description of Geertz's life, showing us the webs of significance in which he worked (and helped spin). Like our readings of Goldenweiser and Evans-Pritchard, students see that anthropology texts are written by human beings in particular social / historical contexts. Their writings are attempts to move the discipline forward, but are also cultural documents open to our critique. Why did Geertz write the way he did in 1973? What was he working toward, and what was he working against? Pay attention!

Those are questions we keep asking and a style we aim to cultivate. Like the big names that do in fact creep into my syllabus, periodicity emerges even though I resist a chronological format. Appropriately enough this comes up most acutely when we discuss the relationship between anthropology and history. If my formal disciplinary sibling at St. Olaf is sociology, the secret sharer of my anthropological training was history. I went to graduate school at the University of Michigan at the moment when the interdisciplinary program in anthropology and history was launched there. One of the sacred texts we shared in Ann Arbor, and that I still assign, is Bernard Cohn's cheeky 1980 essay on anthropologyland and historyland. Through Cohn's joyful skewering of academic pretension, he shows students the academic politics that have shaped the American disciplines. He looks too at the philosophical position of anthropology and history. He argues that just as history studies difference across

time, anthropology studies difference across space. Though his intellectual projects might be similar, Cohn sees the disciplines working quite differently. He claims that historians have been too resistant to theoretical developments, while anthropologists have too eagerly embraced intellectual fads. Cohn concludes (presciently) that the two disciplines could fruitfully destabilize each other in combination, creating a more anthropological history and a more historical anthropology. We discuss what it means for anthropologists to dig into archives, and to think of cultural forms unfolding over time.

From Cohn's polemic that complicates the concept of history, we also strive to complicate the culture concept. The historical turn, the rise of feminist perspectives, and the post-colonial critique are all a lot to narrate, but sketching them out for theory students explains the shape of our department's other offerings. Students see how biopower fits into medical anthropology, how Orientalism is integral to their course on Islamic feminisms, and how embodiment underpins the critique made in their gender course. One could spend a lot of time in an anthropological theory course studying Foucault or Said, but I think it is more important for undergraduates to see how such figures fit into the arc of anthropology's contemporary configuration. Theory 'close to the ground' connects big ideas in the discipline to empirical moments, to time and place and politics. To better understand Said in this way, I have students read a series of essays he wrote right after 9/11 (2001, 2002). They glimpse the high stakes of his critique of Orientalism and the power of writing in a polemical fashion. Foucault's moment is a bit more distant from the American context, but I have them read interviews with him and essays inspired by his concepts and sensibility. One in particular, Valentine Daniel's on refugee discourse, shows Foucauldian tools at work on a vexing, but highly immediate public issue (2002).

There are other ways my course strives to be 'close to the ground.' I have students do a lot of writing, both formal essays and informal journal entries. The formal essays emphasize writing from evidence, which is the practice of professional anthropologists. American students find this style of writing to be a challenge, so I encourage them to read our class assignments both for content and for form. I especially highlight the magic phrase in anthropological writing, 'for example.' 'For example' is the anthropologist's way of saying that abstraction is necessary for complex thought, but it needs to tied to an empirical instance. For example, it is intriguing to claim that time is a human invention. But it is even more powerful to cite Evans-Pritchard's analysis of Nuer task-orientation. One could take this example of anthropological writing one step further, and say that anthropological theory hinges on constant reference to the ethnographic record. Once students grasp the importance of 'for example' they come to giggle at its ubiquity in the texts that we read. Slowly they figure out how to include it in their own anthropological writing. As Becker claims in his essay, 'language intimidates until, like Dorothy with the Wizard, you find out how it all works' (118).

The informal writing I have students do is written by hand in journals. It has become awkward for American students to write in such a manner, but the cartoonist Lynda Barry advocates the practice of handwriting as an important mode of human expression, distinct from digitally processed words (2014). Writing by hand keeps theory grounded by allowing students to write 'in the field.' I have had students write for me on the bus, in a bar, and in a wide range of settings outdoors. Since my course is offered fall semester, we start out the journals with a reflection on the events of September 11. For 13 years I have had students write about where they were on that date and how those events have shaped them. I get entries on their budding understanding of vulnerability, on racial and religious difference, on violence and U.S. foreign policy, on naiveté and the loss of innocence. I am especially taken by how much they remember, 'reading' these events through different levels of mediation, the news of course, but more importantly by analyzing the facial expressions and bodily movements of their parents and their teachers. Our conversations about these responses show us the high stakes of a course on anthropological theory and the importance of working to recognize how our historical moment shapes how we study anthropology.

We also think of a more immediate context, that of the campus where our course is located. To do this I also have students write in their journals about their mundane experiences as seen in an anthropological perspective. When we read about space I have students analyze a particular space on campus, when we do our readings on food I have them analyze how a meal is composed in our cafeteria. Our unit on clothing of course includes a chance to write on the syntax of a favorite outfit. I ask them to detail the kinship structure of their family, the practice of the Thanksgiving holiday, the mood-altering substance scene on campus, and the politics of inclusion and exclusion of the college's annual mega-event, the Christmas Festival. While I rigorously evaluate their formal writing, such informal writing and tentative attempts at using our theory tools allows for experiment with concepts outside of the evaluative gaze. If anthropological theory is a toolbox and a style of inhabiting the world, it is important to use the tools and practice the style as frequently and freely as possible.

The last third of the course is a sustained investigation of anthropological tools in use. Since most of the readings are a mixture of articles and book chapters, by the month of November students begin to itch for an extended reading. If ethnography is the heart of anthropology, I include at least one full-length monograph that allows students to see how skillful anthropologists craft an analysis. I have used several different titles in this role, but the most effective has been Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009). Students are attracted to the book because the subject matter (drugs and homelessness) grabs their attention. But the book also sustains their interest because it is meticulously researched and beautifully written. Most importantly for my purposes, the book shows the use of nearly every concept we have discussed in class. The authors wrestle with concepts that include embodiment, the social construction of race, spatial and temporal dynamics, kinship, biopower and habitus, as well as the politics of representation and the workings of discourse.

Schonberg and Bourgois end their book with a series of policy prescriptions that shows their commitment to using anthropological ideas as public anthropology. In my years teaching anthropological theory, I have heard a familiar lament from my undergraduates: 'this is all fine and good,' they say, 'but who cares?' My initial response to such typically American claims for relevance is to resist them. 'This is a theory course!' I snort, and in a more measured voice add that getting lost in the world of ideas is a way to stretch one's intellectual capacity. I sometimes foolishly try convincing students that solving an intricate puzzle is its own reward. Even with all of my earnest work to keep the course 'close to the ground,' I know from reading their journals and from discussions during office hours that my ground and their ground are often quite separate. So as we work our way through *Righteous Dopefiend*, the exhales I hear from students are ones of relief. Finally, they say, something real, something that matters to the world. The pragmatism of American undergraduates runs deep. I don't aim to either nourish it or unduly frustrate it.

Such issues are not just framework problems, but also questions of learning stage. In the 1930s the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky coined the idea of a 'zone of proximal development' (1978). The concept questions the teaching of a concept before a student is ready to learn it. It also acknowledges the difficulty of introducing students to a discipline, a heritage of thought and practice: the 'process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them' (1978:88). Rigorous abstract thinking is a challenging habit to cultivate, especially in the ever-pragmatic American context. One of my favorite final assignments of the course is to have students create an annotated list of things that they learned in the course. I have them divide their list into categories, including things they learned about anthropology, things they learned about theory, and things they learned about themselves as students. I like them to switch at the end of the term to 'synthesis mode' and consolidate some of their learning. I am heartened at what they take away, but also reminded of the difficulties they encounter. For example, no matter how much we read and discuss, the proper position of the ethnographer can puzzle students. Should the ethnographer aim for scientific objectivity? Activism? What responsibilities does an ethnographer have to a community, to a research question, to the dissemination of findings? Given anthropology's distance from other disciplinary practices on these questions (and the arguments about them within the discipline), it is not surprising that handles prove elusive to grip.

Vygotsky's idea of proximity is akin to that of William G. Perry's schema on the cognitive development of college students (1968). Perry emphasizes that education 'must take forms that are generally relevant to the student's construal of the world, and of himself in it, at different points in his growth' (1968:214-5). He based his ideas on empirical research and they have helped me better understand the experience of my students in their undergraduate journey. As a good anthropologist I am of course hesitant to be too schematic about such things, for students come to my class with a vast range of life experiences, ones that can help or hinder their ability to engage with anthropological insights. But such theories of learning can help us better fit our pedagogical approach to the intellectual and developmental zone that our students inhabit. We all can then figure out our own relationship to the question of catering to their needs (that which is fun!) and challenging them to go beyond the familiar (that which is fulfilling!).

I am not sure how you will react to this perhaps overly idiosyncratic take on teaching anthropological theory. As I have argued, this structure works for me and for my style of teaching, at my institution, and with the kind of students who elect sociology / anthropology as their undergraduate major. It is also deeply American, both for its take on the discipline and for the peculiar mode of liberal arts instruction. Close to the ground, we all teach anthropology in ways that fit our cultural and institutional context. I can only imagine how anthropological theory looks at a British polytechnic or a South African university. Is it even a viable category? I will simply conclude that such imaginings are one of the things I like so much about teaching anthropology.

Microeconomics or calculus is likely taught much the same way everywhere. Even sociological theory has a familiar arc to it. But anthropological theory remains a domain of creative tension, a mode not yet routinized into a 'thing' with a standard iteration. May these musings encourage continued variability and messiness.

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