



Learning anthropology in transitory spaces: uncertain knowledge in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the pedagogical nuances of student self-reflective feedback,¹ as it highlights the importance of acknowledging 1st year students' uncertainty when approaching anthropological terminology for the first time. I attempt to explore the conceptual impact of the broad discipline of anthropology's conceptual terminology on 1st year students. In later sections of this paper, the notions of "experimental knowledge" and "knowledge appropriation" will be developed further and illustrated with examples extracted from focus groups and observations conducted as part of this research. The outcomes of this research suggest that current un-problematised uses of speculative concepts, such as "culture" and "indigenous" negatively impact the discipline's image inside and outside the class. However, these concepts pose numerous opportunities for highlighting their frictions and uncertain natures as thresholds where knowledge is produced and re-produced. Unfortunately, curricula are often designed with standardised assessments in mind; this predisposes students towards a certain body of knowledge required to meet the demands of these assessments. Yet, how do students conceptualise such disconnections between curricula and daily experiences? This paper seeks to combine the fields of education theory, critical pedagogy and linguistic anthropological analysis to approach Higher Education learning from a student-based perspective, where students reflectively navigate their own learning processes and voice their uncertain experiences and knowledge. This will help situate the disconnections between curricula, student experience and outcomes in the context of the very transitory spaces that students occupy. Students' semantic adventures, including all its frictions, can contribute to contemporary ways of understanding student agency and liminal knowledges as conceptual devices that challenge the assumedly immutable aspects of anthropological curricula.

Introduction

The notion of a concept as a "threshold" where the "troublesomeness" of knowledge is produced (Wilson and Leitner 2007) suggests that a threshold concept "can of itself represent...*troublesome knowledge* – knowledge that is 'alien,' uncertain or counter-intuitive or even intellectually absurd at face value" (Perkins 1999, Meyer and Land 2003). The notion of "threshold concepts," when approached critically, provides anthropologists with an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the ways anthropological knowledge is produced, and approaches to teaching anthropology (Wilson and Leitner 2007).

¹This research was completed as a requirement to become a fully qualified Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and as part of the PGCAP (postgraduate certificate in academic practice), both undertaken at Durham University and based on years of tutoring and teaching different modules of the BA and BSc in Anthropology. The students who have made this research possible were 1st year students of anthropology (single honours) during the years 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016.

This small-scale research project explores this complex milieu by echoing examples of student feedback collected throughout five years of teaching practice, where students often refer to “anthropological language” as completely unfamiliar to them and irrelevant to their daily lives at university. Yet, since anthropology is situated within the everyday and seeks to understand the myriad of relations it produces, why not start from the anthropology classroom and the spaces that are often silenced when official assessment is conducted? By doing this, I hope to highlight the importance of critical engagement with the impact of unacknowledged student agency on successfully learning anthropological terminology. Student agency is defined here as the capacity not only to navigate “threshold concepts” that have been pre-designed as essential for that the undergraduate level of competence (e.g. ethnocentric, culture, primitive, modern, relative, indigenous) but also to produce new learning spaces in the frictions between these concepts. These frictions produce uncertain knowledge -knowledge that is private and ignored yet successfully thriving in students’ anthropological thinking. As one student reflected, ‘I think we should learn about how to study social sciences first... I don’t know, it is weird... We talk to each other in class but there’s never enough time to express how we really feel...’² Harp-Rushing (2017) suggests that uncertainty can be a productive space for critically exploring the production of knowledge. In this paper, uncertain spaces are referred to as learning spaces that emerge from conceptual frictions.

Troublesome threshold concepts

Encounters and boundaries

In general terms, anthropology not only ponders about how to translate knowledge, but also places knowledge-making processes in context (Wilson and Leitner 2007). Although turning epistemological analyses on ourselves can feel challenging at times, this fundamental part of anthropological praxis has much to offer when used in the context of teaching anthropology in Higher Education. The academic worlds we inhabit are, no doubt, puzzles of “learning” and “teaching” cultures. As Wilson and Leitner (2007) state, one of the main aims of teaching an anthropology undergraduate course ‘is to get across to the students a mode of inquiry and investigation that lies at the heart of anthropological analysis.’ Anthropological inquiry situates knowledge as experiential, rather than cumulative, and it places emphasis on the use of ethnographic evidence to challenge students’ pre-conceptions and show that the ways of being and thinking in the world are manifold. Thus, through reflexive and critical engagement with the literature, undergraduate students are expected to challenge conceptual categories from other knowledge systems and to critically face the world. Experiencing and acknowledging uncertainty functions as a reflexive mechanism. Nevertheless, problematising anthropological certainty and uncertainty rarely features as a key objective in 1st year syllabi.

Lange (2013) has written extensively about the territorial aspects of different disciplines, including anthropology, and how these disciplines claim certain topics, epistemologies and terminologies as their own. Scholars of teaching and learning call this effect “boundary work.” An example of this dynamic is the term “culture,” with anthropologists believing themselves to be better equipped to explore it than practitioners in other disciplines (Strober 2011: 61). However, the need to focus on broad (and broadly used) topics such as “culture” means that both teachers and students often delve into fields outside anthropology. The epistemological space of encountered boundaries in everyday classrooms is also experienced by students, some of whom are studying combined honour degrees. First year undergraduate students re-define themselves within the disciplinary contexts they inhabit, and, at the same time, they transform these new disciplinary contexts through encounters with others. Thus, students’ boundary work is encounter-determined, and what scholars have determined as adequate for their level of understanding tends to conflict with what the students themselves deem adequate. A generic assumption of competence at the 1st year level then directly conflicts with the diversity of learning processes that are actually taking place.

²All the quotes included during theoretical discussion and in outcomes’ chapter are extracted from direct and indirect feedback, email correspondence and the focus groups conducted as part of this research.

The ‘troublesomeness’ that is produced when experiencing threshold concepts has been considered of significant pedagogical importance, as it compromises the understanding of a concept. In anthropology, terms such as “primitive,” “modern” and “indigenous,” amongst others, are often offered to the students through recurrent, often stereotypical imagery and in the backdrop of outdated binaries (e.g. traditional vs. modern). Condensed lectures and seminars often run out of time to meaningfully unpack such terminology. Critically, the troublesome aspects that define these concepts and the contemporary debates that frame them go unnoticed and, for 1st year students, a form of resistance against suggested conceptual certainty emerges. An example of this is the category “indigenous,” a concept that, despite being constantly revisited in the scholarly production of anthropological knowledge, is sometimes lightly approached in the teaching of anthropology to first year undergraduate students. Such a troubled category can function as both an obstacle for learning and a source of friction that produces deeper learning. If, from the very beginning, the troublesome and uncertain nature of such a category is acknowledged and included in the curriculum, then this broad notion can lead to more meaningful engagement with the discipline at earlier stages. The troublesome aspects of threshold concepts can function as both obstacles and spaces that enhance learning as students explore these frictions through accepted and acknowledged uncertainty.

While a large body of research exists that covers the broad topic of “teaching anthropology in Higher Education,” most of the research tends to focus on the in-classroom use of anthropological methodologies (Rivière 2014, McGranahan 2014), developing and understanding of fieldwork experiences in the classroom (Sainsbury 2011, Kuehling 2014) and ethical representation (Pack 2011), with a predominant focus on the learning experiences of 3rd year undergraduates. Whereas this is essential for the improvement of the curriculum and for developing a coherent pedagogy, much less attention has been directed to 1st year students and their learning experiences. Why does the curriculum exhibit such certainty when our own grappling with the co-production of anthropological knowledge is so positively uncertain? Take a resistance to essentialising discourses of indigeneity and otherness, as mentioned earlier. If contemporary anthropology is full of uncertain spaces and turns (i.e. reflexive, ontological and ethical turns), why are these turns not exercised in the anthropology classroom and applied to teaching anthropology itself? Wilson and Leitner (2007) identified “reflexivity” as their “threshold concept,” but their focus lies with “expert” concerns about “reflexivity,” rather than “experiential” modes of reflexivity. Thus, this paper centres on students’ reflexive encounters with their own learning processes and anthropological terminology.

The uncertain turn in anthropological pedagogy

Wilson and Leitner (2007) critically approach the teaching of the “troublesomeness” of unfamiliar and complex concepts as a useful strategy to embed current anthropological debates in class discussions. Such concepts could be fruitfully introduced as parts of anthropology’s history by discussing the disciplinary production and conceptualisation of anthropology and by incorporating into 1st years’ syllabi current debates on the translatability of anthropological worlds (as widely discussed in Severi and Hanks 2015). Yet, removing problematic contexts and ignoring the complexities of today’s anthropology classrooms is often justified through a generic assumption that 1st years’ understandings of the discipline are still frail, insufficient and always in process.

Anthropology exhibits a tendency to explore the notion of reflexive pedagogy (Garnett and Vanderlinden 2011). Nevertheless, Barnes (1992: 147) laments that “many teachers split off the practice of teaching from the fundamental commitments that inform their research and writing.” She also points out at the fact that, due to underlining pressures and commitments to professional promotion, many teachers use generic strategies and styles to teach anthropology to undergraduates, ignoring the diversity of learning processes that occur daily. The ethnographic knowledge co-produced “in the field” seems to be disconnected from anthropological knowledge(s) produced in the classroom by means of reflexivity and conceptual revision. Do anthropologists remove the ethnographic mask when entering the classrooms where they teach? Paulo Freire (1993) distinguishes between “problem-posing education” and “banking education.” The latter situates students as containers where

teachers, and only teachers, must deposit, stir and manipulate relevant knowledge. Freire's "banking education" is still scarily present decades after his neologism's emergence. This education paradigm conflicts with the speculative nature of anthropology. The limited spaces Higher Education allows for students to exercise their learning agency, which is often buried under strict curricula that leaves students unsuccessfully finding their way through pre-designed lectures, seminars and expectations. This is particularly problematic in the teaching of anthropology, a discipline that aims to understand the world through contextualising its conceptualising processes. Students can find themselves as mere spectators with barely any agency to shape their own learning. The following quote illustrates the disconnection between students' agency and learning environments (e.g. lecture theatres).

'they just want to wrap the baby... they say it's too soon to understand what they are talking about, we just have to become familiar with it [culture, ethnography, indigenous, primitive, modern] and that one day it will all eventually click in... I don't know it's complicated...'

Why are education paradigms such as "banking education" still perpetuated by the audit cultures (Strathern 2000) of contemporary academia? Jacob notes that "an ethnographic approach to teaching requires our pedagogy to be based on understanding and addressing our students' perspectives and cultural meanings" (1995: 106).

Ethnographic research on the practical disconnections between anthropology's ethos and (teaching) practice, as well as between different anthropological learning environments, "can offer a compelling framework for pedagogical renewal across the disciplines" (Barnes 1992: 147) and in learning environments where inter-disciplinary approaches exist as modes of inquiry. Reflexive pedagogy in anthropology ought to include ongoing and open discussions of "ethnography as (speculative) pedagogy" (Ingold 2017, 24; Rowland 2006, 79; Brookfield 1995) to foster disciplinary self-reflection and change through the consideration of the fluidity of students' backgrounds and agency. However, institutional and political pressure strongly compromise the delicate relations that students and staff construct to these ends.

Learning as appropriation and owning

Entwistle's (2009) deep and surface learning approaches, where students engage with the contents of what is being taught differently depending on the way that contents are delivered and assessed, point to the need to pay attention to the diversity of students' learning agency by means of granting enough space to exercise it. Ownership is the most underestimated process in today's Higher Education sector, despite the certainty that "students have a greater likelihood of success when the material is 'theirs' instead of just 'ours'" (Greenfield 2006: 404). Owning anthropology (both publicly and privately) is perhaps the final step towards understanding it, and understanding it only leads to challenging the very basis of the discipline. Where do we shake the pillars of anthropology: in "the field," in the theoretical chamber or in the classroom? Tutorials can be the perfect spaces to experiment with ownership processes and ensure anthropological notions are tailored to the students' needs and understandings. This can, no doubt, be ensured by problematising terminology and practice. The experiential features of tutorials and seminars can foster an intellectual involvement that provides "the context for students to utilize affective elements as a catalyst for simulating enhanced motivation for learning and comprehension of course material is critically important" (Greenfield 2006: 404). However, today's banking epistemologies in academia put pressure on teachers and subsequently negatively impact on the learning outcomes and potential of lectures, seminars and tutorials as places where knowledge is co-produced.

Methodological considerations

In this research, I chose to carry out several focus groups³ (approximately 7 participants per group, with each group arranged arbitrarily), where students voluntarily participated. These students retrospectively explored not only their experiences as students of anthropology but also their learning environments and the space they had to

³ These focus groups happened during 2015 and 2016, after two years compiling student feedback and conducting participant observation and action research as a practising tutor of introductory modules in Anthropology.

exercise their own learning agency. The research's participants were 1st year undergraduates who had just completed their first-year modules. I had taught all the students who participated throughout the year at different 1st level introductory modules within single-honour BA and BSc in Anthropology. Focus groups offer space for the researcher to observe students' interactions, and, although focus groups follow familiar seminar formats, they are not tied to the assessment or practice of any module. The names of participants have been removed and quotes have been generalised for anonymity. This research also includes feedback forms that I designed and collected over a number of years. The formats for collecting feedback span from private emails, during and after-class conversations and a variety of anonymous feedback. All the students who participated in this study have consented for their comments to be included in this paper. These forms were gathered every term, before and after modules had been completed. When conducting focus groups, a series of vague and broad questions such as "what is anthropology" and "what have you learnt in anthropology this year?" were used to start the conversation. The rest was entirely student-led, including the ways in which they expressed what they knew, felt and wanted. The focus group followed Kuehling's (2014) example of the benefits of using the analogue "ethnography as pedagogy" in anthropological education. In her work, she explores the challenges and impact of problematising the word and notion "tribe" through a role play activity where students engage in the characterisation of different "anthropological knowledge agents." In addition, a subsequent discussion on the notion of "the tribal" and "tribe" and its troublesomeness sheds light on students' understandings and conflicts as part of the anthropology curricula in Higher Education. The following sections suggest that "troublesomeness" is not usually directly presented to the students but rather elicited from them by allowing space for students to explore their own pre-existent reflexive approaches.

Uncertain knowledges acknowledged

Transitional knowledge and students' agency when learning

Often, a syllabus for introductory modules assumes that teaching first year undergraduates means transporting students into a space where they will be exposed to basic anthropological knowledge for the first time. They will exit this space only when they have ticked all assessment boxes leading to more advanced discussions and reflections. However, learning realities undergo constant re-negotiation. Thus, 1st year learning is not merely a space one passes through or visits on their way to more nuanced knowledge. Students are never tabula rasa when they enrol for the first year of their anthropology degree. Assumptions of students as empty containers that must be moved through levels underestimate students' learning agency. A better strategy would be to elicit prior experiences and pre-existing knowledge that relate to the discipline. In this research, I started by asking "what do you know about anthropology?", and students consequently drew themselves surrounded by anthropological terminology. An extensive number of students voiced their concerns regarding anthropological lexicon (including the words "theory" and "methodology"). They wrote these words around themselves, and some drew them around their heads, while others did so around their feet.

I am not sure, theory is what anthropologists do and methodology is how they do it. I don't know, there are so many theories and methodologies, why is one more or less anthropological than the rest? (...) Do the people anthropologists study have theories and methodologies too? I mean... how does it work when you go and study people if you are people?

The uncertainty of such terms was voiced in public for the first time, and it made these terms (together with other popular ones such as "tradition", "ethnography", "modernity") easily digestible. Acknowledging uncertainty as endemic of anthropological inquiry and knowledge(s) facilitated students' navigation of the threshold concepts and each other, and this provided the space to exercise agency. Students identified themselves with the terminology explored in the sessions, and, just like "real anthropologists," they theorised about what anthropologists do. At the end of the session, students decided that what anthropologists did these days was too specific to come up with an explanatory one-liner. It was too uncertain to place into pre-existing categories, and that was fine. They drew complex mind-maps explaining their answers, but this time they did not draw themselves surrounded by anthropological terminology, they owned it. Instead, they were exploring their own intimate understandings. Their reflections completely changed my own perspectives of "students as visitors

of specialised knowledge” to “students as experienced navigators of conceptual development.” This contradicts assumptions about 1st year students as mere visitors of (pre-designed) conceptual thresholds and suggests that these thresholds and their frictions are rather constructed by the students themselves, individually and in relation to others.

Shifting frames

The problematic of anthropological terms such as “primitive”, which draws on (not so distant) colonial pasts, is often mentioned by the students themselves. It was not so much the term or the images that often accompany the term but the lack of contemporaneity that it seemed to possess. Similarly, the concept “indigenous” (as mentioned in earlier sections of this paper, is a pre-designed collection of other Anglophone concepts that permeates daily lectures and reading lists. At the same time, the languages of “others” (with whom anthropologists studied in the field) only appear as merely illustrative vignettes, almost as showcases of collections carefully stored and left un-dusted in the written text. 1st year undergraduate students often perceive themselves as the “others” of anthropological learning at university, with their languages ignored in favour of “higher” theories. As one student suggested,

‘You don’t learn things like you do in other disciplines... I was never sure whether using the word “primitive” was a bad thing since it was used in lectures [when talking about the history of anthropology] ... it was never clear how this word was still used nowadays or even if it was at all...’

Current anthropology curricula start by historically presenting a variety of classic works without carefully presenting them within the complex conjunctures in which they were constructed, leaving important debates within the discipline for a later time. However, holding on to a focus on the so-called “troublesome spots” (Wilson and Leitner, 2007) for longer than themed seminars and, as this paper suggests, allowing these spots to be relevant sooner than during the final year could help build the students' awareness of each other and the relational aspects of what happens “here and now.” During the focus groups, extensive discussion about “positionality”, “liminality when producing knowledge about others,” “conceptual troublesomeness” and whether what was learnt in the class really “clicked in with daily life” were initiated and led by the students themselves. Intrinsically related to uncertainty, the concept of anthropological liminality was the most exercised friction. Nevertheless, lectures and seminars are packed with topics and theories that are deemed essential for completing final assessments successfully. How does one detach from preconceptions of what learning is and what teaching is if the very pillars of anthropological knowledge remain unshaken in the classroom? The current emphasis on standardised learning procedures and assessment design suggests deeper systematic discontinuities with how anthropological knowledges are co-produced and experienced. These discontinuities can be addressed by turning a critical and uncertain eye to how the discipline is taught during the early stages of Higher Education.

Concluding thoughts

The main purpose of this study was to explore and understand the underlying issues that fostered discontinuities between what students experienced and what they consumed in the anthropology classroom. After 1st year undergraduate students of a variety of anthropological modules maintained that they were “*feeling uncomfortable with anthropology and anthropological language,*” it was deemed necessary to explore what “anthropological language” meant and why it was automatically placed outside students’ comfort-zones. As a result, attention is drawn to the continuous overlooking of conceptual frictions as spaces for learning and exercising agency, with uncertainty being the channel through which these spaces are navigated by students. Problematising anthropological terminology and contextualising both classic and contemporary anthropological praxis helped students relate to anthropological inquiry by owning the very questions they posed.

This research acknowledges the pressure academics experience when combining research and teaching commitments. Systematic and institutional imbalances inherently project themselves onto students. Learning is presented as a process of certainty that eventually reaches pre-designed outcomes and measures. Yet, this rubs uncomfortably against the process of learning anthropology, which holds at its heart an engagement with uncertain knowledge regarding the world at its very core. Here, the analogy of the “*juris*” (Wilson and Leitner,

2007) springs to mind: “the teacher” as a performance instructor who decides when students approach the next stage after movements have been practised, paving and opening the way to deeper learning and self-reflexivity.

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