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Teaching through Ethnography: Overcoming Mediations and Distractions

Alejandro Reig
University of Oxford

This reflection discusses the scope and limits of teaching through the presentation of an ethnographic situation in the university classroom. It assumes that narrating an ethnography in real time works as an extension of the field experience and is thus an integral part of the ethnographic moment, one that offers, in psychoanalytical terms, an *aperçu* – an interpretative closure. I reflect on a lecture based on an Amazonian ethnography of place- and landscape-making, delivered to a group of master's students in anthropology studying at a suburban university in a cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. The links and disjuncture of the socio-geographical distance between the field site and its people, and the people and place where the ethnographic moment is narrated, are discussed in relation to the creation and bridging of difference underpinning situations of teaching, together with generational contrasts between students and teacher. The latter is highlighted to stress the issue of full or divided attention in the pedagogical environment, often mediated by electronic artifacts, and the configuration of a communication environment that challenges the teacher's ability to convey the message. The lengthy presentation — occupying one full afternoon — manages to maintain the attention of students by constructing a vivid picture of the lives of a group of rainforest villages, the construction of the lived space by Amazonian forager-farmers and their relationship with the environment. This is conveyed through images, testimonies and stories built into a projected PowerPoint document that molds the selection of vignettes, testimonies and theoretical references into a series of interpretative conclusions. But the silence that follows the presentation, together with the shyness of most students during question time, encourages reflecting on the fertility of presenting a totalizing ethnographic image, instead of more partial aspects of social life. At the same time, an interrogation into the issue of indigenous politics, a subject touched upon only tangentially during the lecture, seems to open another gap between the intended and received message. This makes one wonder if conjunctural politics and its overacted staging across many universities might well function as a displacement device, one that complicates an unmediated attention to the life of others which is required to comprehend and develop a compelling ethnography, and in the process to learn about humanity.

The case presented here is that of an extended four-hour class I have taught over the past five years in an anthropology master's program on territorialities, environment, identities and indigenous peoples. It is presented to the students as an ethnography about place- and landscape-making in a group of remote indigenous Amazonian forest villages, helpful for discerning wider patterns of social construction of the environment in many indigenous settings. From the beginning of the presentation, the title and summary of the class portend to disclose a story about a situation which is distant and far-removed from the everyday experience of the students, a group of Spanish- and Catalan-speakers in their mid-20s and early 30s. Their university, set in the outskirts of a cosmopolitan southern European city, is located in a depression delimited by a littoral and a pre-littoral range of mountains, roughly 120 km away from the Pyrenees. In short, a landscape as distinct as possible to that of the ethnographic context narrativized in the class. Some of the students are Latin American, Catalans as well as from other parts of Spain, and a few are Europeans of various nationality. A few students have had experiences in the developing world and may be somewhat familiar with the realities of indigenous South American populations. However, such students are in the minority, and the vignettes thrown upon them during the class is largely exotic for most of them in geographic, social and cultural terms.

There are two landmarks of difference which I perceive as creating a chasm between the experience rendered by the speaker and the experience of the listeners. One is professional/disciplinary: rugged and remote hinterland indigenous ethnographies are no longer at the center of the contemporary anthropological canon, but rather pushed to its margins, and those ethnographies of indigenous societies that do survive in this disciplinary periphery may find themselves categorized in other ways, such as the plight of urbanized Indians, confrontations between global and local, narratives of development in the Global South, etc. This shift perhaps makes the teacher feel like a representative of a certain foundational type of anthropology that does not anymore speak to the whole of the discipline the students are being trained in. This may add another degree of strangeness and defamiliarization to what students hear, but speaking to an international group of students, the teacher is also a foreigner among foreigners. And, at least theroretically, a regional/national context in which multi-cultural understandings have become a hostage of politicial confrontations should work to familiarize the unfamiliar.

The second landmark of difference is generational. It is not uncommon that a university teacher is several generations older than his or her students. However, in this case, the students are of a generation in which the continuous paying of attention has become a rarity, and the rule seems to be to listen to a speaker by enacting a divided attention between the emplaced situation of speaking and listening and a virtual connection with many other actors, mediated by a mobile phone, a tablet or a laptop. Typically, classroom rules tend to sanction or regulate such distractions, but in few cases is this policed. Furthermore, students often quickly learn how to strategize and maintain their remote conversations without making it evident that they are not giving their full attention to the teacher. The first of these two landmarks of difference presents a challenge for the teacher, as he needs to establish the bridges of connection between the exotic, remote reality he is talking about to the students and one that actually can be absorbed by them. This difference, however, works in his favor: discovering an unknown world, a strange, new and exotic reality, still constitutes in the 21st-century a driving force of life for any generation. This difference will not, in general, imply distance between the speaker and listener, but should instead spark interest. The second landmark of difference is much more challenging, and teachers nowadays seem to test themselves and assess how well the communication is going of their subject by checking how many students are not fixing their gaze alternatively in the teacher's allocution and their screens. The fact that an increasing number of students take their notes in class on their laptops while listening does not make this assessment easier for the speaker, considering that the students might well be taking notes while simultaneously chatting in parallel with one or two or more distant friends.

The setting where the teaching actually takes place is also worth mentioning, in part because such learning environments can become permanently etched into the memories of one's formative years. The inadequacy of teaching spaces in the developed world has always struck me as odd. The epitome here may be the university at which I did my PhD, in an Alice-in-Wonderland English city where the "newer" colleges are those built around 1400. Because my department was situated some blocks away from the city's mediaeval centre, tutors and students rehearsed the educational ritual in somewhat more modern, run-down detached houses dating from around the 18th century. These awkward, cramped spaces had the power to make you wonder if a proper understanding of the topics of agricultural involution, colour classification or stone age economics could really be attained sitting by the shuttered fireplace of a carpeted Edwardian bedroom, covered floor-to-ceiling with hardcover books that only just hid the lily-flowered wallpaper (or perhaps they could only be discussed in such settings?). But the lack of spatial allure is more upsetting in those situations in which low quality teaching spaces are embedded into state-of-the-art facilities. The classrooms in which I teach this course are clean, well lit, furnished with upscale computers screens and projectors. Tables and chairs are functional in an 'IKEA Office' way: melamine white-and-grey furniture with safe rounded edges and plastic or aluminium cable-cover strips. The walls are well painted in heavy matte off-white, and the building is relatively well maintained. But the teacher faces a row of windows from which a powerful Mediterranean sun creates a blinding effect, and the back-lit figures of the students put him in the situation of preaching to dark silhouettes. On the opposing side, however, this light streaming in from behind favours the students, who can visualise the well illuminated speaker clearly. The orientation of the room asks for the shades of the windows to be closed, and this implies that the LED-white lighting must be turned on, and one can be thankful that they can be activated separately in different sections of the room. This allows the screen area to be dark enough to permit more or less sharp PowerPoint images, with some light left for illuminating the students. I may apologize for this romanticized retrospective construction, but my early formative years were spent in a UNESCO World Heritage university, a showcase of modernist tropical architectural where shaded and breeze-swept corridors connect different buildings. One in which classrooms with perforated bricks allowed natural climatization, and lateral lighting favored both students

and teachers, while offering a serene view on the bluish mountains in the distance. And this does create a demanding standpoint to assess other university facilities.

The PowerPoint presents a number of photographic representations of the field site: images of the rainforest; foragers scrutinizing the canopy and engaged with plants in the garden; women carrying manioc-filled baskets into the village; men putting meat on the fire while babies watch from the hammock; transcriptions of Yanomami testimonies that melt with a click into their Spanish translations – all of the gimmicks of distance, distinction and difference that the teacher employs to stage the ethnographic situation and develop a narrative. The projector also presents the students educational and thought-ordering artifacts like resounding quotes by Helene Clastres and Carl Sauer, maps; lists of references that situate the debate; bullet points with key observations; conclusive statements that the students feel obliged to write down in order to grasp the core messages to prepare for examination. The maps are great for a "let's pretend we are thinking together" engagement between speaker and audience, enacting a well-informed display of information that is nevertheless subject to scrutiny. Once the initial configuration of light and space is organized, communication begins, and the teacher may move about while talking between his desk and the desk-like tables at which students sit, a movement made possible because a hand-held gadget allows for advancing the slides without being bound to the computer in order to press the keyboard. No matter that the room is equally as antiseptic and clinical as the conference room of an HR firm or the platonic cave ideal of a technocratic government office, devoid of any warmth or human determination. It is there and then that a story about rainforest foragers and their ethos of cannibal predation and body-to-body convivial place-making begins to take place, an effort at enacting an enlightening transfer of experiences.

The presentation moves forth at a good pace, capturing the attention of most of the listeners. From time to time, certain evocative lines and vignettes appear to fully steal attention from students' own gadget screens. As, for example the description of certain rituals, or the moment in which, narrating the outcome of the last battle in the ongoing war with a neighboring village, a speaker claims that Chávez himself (the biggest of chiefs) sent his own personal helicopter to airlift their own wounded warriors (and not those of the enemy village). When the presentation is completed, I typically see a row of wide-eyed and impressed faces staring at me, though a generalized silence in the room seems to stifle any first questions. The eventual questions take some time to find formulation in the students' minds and are usually nudged out thanks to comments by another teacher, the coordinator of the course or the department head, who will point out to the students the connections with other subjects they have studied. My first impression, however, is that the whole ethnography is just too much for them to handle. It may be too extensive, totalizing, too full of details, and may thus become slightly intimidating for the students. But it is precisely because my ethnography touches on several different aspects and configures a somehow total vision of social life that the leaders of the course insist that I present it in this way, as an example of how to carry out a thorough bout of research investigation in our field. In this sense, it seems to offer plenty of material to discuss the issue of territory from a specific angle, but it may also allow the students to see how a researcher interrogates her/his observations and registrations daily in the field, allowing the piecemeal construction of interpretation. This particular case, presented and discussed across nearly four hours of presentation, has included in it the reconstruction of the historic migration of five communities, and their spatial distribution as a result of a wide set of interacting motivations. It has presented interpretations of a contrast in gardening strategies, followed by a close-range observation of the sensorial engagement with the forest by foragers. It has shown an analysis of domestic life and changes in village spaces, pulling up the sayings of people, interactions between them and testimonies. Admittedly, testimonies and vignettes are hardly random but rather constitute an output from a process of selection, the outcome of a triage of many things witnessed and heard. And these emerging landmark speeches, pictures and narratives are precisely those that sustain the interpretation. In that sense, the different components of the ethnography have been hierarchically structured in the process of it becoming interpreted and theoretically reconstructed. Some of the themes are lateral and merely an auxiliary of the primary line of research, as the issue of how shamanism works in a double scale of spatial management.

There is however, an exception to the general shyness of the classroom audience, which is typically incarnated by the intervention of different Latin American students –some of them on scholarships from their home countries– who are invariably stimulated by the whole narrative, but especially interested on discussing political matters and the relation between indigenous peoples and the state. It is as if the issues of politics, territorial rights and confronting the state has a power of actuality that permits all ethnographic, geographic and generational distances to be bridged: suddenly the topic magically becomes lively and relevant for those who ask a question, and this in turn may tow all the rest into a proper discussion. This is a useful device for the teacher, offering a pathway towards a wider reflection on how indigenous politics and activism have been somehow

impoverished in political confrontation, e.g. by mimicking governmental discourses of territoriality. It is because, I propose, that a deeper investigation is missing or insufficiently communicated to wider audiences, of the Amerindian land ethos, that the political confrontation on territoriality can neutralize indigenous difference. This line of discussion is fruitful, and the students depart the class stimulated. But, still, the speaker remains with the feeling that the central issue attempted, that of the close-range reconstruction of a different way of being in the world, has been heard but not discussed, and perhaps not even fully grasped. It may be that something in the nature of the presentation has made him fail in his key objective: to provide a shattering philosophical reflection about a different way of being in the world, which opens up in the listener an insight able to de-structure his own taken-for-granted conceptions. Perhaps a more partial presentation, with a lesser totalizing effect, would prove more efficient for the task?

I walk away from my classroom presentation feeling that, perhaps due merely to having presented an excess of material, I have somehow failed in my fundamental duty as an instructor. The task of opening a window in the souls and minds of our listeners so that the powerful wind of lives so different, lives that construct radically alternative worlds, may gush into their existences as if something never witnessed: a totally new tune, a song you had never heard before. The winter night dominates the empty plaza between the dining hall and the sciences department, which earlier that same the day was abuzz with the frisson of a group of students constructing a pyramid of human bodies, something I noticed while walking towards the classroom to begin my lecture. They were practicing the Catalan tradition of "Castellers", a tower made by people who climb upon each other, in smaller groups as the height increases, such that only one stands erect at the top of the six meter pyramid, raising a saluting hand with the triumphant gesture of reaching a summit that all have contributed to building. In the political climate of Catalonia in the last years, this folkloric practice has become increasingly signified by nationalist contestation. Some other buildings brandish posters of Che Guevara painted on a huge mosaic of newspaper-sized broadsheets. And as I walk back to the train station, I am overcome by this feeling of *déjà vu par tout*. Something experienced many times in similar University spaces with a similar decoration decades earlier. In this intellectual climate, it is understandable that political reason is oft overtaken by schematism, leaving the richness and subtleties of ethnography more difficult to explain. I am carried back to a small Festschrift-like conference in Brussels some years ago in which a group of researchers discussed the influence of Tim Ingold in their work, in his presence. I recall presenting my material to show how useful his concept of taskscape had been for my understanding of forest foraging, but how inadequate it was for understanding the political sphere of social life. Surprisingly, Ingold responded that he believed I was right, that his work fell short of understanding the political. But as I wait now for the train in the outskirts of the globalized Mediterranean city, plagued by a sense that my ethnography failed to shake up young minds in a way necessary to keep our discipline alive, my sense is that Tim was in fact pointing towards a hierarchical difference of values. And that our task is to surmount the impoverishing effect of the invasion of reactive politics on the depictions and representations of social life we construct in our work as ethnographers. In other words: to introduce into the realm of interpretation the rich visions of deep humanity that so many of today's mediations and virtualities distract us from.