

Teaching and learning ethnography in South-Eastern Europe: Making sense of cultural difference in familiar contexts

Ioannis Manos

¹Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, University of Macedonia, Greece

Abstract:

When teaching ethnography and discussing anthropology in Greek universities, instructors endeavor to make students familiar with the study of otherness and introduce them to alternative ways of understanding social phenomena. How can we demonstrate ethnography's potential, not only as an effective means of studying diversity and perceiving social realities, but also as a way of making a living? Such a concern requires revisiting the teaching process in order to better appreciate anthropology's discipline and its method. This paper reflects on teaching experiences in various academic and non-academic contexts. It also discusses the practices employed, the educational objectives set, and the challenges and dilemmas dealt with when teaching ethnography in a Greek/Southeast European academic context.

Keywords: teachin, learning, ethnography, anthropology, ethnocentrism, reflexivity, anthropology at home

Introduction

It has been asserted by many an anthropologist that the strongest image they usually have of themselves is that of the lonely researcher; it is their ethnographic research they mostly talk and write about when considering their professional identity. This representation gives prominence to the ethnographic method as a process of knowledge production, while at the same time downplaying (or, indeed, undervaluing) their role as teachers. This is understandable, since anthropologists have most often been educated to be researchers, with little of their education involving specialised training dedicated to becoming a teacher¹.

This paper explores aspects of the teaching praxis in anthropology. It discusses the practices employed, the educational objectives set, and the challenges and dilemmas dealt with, when teaching ethnography². It draws on a multiplicity of teaching and learning experiences from a broad range of academic and non-academic contexts which involve diverse audiences with an interest in anthropology and ethnography as part of their academic or vocational training. Due to space limitations, I will confine my remarks to the process of teaching ethnography in Greek universities, and will focus specifically on teaching in undergraduate courses.

Anthropology and the teaching of ethnography in Greece

Social anthropology is a relatively recently established and developed discipline in Greek academia³. Its introduction arose as part of the "modernisation" process in Greek society, taking place after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. Modernisation, in this context, should be perceived as a broad process used to overcome everything associated with the Greek state's Oriental or Balkan past. Although anthropology was first introduced in the mid-1980s, it was the 1990s that constituted a period of prosperity and growth in terms of new departments, student numbers and research. Anthropology has gradually gained status in the classroom but has also received recognition outside the classroom.

Ethnography as a research approach has become increasingly popular and important as a conceptual and methodological tool and has made up a broad-based scientific training programme in Greece and elsewhere. Moreover, it is incorporated in interdisciplinary undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes. Universities have become the primary institutions for the transmission of anthropological knowledge and training in ethnographic research methods. Despite this achievement, teaching ethnography in the Greek context concerns anthropology's potential to present both itself and its own particular methods as intervening forces in understanding social reality. Furthermore, this has become a crucial challenge for an academic context which has

not produced many “leading” (or well-known) producers of anthropological knowledge. Additionally, Greece is a country in which cultural differences have been strongly politicised and historically shaped by notions of cultural homogeneity.

The aim of the paper

This paper attempts to raise a number of discussion points regarding the teaching of ethnography as documented in the Greek university context⁴. It could be seen as a reflexive, personal narrative of my own teaching praxis deriving from a specific course format, during which students are required to carry out intensive, short-term fieldwork projects. This format intends to accomplish the following teaching objectives: a) to make anthropology appealing as a study of human diversity; b) to introduce students to the study of cultural difference; c) to familiarize them with the ethnographic method as the fundamental mode of production of anthropological knowledge; d) to make them transcend their conceptual national boundaries; and e) produce qualified researchers according to the needs of the current job market.

The concept of experiential or active learning of ethnography is particularly useful in this context. I adopt a broad approach to the notion of experiential learning, which relies on Hastrup and Hervik’s (1994) idea about turning social experience into anthropological knowledge. Thus, in my discussion, I include various approaches by researchers from a variety of disciplines, who have investigated the effectiveness of teaching (e.g. Wagner, Garner, and Kawulich 2011). The concept of “active learning” is particularly useful (Lundahl 2008: 275-276). Understanding a subject is facilitated by adopting active learning strategies that promote direct and experiential involvement with the research topic, rather than listening to a lecture in class. Experiential ethnography combines theory with practice. It connects the knowledge presented in the classroom with the lived experience from the “field.” It also connects students with previous personal experiences, in this way pushing them to reflect and consider their mode of perceiving reality. This type of course design allows an enhancement of student learning, encourages students to develop a range of personal skills, and provides them with an immediate opportunity to see the relevance of ethnography as a research approach.

In the remainder of my paper, I briefly describe the course format mentioned above. I then outline the current political and socioeconomic context in Greece, which strongly shapes the university teaching experience. I also place emphasis on conditions that pose certain limitations as regards the accomplishment of the above-mentioned teaching objectives. Concluding, I then reflect on certain aspects of the teaching of ethnography and the use of experiential learning.

Ethnography as learning⁵

In Greece, undergraduate and postgraduate courses are designed to be completed in 13 weekly classes of 4 hours each. The number of attendees ranges from a minimum of five to a maximum of 60 or 70. Regardless of the course theme, I design each course with the intention of teaching it both in class and as part of an intensive short-term individual or group research project. Classes are held two days per week, in two-hour sessions. The first session addresses the main thematic units of the course; for example, European Anthropology: the politics of culture and difference. The second session deals with the ethnographic aspect of the course, preparing students for each stage of their short-term fieldwork projects. More specifically, the first four weeks include an introduction to the course’s main theoretical concepts and the conduct of ethnographic research. Simultaneously, students are asked to come up with ideas for potential research topics. They are encouraged to use their existing knowledge or experience, and develop a research question within their own interests or social circles and activities.

In order to give students some examples of what they might study, I always propose a number of topics. For instance, this year I have proposed the politics of culture with regard to the EU policy issues on migration, and the refugee crisis. I am also open to discussing students’ own ideas. During week four, students are expected to hand in a 1000-word-maximum research proposal including a provisional title, the research topic and questions, the potential field, the data collection techniques and a weekly time-schedule before submitting the final research paper at the end of the semester. Subsequently, during weeks 5-10, students enter and spend time in the field. Weeks 10-13 include classes on data analysis and a preliminary presentation in an oral form of their initial fieldwork results. Final assessment takes place after students submit research papers which are considered to be the course’s final product, the textual representation of their research and findings.

The national education system and the problem with ethnocentrism

Greek students develop their perceptions of otherness in an educational system strongly shaped by national ideologies that promote superiority of the Greek nation and its history. As a consequence, all efforts to discuss other societies and cultures, different perceptions and ways of human life — whether distant or nearby — are confronted, at least during the initial stage, by ideas of ethnocentrism. When they first enroll at university, most students have no prior knowledge of what anthropology is and what ethnography really means. Their perceptions have been shaped by an academic and social environment where sociology and folklore are most commonly thought to be the disciplines that use empirical social research methods. Thus, teaching anthropology and ethnography involves great effort in order to familiarize students with the study of otherness and introduce them to different forms of life, lifestyles and living.

When undergraduate students are asked such questions which do not request factual data but only some kind of interpretation, they rely on a range of taken-for-granted essentialisms instilled into them during their primary and secondary education years. Students thus employ stereotypes that reflect the notions of superiority of their own civilization and the continuities between ancient and modern cultures. Alternatively, a number of students might well appreciate anthropological thinking as a cultural critique. They are attracted to anthropology because they perceive it as a conceptual tool, one which enables them to challenge or subvert dominant ideas and representations in Greek society, and, perhaps, understand the way these ideas and representations are constructed and how they function ideologically.

However, Greek students' personal interest in their "own" society is not necessarily concomitant with an equal interest in learning about "other" societies as well. Assuming that such knowledge is additional rather than essential in understanding themselves, they feel content with merely questioning their ethnocentric views without taking into account certain cross-cultural perspectives found in anthropology.

Anthropology at home and the need for reflexivity

Carrying out research projects that fall within the idea of "anthropology at home"⁶ requires developing skills and learning how to be reflexive⁷. Despite its varied understandings and complex theoretical discussions, the concept of reflexivity is used here, primarily, as a way of encouraging students to make sense of their own position as ethnographers both in the field and within their own society. Furthermore, reflexivity is seen as the ability of the self to objectify its own self and to turn itself into an object of study (Babcock 1980, Karp and Kendal 1982). It asks students to challenge what they know, to push the parameters of their thinking and feeling selves and to risk "not knowing" and constant insecurity. In Okely's terms, "reflexivity forces us to think through the consequences of our relations with others whether it be conditions of reciprocity, asymmetry or potential exploitation" (1992: 24).

Students need to begin with the understanding that systematic thinking about their own experiences is a valid source of some knowledge and insight. The purpose of teaching ethnography is to help students become aware of, and challenge, their ethnocentric assumptions about others. Talking about, and doing, research that focuses on understanding cultural diversity in familiar contexts involves the risk of having students taking the discernible differences (e.g. between refugees, immigrants, minority or other social groups) for granted and thus consider them to be self-evident truth. However, such a process this would only strengthen the essentialist notions of identity and otherness.

Within the current socio-economic and political conditions in SE Europe, the recognition of "Others" by "us" through the ascription of an evident and different "culture" permits one to celebrate adopting a tolerant and bias-free position. Yet, this offers the possibility of realizing that social subjects being studied are in a less powerful position than those doing the studying. It may lead students to challenge their own assumptions about the notions of culture, power and identity. This realization can also manifest itself in the critical view of the anthropological practice and its capacity to actively engage in understanding disempowered groups and social categories.

University degrees in the current sociopolitical context

In light of the current economic and political contexts across SE Europe, successive reforms and national governments' laws over the last years have introduced new funding mechanisms and auditing systems designed to render universities not only less costly to run but also more accountable, flexible and responsive to current job market

demands. In a much more demanding way, universities nowadays are considered as one of the sites in the public sector that need to be re-structured, and become more profitable. Moreover, the so-called “global knowledge economy,” where higher education is perceived as being even more significant for economic development, sets the bar high itself (Wright and Rabo 2010)⁸.

According to the prevailing mindset still dominant during the recent economic crisis in Greece, students very often get a university education with the purpose of obtaining a degree in order to join the state apparatus and secure themselves a job and a salary for the rest of their lives. The majority of anthropology students and those enrolled in area-studies departments are provided with a broad-based academic training. They are expected to acquire a certain set of skills enabling them to handle a variety of professions and perhaps to be able to transfer their knowledge to a wide range of different fields. Moreover, it is expected that this will give them the flexibility required by today's job market and the imperative to be able to engage in and acquire lifelong learning.

Yet, there is no state job in particular that is designed to employ people with an anthropological education. Indeed, no positions allocated for anthropology graduates. Thus, students do not even need Anthropology and the ethnographic method for their academic and professional careers, let alone pursuing a job as anthropologists or social scientists.

Reflecting on the use of ethnography in the teaching process

The incorporation of ethnographic projects in teaching in Greece has proved to be a very useful strategy for comprehending the benefits of anthropological thinking. It is a way of experiential learning that is achieved both in and out of the classroom. This type of course design puts emphasis on the knowledge obtained through the fieldwork experience in familiar settings. It is a form of “anthropology at home” that utilizes the reflexive paradigm, making students think about their personal experiences and encouraging the accumulation of knowledge. It also provides opportunities to confront ethnocentrism, while adopting a reflexive stance towards the research process. Furthermore, it assists in transforming knowledge into understanding, and developing critical thinking, while at the same time it challenges one's own assumptions – all crucial parameters and important stages for a successful outcome in this kind of teaching activity.

Likewise, teaching with ethnography is a way to connect theory with practice, while offering help in understanding the ways in which reality is constructed. Aspects such as contextualisation, self-reflection, critical thinking and problem formulation are all equally as significant in the process of learning. Besides, students engage in an active search for meaning and attempt to connect that to prior learning and experience; in doing so, they transform the knowledge gained into understanding their own assumptions about the Self and the Other. Active and engaged learning of ethnography through participation in short-term ethnographic projects is an approach that allows the enhancement of student learning, encourages students to develop a range of personal skills, and provides them with an immediate opportunity to see the relevance of ethnography as a research approach, both in their studies as budding anthropologists – and beyond.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jakob Krause-Jensen, Patrick Alexander and Sherry Fukuzawa for their comments in previous drafts of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the point made by Hannerz (2004: ix).

² Despite the existence of a substantial body of literature that addresses various instructional approaches, that is the ‘how to’ of research methods, the lack of a systematic discussion on the teaching of research methods and the absence of a pedagogical culture for it is detectable. By pedagogical culture I refer to the exchange of ideas within a climate of systematic debate, investigation and evaluation surrounding all aspects of teaching and learning in the subject. Equally evident, however, is the lack of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional connectedness in relation to research methods pedagogy.

³ For the introduction and establishment of anthropology into the Greek academia, see, Agelopoulos (2013), Angelidou (2017), Gefou-Madianou (1993, 2000), Papataxiarchis (2003, 2013), Panopoulos (2004), Tsibiridou (2003).

⁴ There is hardly any discussion about the processes of teaching and learning anthropology and ethnography in the Greek context. Bakalaki (2006) has problematized certain aspects of the teaching process in Greek universities. Another attempt to introduce these topics is an edited volume (Dalkavoukis, Manos, and Veikou 2010) which advocates the usefulness of ethnographic projects as part of the students' university course assignments.

⁵ There is a substantial body of literature with suggestions and reflective experiences on how to design a course in order to teach anthropology and/or ethnography. With regard to scholarly journals that discuss aspects of teaching, and include anthropologists and anthropology in their scope, *Teaching Anthropology* is, to my knowledge, the only scholarly, online, free-access periodical publication, devoted entirely to the process of teaching anthropology on various levels.

Learning and Teaching - The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences (<https://latiss.berghahnjournals.com/>) deals with the education practices, from a very broad variety of academic fields, in the context only of higher education.

Anthropology & Education Quarterly (<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15481492>) examines the educational processes relying primarily on ethnographic research, mainly in US contexts.

Finally, *Teaching Anthropology: Society for Anthropology in Community Colleges Notes* (<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/loi/19414161>) is published online by the Society for Anthropology in Community Colleges (SACC, <http://sacc.americananthro.org/>). This is a US-based network of people who teach anthropology in community colleges, universities and pre-collegiate institutions, which, too, focuses on the teaching of anthropology – albeit in the US context in particular.

⁶ For a discussion on the conceptualization the term, see, Jackson (1987), Mascarenhas-Keyes (1987), Narayan (1993), Peirano (1998).

⁷ See, some early proposals on how to teach undergraduate anthropology and increase awareness on how fieldwork research and ethnographic writing construct, reproduce and implicate selves, relationships and personal identities, (deRoche and deRoche 1990, Segal 1990).

⁸ See, for example, an analysis and critique of these processes in the higher education systems of Denmark (Krejsler and Carney 2009, Moutsios 2010); New Zealand (Shore 2010), Serbia (Bačević 2010) and South Africa (Oxlund 2010).

References

- Agelopoulos, G. (2013), 'Multiple Encounters: Attempts to Introduce Anthropology in Greece during the 1940s - 1960s', in Bošković, Al., Hann, Chr., (eds.), *The Anthropological Field on the Margins of Europe, 1945-1991*, Halle Studies in Anthropology of Eurasia, Berlin: LIT, pp. 65-84.
- Angelidou, A., (2017), 'Anthropology in Greece: Dynamics, Difficulties and Challenges', in Barrera-González, Andr., Heintz, M., and Horolets, Ann., (eds.), *European Anthropologies*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 250-276.
- Babcock, B., A., (1980) 'Reflexivity: Definitions and Discriminations', *Semiotica*, 30(1-2):1-14.
- Bačević, J., (2010), 'Masters or Servants? Power and Discourse in Serbian Higher Education Reform', *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie Sociale* (2010) 18(1):43–56.
- Bakalaki, Al., (2006), 'A Different Kind of Knowledge? Learning Anthropology in the Greek University System', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 24:257–283.
- Dalkavoukis, V., Manos, I. and Veikou, Chr., (eds) (2010) [in Greek], *Anipopsiastoi Anthropologoi. Kachipoptoi Foitites. Didaskontas Anthropologia se Aftous pou "den ti Xreiazontai"*, Athens: Kritiki.
- Davies, Ch., A., (1999), *Reflexive Ethnography. A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, London and New York: Routledge.
- deRoche, C., P. and deRoche, J., E., (1990), 'As I Say, as I Do: Teaching Reflexivity through a Reflexive Subject', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 21(2): 128-133.
- Gefou-Madianou, D., (1993), 'Mirroring Ourselves through Western Texts: The Limits of an Indigenous Anthropology', in Driessen, H., (ed.), *The Politics of Ethnographic Reading and Writing: Confrontations of Western and Indigenous Views*, Saarbruecken and Fort Lauderdale: Verlag Breitenbach Publishers, pp. 160-181.
- Gefou-Madianou, D., (2000), 'Disciples, Discipline and Reflection: Anthropological Encounters and Trajectories', in Strathern, M., (ed.), *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*, London: Routledge, pp. 256-278.

- Hannerz, Ulf (2004), 'Forward', in Drackle, D., Edgar, I., R., Schippers, Th., K. (eds), *Educational Histories of European Social Anthropology*, The EASA Series: Learning Fields, Vol. 1 [1st edition 2003], New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. ix-x.
- Hastrup, K., and Hervik, P., (eds.) (1994), *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Jackson, Ant., (ed.) (1987), *Anthropology at Home*. London and New York: Tavistock Publications.
- Karp, I., and Kendal, M., B. (1982), 'Reflexivity in Fieldwork', in Secord, P., F. (ed.), *Explaining Human Behavior: Consciousness, Human Action and Social Structure*. Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 249-273.
- Krejsler, J., B., and Carney, St., (2009), 'University Academics at a Crossroads? Continuity and Transformation in Danish University Reform', *European Education*, 41(2):75–92.
- Lundahl, Br., W., PhD (2008), 'Teaching Research Methodology Through Active Learning', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 28(1-2), 273-288.
- Mascarenhas-Keyes, S., (1987), 'The Native Anthropologist: Constraints and Strategies in Research', in Jackson, Ant., (ed.), *Anthropology at Home*. London and New York: Tavistock Publications, pp. 180-195.
- Narayan, K., (1993), 'How Native Is a Native Anthropologist? ', *American Anthropologist*, 95: 671-686.
- Moutsios, St., (2010), 'Power, Politics and Transnational Policy-Making in Education', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 8(1): 121 — 141
- Oxlund, Bj., (2010), 'Responding to University Reform in South Africa: Student Activism at the University of Limpopo', *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie Sociale* (2010) 18(1):30–42.
- Panopoulos, P., (2004), 'Between Self and Others: The Academic Establishment of Greek Anthropology', in Drackle, D., Edgar, I., R., Schippers, Th., K. (eds), *Educational Histories of European Social Anthropology*, The EASA Series: Learning Fields, Vol. 1 [1st edition 2003], New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 193-205.
- Okely, J., (1992), 'Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge', in Okely, J., and Callaway, H., (eds.), *Anthropology and Autobiography*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-28.
- Papataxiarchis, Efth. (2003), [in Greek], 'I Koinoniki Anthropologia sti Metapolemiki Ellada. Ta Prota Vimata' in Lampiri-Dimaki, I., (ed.), *Koinonikes Epistimes kai Protoporia stin Ellada. 1950-1967*, Athens: E.K.K.E. and Gutenberg, pp. 115-154.
- Papataxiarchis, Efth. (2013), 'From 'National' to 'Social Science': Politics, Ideology and Disciplinary Formation in Greek Anthropology from the 1940s till the 19080s', in Bošković, Al., Hann, Chr., (eds.), *The Anthropological Field on the Margins of Europe, 1945-1991*, Halle Studies in Anthropology of Eurasia, Berlin: LIT, pp. 31-64.
- Peirano, Mariza, G., S., (1998), 'When Anthropology is at Home: the Different Contexts of a Single Discipline', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27: 105–28.
- Segal, Ed., S., (1990), 'The Journal: Teaching Reflexive Methodology on an Introductory Level', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 21(2): 121-127.
- Shore, Cr., (2010), 'Beyond the Multiversity: Neoliberalism and the Rise of the Schizophrenic University', *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie Sociale* (2010) 18(1):15–29.

- Tsibiridou, F., (2003) [in Greek]. 'Anagnoseis tou 'Koinonikou' apo tin Anrgopologia sthn Ellada tis Metapolitefsis', *Mnimon*, 25: 185-202.
- Wagner, Cl., Garner, M., and Kawulich, B., (2011), 'The State of the Art of Teaching Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Towards a Pedagogical Culture', *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(1):75-88.
- Wright, S., and Rabo, Ann., (2010), 'Introduction: Anthropologies of University Reform', *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie Sociale* 18 (1): 1-14.