



‘Before we Begin...’: The Role of Introductions in Anthropological Education

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Abstract

The classroom – and a first seminar or tutorial in specific – affords a seemingly infinite number of starting points, invitations, orientations, and departures. This report reflects on the introduction as a pedagogical tool *of, for, and as* ethnography, by building upon the work of Eugenia Zuroski. Zooming in on a graduate course in media ethnography and storytelling, I will sketch how a reconfiguration of introductions can both instill an ethnographic sensibility and foster rapport and solidarity in the classroom. Considering how to start a course can generate a more situated pedagogy for anthropological education.

Keywords

Introductions; engaged pedagogy; storytelling; teaching anthropology

Introduction: The Field and The Classroom

Ethnography is always affective and often collaborative. It usually comprises immersive fieldwork, participant observation, note-taking, storytelling, and – increasingly – multimodal output. Ethnography as a relational praxis acknowledges our enmeshment with our interlocutors and environment, as much as it foregrounds the multiple axes of marginalisation and power that punctuate the fieldwork experience (Davis, 2016). As an educator working within and outside of anthropology departments, I wonder: how can we design pedagogical practices that echo and foster such sensibilities? This report reflects on the introduction as a pedagogical tool *of, for, and as* ethnography. Specifically, I address how an in-class exercise articulated by Eugenia Zuroski (2020) fosters a generative framework for introducing students to ethnography *and* building rapport and solidarity among a cohort. The exercise, as I discuss below, centers on the question, *where do you know from?*

Deborah D’Amico-Samuels (1997) reminds us that the field is everywhere; the binary of field and non-field might no longer be (or has never been) tenable or generative. To me, subscribing to ethnography as an ethical and collaborative praxis entails a responsibility to consider its affective and pedagogical capacities beyond traditional fieldwork spaces. The reduction of the field to something ‘out there’ – to paraphrase D’Amico-Samuels – would limit ethnography to a matter of academic inquiry, something epistemological or representational. As such, I consider it my responsibility as an anthropologist working at a public university to consider the entanglements between the field and the classroom. How can we best prepare students for conducting fieldwork? How do our experiences as ethnographers inform our teaching? And, in particular, can these practices be mutually transformative, such that the process of learning in the classroom coincides with the affects of ethnography?

Disentangling the barriers between research and education, I aim to show how a pedagogy focusing on starting points might facilitate relational and situated modes of learning. I reflect on the role of the introduction within a practice-led Masters course for Media Studies and Media Ethnography students. First run in the spring of 2020 and co-designed with film and television scholar Dana Mustata, the course is set up as a collaborative platform for engaging, curating, and producing original stories. The course’s aim is to provide a learning space for students to experiment with mixed-media and multimodal forms of (ethnographic) storytelling. The course is an elective, meaning that graduate students across myriad disciplinary backgrounds can enroll. As a result, few students know one another and ever fewer have experience conducting fieldwork and/or making stories using

non-discursive tools. The course material builds on practice-led and arts-based discourses in media studies, queer theory, and visual anthropology; the curriculum balances artistic work and academic texts, podcasts and blogs, essays and manifestos. With this patchwork curriculum (see: Günel, Varma, and Watanabe, 2020), we intend to center a sense of curiosity, generosity, collaboration, experimentation, serendipity, and, what filmmaker Agnès Varda (2018) calls, “inspiration and good mood”.

Over the course of two months, we guide students to make one story. The format, genre, length, and narrative are open-ended. The main parameter is that the story reflects fieldwork or an adjacent ethnographic approach. Rather than prescribing what a ‘good’ or ‘successful’ story is or can be, we encourage students to explore methodologies that welcome experimentation and fallibility. While some students use the course to refine established skillsets, we explicitly invite everyone to (also) engage with storytelling formats and practices they would like to workshop as beginners (Hölsgens, 2023).

Instead of grading the story on technical, formal, or theoretical merits, we ask students to submit a brief reflection on their story – discursive or otherwise. This includes questions such as, ‘How did your project develop from a sketch or thought into a story? What guided your creative practice? How did you go about choosing the form, modality, audience, and tone of voice?’ Some students write reflections using the format of an academic paper; others submit hand-written letters, voice recordings, moodboards, or zines; yet others embed the reflections in the story itself. Our hope is that such an invitation supports students to locate their storytelling practices in relation to not just the course (material), but also their worldly encounters and emplaced experiences. The overarching aim is to support graduate students in their efforts to articulate, design, and speculate stories they deem meaningful on an individual, academic, local, and societal level – like an ethnographer would.

Our course design offers an implicit critique of the conventional ways we structure coursework in higher education in the Netherlands, particularly in fields like media studies and the social sciences. The ritual of assessment in academia too often emboldens the metrification of success, rather than challenging it or offering generative alternatives. As a result, qualitative orientations can become dominated by measurable data. Subsequently, we tweaked some of the infrastructures we as educators seem to depend on. Considering other educators’ conscientious takes on deadlines (cf. Mattern, 2021; Stephens-Martinez, 2022), we break away from rigid submission dates and apply a soft deadline policy to give students the opportunity to submit their work on a rolling basis. However, we do recognise that some students benefit from a clear structure. So, if anyone is struggling with the parameters of the assignment (e.g. if a student needs a detailed timeline or set of assessment criteria), we allocate time and space to meet and help them find a generative framework for their project. It is within this context that I draw attention to the introduction as a pedagogical tool.

Where Do You Know From?

To attune to the classroom requires an attentiveness to emplacement, embodiment, and worlding. As education scholar Sarah Healy (2016, p.238) writes, “pedagogy emerges out of mutually constitutive assemblages of bodies, materials, media, affects, atmospheres, and space”. When co-designing our graduate course, such assemblages were at the heart of our considerations. For this reason, we decided to position the introduction as a core teaching tool. Specifically, this means that we start our course with a class activity formulated by Eugenia Zuroski (2020): *where do you know from?*

Informed by feminist and Indigenous teaching practices, Zuroski’s exercise offers a framework for introducing oneself within the context of learning spaces. Replacing the commonplace ‘Where are you from?’ or ‘Tell us something about yourself’ with the question ‘Where do you know from?’ draws attention to multiple ways of knowing and sites of learning. As Zuroski (2020, online) writes, “In writing up this exercise, I attempted to craft a document that insisted on the real, unquestionable presence of knowledge and intellectual agency in every person in the room, but allowed space for individuals to identify themselves as intellectual subjects in whatever terms they wished”. Zuroski offers the exercise to students by way of a handout. Students first take five to ten minutes to review the prompts, after which they introduce themselves to the person next to them. Then, everyone introduces themselves to the entire group.

The handout includes questions about pronouns, intellectual interests, and academic and non-academic preoccupations. Instead of focusing on what students have studied or achieved in the past, these questions allow for an introduction that is decidedly relational and contextual: *what are you fascinated by? Who or what brought you to your current ideas and thoughts? And what kind of communities are you committed to?* Zuroski’s (2020, online) document

echoes critical citation practices – encouraging all involved in teaching and research “to think about the work of accounting (for) where we know from”. We might enter classroom by ourselves, but that is not to say that learning is experienced as an individualist or autonomous praxis. Multiple first generation students in my courses have expressed the feeling that – when setting foot inside a university building – they feel as though family members are spiritually or emotionally joining them in their academic efforts. Completing a degree in higher education can be an achievement fostered by and felt across multiple generations. Or, to paraphrase Zuroski (idem), *where we know from matters*.

Within the curriculum of our graduate course, Zuroski’s questions offer a framework for students and educators to place themselves in the classroom. We specifically focus on the handout’s final question: “What else would you like us to remember and recognise about you when we engage in conversation with you?” (Zuroski, 2020, online). This question opens up a space for students and staff to collectively work towards a community agreement: how and on what terms do we hope to engage with one another? And what do we need to recognise about our peers in order to co-create a welcoming learning space? For Zuroski (2020, online), such questions are part of a larger effort to “hear how each member of the class invites us to address them, and to listen to the various kinds of knowledge, curiosity, and objectives that the group has brought to the table”. The exercise foregrounds learning as a shared responsibility – and, as I discuss below, a praxis likened to fieldwork.

By considering everyone’s starting points, we delve into the phenomenological question of orientation – as posed by Sara Ahmed (2006, p.543):

If we know where we are, when we turn this way or that, then we are oriented. We have our bearings. We know what to do to get to this place or to that. To be oriented is also to be oriented toward certain objects, those that help us find our way. These are the objects we recognize, such that when we face them, we know which way we are facing. They gather on the ground and also create a ground on which we can gather. Yet objects gather quite differently, creating different grounds. What difference does it make what we are oriented toward?

After the introductory seminar, we read and discuss Ahmed’s text on orientations. In so doing, we touch upon a range of questions: What affects the stories we tell? Why are we oriented by and toward certain things and people, and not others? How do the objects, atmospheres, lifeworlds, and sites we surround ourselves with feature in the stories we tell? When discussing Ahmed, the question ‘Where do you know from?’ often reverberates.

Responding to these sessions on beginnings and orientations, we start prototyping a community agreement, which exists as a living document and emerges from the particular set of experiences and sensibilities in the classroom. We also invite students to experiment with free style writing and drawing during the first couple of sessions, with the aim to push back against the idea that academic work should be polished and thorough from the get-go. By making space for writings and sketches that might be messy, fragmentary, and erratic, we hope to offer an alternative to learning as a predominantly productive and goal-oriented praxis. Throughout the remaining eight weeks of class, students engage with multimedia material and use in-class discussions and activities as a springboard to develop their own story. As I’ll share below, reconsidering the introduction as a core pedagogical tool is deeply entangled with both the teaching practices at the heart of our course and the ethics of designing a story based on fieldwork.

Introductions: Take-Aways and Adaptations

Our course aims to provide a platform for scrutinising, curating, and producing multimodal stories – grounded in fieldwork. Over the course of a trimester, students develop practical skills to think about, with and through the notion of storytelling, while developing their own original projects. I found that the introduction as a teaching tool resonates with ethnography as a praxis. Below, I emphasise three main take-aways that hopefully encourage fellow educators to consider foregrounding the introduction as a pedagogical tool *of, for, and as* ethnography.

1) An Introduction of Ethnography

For some, the classroom is a site of radical possibilities. For others, it is a space for social mobility. For yet others, it represents a mostly intellectual or even economic transaction. Certain students and staff thrive because

of synchronous communication and the infrastructural norms of the seminar format; for others it reinforces experiences of anxiety, stress, or precarity. Such pedagogical insights translate into more everyday contexts as well: a bad night of sleep might frustrate one's joy of learning, as much as a good meal might give an energy boost needed to start a new course. Paraphrasing Terry Eagleton (1990), our starting points in education relate to the ways in which the world strikes upon our senses.

Acknowledging that students and staff enter the classroom in divergent ways means considering that a course can exist both at the center and periphery in the lives of those involved. Foregrounding students' points of departure is a way to learn about and respond to each other's spectrum of needs, hopes, and expectations – and build trust and solidarity along the way. It creates an opportunity for positioning the classroom not as an escape from students' everyday realities, but “as a space for honing and practicing skills to name, confront, and process social injustices outside of our class” (Sujata Chandras, 2021, p.92).

Each student brings their own lifeworld into a learning space, creating a unique configuration and set of relationships that are always evolving and mutually transformative. This insight reverberates some core ideas of ethnography. See, for instance, AAA's (2004, online) statement on ethnography: “Ethnographic inquiry focuses attention on beliefs, values, rituals, customs, and behaviors of individuals interacting within socioeconomic, religious, political and geographic environments”. By actively attending to their peers' lived experiences, students are introduced to ethnography as a sensibility and methodology. For most, the introductory exercise acts as their first encounter with a predominantly unfamiliar set of methods. Most of these students have a background in media and journalism studies: while they had interviewed people in other courses, the empirical research skills most dominant in their methodology were quantitative and survey-driven. As elicited in informal communication and student evaluations, Zuroski's introductory exercise and Ahmed's reading on orientations showed the relevancy of qualitative methods.

Throughout the course, the collective exercise proved to be a main point of reference when discussing ethnographic texts and anthropological theory. The attentive and contextual dimensions of the introductory exercise instilled a familiarity with the ethnographer's toolkit of listening with care, suspending immediate judgement, and acknowledging difference. Attending to someone introducing themselves fostered a specific relationality to one's peers and environment: one in which affirmation, solidarity, trust, and mutual respect (rather than distilled information) were the focus of attention. To paraphrase Sara Ahmed (2006), the exercise helped students to orient themselves within the sometimes hazy field of ethnography.

2) *The Introduction as a Transformative Modality*

In 1994, bell hooks published *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, a seminal piece scrutinising education as a practice of freedom and transformation. For hooks (1994, p.15), such emancipatory efforts include centering the well-being of all involved in teaching and learning: “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students”. Not unlike ethnography and the fieldwork experience, hooks claims that teaching involves acknowledging everyone's lived experience in the classroom; being vulnerable in the classroom; taking responsibility for the classroom. hooks' engaged pedagogy postulates that the classroom is a place for personal and collective transformation.

Positioning the introduction as a learning tool opens up a space for students with limited knowledge of ethnographic methods to experience what it might feel like to conduct fieldwork. Likening the classroom to the field means that students explore their positionality: who are they in relation to their peers, within the context of a classroom? The introduction is an ethical format to point towards the importance of rapport and trust, while attending to wellbeing, care, consent, and solidarity in a context of mostly unfamiliar faces. Moreover, the introduction is an affect – it stays with us, moves us, affords particular atmospheres and feelings. Education scholars Abdullah Bayat and Veronica Mitchell (2020, p.66) write how “affect permeates our teaching, leaving some moments to ‘glow’ for us, as they leave a mark on our teaching career, staying with us, leaving us to wonder about these events”. This, I believe, coincides with the transformative potential of ethnography.

The introduction fosters a situated pedagogy: like fieldwork, teaching depends on ethical modes of engagement with the people around us (Leijdekkers and Hölsgens, 2022). Moreover, highlighting the significance of introductions and beginnings also prevents students from getting blindsided by output and findings. Echoing

prefigurative politics and ethnographic sensibilities, our course positions end-goals as secondary. Instead, the emphasis is on praxis and method, which emerge from human idiosyncrasy and continuous experimentation. Throughout the course, I observed that the emphasis on introductions, starting points, and orientations fostered a shared sensibility among students to move beyond goal-oriented (and towards process-led) learning. This was later confirmed in some of the students' reflexive pieces.

3) *The Introduction as a Typology for Ethnographic Storytelling*

Introduction can be a core component for building a story. The exercise's principal idea (*where we know from matters*) offers a starting point to unpack how to go about telling stories. It matters where we begin – our story. Our graduate course operationalises these issues by considering some of the following questions: What affects the stories we tell? Why are we drawn towards certain issues, communities, genres? How can storytelling be a catalyst for considering our bearing in the world? And how does the infrastructure of a university course, including the spatial configuration of the classroom and its implied and denounced norms, intersect with the methods we use for storytelling? These questions are particularly generative in light of ethnographic storytelling.

The introduction as a typology serves as the cornerstone in most types of storytelling, including ethnographic vignettes. It plays a pivotal role in shaping one's narrative, setting the tone, and outlining relevant contextual details. When utilised effectively, the introduction helps both writer and reader to orient themselves, constructing shared parameters to explore the intricacies of complex socio-cultural phenomena. The stories we tell in class (and especially their beginnings or origins) help us think more critically and creatively about the genre of ethnographic storytelling (Hölsgens, de Wildt & Witschge, 2020). Drawing attention to storytelling as an academic mode of communication – as opposed to bare-boned knowledge transfer – creates significant shifts in student understanding of the course material. As anthropologist Jessica Chandras writes, “[storytelling] provided a means to shift individual perspectives on deeply personal, intimate, and integrated topics of identity and language to a collective experience of dialogue that resonated with the course material”. Similarly, the introduction as a teaching tool fosters an engaged and attentive relationality to the course material. Critically exploring the stories we tell (about ourselves and alongside those around us) expands our ethnographic sensibility, both within and beyond the classroom.

Conclusion: ‘Before We End This Class...’

The first rendition of our course took place in the spring of 2020, amidst the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we had planned to draw attention to the introduction as a teaching tool for months, it acquired unexpected and unprecedented meanings. For most students and for us as lecturers, this was the first course fully taught remotely. Moreover, as students from multiple disciplinary backgrounds enrolled, the course was a first encounter with most if not all of their peers. The teaching tool opened up a space for building solidarity from a distance.

In the years that followed, I've integrated this teaching tool in multiple fieldwork-related courses within and beyond anthropology departments. It goes without saying that the efficacy of the introduction as a teaching tool within anthropological education varies greatly across different groups and contexts. I've distilled some practical lessons from this tool, including:

- Some students experience the exercise as intimidating if they're confronted with it on the first day of class. Informing students beforehand by emailing the questions affords a timeframe for these students to prepare.
- Allowing space for non-verbal modes of communication is key. Some students feel more comfortable when sharing their thoughts asynchronously, in writing, or through drawing.
- Expecting all students to introduce themselves as per the instructions can be counterproductive. Offering an alternative timeline (or exercise) for these students afforded them the opportunity to attune to the sensibilities of the classroom on their own terms.
- While likening the classroom to a fieldsite can be generative, it's crucial to notice and discuss meaningful differences. In my teaching, this resulted in a session called, *But what happens in the field?*
- The size of a student cohort and the spatial configuration of the classroom affect the practical implementation of the exercise. The exercise especially works well in groups smaller than twenty to twenty-five people.

In conclusion, the introduction as a teaching tool fosters greater rapport and solidarity among students. This approach contributes to deepening students' comprehension of ethnography as a research method and sensibility, enabling them to engage with their peers *and* interlocutors in a conscientious manner. Additionally, the introductory exercise prompts students to reflect on their own positionality, encouraging a nuanced understanding of their worldviews – in relation to those of their peers. Finally, focusing on everyone's starting points, including the issue of orientation, is a way of foregrounding the importance of the introductions and beginnings of storytelling. Reconsidering the introduction as a teaching tool not only fosters a deeper understanding of ethnographic methods, but also contributes to a more welcoming classroom.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank Judith Leijdekkers for the numerous conversations on critical and situated pedagogy. I am also grateful for the Master's students in Media Studies and Media Ethnography: their contributions to the course made for a joyful and inspiring teaching experience.

Disclosure statement:

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Teaching Anthropology 2024, Vol. 13, No. 1, 106-112.

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