

The Craft of Teaching. Cultivating Uncertainty and Moving in Playfulness as Pedagogical Strategy

Lydia Maria Arantes

Department of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology, University of Graz, Austria

Abstract

I have long tried to move away from teaching as “passing on knowledge” and moved towards practicing teaching as co-creating knowledge. I have come to regard teaching as a joint act of exploration, also taking into account students’ everyday life experiences. In the last academic year, I decided to expand my pedagogy by including playfulness. This required openness and vulnerability on behalf of me as the person developing the course as well as a new kind of engagement and involvement on behalf of my students. In doing so, the courses opened up space for making visible “epistemological journeys” (Arantes, 2021) and “liminal knowledges” (Burgos-Martinez, 2018). In this paper I give insights into some of the chosen approaches – of which a few involved playing with the idiom ‘business before pleasure’ – and reflect on their implications. I suggest that anthropology not only move within playfulness in the realm of research and representation but also on the level of teaching. Ultimately, I also reflect on what learning and teaching playfully and giving space to *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1950) can teach us about the broader role of play for anthropology.

Keywords

Anthropological pedagogy; playfulness; peripheral learning; productive uncertainty; epistemology; tools

Prologue

The best and clearest-shaped memories I have of high school are of my French classes with Mr. Picout. He was in some ways very old-fashioned, in other ways very progressive. For the first year he would have us learn passages of the textbook by heart and make us recite them word by word at the written exams, three times per semester. It was tedious at first and seemed very outdated, even back then in the end-1990s. Having internalized the basics after a while, we then were allowed to write our own texts in preparation, and then we recited these ones at the written exams until we were finally skilled enough to write freely at exam time.

Apart from reciting texts – from the textbook or our own – in writing, he also made us recite them in performative ways, his progressive side. We learnt French by regularly performing mini plays in front of our peers. At first, we performed little sketches taken straight from the book. Year after year, our French got better, our skills became more playful and we wrote our own plays dealing with certain given topics in mostly humorous ways. However, our creativity was most spurred by the fact that his assessment system allowed for extra points when bringing stage props. Thus, on presentation day, we’d drag along bags and bags of stuff in order to complement and enrich our performance.

I have very fond memories of these times, and this has made me think about the modes through which we make lasting learning experiences in “traditional” teaching and learning settings such as schools and universities. More concretely, it makes me wonder about the role of the body and performance in these very settings. More on this later on.

Learning to Teach

In Austria, where I was born and raised and where I obtained most of my academic education, it is still pretty much assumed that you have the skills to teach anthropology once you have obtained a degree in anthropology.

Never having had any sort of Higher Education training, I took positive and negative guidance in my own experiences as a student when I started teaching in 2011. Judging from that, I knew that I hadn't benefitted very much from presenting one text per semester per course and listen to fellow students present their texts throughout the course of the semester. I had become suspicious towards this idea of transmitting knowledge, of merely giving and receiving ready-made knowledge as if it were an object we can pass on and take in as we go. Back then I knew nothing of Ingold's (2018) very same critique which he, among others, bases on the philosopher Dewey (e.g., 1929 [1916]) and his emphasis on learning as experience and vice versa. I merely had a hunch, that knowledge must pass through the body in order to have a chance to sediment or at least to make a difference. It needs to be experienced.

Having been socialized in a discipline that puts at its heart the lived experience of everyday life, its banalities and things-taken-for-granted, I wanted to make room for these experiences in the courses I was going to teach. Adopting one of the principles of ethnographic fieldwork – attending to lived realities in an explorative and open way –, I came to regard teaching as a joint act of exploration, also taking into account, or much rather, putting centre stage students' and at times also my everyday life experiences. Thus, I always invite students to regard the texts we discuss as looking glass through which to perceive and understand their own lived realities, their everyday lives and experiences in novel ways.¹

In line with Jacob (1995) I regard "teaching as an opportunity to apply anthropology". This requires us to "link anthropological theory and research in our teaching practice" and it "requires our pedagogy to be student-centered" (p. 106). The approach I have developed over the years is to continuously encourage students to interweave the theoretical with the empirical and vice versa, and thus putting Sara Ahmed's (2017) expansion of the classical feminist slogan "the personal is political" into "the personal is theoretical" (p. 10) into practice. Bringing everyday experiences into the classroom and learning to re-frame them, especially for new students, is also a quite unsettling exercise as it deconstructs their preestablished ideas of what counts as "scientifically relevant", "scientifically valuable" or even "scientific knowledge" altogether.

"Passing through the body" therefore, means associatively following the threads leading out from ourselves and interconnecting them with the readings; it means close engagement with each other in dialogue; it means sharing our own experiences and trying to make sense of them in light of new theoretical frameworks; it means making ourselves vulnerable and opening ourselves up towards the uncertain of what we might make of what we share; it means learning to navigate in "transitory spaces" (Burgos-Martinez, 2018, p. 57), spaces where "learning (...) as a process of certainty" (p. 62) is questioned and "liminal knowledges" (p. 57) are consciously made room for.

In hindsight, I probably owe the early move away from teaching as "passing on knowledge" towards practicing teaching as "co-creating knowledge" also to my novice status as a teacher at the time. I just didn't feel I had much "to give" as I had sat in the students' chairs myself not that long before. I barely felt competent enough to fulfil the role of a teacher whose image for me was that of an intellectual and knowledgeable figure. In some ways, I have always regarded myself as a student ever since. And reading up on Ingold (2018) again, I see that what I have been striving to create over the years are "communities of equals", a space "in which each is different, and each has something to give" (p. 46).

When I returned to teaching last October, I decided to do things yet a bit differently as I found there was still room for improvement – for my students and also for me. *Lustvolles Lehren und Lernen* (pleasurable/playful teaching and learning) became my new credo. This meant connecting the What and the How of teaching – content and pedagogy – in new ways.

Designing a Course

In the winter term 2022, I was to design a new course which I entitled *Home Office, Heimarbeit, Nicht-Arbeit. Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven auf Arbeit* ("Working From Home, cottage industry, non-work. Historical and contemporary perspectives on work"). It took the pandemic working from home as a starting point from which to work through a handful of perspectives of the anthropology of work. I spent as much time on the form (the How, pedagogy) as on the substance (the What, contents). Being a musician myself, I have always been inclined to pay attention to the How. There is no music if you do not care about how you play, or if you do not phrase

¹ In her teaching, Carole McGranahan (2014) pursues similar pedagogies which bring *doing ethnography* into the classroom and ought to teach "ethnographic sensibilities without fieldwork".

the melody and try to understand where it moves towards. If you neglect the How in music, then there is just a sequence of musical notes – the What.

In terms of contents, I approached the topic along the lines of commonly held dichotomies and their disruptions, among others: (1) work vs. home, disrupted by phenomena such as telework and cottage industries (*Tele/Heim/Arbeit*), (2) work vs. leisure or play², contemporarily questioned by gamification of work and workification of games, (3) housework and care work as still strongly gendered “non-work”, etc. While none of the texts were specifically geared towards the pandemic, they were to provide us conceptual tools and looking glasses through which to grasp the pandemic aspect of whichever topic we were discussing in the respective unit. That’s where the question of pedagogy comes in. In order to better comprehend the pandemic aspect of the course I had students bring in pandemic practice- and memory-infused “stuff” (in a *very* broad sense), much like the stage props we brought with us to French class at the time.

My original idea was to jointly discuss the chosen literature in reading group style in the first hour of the unit (I only had 5 students!). In the second hour, the pleasurable and playful half, we’d then work with the manifold stuff the students and I would bring with us and interweave our reflections and analyses of it with the previously discussed concepts and approaches from the readings. Sidenote: In what follows I refer to these “bring-alongs” as *gifts* as the chosen German term *Mitbringsel* – the thing that was brought along – might also be translated as such. As we were receptive towards the *Mitbringsel*, I suggest the gifts do qualify as gifts in an anthropological sense. We received, acknowledged and cared for them, the stories they conveyed and as well as their presenters.

However, in separating the text discussion from the “gifted” part, pleasure and playfulness would be relegated to the role of “reward for hard intellectual work” happening beforehand. Making space for them would be dependent on having gone through hardship first. However, already Huizinga (1956) argued that play only qualifies as play if it is not in function of anything else (see also Graeber, 2016, p. 229). With Work at the heart of our joint intellectual endeavour it was, therefore, going to be much more (epistemologically) worthwhile to play with and question the still commonly held idiom or, more suitably, the prevalent (Christian) dogma “business before pleasure”. This meant thinking newly about how to relate discussing literature on work (the academic work) to the pleasurable and playful approach (the pedagogy enriched by gifts and the threads of thought leading out from them). How to work on work with pleasure? How to playfully work on work without reproducing the dichotomy of work vs. play or business vs. pleasure? Could we find ways to bring the playful into the work on work?

Creating Bloom Spaces

I have been using the pleasurable and the playful interchangeably. Both adjectives and approaches articulated in them become meaningful in relation to the context within which they operate – Higher Education front-of-class teaching approaches or other “conventional” approaches which rather deny or suppress the presence of bodies, student biographies, emotions, memories. As such, they function as relational sister-concepts which gain their particular meaning within the historically grown academic context within which they are deployed, namely a space governed by reason and seriousness devoid of sentient bodies. The pleasurable as well as playful³ bring the experimental, the experiential, the imaginative, the explorative (see also Martínez, Frederiksen & di Puppò, 2021) and the performative into the classroom.

So, what did I ask them to bring along?

When dealing with the broad concept of work and starting with delineating the term theoretically, students were asked to bring in Social Media posts, media reports, Tweets, Instagram Posts etc. and hence we reflected on the discursive surface on which the topical complex of work in pandemic times was publicly negotiated.

² Work, play and leisure are central concepts and modes of experience through which actors experience and make sense of their life(world)s in Western industrialized societies. This should not hide the fact, however, that more tribal and agrarian societies might see work and play in very different ways; among others, play might be seen as part of the seriousness of life; see e.g., the elaborations of Turner (1974, pp. 62–64).

³ By choosing the playful over play I wish to go beyond the common-ground association of play/ing with games. See also Sutton-Smith (2004, p. 4) who reveals a diversity of phenomena that are often said to be forms of play by covering a range of categories such as entertainment, recreations, pastimes, hobbies, or, on another level, states of mind, activities or events which hardly allow for any clear boundaries to be drawn. In his extensive list, he also features activities such as: writing to pen pals, watching videos, reading, sailing, handicrafts.

When discussing telework and cottage work – the German term *Heimarbeit* might in some cases actually denominate both aspects – students were invited to bring in things which for them, or based on informal conversations in their everyday environment, stand for working from home in Corona times. One student brought along a novel by Elfriede Jelinek which is set in the 1970s and illustrates the entanglement of notions of femininity and the male bread-winner model. Another student took her calculator with her as she was studying for her A-levels during lockdowns. Yet another one brought a coffee cup-to-go which she took with her on her walks during lockdowns – one of the only outdoor activities allowed by authorities at the time. For her, the cup materialises and symbolises the freedom she gained through moving about the city. Another student brought along earrings handcrafted by two young girls who, building on their hobby, opened a small business during the pandemic and thus exemplify how cottage industries in a way are still alive, especially in times of economic distress.

When discussing care work, students were encouraged to bring along notable scenes – everyday situations from within the pandemic context which left traces in their memory. The original and too ambitious aim was to then develop short scripts and perform them in class. We mostly resorted to recounting the scenes or, in the case of one very motivated senior student, performed a script she had already written while preparing for class.

At the beginning of the semester, we felt most comfortable with adhering to the usual schedule of reading group first and “fun part” afterwards. In the course of the semester we, however, became bolder. It was the unit on leisure and play that finally helped us crack the corset that “business before pleasure” had put us in. I had asked them to bring along activities (allowing also games and fun stuff) plus props born out of the pandemic context that can be carried out in class. *Et voilà*, gradually leaving behind “the need to legitimise playfulness by instantly framing it as academically useful”⁴, as one student noted in her reflection, all of a sudden, we were playfully mingling the discussion of the readings with the introduction and reflection of the gifts we had brought into the group. We had managed to create a space safe enough for the students to feel sufficiently comfortable in order to take initiative in changing the course of the class by sharing thoughts relating to the texts or the gifts. We started the respective unit in an unconventional way: We began with an anthropological guessing game and from there hopped to playing *Uno*, to doing meditation exercises, to breathing exercises, while in parallel interweaving two texts on the subject matter of leisure from both a historical and an ethnographic perspective. And all the while we also debated about the role the gift activities played in the pandemic everyday life and work-from-home context.

We had created a “bloom space”, a space “where the senses come to the surface, new lessons are learnt, different priorities emerge, connections and adjustments are made: where we understand ourselves and others differently with new depth, clarity and calm, despite the circumstances” (Rana & Hackney, 2018, p. 150). In the midst of the work-then-play corset which we had set out to disrupt but had difficulty with accomplishing at first, we had finally managed to lend ourselves to vulnerability, at last letting uncertainty and playfulness take hold of us.

The pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1926 [1916]) for whom uncertainty plays a central role for thinking and learning once wrote:

To say that thinking occurs with reference to situations which are still going on, and incomplete, is to say that thinking occurs when things are uncertain or doubtful or problematic. (...) Since the situation in which thinking occurs is a doubtful one, thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating. (...) It also follows that all thinking involves a risk. Certainty cannot be guaranteed in advance. The invasion of the unknown is of the nature of an adventure; we cannot be sure in advance. (pp. 173–174)

Lending ourselves – which includes the students as well as me – to uncertainty, insecurity, unplannability does hold great potentials for creating an environment which makes space for emergent learning (Mäkelä & Löytönen, 2017). However, it also demands a letting go of the need of feeling oneself to be in control (of the collective learning journey as well as the outcome).

Reconciling Body and Mind Through Tools

Having already learnt to feel more comfortable with not being in control over the classes and the way they unfold, I decided to build this kind of productive uncertainty into my next course right from the start, organically integrating work and the playful from the very beginning. Let me provide some background first:

⁴ Renate’s reflection, 03.11.2022.

“The disappearance of tools from our common education is the first step toward a wider ignorance of the world of artifacts we inhabit”, writes philosopher and mechanic Matthew Crawford (2009) in the opening pages of his book *The Case for Working with Your Hands*.⁵ This is even more the case for academia in general and more particularly for the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften* in German, which literally translates as Sciences of the Mind).

As an anthropologist teaching at a German-speaking Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology Department (pertaining to a Humanities Faculty), it always struck me, how much we know about the role embodiment plays in and for culture and how little we then make use of this in teaching. For my course in the summer term 2023, I decided to reconcile body and mind by allowing tools into my classroom. Based on my PhD research on knitting (Arantes, 2020b, 2020c, 2021) as well as my interest in the role of crafts in times of crisis (Arantes, 2020a, 2022), I developed a course entitled *DIY in Times of Crisis and Beyond*. Students and I would not only discuss crafting; we would put crafting at the heart of pedagogy. Deliberately creating a space of epistemic uncertainty⁶ which allows for “collateral exploration, diversions and imaginings” (Martínez, Frederiksen & di Puppò, 2021, p. 4), we developed our thinking from tool-guided making.⁷

Already during my research for my PhD thesis, I had become aware that thinking and hence learning (something new) always struck me in moments of transitions, never at my desk, never in a designated learning environment. Thinking and learning happen peripherally if we allow them to (Arantes, 2021; Hackney & Settingington, 2022). For the purpose of this course, this meant putting something else at the centre of attention and (temporarily) relegating the more intellectual realm to the peripheral, allowing it to gain momentum while being busy stitching together.⁸

In order to give space to these potential “happenings”, in other words, for serendipity to strike, I opted for the format of the workshop and designed the whole course as a *crafting circle* growing from a sequence of stitching sessions. Conceptualised as a “community of equals” (Ingold, 2018, p. 46), I included myself as participant in the crafting circle in order to level hierarchy as much as possible. On the one hand, I took inspiration from Hackney and Settingington (2022) who used communal stitching workshops to reflect on as well as promote well-being. On the other hand, I was also inspired by Prior (2022) who introduced “art-based ‘togetherness’ for wellbeing”⁹ (p. 266) into academic settings by way of weekly workshops for staff and students alike. He argues that in light of universities becoming more and more toxic, “creative activity might bring about essential change to combat a corporate hardening” (p. 257).¹⁰

Pahl, Steadman-Jones and Pool (2013) describe the workshop as a “holding form where things can come” (p. 85). In my case, the workshop is a holding form for experiencing, for thinking to come, for ideas to get hold of us. I pursued a similar agenda to what Graham et al (2015) portray as common reasons for resorting to the workshop as an organizational framework. They write, “at a basic level, the use of [the] word ‘workshop’ signals a desire that the space created is different from those academic staples, ‘conference’ or ‘seminar’; that the emphasis will not be on presentations and papers followed by questions and answers; that the ‘knowledge’ flow is not didactic or one way” (p. 405). Elsewhere they state that “what holds all uses of workshop together is that there is an element of transformation: of materials, of ideas or of people” (p. 404) involved.

Instead of using the seminar room I had originally booked, these workshops took place on my sofa in my office as I was lucky enough to have a group of students that comfortably fit in there (6 students, all female-presenting). The new setting ought to promote the emergence of a relatively – that is to say, in relation to conventional academic teaching spaces – *blank* space-time while undeniably making reference to a comfortable living room via the sofa and sofa table. Within this blank and yet cosy space-time new forms of attuning to the

⁵ Tools are such an important thing to think with because for French anthropologist François Sigaut, it is not the human who makes tools but tools who make the human human; tools were the beginning of the cultural process (Sigaut, 2012, as quoted in Marchand, 2022, p. 230, FN9)

⁶ For more perspectives on the role of uncertainty, (reasonable) uncomfotability or the creation of possibility spaces (via workshops) in the context of learning and / or making, see Burgos-Martinez (2018), Golubchikov (2015), Graham et al (2015), Hackney & Settingington (2022), Pahl et al (2013), Rana & Hackney (2018), Sinapius (2018), Singleton et al (2022)

⁷ For an extremely short fairy-tale account of this pedagogical strategy, refer to Arantes (forthcoming).

⁸ For more details on the pedagogical and technical reasons informing the choice of embroidery as well as the course in general, refer to Arantes (2023).

⁹ For literature on the nexus craft/wellbeing, consult e.g., Hackney et al (2022), Lincoln (2010), Rana & Hackney (2018).

¹⁰ Speaking as a crafter and an optimist, I like the hope he wants to offer with his chapter.

environment, of learning, and of knowledges might emerge, was my expectation. Besides, instead of content dissemination, I aimed for content to be worked with and worked from and for learning through transformation of the subject matter (Sinapius, 2018, p. 36) – also literally by actually shaping and transforming materials with our very hands.



Figure 1. Workshop setting of our thinking through stitching sessions (© Author)

Right in the first session, my students took matters into their own hands, stitching away with their marked readings ready from the start, weaving in their comments whenever suitable, pulling out their notebooks whenever needed in order to jot down a few thoughts, and kept going until the very end of the two full hours (see figure 1). Similar to Hackney and Settington (2022) as well as Buchczyk (2020), students and I observed that critical-reflexive thinking made its way into the room almost naturally; it claimed space without having to work hard for it. It simply emerged. The few moments of complete silence over the course of the semester, which we graciously managed to sustain without feeling the instant need to fill them with words, were nonetheless dense in meaning, which was also recognised and commented upon in the subsequent student reflections.

In weaving together the perspectives from the readings on DIY and making, memories of students' pandemic experience of making things at home as well as results of ethnographic exercises¹¹ right from the start, we not only “did our reading” but also carried out fieldwork in our classroom, similarly and yet differently from the course on working from home. The classroom became our joint field site, and it enabled us to cultivate our ethnographic sensibilities (McGranahan, 2014), to refine our perceptual abilities, to attune our senses to the environment as well as the actors who are part of it. Making and simultaneously observing the going on of making (and the post-classroom written reflections both students and I wrote) also allowed for the central ethnographic tenets to be practiced and refined: first of all, making the familiar strange and estranging the familiar, and secondly and more importantly, acting and observing (paying attention to others) at the same time.¹²

Changing the framework of learning also encouraged students to reflect on the circumstances enabling or disabling learning. While in “conventional” learning environments the setting itself is rarely critically assessed by students, this framework invited, or much rather, incited critical reflections of its epistemological value. This became most evident in the unit dedicated to methodological texts. Upon my enquiry why nobody was taking their embroidery into their hands, one student burst out that she needed to concentrate and could therefore not stitch simultaneously. The more students became familiarised with the text terminology, the more they loosened up and even started stitching. This unit made us aware that while stitching together mostly fostered critical thinking, at other times it inhibited thinking altogether – at least in the beginning.

¹¹ Such as eliciting tacit dimensions of DIY and making by conducting an interview according to Gore et al (2013) or developing a *chaîne opératoire* of a chosen practice guided by Coupaye (2022).

¹² Supper's (2023) use of the card game *Uno* in her skills training regarding *Doing Ethnography* serves the same purpose: nurturing students' abilities to embody this dual role of actor and observer at the same time.

While all of us recognised the skill and dexterity required for “good embroidery”, liberating ourselves from fixed definitions and pursuing a playful, at times even “messy” approach had the benefit of rendering visible our stitching trajectories. Threads and needles left traces of their movements on the flipside instead of hiding them and thus rendered perceptible the processuality of stitching (see figure 2), “visualised process”¹³, as Fabienne put it aptly in her reflection. As such, they answer to the wandering of our thoughts-in-progress and their articulations which were fearlessly travelling through the room, gradually evolving over time.



Figure 2. A student's embroidery from the front (freestyle cross stitch) and its messy flipside (© Julia Faßwald)

Teaching and learning while stitching together contributes to ongoing debates about the role of art for research and education. Holding back logocentrism and bringing the body, tools and with them the experiential, experimental and performative into the anthropological classroom, offers ways to reconcile body and mind in Higher Education and for “embodied and existential wisdom” (Pallasmaa, 2017) to take over. Bringing tools, materials and crafts into the classroom, ultimately, puts forward new ways of experiencing learning as an ever-evolving “feel-trip” (Golubchikov, 2015) and, as such, also as a continuing active bodily-sensory, affective and critical-reflexive knowledge creation process.

Cultivating Uncertainty

Concluding her text entitled *Learning Anthropology in Transitory Spaces*, Burgos-Martinez (2018) writes:

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. (p. 62)

Using uncertainty as a conscious pedagogical strategy is yet a different kettle of fish. Either way, teacher and students need to learn to inhabit these uncertain spaces and handle these uncertain, emerging knowledges. When I developed the course for which I asked students to bring along certain predetermined types of “gifts” each week, students suggested during the preparation meeting that they'd much rather choose the type of gift themselves each week. They craved more flexibility and I allowed it. Interestingly, instead of each student bringing along a type of gift of their choosing, they all brought the very type I had suggested for the respective unit in the first place. And they continued to stick to my original script, not making use of the freedom of choice they had negotiated. Similarly to my French classes in high school, where Mr. Picout's strict personal and professional behaviour provided us with a clear structure within which he allowed us room for playful

¹³ Fabienne's reflection, 27.04.2023.

improvisation, my students had found their way back to the preestablished rudimentary structure within which they could then playfully and creatively think of suitable gifts to bring along. This brings to light the creative tension between structure and anti-structure. A certain level of structure is needed in order for creative and playful engagement to be able to unfold.

Reflections of students on the hands-on approach in the DIY course suggest that this kind of “liminal pedagogy”, this “making oneself vulnerable”, the “opening up to what happens” does allow for more or a more holistic “educational benefit”. Kristina remarked that she at first was unsure whether she should remain in the course as she felt uncomfortable with the choice of embroidery on the one hand and with the fact that she was the only first-semester student in the group. In light of the other’s experience as well as what others were stitching, she said it was very hard at first to turn off her inner critic. But she stayed with the trouble and learnt to let go and to allow herself to claim space.

Regarding a more classical learning-related issue, Anja mentioned right at the beginning that she felt she memorized so many aspects we talked about in the first unit while stitching away and we tried to find out why. Our conclusion was that the spoken words are entangled with the unusually dynamic environment and the artefacts-in-the-making. And so, the memory of the words can also be accessed through remembering our bodily making practices and the artefacts-in-the-making.¹⁴

One of the other first unsolicited feedbacks was the general agreement that all students were very much looking forward to returning and continuing after the first session in which we had integrated stitching. None of us had realized that two hours had passed as none of it felt tedious. I didn’t realise I was “teaching”; my students didn’t realise they were sitting in class and “delivering”. The classroom became a possibility space for ideas to casually emerge and take space. We felt collective joy (Turner, 2012), as was noted frequently in the reflections, and nonetheless made “intellectual progress”.

Moreover, a special kind of power lies in performing stitching – a feminine and “merely ornamental, futile” craft – within a (still very much) masculine space such as academia, a space which furthermore has traditionally suppressed the body. Eschewing the pursuit of measurable productivity, we ultimately managed to create a micro-space of self-care. Especially in times of multiple overlapping crises, the so-called toxic university and the still “unfinished feminist revolution” (Federici, 2012), we should never get tired of learning and improving to practice self-care (see also Prior, 2022).

Epilogue

Martínez et al (2021) argue that social acceleration as well as the neoliberalisation of academia leave less and less space for exploration, diversion and imagination and advocate for the benefits of “staying in the in-between fringe” and cultivating indeterminacy on the one hand, and for working “beside the point” (p. 4) on the other hand. This also calls for methodological absence at times (Nolas & Varvantakis, 2021), or in my case, pedagogical absence in order to use the generative potential of what Martínez et al (2021) refer to as the peripheral in their edited volume. For our purposes, we might as well call it play. Moving within playfulness on the level of teaching gives space for emergent learning to unfold. Both courses provided a multi-dimensional and multi-scalar setting of exploration, participation, observation and reflection. In one of her reflections, Kristina who had no experience in ethnographic methodology at all, articulated that withdrawing from the stitching for a while and withstanding the urge to be productive oozing out of these academic walls eventually opened the doors to observation, to “simply observing”¹⁵, to paying close attention to what the others were doing. These sessions thus created something akin to condensed fieldwork labs which *en passant* allowed refining the very skills and techniques ethnographers need when carrying out research in fields “out there”.

The playful approaches to both courses made room for more agency, both mine and my students’. In an environment, where the idea is ever gaining strength that knowledge is prepared, delivered, and received, and where thus the educator more and more takes on the role of deliverer of ready-made knowledge, this kind of teaching felt like regaining sovereignty. With Ann Cvetkovich (2012) in mind, I would like to refer to this as “felt sovereignty” (p. 168), a kind of sovereignty rooted in our conscious corporeality. In both courses, students had

¹⁴ For further elaborations on the entanglement of memory and the senses and its use for teaching in anthropology, see e.g., Kilian (2018).

¹⁵ Kristina’s reflection, 20.04.2023.

to learn to direct the group's joint thinking in the ways they were most interested in, which did not come naturally to them at first. They learnt that learning happens proactively. Knowledge was not simply being made readily available by the teacher, it had to be sought actively. Armed with gifts or needles and threads, they learnt to take their learning matters metaphorically and literally into their own hands, all the while observing themselves and each other, discussing and reflecting.

Particularly introducing *crafting* into the seemingly bodiless academic realm in Higher Education Humanities furthermore prompts students and researchers to consciously reflect the epistemic role of the body, which may contribute to a long-needed recognition of the researcher's subjectivity in a realm where subjectivity is played off against objectivity, neglecting that subjectivity is "the royal road to an authentic, rather than fictitious, objectivity" (Devereux, 1967, p. XVII).

Succumbing to learning as a non-structured and non-controlled happening recognises "learning as the unpredictable and experimental process, opening up to new, emergent possibilities beyond the already known" (Mäkelä & Löytönen, 2017, p. 255). Especially in light of technological innovations such as AI and ChatGPT which are becoming more and more mainstream by the minute, cultivating uncertainty means reimagining the educator's role: from the transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of environments for emergent learning, or as Ingold (2018) drawing on Maschellein would formulate it: an "architect of *scholē*" (p. 46). Rethinking education as the provision of multifaceted learning settings, which rather than excluding the body uses its epistemological potential, also contributes to a more regenerative form of scholarship (Gatt & Allen, 2019). Reframed with Haraway (2016): "Perhaps it is precisely the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible" (pp. 23–24). In the same way that Golubchikov (2015), argues in favour of experiential, affective and critical "feel-trips" instead of "mere" fieldtrips, and much in line with my French teacher Mr. Picout with his performative pedagogy, I advocate for implementing the principle of the "feel trip" into our classrooms and of making learning a bodily-grounded and thus experiential undertaking wherever it may take place.¹⁶

Exchanging and reflecting (on) gifts as well as thinking through stitching (and vice versa) has come to serve as a low-threshold approach for students to learn to think, reflect and critique. It empowers them to develop their own voice without feeling judged. The multiplicity of student voices is given space and, one might infer, marginal voices will find it easier to articulate themselves and to be heard. Especially for students equipped with less eloquent cultural capital, this approach might serve as a vehicle for them to feel "more up to the game" much quicker. Employing more of those pedagogies might therefore lead to university becoming more inclusive to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We might even draw the (preliminary) conclusion that a (re)introduction of tools and crafting into the academic setting contributes to a more socio-economically egalitarian university and academic education altogether.

This brings me to the last point I want to address, namely, what teaching playfully and giving space to *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1956) can teach us about the broader role of play for anthropology. Times, spaces and feelings of uncertainty have always marked ethnographic work and we should allow for this in teaching too (see also Burgos-Martinez, 2018). This brings a certain degree of uncomfotability with it, especially for the educators who – judging from my own experience – would rather feel to be soaked in the very knowledge they ought to "pass on". However, in order for learning to occur and wisdom to emerge, in order to be seized by ideas and insights we'd better see teaching as the provision of spaces of uncertainty, spaces that then might transform into bloom spaces. Anthropology naturally inhabits a grey zone and cultivates the vast space between often taken-for-granted and reality-shaping dichotomies. In this sense, playful approaches and deliberately creating spaces in-between for the yet unknown to emerge also do more justice to the kind of intellectual project that anthropology is. Now more than ever, anthropology should confidently inhabit this zone and cultivate ambivalence (Kierans & Bell, 2017).

¹⁶ We need to be aware, however, that making room for the experiential domain in the classroom requires educators to be at least aware of if not trained in how to deal with unexpected emotional responses by the students. This is, in part, also reflected in Kilian (2018). One other way to handle potentially delicate situations is to get inspiration from ethno-psychoanalytical approaches (e.g., Bonz et al, 2017) which use emotions as their central asset. See also: Singleton et al (2022) and Spencer (2011).

Acknowledgments

I thank the Department of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at the University of Graz for giving “the space to allow [me] to explore such innovative approaches”, as one of the reviewers put it, and the two anonymous reviewers for their incredibly enthusiastic feedback. Furthermore, I express my gratitude to Joy Hendry for her encouragement to publish this piece as well as to Caroline Gatt and Barbara Grabher for generously lending me their ears when preparing the DIY course. Last but not least, I thank my students for being open to our learning adventure, for thinking along and also for giving me permission to use their photos.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11g9836>
- Arantes, L. M. (2020a). Learning to Dwell with Micro-Organisms. *Anthropology in Action*, 27(2), 40–44. <https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2020.270206>
- Arantes, L. M. (2020b). Unraveling Knitting: Form Creation, Relationality, and the Temporality of Materials. *Journal of American Folklore*, 133(528), 193–204. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.133.528.0193>
- Arantes, L. M. (2020c). On Knitted Surfaces-in-the-Making. In M. Anusas, C. Simonetti (Eds.), *Surfaces. Transformations of Body, Materials and Earth*, (pp. 152–166). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315646947-10>
- Arantes, L. M. (2021). Desiring the absence of knowledge: On knitting ethnographies and navigating diaries. In F. Martínez, L. Di Puppò, & M. D. Frederiksen (Eds.), *Peripheral methodologies: Unlearning, not-knowing and ethnographic limits*, (pp. 63–80). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103646-7>
- Arantes, L. M. (2022). Das pandemische Brotbacken: Liminalität und Communitas in Corona-Zeiten. In J. Beuerbach, S. Gülker, U. Karstein, & R. Rösener (Eds.), *Covid-19: Sinn in der Krise: Kulturwissenschaftliche Analysen der Corona-Pandemie*, (pp. 267–281). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110734942-015>
- Arantes, L. M. (2023). Stitching Together (in) Anthropology Class: On the Use of Craft Practices in Higher Education Humanities. *FormAkademisk. Journal in Design Research & Design Education Research*, 16(4), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.5386>
- Arantes, L. M. (forthcoming). The un-forgotten threads and needles. In S. Winkler-Reid, C. Gatt, E. M. ElSehamy, C. Shore, A. Dawson, C. Morelli, T. Ingold, S. Dennis, & S. Venkatesan (Eds.), *Anthropology Educates*. Routledge.
- Bonz, J., Eisch-Angus, K., Hamm, M., & Sülzle, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Ethnografie und Deutung: Gruppensupervision als Methode reflexiven Forschens*. Springer VS. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-15838-5>
- Buchczyk, M. (2020). Making Certainty and Dwelling through Craft. *Journal of American Folklore*, 133(528), 178–192. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.133.528.0178>
- Burgos-Martinez, E. (2018). Learning anthropology in transitory spaces: Uncertain knowledge in Higher Education. *Teaching Anthropology*, 8(1), 57–63. <https://doi.org/10.22582/ta.v8i1.532>
https://www.teachinganthropology.org/ojs/index.php/teach_anth/article/view/532
- Coupaye, L. (2022). Making ‘Technology’ Visible. Technical Activities and the Chaîne Opératoire. In M. H. Bruun, A. Wahlberg, R. Douglas-Jones, C. Hasse, K. Hoeyer, D. Brogård Kristensen & B. Ross Winthereik (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of the Anthropology of Technology*, (pp. 37–60). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7084-8>
- Crawford, M. B. (2010). *The Case for Working with Your Hands: Or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good*. Viking.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2012). *Depression: A Public Feeling: A public feeling*. Duke University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1926 [1916]). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. The Macmillan Company.
- Federici, S. (2012). The Unfinished Feminist Revolution. *The Commoner*, 15, 185–197.

- Golubchikov, O. (2015). Negotiating critical geographies through a “feel-trip”: experiential, affective and critical learning in engaged fieldwork. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 39(1), 143–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2014.1003800>
- Gore, G., Rix-Lièvre, G., Wathélet O., & Cazemajou A. (2013). Eliciting the Tacit: Interviewing to Understand Bodily Experience. In J. Skinner (Ed.), *The Interview: An Ethnographic Approach*, (pp. 127–142). Berg Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003087014-8>
- Graeber, D. (2016). *Bürokratie: Die Utopie der Regeln*. Klett-Cotta.
- Graham, H., Hill, K., Holland, T., & Pool, S. (2015). When the workshop is working. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 15(4), 404–415. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-06-2015-0043>
- Hackney, F., Rana, M., Gant, N., & Hill, K. (2022). Guest Editorial. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 13(3), 283–290 (Special Issue: Well-Making and Making-Well. Craft, Design and Everyday Creativity for Health and Well-Being). https://doi.org/10.1386/jaah_00111_2
- Hackney, F., & Settingington, L. (2022). Crafting with a purpose: How the ‘work’ of the workshop makes, promotes and embodies well-being. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 13(3), 307–324. https://doi.org/10.1386/jaah_00113_1
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Huizinga, J. (1987 [1938]). *Homo ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*. Rowohlt.
- Ingold, T. (2018). *Anthropology and/as education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315227191>
- Jacob, E. (1995). Teaching Anthropology: And Opportunity to Apply Our Discipline and to Research That Practice. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 26(1), 105–111.
- Kierans, C., & Bell, K. (2017). Cultivating ambivalence. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7(2), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau7.2.006>
- Kilian, C. (2018). Exploring Sensory Memories: Acting Lessons for Anthropologists. *Teaching Anthropology*, 8(1), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.22582/ta.v8i1.448>
- Lincoln, A. (2010). Body techniques of health: Making products and shaping selves in northwest Alaska. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 34(2), 39–59. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1003911ar>
- Mäkelä, M. & Löytönen, T. (2017). Rethinking materialities in higher education. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 16(2), 241–258. https://doi.org/10.1386/adch.16.2.241_1
- Marchand, T. H. (2022). *The pursuit of pleasurable work: Craftwork in twenty-first century England*. berghahn.
- Martínez, F., Di Puppò, L., & Frederiksen, M. D. (Eds.). (2021). *Peripheral methodologies: Unlearning, not-knowing and ethnographic limits*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103646>
- Martínez, F., Frederiksen, M. D., & Di Puppò, L. (2021). Introduction: Welcome to the corners of the peripheral. In F. Martínez, L. Di Puppò, & M. D. Frederiksen (Eds.), *Peripheral methodologies: Unlearning, not-knowing and ethnographic limits*, (pp. 1–14). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103646-1>
- McGranahan, C. (2014). What is Ethnography? Teaching Ethnographic Sensibilities without Fieldwork. *Teaching Anthropology*, 4(4), 23–36. <https://doi.org/10.22582/ta.v4i1.421>
- Nolas, S.-M., & Varvantakis, C. (2021). “This parenting lark?: Idiomatic ways of knowing and an epistemology of paying adequate attention. In F. Martínez, L. Di Puppò, & M. D. Frederiksen (Eds.), *Peripheral methodologies: Unlearning, not-knowing and ethnographic limits*, (pp. 45–60). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103646-5>
- Pahl, K., Steadman-Jones, R., & Pool, S. (2013). Dividing the drawers. *Creative Approaches to Research*, 6(sig1), 71–88.
- Prior, R. W. (2022). Detoxing University Through Creative Engagement. In A. P. Francis & M. A. Carter (Eds.), *Mental Health and Higher Education in Australia*, (pp. 257–271). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-8040-3_15
- Rana, M., & Hackney, F. (2018). Making and Material Affect: From Learning and Teaching to Sharing and Listening. In R. W. Prior (Ed.), *Using Art as Research in Learning and Teaching: Multidisciplinary Approaches Across the Arts*, (pp. 145–161). Intellect. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv36xvzf5.14>

- Sigaut, F. (2012). *Comment Homo devint faber: Comment l'outil fit l'homme*. CNRS Editions.
- Sinapius, P. (2018). 'Not sure': The Didactics of Elusive Knowledge. In R. W. Prior (Ed.), *Using Art as Research in Learning and Teaching: Multidisciplinary Approaches Across the Arts*, (pp. 30–41). Intellect.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv36xvzf5.7>
- Singleton, B. E., Gillette, M. B., Burman Anders, & Blanes, R. (2022). Uncomfortable knowledge: Toward a Pedagogy of Reflexivity. *Teaching Anthropology*, 11(2), 73–85. <https://doi.org/10.22582/ta.v11i2.654>
- Spencer, D. (2011). Emotions and the Transformative Potential of Fieldwork: Some Implications for Teaching and Learning Anthropology. *Teaching Anthropology*, 1(2), 68–97. <https://doi.org/10.22582/ta.v1i2.301>
- Supper, A. (2023). Observing Uno: Practicing participant observation through a card game. *Teaching Anthropology*, 12(2), 11–16. <https://doi.org/10.22582/ta.v13i2.675>
- Turner, E. (2012). *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137016423>
- Turner, V. W. (1974). Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology. *Rice University Studies*, 60(3), 53–92.