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Trauma, Triggers and Tricky Terrains:
Reflections on Teaching on Violence, Rights and Anthropological Controversies.

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Abstract:
For the same reasons that action, thrillers and horror are among the more popular film genres, within anthropological teaching and research the vicariousness of anthropology is often amplified when we delve into violence, suffering and the morality of others. Over the past two decades I have taught across many themes and topics, but recurrent throughout and increasingly central to my teaching (as I became more specialised and gained more agency in designing curricula) have been violence, human rights and anthropological controversies. These are subjects that inherently deal with narratives and testimonies of violence and abuse of power, exploring traumatic events through prisms of history, theory and lessons to be learned. In a ten-week course spanning across centuries and continents it is inevitable that some of the suffering touched upon will relate to specific student's experiences and familial biographies. This reflective piece explores some of the lessons students have taught me, helpful practices I have developed along the way and thoughts about the problematic limits of ad hoc trauma-informed teaching.

Keywords: Teaching anthropology; teaching violence, teaching controversies, teaching human rights, trauma.

Introduction

As the Co-Editor-in-Chief of this journal I nearly let the opportunity to contribute to this Special Issue slip past me, then I realised there was some things I wanted to share that fitted with the goals of our Developing Teaching: Reports and Reflections submissions. This is very much a reflective piece, exploring my experiences of teaching trauma-adjacent material over the last two decades. I wanted to share my experiences in regards to content warnings – and how I've come to use them as a starting point for discussions rather than an end in themselves; I wanted to discuss the need to follow a student who has fled a classroom and what I think it shows about anthropology classrooms collective disposition towards trauma; and finally I want to share what I see as a need to incorporate hope and lightness into teaching that intrinsically focuses more on shade than light.

Most of the learning moments discussed in this paper are painted with broad brush-strokes. As time has passed I've lost contact with some of those students and staff involved in the stories that inform these observations, so rather than turning them into anecdotes (without their permission) I've leant towards an ethnographic vagueness that will no doubt infuriate ethnographers.

A Little Personal Background

I first started teaching anthropology in the early 2000's at the University of Sussex as a post-fieldwork PhD student. While I taught a number of modules on topics spanning from West African regional ethnography courses through to research methods courses, it was a module on human rights that really kicked my love of teaching into existence. I'd decided to take a shot at becoming an academic after Richard Wilson's units on political anthropology and human rights had opened my eyes to a more politically and globally engaged form of ethnography. I'd completed my doctoral fieldwork on a wave of lynchings (*linchamientos*) in Guatemala, which the UN had described as a 'new form of human rights abuse' (Godoy 2002) aiming for a rights-based PhD thesis. While conducting fieldwork it transpired that human rights agencies wanted little to do with lynchings as they were locally popular, the fundamental solution was better policing (for which there was no magic wand to fix)

and direct engagement with anti-lynching programmes risked burning bridges with local communities. As a result I found myself slowly traversing away from the anthropology of rights towards the anthropology of violence as my central research area.

In my early days as an Associate Tutor at Sussex (2004-2009), as a Teaching Fellow at Durham (2010-2012) and in my first year as a Lecturer at Goldsmiths (2012-13) I was always on fixed term contracts. For those who traversed from PhD's to postdocs to lectureships, managing to avoid the teaching route into academia, it is often hard to fathom the lack of solidity that these posts involve. You rarely get the chance to create your own module, instead being parachuted in as cover on pre-existing modules where you are constrained by existing handbooks and learning outcomes. Sometimes I was lucky and got to teach in my academic comfort zone of rights, violence and political anthropology – more often I would shoehorn these themes into ethics weeks in methods modules, or the intersections between families and violence in kinship courses. Teaching outside my comfort zone expanded my horizons and I came to love the breadth and diversity of anthropology in a way that still shapes my approach to the discipline. So while I admit these were probably the hardest years in my academic life – they were also incredibly rewarding and shaped me in immeasurable ways. My love of anthropological controversies (Weston 2019; Weston and Djohari 2020) emerged in these moments; my joy in the intersections between anthropology and popular culture bloomed in this soil; and my first forays into student/staff collaborations (Weston et al 2019) shaped the more experimental parts of my teaching.

In 2013 I became a permanent lecturer at Goldsmiths and things changed. The security of permanence meant I could design courses from the ground up. So from 2013 through to 2022 (when I left Goldsmiths for Bournemouth) I got to teach Anthropology of Rights and Anthropology of Violence modules entirely of my own making. The purpose of this autobiographical meander is just to ground my experiences in teaching on rights and violence. They have spanned seminars on other people's units, lectures and seminars tied to pedagogical scaffolding prepared by others, and more recently experience relates to lectures, seminars and other teaching where I had more autonomy. Autonomy in the UK Higher Education system still involves constraints regarding assessment forms, hours of contact time and hitting specific learning outcomes – but it is an autonomy that allows for teaching to take on an iterative form where experiences from one year feed into the next.

I loved teaching at Sussex and Durham, but I adored teaching at Goldsmiths. The main reason for this was the diversity found in the classroom. The diversity of a London base was reflected in the diverse background of local students, with international students adding to this and Foundation Year students, who came in from non-conventional academic backgrounds that skewed towards mature students. As a working class academic, I am always attuned to class within the classroom, and while at other institutions there had always been exceptions, at Goldsmiths a mixed class background was the norm. These combined factors meant there was always a mixture of backgrounds and experiences in any classroom, and when teaching on thematic courses this was always reflected in class discussions. Right from the beginning of my teaching, and across every institution I've taught at, there are always moments when teaching on violence and human rights abuses resonates with a student's experiences and risks creating aa negative learning environment. My reflections and observations here are based upon two decades of teaching experience.

Content Warnings as Perpetual Work in Progress

Doing a brief archaeology of my memory stick I can see the first iteration of my Violence course (taught in a Current Issues class at Durham in 2010) didn't contain any slides detailing issues regarding content, neither did the first iteration of my Controversies course at a similar time. The first iteration of a content warning I can find in my slides is from the Anthropology of Violence in 2015. I had always discussed content in seminars with students, but the shift to it being one of the first few PowerPoint slides in every iteration came about as a pragmatic decision responding to an obvious need. Over the years students had taken it upon themselves to disclose, either one-to-one or in seminars, about various experiences of violence touching upon more or less every form of violence covered in my courses. Whether this took the form of intimate violence, experiences of genocidal violence, intergenerational transmission of trauma from wars experienced by parents and grandparents or experiencing terrorist attacks, the more I taught the course the clearer it became that I could not second guess which topics might have personal bearing on students or how specific issues might directly affect them. One student got to the first mention of blood which came up in my second lecture and started retching. When this was unpacked I discovered it was a phobia that could be triggered by talking, seeing or reading about blood. Even if I could censor the lecture material I certainly couldn't censor the readings – but a brief discussion allowed for an informed decision to bow-out and sign up for another unit. While I've always flagged content,

front-loaded content warnings have become my pragmatic solution to pre-empt potentially traumatic and trauma-adjacent issues. Frontloading it in the course avoids constantly circling back to the issue and it allows for a place where I can flag my accessibility so that any students with particular issues can come and discuss them, and, if suitable, I can adjust or flag content within reasonable parameters.

Since this became my preferred method I realised it needed to be iterative, changing each year and refining it through conversations with students. Through discussions with students involved in an anti-racist movement we pruned all images of black and brown suffering from my lectures. My discomfort at leaving images of other minorities suffering led to me removing them too. This in turn led to me foregrounding a wider discussion about what images and wider content I would and wouldn't include and why. I began to use the space initially set up for content warning as a space to open up discussions regarding the suffering of others, the power of images and how we go about mutually building safe spaces to discuss these issues openly. Instead of taking on the mantle of the dominant white male lecturer telling people what to think I aimed to open up a space where power dynamics and certainties were open to discussion. This gave me a space to discuss my own uncertainties about why I felt OK showing them a film of Christopher Hitchens being waterboarded (Vanity Fair 2008) but felt unhappy showing them newspaper images of Leo Frank's lynching, or why I would show images of Black resistance and empowerment at Black Lives Matters protests but wouldn't be showing images of police brutality or white supremacist violence at similar events. In stating my own decisions, I opened up a space to discuss and refine my practices. It wasn't a full-proof approach – for example when students missed the first lecture much of this work could appear missing or in need of a refresh. Slowly, the space where content warnings were discussed became the space where the entire nature of teaching and learning about violence was unpacked. I'll admit to still being bemused by the primacy of images as a medium that seems to trigger more than texts (or me speaking) in detail about the same events or images – but saying this out loud to everyone opens a space to discuss these issues. Asking students why they think I personally respond to text and talk in a similar way to images, or why directly witnessing violence hits differently to these other representations, opens dialogue where students lean into other's ways of perceiving violence in the world.

When it came to co-authoring a book on controversies with Natalie Djohari (Weston & Djohari 2020) that we hoped would be useful in classrooms, it seemed obvious to include some sort of parallel content warnings and discussions of why we were flagging particular issues in the way that we were. As we covered issues of racism and colonialism at the heart of the anthropological canon, sexual misconduct by anthropologists and military collaboration among other issues and given that we hoped some of these might be used in classroom discussions it seemed appropriate to take a similar 'square bracketed warning followed by a more extensive delineation of why we had done so' approach in the shift to text. Content or trigger warnings are never going to be a one-size-fits-all approach to trauma (Laguardia et al 2017) – but where they are used I feel the act of unpacking the warning is more important than the warning itself. In a lecture this would take the form of any slide containing a content warning being an indication for a moment of pause to explain what was being flagged, why it had been flagged, and my rationale for doing so. This would be followed by offering up space to discuss it there-and-then if needed or later in the seminar if we wanted to return to it. This did not necessarily lead to any follow up discussion, but where it did it was always fruitful.

Always Follow a Distressed Student

Having lectured or taught on over 30 different modules, with most containing multiple iterations and a number of seminars I'm definitely close to my 1000th hour of lecturing and have many thousands of hours of seminars already under my belt. A majority have gone well, but I have certainly at times lost classes. Rarely for long, you tend to be able to win them back, but an argument in a seminar, a sub-par lecture when you're not feeling at your best or an over-reliance on outdated cultural touchstones are all missteps I've had to come back from. The times I've seen a lecturer lose a class the quickest have always come from how they treated students in distress. As a student I remember a lecturer shrugging as a distressed student left the class after a seemingly innocuous (but obviously problematic for the particular student) point in the lecture. They left the event hanging and tried to push through as if it never happened. The rest of the lecture was beset by mumbled discussions, the post-lecture analysis was harsh on the lecturer and subsequent attendance plummeted. I've seen it happen as a lecturer/tutor present in other people's lectures and as an audience member in public talks by academics – it always ends the same. As a result I've always followed any student who left a lecture in distress and I've never 'lost' a teaching group as a result of this happening. I've had students leave when I directly mentioned specific violent events they had witnessed or occurred close to home. I've also had students leave, obviously in distress, for unrelated reasons (such as a bad-news text coming in during the lecture). I've always followed – and never had an issue

with the classes where these events have taken place – even if it's taken me 15 minutes or more to return to the class. My take-home from this is that every teaching group I've had the pleasure to teach has been compassionate enough and aware enough of trauma to know that there are moments when compassion matters vastly more than teaching, and if you fail to recognise this you risk bringing into question your own moral compass. I have no idea if the same extends into other disciplines – but to me it says something about the worldliness of anthropology students that makes me feel warmly towards them. I have no doubt this increases the deeper one goes into potentially traumatic themes in teaching. Now I'm approaching a vintage where many of my former students are now lecturers, this is routinely a piece of advice that I pass on. If you act like nothing happened when something obviously did – you are (or are likely to be seen to be) complicit. It should go without saying that this one act of following is not the end point. Touch base with them in an appropriate form afterwards offering them a space outside of normal classes to chat with them later. Make sure they have someone to decompress with beyond campus and show them their emotional response was, if they want it to be, the beginning of a conversation and not the end.

Light and Shade

Throughout my years as an undergraduate student, postgraduate student, and subsequently as a tutor and lecturer my view regarding the need for moments of levity in such courses has remained unchanged. I've taught on modules that have led to students feeling a sense of melancholy or disempowerment. I co-taught on a development module where the critical content of the course led to upheaval. "The students' strong personal reactions ranged from intense introspection, frustration, disillusionment, and personal withdrawal, to defensive mocking, the rejection of anthropological inquiry and subsequent non-attendance" (Djohari 2011: 21). If theory, critique and contextual examples are all on the same vector, students experience of a course can be overwhelming, particularly in trauma-adjacent subjects. When teaching about more emotionally challenging subjects, one thing you have to ensure is that there is a mixture of light and shade. That is not to say that you are compelled to reach for cheap laughs, although humour is another path through these issues. More that you have to be conscious of the fact that intense reading materials and depressing lectures generally lead to despairing seminars and jaded students. When a class starts spiralling towards nihilism nobody wins. To counteract what can become the unremittingly bleak moments of studying modules framed around suffering you have to provide moments of hope. This can take the form of activists or organisers pushing back against violence or rights abuses. It can take the form of looking for flipped perspectives – listening to stories of post-conflict reconstruction, survivors overcoming challenges or individuals who have built lasting change. In my controversies course it took the form of looking at anthropologists whose work offered pragmatic solutions to the ethical situations encountered or examples that empower those formerly disempowered by anthropologists.

There are obviously limits to this – there is rightly a need to take pause and to approach the suffering of others with empathy – sadness, outrage and anger are appropriate responses to much of what we study. But if there is no hope of avoiding repeating patterns of violence, human rights abuses or gross ethical failures of anthropologists then teaching these subjects can feel like voyeuristic complicity. While I scatter moments of hope throughout these courses I tend to aim towards a more future oriented crescendo. What can we take from the mistakes of others? What can be done differently? These are the more structural aspects I try to build into course design now.

Conclusion

I am sure there are many hundreds, thousands even, of anthropologists out there teaching on similar topics whose experiences will be radically different to mine. My musings here are intended to offer a potential insight that might help frame others' teaching, and as the Co-Editor-on-Chief of the journal I would love to see parallel hard-learned-lessons shared to help others along their teaching paths. There is some wonderful reflections on trauma-informed anthropological pedagogies emerging at the moment (Trundle & Vaeau 2023; Yankovskyy 2023) that show this is an important topic for an inclusive discipline to grasp. What I hope to have shown here is that my teaching has adapted over the years to better accommodate the needs of students through active discussion of these issues with those students. We are used to changing examples in our lectures so they fit better, feel more inclusive, or demonstrate our points better. It is not a big step to thinking about our teaching practices relating to potentially problematic themes as similarly iterative. If others have similar reflections they would like to share – this journal is very receptive to such contemplations.

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