

Incorporating elements of heuristic research in teaching Anthropology

LEONIDAS SOTIROPOULOS

*Department of Educational Sciences
and Early Childhood Education
University of Patras
Greece
lsotir@upatras.gr*

ABSTRACT

An examination is presently attempted of whether anthropological teaching may to some extent blend well with elements of heuristic research. Since heuristic research gives emphasis to personal involvement and focuses on queries pertinent to the individual, it could possibly enhance the usefulness of any anthropological knowledge a student receives. Such an approach would perhaps be more fitting for teaching at a university level, providing an interesting addition to anthropology courses that are not addressed to would-be anthropologists.

KEY WORDS

Anthropology, teaching, heuristic research

RÉSUMÉ

Nous examinons si l'enseignement de l'anthropologie peut – dans une certaine mesure – bénéficier de l'introduction d'éléments issus de la recherche heuristique. Étant donné que la recherche heuristique se réfère à l'implication personnelle et se centre sur des questionnements propres à l'individu, une telle introduction pourrait enrichir l'utilité d'un savoir anthropologique reçu par les étudiants. Cette approche pourrait être appropriée particulièrement à un enseignement universitaire, apportant une nouvelle dimension à des cours d'anthropologie donnés surtout à des personnes qui ne se destinent pas à devenir des anthropologues.

MOTS-CLÉS

Anthropologie, enseignement, recherche heuristique

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

As with teaching any subject, so also with anthropology, it is imperative that the scope and aims of the educational act have to be specified. To the extent that teaching anthropology does not serve exclusively one specific purpose and addresses itself to different groups, various educational approaches have evolved. Obviously in tertiary education a main aim of anthropology university Departments is to provide the professionals that will serve and promote the discipline. Still, the intension to stimulate interest in anthropology beyond a limited small group of specialists has been present for decades. An A-level curriculum that attempted to introduce anthropological concepts at school level was recently created (and abolished) in the United Kingdom. Even half a century ago, in 1958, in the conference of the Association of

Social Anthropologists, though preoccupations about teaching this subject dealt mainly with instructing undergraduates or with training graduates and professionals for fieldwork, a session on “Social anthropology for the non-professionals” was included (Mills, 2004). Teaching anthropology to a more general public tends to focus on the diverse ways humans have constructed their “worlds”, on understanding other lifestyles or modes of thinking, and on how this understanding could lead to a better apprehension of one’s own prejudices. Spencer and Mills claim that, “the key anthropological proclivities include openness to different ways of being, knowing and doing as well as a willingness, an interest and a readiness to embrace different worlds in order to understand them” (2001, p. 41), and they hope that teaching this subject to youngsters could lead to more tolerant and respectful attitudes towards the “Other”. It has been also argued that, “anthropology has the potential to become, in the contemporary world, the kind of fundamental non-vocational discipline that classics and history were for earlier generations” (Street, 2010, p. 3), thus aspiring after a special place for courses on this topic in present-day curricula.

When one teaches in a culture which has been consistently studied by anthropologists, the issue arises as to whether precedence should be given to studies that focus on the local, i.e. whether the chief intention of teaching anthropology may be to acquaint students with a corpus of published ethnographic data about their own society. Schapera's work, for example, has been used to remind Botswana indigenous population of facets of its culture and legal organization; furthermore, many in Botswana “have, perhaps unknowingly, learned their chiefdom’s history from Setswana texts he [Schapera] published in the 1930s, which were incorporated into the school curriculum” (Heald, 2003, p. 19).

It is not the aim of this article to provide a full inventory of the ways to teach anthropology. The aforementioned instances serve simply as examples, providing an introduction to an aspect I presently wish to add to the several ways anthropology can be taught, and which relates more to my own approach and preoccupations. Teaching anthropology for some decades now, in Greece, both to future educators and in classes on modern Greek culture, I have often brooded about what would lead to the most advantageous benefit for those taught, so as to align my teaching accordingly. My classes on modern Greek culture, at the Hellenic Open University, were attended mostly by adults who wanted to enhance their general knowledge. In such courses, though students diligently learned about features of modern Greek culture, its institutions and customs, they often, near the end of the academic year, seemed to wonder as to the exact use they could put their newly acquired knowledge. They, at times, expressed a wish to conduct research in their familiar surroundings, but, since they did not intend to pursue an anthropological career, the anthropological scientific discourse appeared in these instances as alien and aloof. Hence, the anthropological subject matter seemed so close to them and at the same time distant. In university anthropology courses, in an Education Department, I attempted to install to the audience of future teachers a sensitivity that would permit them to read more clearly the particular environments they would eventually be called to teach in. Anthropology could thus be a way to ascertain one's own social parameters and identify one's positioning within the group one is functioning. In that sense, this approach relates well to the ideas of Lave and Wenger (1991) about situated learning in communities of practice, to Mezirow’s theories (2003) on transformative learning (Karalis, Sotiropoulos & Kampeza, 2007), and to action research. Yet, though such combining of ethnography with pedagogical approaches as the above brings it closer to the individual needs of the researcher, one wonders as to whether additional value can be added to the anthropological teaching these future educators receive.

I sometimes think of the influence on Kandinsky’s art of his early studies in ethnography back in the end of the 19th century, when he was a member of the Russian Imperial Society of Friends of Natural History, Anthropology and Ethnography. The famous painter started his

career as an ethnographer, and the data and impressions he collected during his trip to the Vologda area in Russia, influenced his way of painting, and can be traced throughout his work (Weiss, 1986). To the extent that, as it is claimed, his fixation with shamanism guided the flow of his artistic production, his case – an extreme case perhaps – exemplifies the potential of studies in anthropology to contribute in the production of fruits (indeed strange fruits) unrelated to this discipline (Weiss, 1995). The lasting influence of the ethnographic data he collected in his early youth indicates, however, that these were consistently and constantly elaborated within his inner self, providing questions that merged with his artistic quest. And precisely this point, from that obviously marginal example, could serve as an insinuation, pointing to the eventuality of blending, on a more mundane level, heuristic research with teaching anthropology. Particularly when such teaching does not aim exclusively at producing scholars that will serve the discipline of anthropology, such a combination could be of interest.

HEURISTIC RESEARCH – RELATING IT TO ANTHROPOLOGY

Trying to expand the bounds and potential of teaching anthropology, I have found it opportune to correlate anthropology with elements of heuristic research; and on this topic I want to elaborate. Heuristic research was introduced by Clark Moustakas (1990), who classes it, according to his taxonomy, close to ethnography (Moustakas, 1994). This proximity permits, perhaps, the incorporation in university anthropology lectures – particularly in cases where such lectures do not aim at producing anthropologists – of a recommendation to view elements of heuristic research as complementary add-ins to what one is taught about anthropology.

Though the structure of heuristic research may seem distinct from anthropological approaches, and some of its elements, like the indefinite duration of a heuristic project, do differ, other elements/phases, like immersion, are not far from anthropological practices, during fieldwork. Several aspects of heuristic research could tune well with an anthropological perspective, yet two in particular could be adapted to correlate, in a suggestive way, with the possible utilisation of acquired knowledge about anthropology. These two relate to the eventual future involvement of the anthropology student with an inquiry, and in particular with the beginning and the termination of a research project. The first point refers to the pertinence of the research question to the inner world of the researcher; the research question derives from the personal quest of the researcher. The researcher thus is wholly present during the research process, and at its initial stage has to elucidate and clarify the question he poses. The second point could introduce the stand that once the researcher receives an answer to his query that is satisfying to him personally, the research procedure can be considered as completed. An eventual research could close with a creative synthesis (normally a text, an essay, but also maybe some other form of expression: a poem, a set of photographs), that would not necessarily respond directly to contemporary academic preoccupations. The main advantage of such adaptations is that, if introduced as suggestions in a university anthropology course, they provide an opening, so that whatever is potentially researched along these lines by those taught could be relevant to their interests and preoccupations.

A brief sketch of the steps of this research method and its main characteristics may be in place at this point, before a further elaboration of its pertinence to teaching anthropology is attempted. The phases of heuristic research are: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis, validation. “The task of the initial engagement is to discover an intense, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27). During this phase one attempts to fully clarify and define this core issue, and to uncover the principle research question that lurks behind it. Once this is accomplished, one immerses

oneself in the research problem and lives with it continuously and constantly. The next phase, incubation, entails taking a step back, detaching oneself from the constant preoccupation with the research quest. Illumination constitutes a “breakthrough into the conscious awareness of qualities and a clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question” (ibid., p. 29). Explication involves a fuller understanding and elucidation of the produced results, while during the creative synthesis one gives form to these results. Finally, validation involves the extensive checking of whether “the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one's rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience” (ibid., p. 32), a process admittedly partially subjective, but not excluding sharing results with research participants and a wider public.

The main constituents of the heuristic research method, as described by Moustakas, are: identifying with the forms of inquiry, self-dialogue, tacit knowledge, intuition, indwelling, focusing, the internal frame of reference. During the research process, which is experiential, one tries to infiltrate and attune to the question posed, by entering into a dialogue with the phenomenon, with oneself, and, of course, with others. Through empathy, focusing and elucidating core themes and meanings, and through tacit knowledge, one works his way back and forth from the general to the particular, aiming to be guided, through thinking and intuition, to the discovery of a kind of bridge “formed between the implicit knowledge inherent in the tacit and the explicit knowledge which is observable and describable” (ibid., p. 23).

Following the above mentioned, it can be argued that anthropological information relating to one's own culture, and/or another different culture, may relate to a personal question, which one can then attempt to research. Data collection, with the use of ethnographic methods (ethnographic interviews etc.), provides a fuller examination of the issue under study, and could combine with the constant gazing at the researcher's own internal thoughts and workings, which also constitute research material. The method in this respect is not distant from reflexive considerations in anthropological thinking, yet the principle and, I believe, crucial difference is that the research question/issue derives from the researcher, and not from the general framework of scientific discussion. Furthermore, everyone adequately equipped, not only a professional scientist, can attempt to investigate, in such an experiential way, an issue that interests him/her or bothers him/her. The researcher may choose to focus on a small or more general issue/problem to which he/she personally relates, and research it to his/her understanding.

Heuristic inquiry may also be limited to the examination of existing anthropological data and analysis, through correlating them to a personal quest and to one's individual standpoint. Pursuing an interest in the anthropological literature, having clarified what this interest is, what it means to the self, sharing this path of inquiry with others, may prove heuristically fertile. On the other hand, such an approach could expand and become so vague, so as to approximate Needham's comment (1978, p. 25) that reading about other cultures can be as useful educationally as reading *Hamlet* or *Crime and Punishment*. However, commenting on this latter point according to our argumentation, it is important to mark the distinguishing contribution of heuristic research, by emphasizing the serious commitment involved in the process, and the wish to clarify a personally important question.

Heuristic research is experienced; in fact it is the researching of a field of experience of the researcher. Though not everything an anthropologist experiences during his/her fieldwork is apparent in his/her ethnography, such experiences during participant observation could hold a significant position in the research procedure. Particularly when one is researching one's own cultural milieu, one might not be far from correlating a systematic recording of one's experiential condition with the analysis of social data. Hence, indicating the vicinity of anthropology and heuristic research could be enriching, enabling a coherent incorporation into the research procedure of impressions, feelings, thoughts, moods that appertain to the issue

under study, yet belong to the researcher's inner world. As already mentioned, reflexivity in anthropology deals with such issues, but heuristic research permits, perhaps, a more focused integration, since the incorporation of the personal in the research product is viewed positively, while in reflexive commentaries, data deriving from a personal source is often deemed as a handicap, precluding full understanding.

Heuristic research creates out of individual impressions and experiences a composite depiction that is representative of a whole group, (Moustakas, 1994, p. 19) and hence its primary preoccupation with the “personal” should not screen its proximity to ethnographic endeavours. The socio-cultural framework within which individual actions and experiences appear and evolve is not studied in isolation; analysis essays to merge such personal data into a holistic meaningful synthesis.

Yet, adjusting elements of heuristic research in order to incorporate it in attempts to teach anthropology could entail downplaying somewhat the importance of the anthropological end result. The importance of the subjective value of such a result, the equating it with a personally satisfying “answer” to the issue under research, becomes thus salient. The provisional or limited adequacy of the research's end product does not necessarily diminish its significance. On the contrary it could provide the researcher with a better circumstantial understanding of his/her contingent situation, or contribute to the evolvement of a new personal point of view. Heuristic inquiries have examined subjects like the experience produced by family relations or that formed through the contact with one's cultural background (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 64-65, 73); such studies may be enriched by a fuller understanding of the social environment in which their subject matter exists and evolves. Equally, if one starts by anthropologically investigating the social environment related to issues as the above-mentioned, one could profit by a systematic investigation of one's personal experiential familiarity with the subject matter of such a research, particularly when one is an integral part of the field one researches. The results of such an investigation may interest a wider public, but should not necessarily do so.

The proposal of blending an anthropological investigation with elements of heuristic research opens up the spectrum of one's involvement with anthropology, and thus adds further meaning to its teaching. A constant preoccupation with a theme along these lines may lead to unforeseen results, as in the afore mentioned case of Kandinsky – “Kandinsky's ever-increasing immersion in the ethnographic experiences of his youth and his reliance on motifs associated with shamanic lore persisted during the last four years of his life and, in the end, came to constitute the major part of his imagery, the figure of the shaman often dominating” (Weiss, 1995, p. 193).

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Any subject, from an inquiry into the architectural choices of one's house and their relation to the cultural norms of space prevailing in the culture where the building exists, to the understanding of a custom one finds oneself participating in, if viewed as an experience significant to the self, can be a valid commencement for a heuristic quest. An issue perplexing to an educator involved with a class may likewise be a valid research topic, to be examined by him/her along the lines expounded. The marginality inherent in the anthropological approach, whereby one belongs to a cultural group, and simultaneously studies it, tunes well with such an endeavour.

Anthropology thus acquires a personal interest, and involvement with its practice is not limited only to specialists, nor is any research necessarily bound to the impact effect it can have on the academic world. This link however of anthropology to heuristic research may, I believe,

only come, during the process of teaching this subject, as a suggestion, as an appendix, upon the completion of a systematic anthropology course. The student should have grasped the principles of anthropology and done his homework in this field, before he/she may expand on it, in a more liberal form, by correlating it with elements of heuristic research. Hence this blending of two methods relates more, I think, to teaching anthropology at a university level. Though, it could be pertinent in cases when such teaching deals more with “anthropology at home” issues, this blending of methods is not limited to such instances. Since also an inner urge is needed in order to commence on a heuristic quest, such an approach cannot be imposed on a student. It can only be sown, as a suggestion, and hence the results of such a recommendation inevitably remain open and undefined.

In cases where the scope of teaching anthropology is not to produce anthropologists, but rather to provide the student with a sensitivity that will enable her/him to understand better the intricacies of the cultural environment she/he is in contact with, the extension perhaps of such a sensitivity so as to provide a view of the wide spectrum proposed by heuristic research may be of interest.

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