

Teaching anthropology to educators: lucid and opaque issues

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ABSTRACT

My commentary, based on my educational involvement, focuses on anthropology university courses addressed to teachers plus would-be educators, and discusses how such lessons may essay to be open-ended, indicating also that some of their aspects may entail clarity, while other verge towards opacity. Though, for example, the teaching of ethnographic skills necessitates exactitude and clarity, reflexivity reminds us of the dim side of such a research. Aspects of the vast corpus of amassed anthropological knowledge, when chosen to be taught, may retain or suggest a degree of opaqueness, being indicative and suggestive, permitting learners to contemplate on issues raised.

KEY WORDS

Opaqueness, lucidity, educators, inculcation, open-endedness

RÉSUMÉ

Mon commentaire, basé sur mon engagement éducatif, se concentre sur des cours universitaires d'anthropologie destinés aux enseignants ainsi qu'aux futurs enseignants, et discute de la manière dont ces leçons peuvent sembler ouvertes, indiquant également que certains aspects peuvent nécessiter de la clarté, tandis que d'autres frôlent l'opacité. Bien que, par exemple, l'enseignement des compétences ethnographiques nécessite exactitude et clarté, la réflexivité nous rappelle le côté sombre d'une telle recherche. Certains aspects du vaste corpus de connaissances anthropologiques accumulées, lorsqu'ils sont choisis pour être enseignés, peuvent conserver ou suggérer un certain degré d'opacité, étant indicatifs et suggestifs, permettant aux apprenants de réfléchir aux questions soulevées.

MOTS-CLÉS

Opacité, lucidité, éducateurs, inculcation, ouverture

The issues I intend to presently discuss, though based on my educational practice, shall be stated in a more theoretical, abstract manner. Yet, not intention to generalize is implied. I may also clarify from the start, that my use of terms (especially these of lucidity and opaqueness) is somewhat loose, and should be seen along the lines of Gregory Bateson: like “knots in a handkerchief” (1972/2000, p. 84) – a reminder that they are provisionally used, so as to communicate meanings in the process of discussing various aspects of the teaching condition under scrutiny, i.e. teaching anthropology to educators. (I have been conducting university courses in anthropology at an Education Department for some decades.)

Given the above, I shall commence from a broadened perspective, by pointing out the instantly obvious: that great variety is contained in each pole of the pair “anthropology –

education". Still, notwithstanding (though heeding) the fact that generalizations generate exceptions, a fundamental difference in orientation may tentatively be discerned between the approaches of anthropology on the one hand, and that of institutionalized teaching on the other. Education (formal/institutionalized education) entails and presupposes value choices as to what is intended to be taught, which is thought to be useful, advantageous, valuable etc. (in a word: situationally "good"). Anthropology on the other hand, though occasionally critical of its approach and of the world, is not theoretically geared towards such value choices.

The above distinction does not affect students studying to be anthropologists, for whom it is imperative that they become well versed in the totality of the discipline's progressive history and multiple approaches. When, however, anthropology addresses wider audiences, the issue of choice as to what is appropriate ("good") to be taught in each case looms in the foreground.

In a fairly recent publication by Tim Ingold, titled *Anthropology and/as Education* (2018), the above mentioned quandary seems to be resolved, in that anthropology is equated to education: both – reshaped and restructured through Ingold's approach – being ways of attending to the world around us, promoting a continuous process of growth and discovery. Being in general agreement with this stand, I shall make use of some of Ingold's ideas; but first I shall pursue a little further the general distinction I just made.

Obviously, varied cultural environments, holding distinct cultural values, may produce educational acts that differ. And the situationally deemed as "good" in an educational act, may be disputed/refuted if seen from a different angle. An initial complementarity between the two previously contrasted poles – anthropology and education – can hence be found, since anthropology may, by providing detailed analyses of such diverse educational instances, prove useful. Consequently, students' acquaintance with the existing multitude of anthropological studies about varied educational acts may be eye-opening.

Still, it must also be taken into account that the said value choices in formal education do not result solely from local cultural tendencies or needs. Though circumstantial and partly subjective, these choices are also largely shaped by trends that transcend the local. This is a complicated issue. I opt to condense and present it through anthropologist's Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt summary, which stresses the existence of a global culture of schooling, influencing educational institutions almost worldwide. What she defines as a West originating somewhat inconsistent "world culture", does provide educational blueprints, which blend with local meanings. She states, "on the one hand, anthropologists and many scholars in comparative education emphasize national variation and, beyond that, variation from district to district and from classroom to classroom. [...] According to world culture theory [though], rather than diverging, schools are converging toward a single global model" (2003, p. 1).

Such prevalent cultural universalistic or traditional trends can also influence anthropology teaching perspectives, or indeed the discipline of anthropology itself. That issue has a long, broad history, which, amidst other, can be traced to comments like these of Edward Bruner on the influence of "new narratives [which] yield new vocabulary, syntax, and meaning in our ethnographic accounts" (1986, p. 143), stretches as far back as Evans-Pritchard's observation that anthropologists' impartiality can be affected when describing matters hinging on their world (1946, p. 414), and may be identified in Max Weber's (1919/2004) century-old cautioning about the mixing of ideology with scientific work. The issue is still pertinent nowadays, as indicated in Chip Colwell's recent article in *Anthropology Today*, who, contemplating on "the thin line between insights from research and the personal outrage of scholars at what they discover" (2025, p. 1), expounds on empathy, positionality, advocacy and activism.

In view of this condition, we may take heed of a commentary by Michael Herzfeld, who, as I read him, presents anthropology's pedagogical aspect as a "productive irritant" that is

provocative rather than prescriptive, in that it constantly questions the “obvious we call common sense” (2001, p. xiii, xv). Using this lens, one should, I believe, also ponder about the roots of the eventual value choices one makes, when teaching anthropology beyond the realm of this discipline.

No clarification of the complex situation defined above was intended. Yet, perhaps, some of its seemingly clear-cut facets did disclose their partial opacity, through having some light shed on them. Trying to distill from the century old research efforts of anthropology, what is circumstantially valuable, is not by itself always a self-evident process, in that it is different from the incessant valuable discourse that continuously ferments within the core of this specific field of study (or even from its abridgement in introductory textbooks). Furthermore, though no simplified popularization of this academic subject is presently proposed, we should not lose sight of the claim that “in a broad sense, there are as many different ways to ‘popularize’ anthropology as there are audiences for it” (MacClancy, 1996, p. 5).

Still, if we distinguish two distinct though interrelated units – a/ Methodology, and b/ aspects of the Studies and Theoretical Knowledge amassed by this academic discipline – as being of relevance in an anthropology course addressed to educators (or would-be educators), we may proceed to examine more thoroughly and separately the content and teacher/student roles of these units, according to my adopted stand. Such an exposition shall not, obviously, solve the previously stated dilemmas; rather it shall attempt to incorporate them, indicating simply (through a personal trajectory) how in a specific instance one attempted to sail along with them. In this process, areas of existing or intended opacity and lucidity emerge. However, though presently characterized as such, if other teaching approaches are followed, some of these areas may retain their said quality, while others may change their shade and level of transparency. By pinpointing them, I draw attention to their criticality in organizing an anthropology course for the above mentioned audience.

Let us first tackle the issue of Methodology, focusing on the research method of anthropology. Though Ingold’s approach (2018) seems to downplay the role of ethnography (when excess emphasis is given to the end product of fieldwork), the attentive attitude is an indispensable element of his approach (“attention” in “hearing” and “seeing” the world around us is stressed). That tunes well with anthropology university level courses addressed to educators (or would-be educators), who may learn to use, or partly use, the skills of anthropology’s research method, ethnography, for clarifying issues of educational acts they are involved in and may want to further elucidate, without necessarily bothering to subsequently transform the knowledge gained into monographs or articles. The skill of using the ethnographic method is something that has to be taught with exactitude and persistency, so that students become competent in its use; lucidity and meticulousness are essential. Yet, though even on the rudimentary phase of collecting data exactitude and avoidance of bias is indispensable, we may also be reminded that the classes we teach are often opaque to us, and usually retain facets of their opacity, even if researched. And such a realization can lead to that so well-known aspect of anthropology: reflexivity.

I would also concur with the comment of anthropologist Signe Howell (2008), that a sense of adventure is (or rather was) an indispensable (though fading) element of fieldwork, and hence of the anthropological discipline. I deem that it would be advantageous, if we can instill in our students a fraction of fieldwork’s adventurous curiosity, which will prompt them to view the familiarity of their future classes with a freshness of perception, as if they were entering their teaching environment for the first time.

Apart from the research method anthropology has produced, the vast volume of data accumulated through anthropological studies and the varied theoretical schemes which have sprouted thereof, should also claim a place in the shaping of an anthropology university course for an Education Department. In such an instance, the anthropology teacher is inevitably

constrained to pick a thin slice only from this vast corpus. If we are to follow Ingold's ideas through one of his similes, the anthropology slice the teacher chooses can be viewed as a terrain which students have to traverse – like attentively walking in a landscape with an orientation, but no particular destination.

An individualistic element may not be absent in the setting up by the teacher of such a “terrain”, composed of a selection of fruits anthropological research has produced – and that point accordingly should be acknowledged in the class. Yet, accuracy (in regards to the sources used and their contextualization within the more general framework of anthropology) should be strictly observed in such a domain. Given the open-endedness of such a “terrain”, the benefits students reap from the experience of traversing it, are not strictly predetermined. Teachers are not expected to inculcate something specific, on which subsequent exams will eventually focus and attempt to evaluate its degree of absorption by learners. In that sense, the subjectivity and intention/scope of the creator (the teacher) of such a learning environment should be lucid, contain authenticity; and yet the teaching result entailed may remain opaque to the audience addressed. The way of its assimilation by the learner may remain, hence, open-ended. The students' inherent selective assimilation can be thus encouraged, rather than harnessed through the influence a teacher's power can exert in a class.

Such a course may contain ethnographies of culturally contextualized educational acts (to which reference was previously made), and perhaps serve to explicate aspects of the above mentioned reflexivity. It may also include elements of a critical anthropological approach, while guarding, through reflexive reference to the approach's ideological origins, that no strong tutelage influence is thus exerted. Furthermore, I deem, the course should additionally cover a much wider spectrum, including the fact that opacity is not absent from anthropology, at times insinuating some of the discipline's limitations. Apart from the fact that some anthropological texts may seem opaque to the non-scholar, as Arthur Marwick (1998, p. 289) claims was the case for famous professors like Lévi-Strauss, anthropologists have focused and examined the contents of the concept of opacity itself, and its ramifications. Indicatively, Crapanzano (1996) points out the opacity of the terms “other”, “others”; Marilyn Strathern, in discussing the *Tyranny of Transparency* (2000) in auditing educational institutions, points through contrast to a resulting murkiness. Rodney Needham stresses the fact that, “the concept of belief is a pattern of the means by which we are subjected to opacity and misunderstanding in taking account of the modes of human experience”; furthermore, he emphasizes that “to say we are opaque to one another”, does not entail that eventually “the achievement of clarity is a feasible aim” (1972, p. 245-246). Parallel to this latter valid comment, Charles Stépanoff (2026) stresses the opaqueness involved when communicating with a baby, with an ancestor, with an animal, or in behaviours like kissing an icon – such acts not being absent from our lives. Édouard Glissant's stance when discussing opaqueness, though not of anthropological origin, blends well with Stépanoff's commentary, in that he insists it is not necessary to have a “grasp” of “others”, so as to positively coexist and interact with them (2010, p. 189-194).

At this stage, another statement by Rodney Needham may be opportune, since it rhymes with the aims of teaching the results anthropological studies have reached, as presently discussed. He emphasizes the benefits offered by being acquainted with anthropological works, parallelizing them to the advantages acquired through reading instructive works of literature: “If it is morally instructive to read *Hamlet* or *Crime and Punishment*, [...] there can also be much to gain by reading true accounts of what other peoples have actually made of their lives and how they have come to terms with the predicaments of human existence” (1978, p. 25).

Needham's counsel is of a moral nature, in that it prompts the moral cultivation of the self. To the extent that the aims of teaching anthropology become thus somewhat opaque, and acquire some of the attributes associated with teaching/reading literary texts, one discerns a proximity to other perspectives, which theorists from corresponding disciplines have specified.

Such potential affinities, do not entail for anthropology (which is geared towards non-fiction) a genre shift or a blending with artistic trends; rather, they may be seen as resulting from extending anthropology to reach wider audiences, an attempt that can stretch this academic discipline beyond its strict confines. With the above in view, I may hesitantly add, inspired by Danto's (1981) ponderings *re Art*, that the teaching under discussion may possibly, through its style and rhetoric, appear to learners as simultaneously transparent and opaque, inviting them to a response.

In that vein, Louise Rosenblatt's literary theory comes to mind (Langer 1994; Politis 1996; Rosenblatt 1964; 1969; 1994), as a proposed enrichment in understanding the teaching potential of an anthropological exposition along the previously defined lines, when seen through a novel yet related perspective. Transposing Rosenblatt's reader-response transactional approach to serve our case, may help in understanding better the usually opaque for the teacher, holistic response solicited from the learner, the latter response being both experiential and "efferent", fact enriching. Her remark that "Literature provides a *living through*, not simply knowledge *about*" (2005, p. 63), could well be appropriate to the teaching outcome presently under study. Learners respond through their previous experience and knowledge of life to the proposed teaching subject, the latter – through its form – being possibly evocative, while concurrently proposing shifts in one's mental landscape.

Besides, Rosenblatt (incidentally she was a close friend of Margaret Mead), ends one of her articles with a remark about researching the teaching of literature, stressing the utility of using ethnography for that purpose.

"Any encounter between readers, teachers and texts in a classroom has as its setting the society, the community, the ethos of the school, the total curriculum, the cumulative social concepts embodied in the works presented to the pupil over the years, and earlier experiences with literature at home and in school. The dynamics of the particular classroom, in turn, provide a context for the individual students' evocations and responses. [...] The ethnographic approach [...] seems especially congenial to research problems involving the transactional view of language and literature" (1985, p. 50-51).

In that passage of hers, she spells out the complex dynamics of a class: a reminder of the framework within which lessons – including these presently discussed – operate, and which anthropological research can help elucidate. And thus, it seems we have come full circle. The theory and method in anthropology, though examined presently as distinct entities, for operative, analytical convenience, are interrelated, interconnected, and perhaps inseparable in practice from the person itself of the anthropologist.

Rounding up, it may be appropriate to close with a personal comment. Perhaps (probably) what I have hereby expounded on, though relating to my practice during my past years of teaching, in the unconstraining academic environment of my University Department, reflects more the ideas that have with time simmered and surfaced through this experience. In that sense – in a parallel way to the mode of teaching I have expounded – these are just the pensive notes at the end of a personal trajectory, that commenced with fascination and seemingly transparent aims, and progressively evolved into something that reminds me of the *dZi* Tibetan beads: full of eyes, and so opaque, and yet so thought to be alive and beneficial.

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