Introduction

Ethnography is the heart of cultural anthropology. Many cultural anthropologists do not learn how to “do ethnography,” as the phrase goes, until they go into “the field,” a mysterious location still seen as a far-away place where an anthropologist finds a new people with a new social structure, beliefs, and traditions (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997 for an exploration of the myths of “the field”). I did not understand cultural anthropology until I discovered ethnographic fieldwork as an undergraduate studying abroad in Nepal. While in rural Nepal, I was struck by the sight of men, called porters, half my size, who carried double their bodyweight in baskets hung from their heads; who were these men, why were they carrying such heavy loads, and why were the loads on their heads? I decided to write my undergraduate thesis on the economic life of porters in the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal, near Mount Everest. This undergraduate research was a transformative experience for me: I realized that, in contrast to my initial wonderment and confusion, porters were akin to long-haul truckers in America, carrying scarce goods from valley to valley. For this work they were paid very little, but paid consistently, an important fact in an area of Nepal where much of the population experiences periodic food shortages. The porters, in essence, traded low pay and backbreaking work for the stability of a wage, rather than farming their ancestral land. I discovered the joy of ethnography: finding that, despite appearances, there is a cultural logic at play in what people – familiar and unfamiliar – do with their lives.

My goal in teaching E105, “An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology,” was to recreate my experience as an undergraduate for my students, enabling them to understand ethnography as the core method and genre of anthropology. This goal dovetails with pedagogical
theories emphasizing “signature pedagogies” (Gurung, Chick, and Heynie 2008) and “contextualized activity” (Babar and Plucker 2002). A signature pedagogy seeks to teach students in distinctive disciplinary methods and thought processes, rather than simply disciplinary content. In other words, anthropology students must learn how to do fieldwork and write ethnographies in addition to learning about the Lakota kinship system or Nuer religion. Sociology courses should not teach sociology, but train sociologists; law courses should not teach law, but turn out lawyers; and anthropology courses should not simply introduce the customs of exotic peoples, but should produce citizens capable of creating knowledge about culture. Teaching, performing, reading, and writing ethnographic research should all be aspects cultural anthropology’s signature pedagogy.

Teaching how to conduct and write ethnographic research is not, however, as simple as telling students to observe a few people and interview others. Students learning how to conduct ethnographic research and write an ethnography must be placed in “smart contexts” (Barab and Plucker 2002). Rather than conceiving of students’ abilities in terms of individual cognitive learning, I wanted to emphasize the relationship between individual agents – students – and environment. Barab and Plucker argue that

Ability does not reside (and talent development does not occur) in the head of the learner, but is best conceptualized as a collection of functional relations distributed across persons and particular contexts through which individuals appear knowledgeably skillful. (Barab and Plucker 2002: 166)

Learning how to conduct ethnographic research, then, is not simply gathering tools in the classroom, but learning how to deploy these tools in ethnographic settings. My reasoning is that students who do ethnographic research outside of the classroom and the library will understand how anthropologists produce knowledge, and will be better able to produce this knowledge as
well as better able to understand ethnographic writings – books, articles, and reports produced by anthropologists.

My basic intervention into anthropological pedagogy was to attempt to find the correct context for students to develop their skills of conducting and writing ethnographic research. What follows is a narrative of my reasoning behind individual assignments and the results of these assignments.

Course Background

E105, “Social and Cultural Anthropology,” is the introductory cultural anthropology class for non-majors. This was my first time teaching the course, and I was directed to design the course on my own. Although I hoped to have debates and discussions as my major pedagogical technique in the classroom, I ended up lecturing for much of the course, as I had trouble inspiring students to read (something I hope to correct by assigning mandatory reading reactions next semester). I assigned three mini-ethnographies of six to eight pages as formative assessments; these mini-ethnographies were due in week 5, week 10, and week 15.

The students in the course were mainly underclassmen: seventeen (twelve freshman and five sophomores) of 28 students were underclassmen. Unfortunately, particularly for an anthropology course, the students in the class were not very diverse: only four students were not white Americans; in addition, the majority (21 of 28) of the students was from Indiana.

The Initial Problem

In the class I taught directly before E105, I found that students taking an anthropology course for the first time often write anthropological papers as reports on the behaviors of others and ignore the meaning of others’ activities. In other words, students do not write interpretive ethnographies, but behavioral histories. In my A200 topics class last semester on nomadic
pastoralism, seven of thirteen students wrote final papers describing behavior or political histories without examining cultural meaning. For example:

(from “Gender, Age-Groups, and Alternations of the Turkana People of Kenya) Age-grouping is a process that is done inside of the initiation process. Age-grouping happens usually twice during the year of initiation. The ecology of Turkana plays a very important role in the initiation and age-grouping. The rainfall is the deciding factor for the initiation ceremonies and the age-grouping. .. wet seasons tend to occur only once every 4 years which makes initiation not an annual occurrence. The north-western part of Kenya usually has more rainfall which means they have more wet seasons and more initiations and age-grouping.

(from “Kazakhstan, The Development of a Religiously Pluralistic State”) As early as Gorbachev’s perestroika people began to rediscover Islam and reconsider its role in human development as a faith having deep and profound humanistic and ethical values and not a roadblock to progress. The Soviet Union, now in shambles due in part to Gorbachev’s progressive policies about government transparency, had not control of Kazakhstan’s government and in 1991 gained formal independence from Russia. This revival takes the form of change in popular attitudes towards Islam, the building of mosques and madrasses, and the politicization of Islam and the formation of political parties on a religious basis.

In the first paper, the student focuses on when initiation rites occur, but ignores what initiation rites do to initiates or what these rites means to Turkanas. In the second paper, the student emphasizes the political changes that brought about changes in Islamic practice in Kazakhstan, but does not, for example, describe why Kazakhs might want to build a mosque after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. What is missing in students’ papers is any sense of what it is like to be Turkana or Kazakh, to undergo initiation processes or be able to publicly practice Islam again.

Assignment I: Theory

In order to focus my current E105 students’ writing on the meaningful aspects of culture, I assigned them a “mini-ethnography” which asked students to analyze a music video and interview five or six other students or friends in order to understand larger cultural texts. By forcing my
students to examine an American music video, I hoped to give students an opportunity to interpret a culture more familiar to them and to reinforce the notion of cultural anthropology as the process of understanding the meanings of culture: what Americans think the world is and how should they act in the world. I encouraged students to examine videos as examples of the construction of gender roles, nationalism, or economic ideologies, topics we had touched on in class or in readings.

**Assignment I: Results**

More students analyzed the symbolic meaning of activity in their first mini-ethnography than did in the final paper of my previous class. Most of the mini-ethnographies examined the symbolic meaning of the music video and what these symbols meant for viewers, including diverging interpretations of the videos. For example, one student's paper examined Brooks and Dunn's *Only in America* and viewers' reactions to the video:

[describing a particular section of the video] The next scene in the video shows newlyweds driving in a car to L.A. and the lyrics describe them as a “welder's son and a banker's daughter,” and talk about their both wanting to be famous; it later shows them as a happy old couple back in Oklahoma. Many people also had similar feelings and opinions toward this scene. One person, a 30 year-old female, said that the young couple “represent that social class doesn’t matter, they’re together although one came from a white collar family, the other blue collar, they have dreams and together they’ll work toward them.” This quote represents the fact that this person, along with many other Americans, has the attitude that marriage is a personal choice and that two people can have a successful marriage even if they come from opposite backgrounds... although this is a widely accepted opinion in America, many other cultures do not allow individuals to choose their own spouse; they are often chosen for them on the basis of commonalities in religion, social class, or economic standing (Kottak 2010)...

In the place of a description of ritual timing – “the Turkana have initiation rites in the spring” or “Many Americans marry in the summer” – Jenny analyzes what marriage and class discourses in America, and contrasts these discourses with a generalized description of other understandings of marriage taken from the class textbook.
However, students also see meaning as subjective, and many students interspersed their own feelings about the video or American culture throughout their mini-ethnographies. For example, Luke wrote

[introduction, thesis, and first body paragraph] Going in to this paper, I believed that money would solve the majority of problems in life. I still believe that to an extent. Going along with that, I thought that T.I. had the perfect life. Not only because he has more money than he knows what to do with, but also because he has fun constantly. I was nearly envious of his life, especially after watching this video. If this was how his life was, I wanted to be a part of it or have my life mirror his. I assumed that everyone wanted the same thing. Who doesn’t want to be rich, famous, and party all the time? I was wrong; no one I interviewed was envious of his life. As 36 year old James said “it looks good on the outside, but there is definitely more going on behind the scenes... although, this might attract younger people, it is not attractive to me.” James was not envious in any way. He mentioned how it would be nice to have the money, but that was it. This is very interesting to me. I assumed that out of everything in the video, this is the one thing that everyone would absolutely agree on. Everyone would want his life. I wondered if maybe it was just this demographic; if maybe older people, people who have experienced life a little more than I have, are the only group that wouldn’t want this life. So I interviewed someone younger than me. 16 year old Troy said some similar things. In response to my question about wanting this life Troy said “I don’t necessarily want that life, just because I’m sure there are consequences to that life... You would probably get in trouble for living a life like that.” Again my mind was blown. How could a 16 year old kid not want the perfect life, materialistically that is? My next thought was perhaps only college students want this lifestyle? We are the only ones who have idolized this idea. Again, I was wrong. All three college students that I interviewed did not want this life, in no way, shape, or form. I was flabbergasted. I got responses ranging from “I can see how people would be envious of that lifestyle, although, I personally am not” to “you can’t live this crazy lifestyle without having to pay the consequences.” Across the board, people agreed on this issue. It all boiled down to no one, but me, wanting his life. The closest I got was a curiosity from people about his life.

This was an unexpected, and unfortunate, result of emphasizing the importance of writing about meaning. Many students thought that their personal opinions were data, and focused on their own reaction to their chosen video rather than their interlocutors’ statements. Luke’s approach to his first paper, emphasizing what he thought was the perfect life and his own understanding of the role of money in life, is not the type of interpretive anthropology I wanted to teach, nor the
type of anthropology that often gets published, despite the reflexive turn in anthropology (e.g. Rabinow 1978).

Many students approached the first assignment as Luke did: as a narrative of their own experiences, rather than a description and explanation of others’ cultures, subjectivities, and agencies. The average score for the first assignment was a 78; the assignment was scored using a rubric to ensure uniformity in grading. I was disappointed in my students’ performance on this assignment, and understood their poor performance as the result of their understandable unfamiliarity with anthropology and my failure to provide the correct context for students to begin producing their own ethnographic knowledge.

Assignment II: Theory

Geertz, in an essay on the nature of ethnography, distinguishes between “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts (1984: 57). Experience-near concepts are used effortlessly to describe experience, while experience-distant concepts are the concepts of specialists learned for particular purposes. For example, “blue” is an experience-near concept for most people, while “energy with a wavelength of 440-490 nanometers” is an experience-distant concept: the first is an everyday expression, while the second is an explanation of what is perceived as blue used by psychologists and physicists. Geertz goes on to argue that ethnography is taking the experience-near concepts of other people and putting them into terms that are experience-distant in order to make them understandable to other anthropologists. The writing of many of my students produced in the first assignment was too experience-near: they analyzed their interlocutors’ reactions in experience-near terms, which made this first assignment a relative failure: the whole point was to make them understand music videos, and culture, in a new way with a near vocabulary.
I decided to attempt to force my students into “experience-distant” thinking by making them conduct ethnographic research on a subject less familiar to them: a religion that was not their own. My reasoning was that students would then be forced to convert unfamiliar concepts into an anthropological vocabulary that allowed them to make sense of others’ religious practices and beliefs. The “smart context” for allowing students to create experience-distant thinking is a context in which there is not experience-near vocabulary. Most anthropologists experience this when speaking a foreign language in a far-away country (or so goes the anthropological myth); my challenge was to find smart contexts in Bloomington, Indiana. When I advocated this in the Teagle Collegium, however, most participants thought that I was overreacting, and argued that I should continue to push an experience-distant vocabulary while providing experience-near topics. I then reworked my second assignment into an experiment by allowing students to work on either their own or another religious tradition, and I would see which students wrote better papers. The assignment, as handed out, was to examine one religious practice – such as communion, Islamic prayer, Zen meditation – and write a mini-ethnography about it.

Assignment II: Results

The best students’ papers from the second assignment were those that did not address their own religious tradition, nor those that addressed a radically different religious tradition. For example, one of the best papers was written by Luke, whose first, unsuccessful paper we saw above, and who is a Protestant student who spoke with Catholics about the Sacrament of Reconciliation. By using the readings and theories we discussed in class, Luke was able to place the Sacrament of Reconciliation in experience-distant terms, allowing him to understand an unfamiliar cultural practice, as can be seen in the introduction of his paper.

[describing Catholics’ participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation] As Luhrmann states "in the last 30-40 years, middle class U.S. citizens have begun to worship their god(s) in a markedly different manner than before," using prayer to come into
personalized contact with God more often (Luhrmann 2004). A ritual is something done daily for a higher purpose, confession used to be a biweekly ritual for many adamant Catholics (Kottak 2010). In today’s society, people are lucky to make it to confession once a year. Recently there has been a drop off in attendance. Most Catholics today say that they would rather go to the dentist than go to confession (Ho 2003). Nearly 60% of Catholics throughout the world do not attend confession at all (Ho 2003). This is a change from just a few years ago. In 1965 it was recorded that nearly 40% of Catholics regularly attended confession (regularly being biweekly) (English 2010). This is a huge change in just a few short years. Although followers have changed their practices, many still strongly believe that going to confession is an important aspect of being part of the Catholic faith.

Many Catholics do not feel it necessary to go to confession anymore. “It is still important to us, but it is not always necessary.” This quote from a 20 year old adamant Catholic seems odd, but the more it is examined, the more it makes sense. Many Catholics still see the importance of going to confession on a regular basis. The term regular is used loosely here because what is regular has changed over the years. Today many followers believe that going once a year will suffice. Why is it not as necessary as it once was? When asked this question many quickly answered with the single word, “prayer.” Praying is more sufficient for everyday life and everyday sins. Catholics are taught that prayer everyday is essential. Many use this sacred time to also admit their sins to God and ask for forgiveness. This is a common practice with smaller sins, such as lying or not fully fulfilling duties. Confession is used more for repeated sins and heavier sins that are not taken as lightly, such as manslaughter or cheating on a spouse. Since the common person does not commit these terrible sins all the time, it is not necessary to go to confession. This kind of “new age” thinking has led to people only going to confession about once a year or less.

The worst paper was written by a student who was raised in a non-religious household who attempted to write about Ramadan. Her thesis was that Ramadan was not an authentic religious practice because Muhammad had, in fact, never received a divine revelation. Aside from the insulting and culturally insensitive aspects of this thesis, data cannot be brought to bear on the thesis – as anthropologists, the data we gather cannot determine whether Muhammad received a divine revelation or not. The context of interviewing a religion extremely unfamiliar to the student caused her to place Islam and Ramadan in particular into terms too distant for anthropological writing and understanding.
Other students who looked at a religious tradition that was too different than their own also had difficulty placing their interviewees’ experience-near concepts into experience-distant anthropological terms. One Presbyterian student referred to Catholics as non-Christians through his paper on the Blessed Sacrament and had difficulty placing the bodily experiences of his Catholic interlocutors with the Eucharist in terms that were not experience-near for him, referring to the doctrine of transubstantiation as “gross.” Overall, however, my students’ papers showed improvement (from an average of 78 to 84) from assignment one to assignment two, an improvement I attributed to a better context for my students to learn how to conduct ethnographic research and write ethnographic papers.

Assignment III: Theory

For my final paper assignment, I decided to find a suitable context for my students to have an ethnographic encounter which forced them to use experience-distant terms without exceeding their ability to use these terms, as happened to the non-religious student who attempted to write about Ramadan. In the last third of the class, we had two units: one on nationalism, race, and ethnicity, and another on modes of production and culture. I chose to assign students a paper on capitalism and labor because “work” is often unexamined by Americans, particularly young students, but is familiar enough to enable students to relate to the subject. The assignment instructed my students to look at four questions in particular:

- What are people doing at the workplace? (You should address this through data gathered from observations and interviews)
- What do people think they are doing? (You should address this through data gathered from interviews)
- Why do people do what they do? (You should address this through data gathered from observations and interviews, and use theory to analyze this)
- Finally, why do people think about work in particular ways? (You should address this through data gathered from observations and interviews, and use theory to analyze this)
My hope was that students would be able to take these simple questions and use them as a base to employ the theoretical (experience-distant) terms from Richard Sennett’s book *The Culture of New Capitalism* (2006), such as alienation, bureaucracy, rationalization, “iron cage,” and consumption.

**Assignment III: Results**

Students showed continued improvement in assignment three. Most papers used the readings in a more appropriate fashion more often, and discussed ethnographic data in both experience-near and experience-distant terms. For example, one of the best papers looked at a company which described “bureaucracy” as the “arch-enemy” of creativity, and saw itself as breaking the bureaucratic mold in order to see how bureaucracy functions in a supposedly non-bureaucratic workplace.

[thesis] In my analysis of these three aspects in the workforce of [workplace], I will attempt to review the anti-bureaucratic approach of a modern capitalist corporations in order to determine whether or not bureaucracy should truly be considered as an “arch-enemy” to developing labor force.

[describing the bureaucracy of Company X] Sennett explains that in a bureaucracy, “each office defines the talents and skills a person needs for inclusion, the obligations he or she has to fulfill” (2006). In Kottak’s understanding of the industrialization of the workforce, he explains that one of the main objectives of the modernization of The World System is the idea of having more freedom and fluidity in the workforce, which is considered one of the key attributes of modern capitalism (Kottak 2010). In [company X], this is another aspect that can be considered from both the bureaucratic and modern capitalistic perspectives.

I found that the people I interviewed felt that although they were initially employed given a more bureaucratically defined responsibility, their daily activities do not necessarily maintain that given description. The fresh page philosophy of modern capitalism is very evident in the variety of activities and responsibilities that employees are forced to confront in their daily experiences at [company X]. For example, [person Y] works in the customer services department, and is constantly confronted with situations in which he is forced to resolve issues that require jumping from one department to another, interpreting vague information, and at times executing the job descriptions of others. I have observed that this is a common experience for many other employees; and it is a
source for a great amount of anxiety, frustration, and confusion for [company X] workforce.

Much like the other exemplary papers cited in this portfolio, this paper translated experience-near concepts of the employees into experience-distant terms, enabling the student to compare the culture of one particular local company to the culture of new capitalism as outlined by Sennett.

There were no students, unlike the other assignments, who failed to incorporate the readings and experience-distant theoretical terms. Unlike the other assignments, in which several students received Ds and Fs, the lowest score for this assignment was a 76; the average score rose from 84 in assignment two to 87 in this assignment.

Discussion

In a late interview, Clifford Geertz said there is no correlation between talent in class work and fieldwork (Geertz 2004); I hoped to bridge this divide by engaging my students in ethnographic fieldwork as class work. This is not, of course, a revolutionary idea, but I hoped to make students’ own production of knowledge the centerpiece of the course – a “signature pedagogy” – and to use the theoretical concepts we were learning in the Teagle Collegium to tinker with my assignments throughout the semester to construct better assignments and guidance for my students, and thus to facilitate better student ethnography.

In particular, I attempted to use the notion of a “smart context” for learning to improve my students’ understanding and use of ethnographic research and writing. I found that the best contexts for beginning anthropology students to conduct ethnographic research in are contexts that are neither too culturally near to students nor too culturally distant from students. When students conduct research about cultural contexts too near to themselves – as in my first assignment on music videos – they are not able to distance their analysis from their own experiences, and use exclusively experience-near and non-comparable terms to describe ethnographic data. When students conduct research in contexts that are too culturally far from
their experiences, they are not able to grasp the experience-near terms of others, and exclusively use experience-distant terms to describe culture, resulting in an ethnography focusing on behavior that is devoid of meaning. In the future, I plan on building on my experiences this semester to emphasize contexts that take students out of their cultural comfort zones, but only marginally so, in order to allow students to produce meaningful ethnographies.

Works Cited


