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On the Pedagogical Strengths of Teaching Controversy

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Abstract
This paper argues that we should embrace the potential to engage by intentionally exploring our discipline's controversies, as controversies bring anthropology to life in a way that humanises those anthropologists we study. If we simply provide students with the stark "for" and "against" arguments in controversies we allow our students to engage with these issues critically, exploring the moral complexities themselves in essays, seminars and other forms. As such, it offers the perfect opportunity to facilitate student "unlearning," taking them away from expectations of being spoon-fed the knowledge they need to pass exams and instead providing the tools necessary to take their own stance on literatures and ideas. Being given the raw "for" and "against" arguments regarding a controversy forces them to critically engage with the moral and practical complexities that fieldwork and writing pose for ethnographers. While doing this, controversies also allow us to use surrounding debates as platforms from which we can discuss the bigger ideas entwined in the specificities involved in controversies. Once students are engaged, we can then deal with the full complexity of events without trivialising them. As such, controversies open doors to wider subject areas: to theories, to the history of our discipline, and the role of institutions such as the AAA and ASA. In an era when anthropologists routinely avoid polemic (Reyna 2001), this paper argues we ought to unlearn this behaviour in the classroom and lecture theatre, and embrace the ability to play devil's advocate in order to force our students to think for themselves.

Introduction

Gluckman observed "I believe I am not alone among senior anthropologists in finding it more interesting to teach students about anthropologists than about anthropology" (Gluckman 1963: 312). Those who have taught students regarding some of anthropology's juicier controversies will recognise that the feeling is mutual. While this article advocates the use of controversies as a vehicle for teaching and learning, I am not the first to stumble across their efficacy as an educational tool: I was taught using various anthropological controversies, as were my teachers before me. But why they are such effective tools for lecturers and tutors? In this article, I will explore how the intimate, gossip-like nature of controversies affords an excellent tool for engaging students. Frequently occurring at important transitional moments within the discipline, such controversies offer platforms for engaging students in critical thinking. They allow us to explore the history of the discipline and show anthropological thinking regarding best practice to be a living, breathing thing. Such pedagogical strengths make controversies excellent tools for teaching at all levels. Additionally, controversies can be used as an educational "Trojan horse," allowing for related history, theory and ethnography to be introduced in relation to varying controversies. In the latter stages of this article these benefits will be explored using the controversy, or controversies, surrounding Carlos Castaneda (1998 [1968]), to illustrate such possibilities.

But before beginning, I must clarify what I mean by controversies. I do not want to include outright criminality and for similar reasons I wish to avoid extreme cases where there is little debate over rights and wrongs, such as anthropologists' Nazi complicity (Schafft 2004). Despite this, some of the controversies explored here do still dance very close to, and occasionally across, the line between legal and illegal practices. I also exclude debates that may be heated, but remain within the everyday cut and thrust of intellectual life and the production and testing of new ideas and knowledge. Instead, I wish to focus on those events that have involved accusations and rebuttals concerning ethics, fieldwork practices or representations through ethnography. It is this potential for meaningful debate that makes this order of controversies important, as there is a possibility for more than one interpretation of the rights and wrongs involved. There is also an element of spectacle around such

controversies, as they occur in public and the sparring is therefore not limited to the protagonists alone. By way of example, I therefore include within such controversies, for instance, the argument between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere. The dispute was spurred by an accusation by Obeyesekere (1992) that Sahlins (1985) had, in representing the murder of Captain Cook as the result of Hawaiians mistaking Cook for their god Lono, represented Hawaiians as irrational. Intrinsic to these debates were arguments concerning academic research in post-colonial contexts, ethnocentrism and the ethics of representation (Borofsky 1997). It is more than a debate in that it crystallised wider discussions, divided opinion and demanded further scrutiny. In my opinion (and others would surely disagree), the controversy was drawn to a close by Sahlins' (1995) excellent rebuttal in *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example*; a book which applied academic rigour to demonstrate the veracity of his original assertions while also using the findings as a starting point for inquiring into the possibility of representing any 'other' and the particular problems this poses for many modern male, white, "western" scholars.

Such controversies would also include: Malinowski's diaries – where the stark contrast between Malinowski's fieldwork (Malinowski, B 1922[2002]) and his more private thoughts (such as his sexual fantasies and disregard for informants) came to light posthumously when his wife published his private journals (Malinowski V. 1967); the Chagnon and Tierney dispute – whereby Patrick Tierney (2002) accused anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon and the geneticist James Neal of an array of offences which "bordered on the criminal" (Borofsky 2005: 3), including exacerbating a fatal measles pandemic, misrepresenting the Yanomamö as inherently fierce, intensifying warfare and staging events in films among other things; the Mead and Freeman controversy – in which Derek Freeman (1983) accused Margaret Mead of idealism regarding her work on Samoan sexuality, arguing that Mead was the victim of a hoax by her young informants regarding their supposed sexual liberation (Appell 1984); and the Carlos Castaneda saga, in which Castaneda falsified research and plagiarised, among other offences, before eventually establishing a cult which led to at least one suicide following his death (Seaman and Austin 2007). Most recently anthropology has found itself in the spotlight in relation to the Human Terrain System (Denselow 2010; González 2008), for which anthropologists and other social scientists have been recruited by the US Army to appraise the cultural terrain and to assist with interfacing with local populations in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the advantages of greater cultural awareness within the military are clear, the ambiguities regarding the use of anthropological knowledge in targeting recalls the controversies surrounding Project Camelot (Solovey 2001) in the 1960's, where anthropologists were accused of involvement in research on counterinsurgency for US intelligence services. This represents a contemporary point of anthropological controversy, which is also a valuable vehicle for teaching and learning.

Such controversies form a particular strata within broader disagreements or disputes in that they concern fundamental issues for the discipline as a whole, and because their controversial nature, at least in part, is the result of there being some ambiguity about the rightness or wrongness of the actions which are critiqued. While this encompasses a broad range of allegations, there are mitigating factors, comprehensive rebuttals or significant benefits nestled amongst sometimes shockingly poor practice in each of these cases. As such they stand out as examples, which have been analysed and raked through by others, providing us with a rich literature from which we can teach.

Critical Thinking and The Implied Intimacy of Scandal

When Gluckman made his comment about anthropologists, he touched upon a quirk which most of us share: social anthropologists are generally gossips. While Robin Dunbar would argue that this is an evolved trait of our species as a whole (Dunbar 1996), I see it as an adaptive behaviour among practitioners of a discipline that is based on ingratiating ourselves within alien communities, and where our successes are based on face-to-face contact with our research subjects. Discussing the less academically relevant aspects of the lives of our peers is therefore sometimes more engaging than their written output. Often such biographical details cast light on their publications, meaning this is not idle banter but a process which adds texture and nuance to reading.

Due to the scandalous nature of controversies, they contain the same tropes as the scandals that result from gossip and rumour (White 2000). Such tropes include the fact that the discussion of such topics is often considered to be fun, while simultaneously conveying an important (if sometimes ambiguous) moral message (Gluckman 1963). By looking at such scandalous elements of the lives of certain anthropologists (such as Malinowski or Mead) the implied intimacy frames anthropology in a more familiar and relatable manner. While this may sound like we are dabbling merely in salacious conversation about the lives of anthropologists, this can be done in a structured and sensitive way. What is more, such implied intimacy serves a crucial function: it shows

anthropologists to be flawed and therefore counters any assumption that we should be placed on pedestals. In doing so it opens us up to criticism and allows students to critique the actions of anthropologists with ease. If getting students to engage critically with literature is a key concern in the social sciences, then such an approach to controversy provides an excellent starting point.

The Strengths and Potential Challenges of Teaching Controversy

Graff (1993) notes that within education, polemic topics ought to be embraced, as they provoke emotional responses and therefore engagement within students. While Graff is largely referring to those topics which have divided the education system in the US, such as multiculturalism and political correctness (and presumably one would now add evolution and creationism to this mix), such an ethos towards embracing polemics is also intrinsic to embracing those divisive controversies highlighted here. The polemical nature of controversies as a tool for teaching is often derived from the fact that they occur at pivotal moments within anthropology. Their divisiveness comes about due to changes within the discipline, which are understood, at least in part, through the tensions within the controversy. Controversies are therefore entwined, along with a plethora of other factors, within wider debates, movements and changes within our discipline. We can embrace this fact and actively engage with the diverse threads, which spread beyond the controversies themselves. What is more, anthropological controversies, such as those involving Malinowski's diaries (Malinowski 1967), Mead and Freeman (Acciaioli 1983; Appell 1984) or military complicity (Moos, Fardon and Gusterson 2005) are incredibly layered, providing varying depths for inquiry that allow for them to be studied at any level, from the new A-level through to postgraduate and professional academic research. There is often so much nuance that even those of us familiar with controversies can be moved from (what might seem like) firm opinions when details begin to reveal themselves in the course of further reading. Almost every new thing I read or hear about the controversies Chagnon makes me change my mind in a new and subtle way. Chagnon was accused by Patrick Tierney (2002) in *Darkness in El Dorado* of playing a role in the exacerbation of a measles pandemic in research on the Yanomamo, alongside the epidemiologist James Neel. While he has been unambiguously cleared of the accusation by a panel convened by the American Anthropological Association consisting of historians, anthropologists and epidemiologists (Dreger 2011), other controversies concerning informed consent on stored blood tests, detrimental representation of research subjects and unsavoury relationships with other academics still linger (Borofsky 2005). Having swayed between condemnation and sympathy over previous years and ending up somewhere in the middle, I heard an anecdote recently about Chagnon's colleagues' envy at the sports-car he brought with the profits from *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* (1968). It made me consider new aspects of the personal nature of some of the attacks in a way I previously had not. If the nuance of my own understandings can be changed through new details, doing the same to students through the abundant literature on these topics can be used to keep the level of challenge appropriate to the level of study. The layered nature of the debates surrounding controversies can assist in the dialectic of learning/unlearning at any stage in an individual's development as an anthropologist.

The process of going beyond surface impressions to dig deeper and formulate their own impressions helps students to move beyond the expectation of spoon-feeding knowledge - something which seems to be increasingly common as students learn how to pass exams rather than learning how to learn. For those students already thinking for themselves such topics provide engaging real-world contexts in which they can apply such skills. While this method is particularly good for deconstructing and rebuilding students' assumptions, and at its most engaged level - their worldviews, such an approach may at times have detrimental effects (Djohari 2011), pushing students too far. This makes it is necessary to be mindful regarding the manner in which we challenge students to appreciate such complexities; but we should push them nonetheless, and controversies serve as an excellent tool with which to do the pushing.

Of course, encouraging such laissez-faire thinking is also not without its pitfalls. Moving from a more liberal-minded anthropology department at one university to the more often conservative students of another, for instance, I was using teaching on the controversies surrounding the Human Terrain Project to discuss anthropological involvement in rapid social terrain appraisals, providing communication channels with locals and fostering cultural sensitivity among soldiers (González 2008). At the former, more liberal-minded university, I found myself playing devil's advocate against knee-jerk liberalism to make student's instinctive dispositions more robust, albeit largely still anti-Human Terrain. Yet, I ended a seminar at the more conservative university with a student trying to find out details as to how to apply for the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholarship, which trains analysts for US intelligence work. As a (very pragmatic) pacifist myself, the latter outcome would not be my

intended aim if I were engaging in rhetorical pursuits of making students think 'my way'. But as I was seeking to foster free-thinking, I must on some level consider this provocation towards free thought a success.

This same third year course (on the anthropology of violence) also led to my clearest experience of student interest in controversy. Through a quirk of timetabling I was left in the unusual position of students having already carried out all their assessed coursework prior to the full duration of allocated teaching weeks. In order for them to have the best opportunity to do well in this coursework I had already completed all teaching on the anthropology of violence. This gave me the opportunity to offer the students *carte blanche* regarding their lecture topics for the last three weeks of the course – I told them I would lecture on (and if necessary research) absolutely any topic of their choosing. Having looked at the Human Terrain System and previous instances of anthropological complicity with military intelligence their interest in controversies had been piqued. They requested three weeks of lectures and tutorials on controversies. Despite the fact that these were third year students approaching their final exams with no assessment-based interest left in the course – two thirds of students still attended these last three weeks.

Controversies can also serve another function in teaching by acting as a Trojan Horse through which other weighty topics can be approached. It is a short step to move from discussion of controversies to talk of ethical guidelines. I have used the Human Terrain System as a starting point to make third year undergraduate students reflect upon the real world applications of anthropological ethics, while Chagnon's representation of the Yanomamö as fierce has become my starting point for discussing the ethics of representation with first year students. James Clifford's discussion of the similarities between Malinowski's diaries and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Clifford 1988) also provides a similar starting point. Such "gateway topics" afford opportunities to direct students towards discussions of ethical guidelines and the anthropological organisations behind them, and to discuss the grey areas and ambiguities of ethics in relation to concrete case studies. Beyond ethics, I also always draw upon controversies within methodology and fieldwork-oriented courses. If there is a better example for illustrating the need for triangulation and verification than Mead's supposedly mischievous informants (Appell 1984), I am yet to find it. Likewise I draw upon Malinowski's diaries to illustrate ideas of reflexivity and the need to locate the author in the text, while I use Chagnon's gift of machetes (Borofsky 2005: 129, 206) to discuss the gifts given by anthropologists to informants and the thorny issue of compensating our informants for their time and knowledge.

In this respect controversies are educational Trojan horses capable of encapsulating a number of other ideas under umbrella topics that might otherwise seem less appealing to some students. In order to illustrate this in more depth, I will briefly explore one particular controversy, that of Carlos Castaneda, and how his obvious flaws can be used to open students to a whole plethora of related ideas, issues and ethnographies.

An Example of Teaching Controversy: Carlos Castaneda

Based on events that occurred more than 40 years ago, the controversy surrounding Carlos Castaneda may not be the obvious case study to turn to for a contemporary anthropological course. But I chose Castaneda here partly because it is a path less trodden among contemporary British anthropology courses, and partly because what seem like stark black and white issues of his wrongdoing blossom into much broader avenues of inquiry when discussed in the classroom. Castaneda is also an anthropologist who a surprising amount of students have already encountered, but largely just fleetingly and often with over-simplistic preconceptions ripe for unlearning. His book is often encountered in the backpacking treks which lead students to take anthropology in the first place, while first encounters with Castaneda at degree level often take the form of a cursory debunking which paint him as a liar and a plagiarist unworthy of our attention. These are among the reasons that Castaneda is so pedagogically rich as a subject for discussion. Having used Castaneda to teach both first year undergraduates and third years in their final term, I can attest to the fact that there is more than enough nuance available to discuss him in depth. While I have had excellent responses regarding teaching on the Human Terrain Project, Mead, Chagnon, Project Camelot, the Sahlins/Obeyesekere debate and other controversies, none have been quite so enthusiastic as those regarding teaching on Castaneda. Sometimes the 'worst' anthropologists lead to the best discussions.

Carlos Casteneda's (1968) *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* sold over 8 million copies (Fikes 1993: 14). The book, its eleven sequels and related output by the likes of Florinda Donner-Grau and Taisha Abelar amount to a significant body of work which "sowed the seeds of Western [...] neo-shamanism" (Hardman 2007: 38), advocating the spiritual use of hallucinogenic drugs such as datura, peyote and mushrooms in a way

which struck a chord with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960's. The first book in the series, while containing tales of shape-shifting into crows and other seemingly fantastical elements, is academic in tone and appeared to be an interesting adjustment to the boundaries of anthropology and participant observation. It is divided into two sections covering the teachings he received and a structural analysis of these practices. The book sees Castaneda, then at UCLA, becoming an apprentice to the Yaqui shaman Juan Matus in the Sonoran desert of Mexico, following a chance encounter at a bus stop on the Mexican border while undertaking postgraduate research on medicinal plants. Subsequent publications become increasingly less academic or anthropological in tone, while still purporting to be non-fictional, despite much being based on non-corporeal experiences and increasing forays into other realities (although with decreasing reliance upon drugs). Conversations with coyotes, jumping mountains in single bounds and other similar feats become more frequent. As Robert Marshall notes: "If Castaneda's early books drew on Buddhism and phenomenology, his later work seemed more indebted to science fiction" (Marshall 2007).

The debunking of Castaneda began very slowly at first. It was only really around the mid-1970's with two books by Richard De Mille that the scale of the deception perpetrated by Castaneda really began to dawn on anthropologists. According to De Mille, "Logical or chronological errors in the narrative constitute the best evidence that Castaneda's books are works of fiction" (2000: 166). Taking the events of the first three books, which happen concurrently between 1961 and 1970, and putting them in order highlighted anachronisms, contradictions and disjunctures in the representations of characters. The picture becomes one where it seems there are two versions of Carlos experiencing the same time period differently (2000: 168). "Judged by common sense rules of time, tide, clock and calendar" (De Mille 2000:166), it becomes clear that this is a work of fiction. In addition, Jay Fikes' (1993) analysis of nearby Huichol shamans' peyote rituals showed Castaneda's use of peyote to be at odds with the community-oriented role it played in Huichol healing practices. On further investigation by Fikes, it turned out that the Yaqui did not even use peyote or datura (Hardman 2007). This led Fikes to make some of the more public declarations of Castaneda being a fraud who was cashing in on hippy drug-tourists who he inspired to spill across the border to Mexico in search of Yaqui gurus of a type, which did not exist. This influx of drug-tourists led to the Yaqui (who themselves had no peyote rituals) gaining unwelcomed visits while the Huichol had their peyote practices outlawed as a result of this new attention to their use of this hallucinogenic cactus.

De Mille (2001) also notes widespread plagiarism throughout Castaneda's work spanning from Wittgenstein to C.S. Lewis. The accumulation of instances of plagiarism leads De Mille to conclude that "Carlos's adventures originated not in the Sonoran desert but in the library at UCLA." De Mille convinced many previously sympathetic readers that Don Juan did not exist (Marshall 2007). Somewhat inevitably in what must by now be considered a hoax or a fraud, Castaneda's fieldnotes were conveniently destroyed, undermining any opportunity to inquire further into many of these matters.

If plagiarism, harming a research site and falsification of evidence were not bad enough, the excellent BBC documentary *Carlos Castaneda and the Shaman: Tales from the Jungle* (Seaman and Austin 2007) went beyond these accusations to look at his later life and his establishment of a cult which claimed to assist followers in achieving immortality. Within this cult Castaneda had multiple 'wives' with whom he had an active sex life, including his own adopted daughter, despite the cult's advocacy of abstinence among his followers. The cult's belief were believed to be behind the disappearance and suspected suicide of at least three followers following Castaneda's death in 1998 from hepatitis-related liver failure.

Lessons Learned from Castaneda

So aside from the obvious 'suicide cults are bad' message, what can we draw on from this one particular controversy within teaching? The simplest place to start is in using Castaneda as an overt warning against plagiarism. The very fact that we are still talking about a book written over three decades ago by a man who went on to found an incestuous suicide cult in relation to his improper citation of sources ought to provide stark enough warning to students concerning the seriousness of this practice as an academic sin. But there is much more depth available pedagogically through Castaneda's cautionary tale. The notion of "anticipating harms" as described in ASA and AAA guidelines (2011) is an abstract demand. But here we are provided with a perfect illustrative example. While Castaneda was guilty of many things, I doubt that he was guilty of intentionally promoting cross-border drug tourism. Yet this was a consequence of his books and their popularity. This illustrates how anthropologists are expected to orient our research design and writing somewhere between consequentialist and deontological morality - a pragmatic middle ground where both our intended and

unintended consequences are brought into sharp relief. In courses where students are expected to conduct their own field research, such examples are invaluable. Also connected to such ethical concerns, we can draw upon Castaneda's anonymising of informants as a tool for obfuscation. Yes, anonymisation protects informants, but there may be other cynical motivations for pseudonyms such as hiding a data trail or undermining critics' abilities to disprove aspects of dubious research.

Beyond ethics, Castaneda also opens up discussion regarding what is "good" and "bad" anthropology. Students sometimes assume it is the nature of Castaneda's research topic, which is at fault: that in attempting to become a shaman he was crossing a line. Yet if we explore the work of others such as Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes (1989) we see anthropologists doing research on similar themes and with similarly immersive methodologies, but with academic robustness. The work is similarly immersive and pushes the boundaries of participant observation in much the same way, but without the fundamental flaws of Castaneda. As such, those students whose interest is thematically piqued by Castaneda can be shown similar paths and interesting related ethnographies. Geertz's (1977) advocacy of experimental ethnography can be explored in full: Castaneda becomes a starting point for wider ethnographic exploration.

Murray (1979) notes that many, including anthropologists, often actively search for the positives in Castaneda's work, even when debunking it in other ways. An example of this can be found in Silverman (1979) who advocates reading Castaneda as not "true" but containing "truths;" a magical realism of sorts. While such a perspective would have implications for the objective reliability/veracity of other ethnographies, there is a body of literature, which tackles similar issues in more pleasing ways. Hernandez' (2002) experimental ethnography *Delirio* looks at the way in which folk tales regarding the history of Nuevo León, Mexico, are woven into the fabric of everyday reality of the townspeople in a way which is both excellent magical realism and academically rigorous anthropology.

Hardman's (2007) "He may be lying but what he says is true" explores how one can read Castaneda in a more critical way by exploring the issue of why Castaneda was so popular. Hardman looks at Castaneda's clever use of rhetoric and how it was specifically appealing to others who had experienced hallucinogenic drugs, in a form of writing, which leant towards the tropes of fantasy fiction. It is also worth noting that both Mead and Chagnon, who achieved similar success at the time, also tapped into the same idealistic notion that the answers to social problems could be found by looking towards "exotic", seemingly less corrupted indigenous cultures. The fact that they too became the subjects of controversies says something about the problem of idealism within anthropology more generally.

Castaneda's work is undoubtedly a poor reflection on anthropology. But what I have shown here is that such controversial work should not be avoided or confined to a folder labelled "noteworthy mistakes." Instead, we should embrace them as pedagogical strengths. While other controversies offer equally rich possibilities, Castaneda offers a particular platform from which to explore issues including plagiarism, fabrication, research ethics, harm, field notes, good ethnographic practice, experimental ethnography, similar (but more robust) ethnographers, populist anthropology, idealism, shamanism and magical realism among many other issues. There is abundant accessible literature available that is easy for students to engage with.

Conclusion

Mindful of the accusations of trivialising anthropology and turning it into idle banter (for example, the accusations sometimes directed towards Kuper's (1983) excellent and engaging *Anthropology and Anthropologists*), I am not advocating the use of controversy at the expense of all the other rich and wonderful anthropology out there. Instead, I am suggesting that controversy is an excellent tool, which should be part of any teaching anthropologist's arsenal. It should perhaps be used sparingly and with an awareness that too much of a good thing becomes harmful. There is the inevitable risk that other less-contentious anthropology may be made to seem slightly less interesting. We should also not limit ourselves to anthropological controversies alone. We ought to embrace those occurring beyond our disciplinary boundaries whenever they become useful as tools for thinking with. When Barack Obama stated his hope that the wrongful arrest of African American writer and documentarian Henry Gates would become a "teachable moment" (Nasaw 2009), he alluded to the wider fact that such controversies retrospectively take on a narrative purpose. This being true - both for anthropology and the wider world - means that using controversy pedagogically is not a new idea in itself, but what I hope to have shown here is exactly *why* teaching controversy is something which has merit, for reasons we perhaps too often ignore. The engaging nature of controversies is not a coincidence; it is derived from the gossip-like intimacy that

such scandals provide. Using this as a platform we are able to use such engagement to broach other topics in a way that seems less abstract and fosters critical thinking. With A-levels increasingly oriented towards learning the specifics needed to pass exams, students often need encouraging to "unlearn" negative "teach me what I need to know" mindsets. We need to replace this with "teach me how to think" mindsets, and controversies are one way to facilitate such an approach.

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