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Teaching Anthropology through Anecdotes

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Abstract
I reflect on my experience with anecdotes in teaching anthropology. Drawing on my Oxford teaching experience, I explore how the tutorial format might be conducive to students telling anecdotes and how anecdotes might challenge anthropology, teaching and learning.

Introduction

It is difficult to define what is a consistent part of the Oxbridge tutorial model – other than their length (usually an hour) and the focus on the relationship between the tutor and a small group (usually between one and four) students. Moore suggests that "a usual feature of the method is informality" (1968:15). Following this, a tutorial is generally thought of as an interactive encounter between students and tutor. Beck (2007) describes a tutorial in the following way: the tutor facilitating learning through writing and discussion, and the aim is for students to learn metacognition and develop this ability to think about their own thinking, rather than explicitly being dictated to by the tutor. This moves us away from the teacher-centred focus of lectures to a more student-centred approach to learning (Exley and Dennick 2004). It could be argued that in this way a tutorial fits in with "modern" concepts of learning, which predominate in a range of current educational strategies.

The format of a tutorial could be seen also as a type of performance. I would suggest that the more traditional structure where a student reads the entire essay, discussed by Moore (1968), is in many ways like giving a speech to convince an audience. Within a performative environment, an anecdote can achieve certain objectives. An anecdote can disguise a student's lack of familiarity with the set work. It can also help establish a student's identity within the tutorial space, which is important within larger tutorial groups of three or four. In an environment that is loosely defined by informality, interactivity, self-directed learning and performance, it should not be surprising that there might be a trend towards telling anecdotes in tutorials. Here, I refer to an anecdote as an informal story derived from personal experience.

Challenges and Opportunities of the Anecdote

The challenge I began to think about in my teaching practice was whether anecdotes add or subtract from the learning experience in tutorials. The value of student participation and the trust that a student has in sharing an anecdote cannot be taken for granted in exploring possible negative impacts of the use of anecdotes in tutorials. For example, in discussing the epidemic of obesity, after the set reading

and essay, a student used his personal focus on sport to explain how he felt people got fat because they ate too many calories and were lazy. This was presented unequivocally and at the beginning of the tutorial. The other students appeared to be unsure of how to react. However, it seems possible to say that anecdotes can also add to the learning experience and challenge the tutor to come up with novel ways to develop an argument. The above example prompted a lively discussion after I presented a series of different food goods and asked the students to imagine they were Mexican mothers with a small budget, who were feeding large households. The student, who gave the anecdote, suggested that the egg yolks of the box of eggs were thrown away and only the egg whites were eaten. This allowed us to discuss issues of feeding a household, food waste, traditional food and local knowledge of calorie-laden food. This could be seen as a successful tutorial, but I felt that there was limited discussion of the set ethnographies as our focus was on engaging personal experience instead.

So what is the position of anecdotes within anthropology? Should tutors see these anecdotes as the beginning of an informal anthropological methodology and encourage anecdotes? I tried to answer this by making a rudimentary distinction between personal and authoritative anecdotes. Personal anecdotes are defined as anecdotes taken from one's personal, emotional life; authoritative anecdotes are defined as anecdotes taken from an authoritative position of having participated or observed the subject under discussion. However, the implication of this distinction is that authoritative anecdotes are more useful or valued in anthropology tutorials. In reality, a tutor is grateful and respectful of all participation in tutorials and neither type of anecdote has a prescriptive reaction. It is also not clear if an anecdote presented from a student, whose ethnic, cultural or social identity is under discussion, would be personal or authoritative. For example, if a student was Mexican and came from a large household of strained resources and was participating in the tutorial discussed above, would that be both personal and authoritative and would the other students feel able to express an opinion? For this reason, it is worth exploring the demographic make-up of students and tutors at an Oxbridge university.

The changing character of tutors and students at Oxbridge universities can help explain this trend towards anecdotes. Palfreyman (2001) explores whether the financial pressure of the tutorial will become too much for universities with a move towards small classes being more economical. In order to counteract the teaching pressure on academic staff and financial pressure for the universities, it is common for graduate students to gain valuable experience in teaching tutorials. This potentially http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/international/breakdown/by-university/students, and no shared knowledge of the tutor's academic ability or teaching style. There is also an interesting divide in the percentage of international students that make up the undergraduate, graduate, and academic staff at Oxford and Cambridge. It is approximately 15% of undergraduates, 55% of graduates and 35% of staff across the two universities.[i] The percentage of international graduates means that it is frequent for an international graduate student to be taking an English student for a tutorial. Anecdotes could provide a means of bridging this gap. This is principally evident in a discipline like anthropology that, broadly speaking, studies different cultures and societies. When tutor or students are from the culture, which is the topic of study, not offering an anecdote is like not addressing the "pink elephant" in the room.

The use of anecdotes in anthropology tutorials is also a methodological challenge. In an interconnected or globalised world, many students have had the opportunity to complete extensive travel or internships in different parts of the world, which were once considered inaccessible locations of "primitive peoples." Anecdotes of the student's travel provide informed examples, enrich a tutorial and encourage a familiarity with the core methodology of anthropology: participant observation. For example, a student recounted his recent travels to Vietnam where he observed women taking their babies in a sling to work in the fields. This reinforced the ethnographic example of Tamang women in Nepal and appeared to legitimise and contemporise the text (Panter-Brick, 1996). However, the impact of an anecdote can also be to alienate other students from feeling they are able to compete with such recent accounts of distant places and can challenge or question the value of long-term ethnography in favour of observant travel or international development policy of a non-profit organisation. I

distinguished this form of authoritative anecdote from an anecdote that is personal and reflects a student's own life situation.

Personal anecdotes illustrate that the students feel comfortable enough in the environment to share their illustrative personal story and also helps sensitise the other students to the impact of the topic on people's lives. Anecdotes are common when the area of study is thought to directly affect the student on a daily basis. Nutritional anthropology was one such topic, which elicited an animated quantity of anecdotes including this one taken from a student's essay:

> Given the prevalence of obesity in the developed world [...], it is striking that neither myself nor either of my fellow Human Scientists is even remotely obese. This could, of course, be due to our youthful age, to our relatively privileged socio-economic backgrounds, or to extreme media and peer pressure to remain thin. (*Second year student; 2008)*

However, these more personal anecdotes can also alienate the other students from feeling able to comfortably return to the text or essays without a natural bridge between personal emotion and academic study. In the example when the student was asked to expand on their comment, he focused on possible eating disorders of students, which seemed to alienate the other students, and distracted them from returning to a discussion of whether there is a difference between the nutrition transition of lower income countries as opposed to Western European countries, Unites States and Japan (Popkin 2002). The tutor is left in the difficult position of respecting the student's anecdotes, while refocusing the group. Nonetheless, the two types of anecdotes, authoritative and personal, are equally as likely to prompt lively discussions as to alienate other students into silence.

An anecdote is introduced to a tutorial when a student makes a comparison between the discussion and his or her individual experience. For Beck (2007) this lies at the heart of tutorials: "The purpose of tutorials is not to instruct or convey information to the student so much as to induce students to actively consider ways to evaluate evidence and make *connections among diverse pieces of evidence***.** It is a sceptical method using initial inquiry, criticism, theory analysis, *and comparison*" (author's emphasis). Seen in this context, the aim of a tutorial could be viewed as a prescription for anthropological fieldwork. Evans Pritchard famously said, "There is only one method in social anthropology and that is the comparative method. But it is impossible" (recalled by Rodney Needham, 1975: 365). An anecdote is an immediate reaction that links diverse pieces of evidence through comparison. It could be argued that this keeps students involved and thinking about their position in relation to the topic they are studying, which may lead to the self-reflexive awareness that Clifford and Marcus famously triumphed in the pivotal treatise "Writing Culture" (1986). However, anecdotes could not be considered a "method." Sometimes, they might stand, as Geertz (2000: 13) explains it, in opposition to attaining comparisons "by orchestrating contrasts" and be close, instead, to "isolating regularities or abstracting types".

Conclusion

The flexible nature of the tutorial means that there can be no definite answers as to when an anecdote, either authoritative or personal, adds to the learning experience. Perhaps, if nothing else, the tutor should be attuned to the use of anecdotes. The aim could be to potentially tease out the anecdote into positive, constructive, comparisons that encourage other students to link texts, theory, ethnographies and their own personal and authoritative anecdotes within this performative environment.

References

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Notes

[i] The exact percentages quoted by the universities are for Oxford 14%, 63%, and 38% and for Cambridge 15%, 50%, and 30%, see http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/international/breakdown/by-university/ (last accessed 10.10.11) and also: http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/index.html (last accessed 10.10.11).