



Three Challenges in Teaching Anthropology

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Abstract:

This article discusses three intricately interwoven challenges in teaching anthropology: teaching anthropology to students from different disciplines; pedagogical negotiations of power distance; and working with the specificities of the Oxford tutorial system. The author argues for understanding and actively engaging with the lived dynamics of teaching and learning anthropology where students, tutors and the discipline of anthropology are constituted.

Introduction

This article is based on two academic years of tutoring in Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford. I began teaching in March 2008 as tutor to two second-year students reading for the degree of Archaeology and Anthropology. I taught a course of eight tutorials in *Cultural Representations, Beliefs and Practices*. By the end of the same month, my tutorial duties had expanded dramatically: my students' number had increased to nine, spread over two degrees, three different papers and four colleges. Throughout the next two years, I tutored for a total of seven colleges, three years of undergraduate studies, on two degrees: Human Sciences and Archaeology and Anthropology.

In order to provide a structured and organised testimony, I focus on three particular problem areas that developed almost as soon as I started teaching. These challenges were combined and intertwined.¹ The first challenge came from gaining an understanding of the specificities of the Oxford tutorial in order to deliver knowledge in an appropriate form, making the most of the system to convey knowledge and stimulate reflection within the students. The second challenge came from establishing a sense of distance from, and authority over students in the specific context of tutoring anthropology. Anthropology, as a discipline, is highly self-reflective and incorporates personal experience in the construction of knowledge. Because of the close, personal relationship with individual students in the tutorial, authority can only be established through the tutor's style, not just through learned and rehearsed teaching techniques. The third challenge came from teaching anthropology to students from different degrees, with different expectations, learning styles and thinking methods. Very soon, these differences appeared to be broadly based on the two degrees being taught the same discipline. On the one hand, *Archaeology and Anthropology* students, who chose to study *Social Anthropology* as half of their curriculum, generally presented themselves as *Humanities* students. On the other hand, my *Human Sciences* students (whose work involved mostly studies of mankind through a more quantitative approach) often described their degree as a hard science applied to the social environment. These students had a different understanding of the outcome of the discipline of anthropology and, more generally, of what constitutes knowledge. Whereas humanities students accepted that tutorials should leave them with more questions and reasons to wonder about the world than when they entered, most sciences students were frustrated by equivocal answers and no clear, undisputed, truth.

The combination of these three challenges has led me to develop a “practice” of the tutorial, based not only on the particularities of the tutorial system, its *techné*, in the Aristotelian sense, but also on the specificities of the discipline of anthropology; its *epistémè*. This article will explore these challenges separately and as they developed almost chronologically, whilst attempting to evaluate the answers I provided through my teaching.

Challenge One: Working with the Specificities of the Oxford Tutorial

The first challenge was to understand the nature of the Oxford tutorial system in general and its implications for my teaching. In academic literature and in the press, two images seem to be associated with the tutorial system. On the one hand, it is held as a highly specific and privileged method of transferring knowledge. It is the “treasured hallmark” (Curtis, 2002: 7) and the “jewel of the crown” (Palfreyman 2002: 6) of an Oxford education. On the other, it is perceived as threatened by the development of economic rationalisation within the academic world (Howard-Johnston 2005) and the specialisation of knowledge (Shale 2000; Tapper and Palfreyman 2000). As Palfreyman summarises it: the tutorial system is “Oxford’s ‘premium product’ for which, via college academic fees, it commands a ‘premium price’” (2002: 5).

But despite considerable literature and societal debate about the tutorial system, starting as early as Lewis Maidwell in 1700, its nature remains highly difficult to define and there is no unified description of how a tutorial should be conducted. This difficulty arises from the fact that no two tutorials are the same. According to Beck, “there is [no] formal pedagogic theory of the tutorial” (2007: 1). Instead of a definition, researchers have resorted to a description of the general characteristics of most Oxford tutorials. Ashwin (2005:632), for example, describes the typical tutorial as a

part of a learning system that involves a period, usually a week, of intensive study, the preparation of some work, whether an essay or completion of a problem sheet, followed by the tutorial itself. Students usually have about three tutorials a fortnight and report spending about 13h preparing for each tutorial.

This description is incomplete and does not account for the specificities of the Oxford tutorial system, as opposed to any other tutorial system in other British universities. Tapper and Palfreyman (2000) described a typical tutorial at the University of Sussex as involving twelve students or more. In Oxford, they remarked that most tutorials that did not require lab demonstration were much smaller in size. Indeed, the Commission of Inquiry of 1997ⁱⁱ established the common size of a tutorial at Oxford to be two students. Another specificity of the Oxford tutorial would be the collegiate system, whereby most tutorials are organised and centred around the students’ college, not the relevant department or faculty. This federal system contrasts with other British universities where colleges are mainly residential (Tapper and Palfreyman 2000). Arguably, another specificity of the Oxford tutorial is the very lack of a single definition. The “Oxford experience” would in this case be a more personal experience and open a wealth of anecdotal accounts, from both academics and students (Ashwin 2005).

The challenge posed by the lack of a single, standardised, definition of the Oxford tutorial meant that I had to use my own previous experience as a student, as well as the experience of the people I knew, in order to make sense of how I was expected to conduct my tutorials. It also meant that I had to reflect on what learning experience I deemed appropriate: what I wanted the students to get out of my teaching.

As a Master’s student at the University of Oxford, I had had the opportunity to sit through tutorials with four different tutors, over two years, in groups ranging from one to three students altogether. Some tutorials left me embarrassed with my lack of work, some left me perplexed or frustrated, but some were really enjoyable moments, where I felt a real exchange with my tutor, and left the class with the impression that my understanding of the topic had deepened. As all students, I used to discuss tutors and their methods with my friends. This is how I formed a clear idea of the type of situations I

would have wanted, as a student, to avoid, and the ones I would have enjoyed. My views were further developed through two training days for new tutors in my department. These two days led me to consider further how each of my tutors had conducted the tutorials. More importantly, I listened to experienced tutors give their views and tips on how a tutorial should be conducted, giving me for the first time the perspective from the “other side.” This, in turn, enabled me to think not only about what I liked in tutorials, but also how I would have liked them to be versus how they were delivered. What I liked, as a student, about my tutorials was not what Ashwin (2005: 632) describes: regularity, the amount of work, or a new topic each week. I had experienced that in other universities. What I enjoyed about my tutorials was their personal dimension. The tutorials were an exchange between a tutor and a student where I did not just feel the recipient of the curriculum but an individual, a developing thinker. In the words of an Oxford tutor in Law:

One of the great strengths of the tutorial system is that it enables tutors and students to engage in a dialogue that demands more sophisticated levels of understanding, and suggests new conceptions of learning. Tutorial teaching encourages students to make the discovery that higher learning is different from, and demands more of them, than learning as they may previously have conceived of it. (Shale 2002: 71)

The main difficulty was therefore to develop my *techné* of tutorial teaching in order to give a tutorial that would correspond to my own expectations. I did not realise at the time that the personal dimension involved a dynamic uniqueness of each tutorial, which would mean that each tutorial relationship with each student, on each encounter, would therefore be different, and unique. According to Shale (2000:15):

What makes the Oxford tutorial such an exhilarating – and demanding – forum for teaching is the personal relationship upon which it rests. In a simple sense, students’ and tutors’ personalities may combine in a multitude of ways to make the tutorial relationship mutually pleasurable or something quite else. But far more than the vagaries of personality and personal preference, it is individual needs and how they are expressed that demand the tutor’s attention.

As a former tutorial student, the first need I identified was for a tutorial that would “cover the ground.” I started by studying the social anthropology curricula for the degrees of Human Sciences and Archaeology and Anthropology. I read the courses descriptions, prospectuses, booklets, recommended reading lists, and past papers questions from 2000 to 2007. This task left me very concerned. How could I possibly know in depth all these topics and their different must-reads? My research was in material anthropology and surely the students would see that I lacked the in-depth knowledge on topics I had not myself studied. This would be reinforced, I thought, by the fact that as a graduate tutor rather than a full-time member of staff, they would not assume I had the knowledge. In a survey about graduate teaching conducted at the University of Sheffield, Muzaka found that “the most oft-repeated problematic aspect for students from their vantage point [was that graduate teachers] may lack a sound, overall knowledge of the subject” (2009: 4). I therefore decided to establish a list of the topics I should cover for the term; not based only on what I thought was important to know in social anthropology, but based also on a combination of the exam requirements and my own knowledge and preferences. I marked the topics most often repeated in exams over the years and narrowed these to the ones I knew enough about or the ones I could learn about quickly. I then looked at recommended readings and two encyclopaedias to set my first essay question and reading list. I hoped, like a guilty student, that I would have time in the coming week to read the literature myself and acquire overall and precise knowledge of the topic. I did just that for the whole term, and almost nothing else.

This intensive work influenced the second part of the preparation and, in turn, the dynamic of my tutorials themselves. I would ask the students to send me their essays in advance, usually leaving me four to six hours to read them, and to prepare questions based on the issues I found problematic or, on the contrary, particularly interesting, and write a page long comment at the end of the essay, commenting on the structure, style, content and ambition.

Ramsden (1992) has opposed teacher-centred and student-centred learning contexts. It is difficult to establish, given its evasive nature, whether the Oxford tutorial in general is one context or the other. Undeniably, it has a great potential to be a student-centred one. My own preparation (required prior to each tutorial, both in terms of knowledge acquisition and discussion preparation) led me to feel assessed each time. As a consequence, I associated more closely with the students' experience. I would argue that this contributed towards a more student-centred tutorial, as it kept me aware at all times of the student processes involved in the development of knowledge and abilities to develop an argument.

This student-centred inclination was reinforced by the specificities of the Oxford tutorial mentioned above: size of the classes and college-based system. Most of my tutorial groups have consisted of two students, which allowed for a particular dynamic between me and them, and between the students themselves. The students were not simply asked to absorb and repeat a *corpus* of information, but were encouraged to engage actively, to contradict each other, debate amongst themselves, and share their views. As a tutor, I acted as a facilitator and a discussant, summing-up their arguments and pointing to their weaknesses or originality.

Whilst I have not been based at my students' colleges, the federalism of the collegiate system has induced a liberal character to the tutorials (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2000). It allowed the introduction of concepts that are not purely anthropological, but more broadly used in philosophy, sociology, law, and the history of culture. Also, it allowed the tutorials to be influenced by the daily life of the students; their weekly activities and lectures fed into the discussions and informed their points of view, all contributing to reinforce the student-centred context of learning that Moore calls the "Socratic approach to knowledge in tutorials" (Moore, cited in Shale, 2000: 12).

Beck (2007: 2), citing Moore, states that "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." In his view, Oxford tutorials teach metacognition, the students' "active control in thinking or reasoning about thinking" (p.2) as well as *via* metacognition, through the tutors' engagement in discussion and debates. In my case, I would partially disagree and point to a factor that disturbed the Socratic conception and gave it more layers. This factor was inherently linked to the nature of the Oxford tutorial as delineated above and to the nature of my preparation. Tutorials are not just meant to teach how to think, but also to ensure that students have enough material and knowledge to think about.

In other words, as much as the tutorial privileged discussion, it was still based on the preparation of an essay by the student and sufficient knowledge of the topic by the tutor. There needed to be "food for thoughts." Tutorials did not teach metacognition only. They taught cognition and metacognition: knowledge and critical distance with the knowledge. This entailed more layers to the construction of knowledge as the students were not only encouraged to see their writing process and knowledge acquisition process (metacognition), but also to discern the authors' writing process. In tutorials, I would ask students, and tell them, what school of thought an author belonged to, what agenda he had (epistemological, political, methodological, etc.) when writing, and how style would convey and transform the meaning. This was teaching the students to distance from the authors' theories and, consequently, toward their own writings. This process of cognition and metacognition allowed the students greater analytical distance but ended up in a relative lack of valuation of their own arguments against the authors' ones: understanding how all arguments were personally, contextually and stylistically construed, they sometimes felt they had no reason to trust their own judgement over that of established scholars.

Challenge Two: "Power Distance"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ in Anthropology Tutorials

The second challenge came from finding how to position myself in relation to my students in the specific context of tutoring anthropology. I experienced this as a mutual process of creating,

challenging or navigating some degree of a “power distance” (Hofstede, 2001, see further below). Notwithstanding the complex, multi-layered and unique nature of each tutorial, there remains the question of the tutor’s relational style. Again, there is no unified standard of what teaching style a tutor should adopt in an Oxford tutorial. Even the word “teaching” is problematic. As Emma Smith (2002:54), a fellow in English at Hertford, wrote of her experience of the tutorial:

Do we talk, as tutors, of giving a tutorial (as if it were a bunch of flowers, perhaps, or some advice), or of delivering a tutorial (a parcel, or maybe a baby), or teaching a tutorial (as if it were a pupil)? Do we hold on to the older description of ‘reading’, with all its quaint image and tweed connotations?

Such hesitations about the meaning of a tutorial could be rather confusing indeed. I would prefer to think of myself as exchanging knowledge as a gift, or delivering in mutuality; or - in the Socratic *maieutic* acceptance described and advocated by Moore (1969) - even helping to deliver. During the tutorial training days held at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology in Oxford, I was instructed never to engage in a soliloquy, never to just talk and ‘give’ students the knowledge they would need for exams; but to let them find it, unearth it, discover it, and work towards it. This was one of the differences between a tutorial and a lecture. I was instructed not to fear moments of silence and reflexion, to let the students take time to engage with anthropological concepts, and come out victoriously after careful consideration. The students expect to “not know” and enter the tutorial with the prospect, fully formed already, that there could be an embarrassing moment; and silences can be very creative.

On my side, I could never sustain that fully. And, tutorials ended up being taught as well. As discussed above, tutorials work *via* metacognition but need cognition in order to stimulate the metacognitive process. This makes for a constant negotiation between being a discussant and a figure of authority. I was a graduate student helping the undergraduates understand difficult concepts. For the students, often, I was also the repository of anthropological knowledge and the teacher who assesses their efforts and abilities. The result was an interesting (and sometimes productive, sometimes uncomfortable) tension between different expectations invested with different degrees of power imbalance. I was expected at times (by myself or by my students) to facilitate understanding, and I felt I was also expected to authoritatively determine what answer was right or wrong and what the students ‘should know’.

Here, Hofstede’s concept of “power distance” is helpful. . The author defines “power distance” as the extent to which the members of an institution accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (2001: 83). He suggests that the distinction between “low” and “high power distance” is useful to an understanding of the formation of a functional personal relationship between teacher and students. In a tutorial, a “high power distance culture” indicates a highly formal relationship between students and tutor, where authority is derived from the tutor’s hierarchical position, and where discipline is strict. On the contrary, a “low power distance culture” implies a more informal and consultative relationship, where the tutor is expected to derive authority from personal knowledge and a capacity to convince students.

Unlike Hofstede, however, I am not concerned with cross-cultural encounters in the operating framework of the university; I am not concerned either with the distinction between “low” and “high “power distance” in the context of my cultural background versus the cultural background of the students although these are also important. I am mainly concerned with the negotiation of my authority with students, in the small-scale context of the anthropology tutorial – ranging from the consultative to the paternalist or the autocratic.

The notion of “power distance” became prominent when I taught a tutorial to three students with a graduate tutor in training. We had agreed that she would observe my tutorial and then would give the students their next week’s topic. She would then be responsible for the marking of their work and would be in charge of the following tutorial. The contrast between her attitude and mine, and our

following discussion about it, revealed that I did not use “scare” as a technique to push my students into delivering their work even when essays would arrive late with some excuse, and I would have to struggle to correct and annotate them in time for the tutorial. The new tutor had immediately cut a more stern and authoritative figure, and had laid out boundaries and rules about essays and about the topic. By the following week, however, the students had bent the rules and the essays were last-minute as usual. At the end of the term, the students turned back to me for advice about their dissertations, even though the other tutor was more specialised in their subject of choice: medicine.

This example led me to believe that a higher power distance created through “scare” in the tutorial was less than ideal when used by graduate tutors. Indeed, if the tutorial rests upon a personal relationship, the large power distance did not allow for the sufficient constitution of a bond between the tutor and the students. The graduate tutor does not possess the status of a full-time member of staff and the deliberate construction of a power distance was seen and discussed by students as artificial, reinforcing the distance with the tutor and, in turn with the topic itself. Rather, power distance was to be located within the status of a graduate tutor, or what students perceived it to be. As Muzaka’s survey (2009:5) has shown, students find graduate teaching beneficial because they tend to be “more flexible and less formal” and because they tend to be “better at stimulating group discussions [...] by exploring their own ideas.”

Anthropology, as a taught discipline, incorporates the difficult negotiation of power distance more than many other academic subjects. Long before the surge of post-modern self-examination, anthropology had constructed itself around the lived experience of the ethnographer at work and relied upon imagination and empathy to pass on the acquired understanding of the subject. For example, classic works by Malinowski or Levi-Strauss would start with a call to the reader to put themselves into the ethnographer’s position. Sentences such as “Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach...” (Malinowski 1961: 4) or “I hate travelling and explorers” (Levi-Strauss 1992: 3) locate the transmission of knowledge and analysis within the experiential, not just the theoretical. And indeed, in my department, great emphasis has been put on students reading ethnographies before looking at the abstract analyses and conclusions. This is seen as the only way to really “get a grasp” of social anthropology in its full dimension: not a collection of theories but a sensitive, literary comparative exercise relying primarily on an understanding of the real world. Tutors are instructed to convey the full dimension of anthropology by prescribing ethnographies in their reading lists and encouraging the students to read them. The graduate tutors are able to teach only after they have completed their fieldwork; that is, after they have acquired the lived experience and combined knowledge with self-referential reflexivity. The lived awareness of power imbalances in field relationships could be very useful in understanding the dynamics of the tutorial.

This particular dimension of knowledge combines with the close, personal relationship with individual students during the tutorial, and interplays with notions of authority and authoritative knowledge. According to Moore (1969: 32):

an approach to knowledge which is the reverse of dictated or memorized data...It is an attitude which sees the human condition as an endless process of discovery, of re-evaluation, re-examination, revision of what we think we have acquired... Here, I suggest, are the roots of the tutorial method. It is a sceptical method, a method that inquires, probes, scrutinizes. It is not at its best in ex cathedra authoritative statement, but in criticism, theory, analysis, comparison. It prefers the relative to the absolute, the tentative to the dogmatic...and does not offer that certainty which the young so often and so naturally seek.

The tutorial is a space for discussing and contesting values within a discipline. Anthropology adds another dimension to the space for contestation: it is a discipline open to re-invention through the personal experience of the anthropologist. In the tutorial, the tutor is the anthropologist. And his delivery of knowledge should be open to contestation as much as the content of the knowledge itself. As such, it can be said that authority needs to be established through the tutor’s style and personal experience, not just through learned and rehearsed teaching techniques, which then can be used to

support the expression of the style and personal experience. This should contradict a simplistic understanding of the Foucauldian perspective, whereby the tutor would be *de facto* the “expert” and natural recipient of power in the classroom. This is a challenge because there is still the need for the tutor to guide and orientate the student. Moreover, common sense tells us that the tutor still has something to convey to the students, and not everything can just be permanently and systematically contradicted, lest the tutorial become a completely confused and un-productive experience. It is therefore up to the tutor to present the students with an experience that does justice to anthropology in all its aspects: as a space for contestation and debate but also as a constituted discipline, with its original, established and useful concepts, including also the modelling of an awareness in balancing power relations and various relational tensions.

Sainsbury (this issue) highlights the need for balance discussing the use of anecdotes in anthropology tutorials. When teaching about anthropology, there is a fine balance between establishing the use of relevant lived experience and mundane commonplaces. Certainly the tutor is in a position to tell of his/her experience in the field in order to enrich, enlighten and exemplify the discipline to the student. But the tutor needs to be careful to keep enough distance in order to avoid the simple sharing of life’s little events. This balance is necessary to convey the discipline accurately. Students are easily encouraged into telling anecdotes to relate and sustain their arguments. Students’ anecdotes can be a powerful tool to stimulate their capacity to abstract and analyse in the anthropological method.

However, anecdotes can be dangerously over-used to obliterate the arguments and theories of established scholars by rejecting them on the basis of a single, barely applicable, little story. In my case, I have been encouraging students to apply the newly learned anthropological notion to their lives. For example, when tutoring second-year students about rituals and rites of passage, I would ask them to find, in their lives, examples and anecdotes of such rituals. This was meant to demonstrate that ethnographies were not just interesting to understand alterity, but also to understand our own beliefs and behaviours. There has been a particular group of two male students who took my weekly questions about the relevance of the topic to their lives to be the start of discussions about our private lives. I resisted this trend by telling them, on more than one occasion, that this was not the purpose of our tutorials. Nonetheless, it was difficult to stay clear of any personal reference when telling examples of the field and I came to accept that, in this particular relationship, the personal input was a motivating factor for the students to form an affective bond with me and give their best in each essay and in the tutorial.

More generally, in order to find the right power distance, I experimented with different techniques with my students, from the most democratic and consultative, to the more hierarchical. For example, at the end of term, I would give my reports to the concerned students in advance, before submitting them, and leave them a few days to comment and offer alterations to the reports. This process could be described as very consultative as the students were offered the possibility to contest the tutor’s final evaluation and to voice what they felt they had achieved throughout the term. But this initiative failed to interest the students sufficiently. They accepted a certain degree of power distance whereby the tutor would have the final say in their evaluation; they saw their reports as inevitable and based on their previous efforts rather than their comments. Another consultative initiative was more successful: during the term, the students were encouraged to choose one essay topic, not necessarily directly part of the curriculum, that they would then present, to other students and the tutor. There, students felt more empowered whilst still guided and within the delineated hierarchical relationship between learner and teacher.

Ultimately, I found the balance between consultative and autocratic, contestable and established to be located both in the space of the tutorial and in the space of anthropology. The space of the tutorial gave me room for what Patience (drawing on Nussbaum, 2001), calls “intellect and emotion.” Anthropology provided me with what I simply label as “enthusiasm.” According to Patience (2008:58), late-modern pedagogy is:

aggravated by the severing of intellectual conduct from its emotional roots. It is one of modernity's many conceits (part of its spiritual hubris) that reason is required to be a cold-blooded affair, necessitating a kind of emotional and intellectual self-sterilisation.

Following Nussbaum, he proposes that good teaching and learning methodologies should “embrace the human experience in all its complexities and possibilities at intellectual and emotional levels” (2008: 59). It is my argument here that the nature of the tutorial and the nature of anthropology, combined, offer just that. To go back full circle to Emma Smith, quoted at the beginning of my article: “In my tutorials, I’m trying to do several things, and, if even some of these objectives are achieved, I think that the tutorial has been worthwhile...” (2002: 55) and she lists these objectives, including:

To convey my enthusiasm and excitement about my subject without presenting myself as someone who already knows it all, and therefore encourage students’ own intellectual excitement.

To encourage debate, discussion and the development of ideas within the tutorial, rather than to use the time simply to reflect or comment on ideas arrived at elsewhere.

To attempt to connect work previously completed or still to be done, so as to monitor the more general points about the subject alongside the more specific ones.(p.55)

In all the reports and feedback I have received from my teaching, “enthusiasm” and “enthusiastic” have been a common denominator. I think it works. Enthusiasm conveys the curiosity, the constant questioning that are to be found in anthropology throughout the tutorial. It also provides a fixed point beyond the question “What did you think of this week’s topic?”: whatever the student’s intellectual background, personality or expectation, whatever the week’s topic, it carries the discipline and fulfils its purpose.

Challenge Three: Teaching Humanities versus Science Students

The third challenge came from teaching social anthropology to students from different degrees. If this challenge was brought to the fore later in my understanding of social anthropology tutorials, it was nonetheless interconnected to the earlier ones. The Oxford tutorial system is a highly contextual, relational and personalised learning environment. The nature of the discipline of anthropology, combined with the ambiguous status of the graduate tutor, reinforce the student-centred and Socratic aspect of the tutorial system. As a consequence, students’ backgrounds and personalities played an important role in the construction of a series of tutorials. Each tutorial was different, between different groups of students and from one week to the next, depending on the time of year, the proximity to holidays, exams, and of course depending on topics for discussion and probably my own mood. But despite considerable variations, a trend gradually emerged that differentiated tutorials between the two degrees on which I tutored. The differences I found could be seen as a general trend deserving further exploration and I have to stress that not everyone falls neatly into the fields of differences I describe here below. However, these trends seemed important in my teaching and did present an interesting challenge.

In the past two years, I have taught students reading for the degree of *Human Sciences* (HumSci) and students reading for the degree of *Archaeology and Anthropology* (Arch&Anth). The first difference came from their concentration on social anthropology. For Arch&Anth students, anthropology makes up to half of their degree. For HumSci students, anthropology in their first and second year is only an option in a broader degree that combines biology, genetics, evolutionary anthropology and statistics. The second difference came from their reason for choosing anthropology. Whereas Arch&Anth students had chosen to read for anthropology in their three years of undergraduate degree, HumSci students had chosen between either anthropology or sociology. I asked the Arch&Anth students why they had chosen anthropology. Their choice had been set while still at school and with little exposure to the discipline. The answers were mostly that they had been attracted to the popular image of both archaeology and anthropology as literate yet adventurous activities. I asked the HumSci students why they had chosen anthropology and the answers were, as all things in tutorials, varied. Some had chosen

“because one has to make a choice”, “because sociology was very dry” and most students in their second year had liked anthropology in their first year. Why? It was difficult to come up with an answer, but what transpired was that they liked reading stories of “strange people in faraway lands,” because it was full of details on beliefs, customs and practices. They wanted to do just that again for a year.

In the beginning, however much I had prepared, I had not provisioned for their most consistent concerns with anthropology: what was the point of all these debates and, most importantly, what was the solution to the topic’s question. Arch&Anth students had embarked onto their degree, and undertook each week’s essay, just as I had done before them; without once asking themselves what was the relevance of questions such as “How useful is the concept of gender when looking at Melanesia? Should it be central to any anthropologist’s view in order to understand any society?” or “Is it only people who are marginal in society who become possessed?” But HumSci students, even confronted to more political questions such as “What is ethnicity and how does it matter?” were confused, felt rebuked and at a loss to see how any of this could matter. Furthermore, most of them would enter the tutorial with the feeling that they had not managed to understand the question and deliver a proper essay. Broadly, this was not the case. And this was strange to me. They were all familiar with tutorials. They were all intelligent, able to read different points of view, give a summary of the different approaches and confront them. But most of them felt they had “missed the point.” It took me a few tutorial discussions to understand where, and what, the issue was.

It would be easy to explain the divide between Arch&Anth students and HumSci students by resorting to notions of deep and surface approaches to learning. As Marton and Säljö have argued, the deep approach correlates an intention to understand the material, interact critically with its content, and relate it to previous knowledge and experience. In this case, the Arch&Anth students would be deep learners of anthropology, whom, having accepted the organising principles of the discipline, would assess it critically and integrate its ideas. The HumSci students would be mostly surface learners, with little interest for a subject that was not central to their degree. In this view, they would have failed to distinguish the guiding principles, or patterns, of anthropology and would passively accept ideas and information with an intention to reproduce parts of the content in their essay, focusing only on what is required for their exams. Most students would be hard working and would deliver essays covering most of the readings, but all the commitment would result from a strategic approach intersecting with a surface approach. Strategic approach may be defined as “an intention to obtain the highest possible grades and involves adopting well-organised and efficient study methods” (Entwistle, 1992: 12 cited in Shale 2000: 6). Indeed, most of my students were efficient and organised, concerned with how well they would fare in their exams and where their studies would take them in the future. But this explanation fails to account for the students’ genuine determination, week after week, to unravel the finer points of anthropology by critically examining the authors’ arguments and by increasingly reflecting on the relation between concepts and their experience. More importantly, this explanation fails to account for the recurring questions about the “point” of the weekly topics; or, the “why” this subject is worth studying.

In order to provide a more convincing explanation, it is important to depart from an analysis, which only focuses on the students’ interests (deep or surface) and their conscious choices (strategies). As discussed above, there is no such thing as a *sui generis* Oxford tutorial. Rather, there is a vast range of relational, individual contexts, depending on factors such as the size of the class, the tutor’s style, and the discipline taught. Perry (1970) offers a grid of analysis through his maturity stages. According to him, students develop intellectually (mature) in cyclical fashion, to eventually reach a comfortable state where they are at ease in the “pluralistic world of higher learning” (Perry, 1970: 4 cited in Shale 2000: 9). In the earlier stages, students believe knowledge is dualistic: there are right and wrong answers that either are known (position one), non divulged (position two), or yet to be discovered by academics (position three). As they try to make sense of new knowledge and experience, students come to accept the pluralistic nature of knowledge and the validity of “liberal education” (position four to nine). For

Perry, this cycle repeats throughout life as individuals are confronted again to new situations and new knowledge.

In the context of the anthropology tutorial, this would mean that Arch&Anth students have been already exposed to the anthropological method, and therefore have been able to “advance” to a latter stage in the “pluralistic world of higher learning.” HumSci students would be relatively new to the discipline and consequently, would need time and exposure to accept the pluralistic, polysemic answers. Constructivists in education research have further given the discipline studied (the “subject-matter”) a central role in the acquisition of knowledge. As Shale (2000: 7-8) notes:

The question that the constructivists ask, however, is how a student is able to make sense of, to incorporate, and to embrace, the subject matter itself. How does the student’s intellect reach out to grasp new knowledge? Knowledge, in the constructivist view, requires mental construction. New knowledge must be situated within the intellect’s grasp of the old, and this requires the reorganisation and recombination of existing understandings. [...] The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain that and teach accordingly. Subject matter content is always, and can only be, learned in relation to a previously learned background of relevant concepts and principles [held by] a particular learner.

In this view, the HumSci students were influenced by their other subjects, as combined in their degrees and determined since school by their choices of (mostly scientific) A-Level subjects. Whereas Arch&Anth students were familiar with the intellectual frame of social anthropology, HumSci students were forced to reorganise, recombine, their existing understandings. Anthropology, a “wordy”^{iv}, self-reflective exercise, was in stark contrast with the frames, schemes and models given by their more familiar, and more scientific, disciplines.

Humanities and sciences students had a different understanding of the outcome of the discipline of anthropology and, more generally, of what constituted knowledge. Whereas humanities students accepted that tutorials should leave them with more questions and reasons to wonder about the world than when they entered, most sciences students were frustrated by equivocal answers and no clear, undisputed truth. When choosing anthropology as an option, they had been attracted by a compilation of established facts about other cultures. They were familiar with debates and a history of conflicting theories in genetics, for example. But they were confident that, one day, knowledge would progress and that new evidence and analysis would emerge and close such or such question with an answer. Knowledge, therefore, was not just a personal process of questioning and reasoning, but a positive, and positivist, way of being in the world. Thinking and acquiring knowledge was a progressive and constructive action, not a preference of *vita contemplativa* but of *honorias*, to follow Thomas Aquinas’ comments on Aristotle. Anthropological theory was therefore posing an epistemological problem for them: there could be arguments, refutations and counter-refutations. But at the end, they believed that there had to be an answer or the prospect of a single, monosemic, truth. I am not here making the distinction between the *techne* and the *episteme* of teaching anthropology. This distinction has been summarised already, for example by Allan Patience in his “Art of Loving in the Classroom” (2008: 55):

The history of late-modern pedagogy may be read as a struggle between two broadly contending views. The first view is that education serves an instrumental purpose: it is a necessary investment in the development of human capital. To put it another way, it is a socialising means to an economic end. The second view is that education is about opening students’ awareness to the many underpinnings of human consciousness and civilisation in a rapidly globalising world. While this second view, too, may be seen as a means to an end, it is also viewed by its proponents as an end in itself.

Here the author traditionally opposes *Laures* - an economic end - to an un-adulterated form of the *vita contemplativa* - an end in itself - by-passing Thomas Aquinas. In the case of the HumSci students, the distinction was not to be located within the conception of knowledge as an end in itself. Therefore they were putting *honorias* before the *vita contemplativa*; as a preference, not an exclusive choice. The HumSci students had not chosen anthropology to gain a competence or a skill for their professional life. In which case, they would probably not have chosen anthropology at all. They had chosen anthropology

out of sheer curiosity, but were confused by the very nature of the discipline, as opposed to other disciplines they were familiar with. In Clifford and Marcus' terms, they were confused by the fact that "the process of cultural representation (was) now inescapably contingent, historical, and contestable" (1986: 11). And it challenged me as an anthropology tutor: to make understood not just the content of anthropology but its very nature.

I call it a challenge (as Clifford and Marcus do) because, as I mentioned previously, this was not something I had ever wondered about. I was at a loss to explain why, in my opinion, in my life, anthropology was so central, should be to others, and what its place was among other academic disciplines. Here, as in a Venn diagram, the nature of the tutorial and the nature of anthropology were linked back together in the workings of an understanding of the discipline. As a tutor, I was not giving or teaching a tutorial. I was merely engaging in "a dialogue that demands more sophisticated levels of understanding, and suggests new conceptions of learning" (Shale 2002: 71). This, in turn, contributed to shape my teaching style. Giving a lecture or a conference on any topic in anthropology would never have prompted me to explain, every time, why the topic was relevant to the students, why anthropology, as opposed to any other discipline, could shed an invaluable light on the topic. More importantly, it would never have required such personal engagement as well as intellectual commitment in the classroom. In turn, had it been any other discipline, my engagement, and my method to convey ideas and concepts, would have been different as well. Anthropology, through its methodology, requires participation from the anthropologist. In the tutorial, it was consequently asking not just for an intellectual justification, but for a personal, experiential, defence.

Conclusion

When tutoring anthropology, the three challenges - teaching students from different disciplines, finding an adequate power distance, and working with the specificities of the Oxford tutorial system - are intricately interwoven. The delivery of knowledge is conveyed through the personality and experience of the tutor as the tutor adapts to the context of the tutorial. In turn, the tutor has to understand and engage with different student conceptions of knowledge in order to convey a felt sense of what anthropology is: a method of constant social inquiry and a never-tiring marvel at the world.

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Notes

ⁱ I developed two of these challenges in a paper delivered at the conference *Teaching Anthropology Today*, 9-10 September 2008, Keble College, University of Oxford.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in: Ashwin, P. (2005), Tapper, E. and D. Palfreyman (2000), Barnett, R. (2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Hofstede (2001).

^{iv} One HumSci student, delivering particularly strong essays, explained that social anthropology was a welcome break from other subjects as it allowed her to use words.