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# Introduction to the Special Edition
# Learning Unlearning: Critical Dialogues between Anthropology and Education

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## Introduction

This special edition of *Teaching Anthropology* explores the common ground between pedagogy and the practice of anthropology. In particular we focus on the process of learning in order to think critically about *unlearning* – that parallel process of loss, of reshaping, of uncertainty, of shedding intellectual skins, that makes up part of how we gain new knowledge and new forms of academic, institutional or disciplinary identity. To this end, *learning unlearning* is an exploration of the revelatory paradoxes that lie at the heart of pedagogy and anthropological inquiry.

One of anthropology's strengths is its determination to unravel hidden meanings and complexities in taken-for-granted assumptions about social worlds. Such parallel processes of revealing the unexpected, making the strange familiar, and the unknown known, are important for all involved in pedagogy (Spencer and Mills 2011:1). Academics, teachers and students of all kinds sometimes have to unlearn assumptions – for example, about disciplinary boundaries or received wisdom about academic practice, methodological approaches or epistemology – in order to move knowledge forward. *Unlearning* becomes just as important as learning in the process of developing new knowledge. At the same time, however, processes of unlearning also take place in institutional settings and within the context of assessment regimes that necessitate a simultaneous and at times seemingly contradictory reining in of unlearning. Often this is for the purposes of academic success or prestige, to fulfil the requirements of one's course of study or job specification, to satisfy the demands of audits on pedagogical and academic practice, and/or to successfully perform imaginings of academic, institutional or disciplinary identities. It is this paradox, and the potential means of effectively engaging with this paradox through pedagogy, that are explored in the articles that follow.

## Background to the Special Edition: Debating Learning Unlearning

The special edition on *learning unlearning* emerged from a one-day conference entitled "*Learning Unlearning: Critical Dialogues Between Anthropology and Education"* that was held at Kellogg College, University of Oxford, on 22nd September 2011. The conference was organized in conjunction with *Teaching Anthropology,* which was officially launched at a reception directly after the conference proper. The day produced debate and discussion around the theme of 'learning unlearning', driven by a desire to establish critical dialogue and exchange between academics, teachers and students in the fields of anthropology and education. Equally as important, *Learning Unlearning* also illustrated the importance of maintaining ongoing links between scholars in these two disciplines. In addition, the conference highlighted the need for debate both about the nature of teaching in anthropology, and about the changing shape of anthropology of education as a sub-discipline.

One of the most important discussions to come out of the conference was the debate about the usefulness of the term 'learning unlearning' itself. Learning unlearning involves an active reflexivity towards the Janus-faced nature of education: education is inherently double-edged because it always involves an element of loss, or of *unlearning*, which takes place alongside the more frequently-discussed emancipatory and enlightening effects of pedagogy. The challenge of learning unlearning is to embrace this experience of loss and recognise it as an integral, if sometimes uncomfortable, part of teaching and learning. Learning unlearning is therefore not a particularly new idea. It is intended to describe the foundation of any pedagogical approach that encourages critical thinking - that recognises the fundamentally social nature of pedagogy, and that asks students (and educators) to question the boundaries that frame their experiences of education (Lave 1996). The use of the term

"unlearning" to describe this critical element of the learning process is contentious because it jars with an understanding of learning as a straightforward, linear and acquisitive process whereby new knowledge and competencies are added to an ever-increasing compendium. It also diverges from the notion of knowledge acquisition as a binary process through which learning is contrasted with not learning (or "wrong" learning). Instead, learning and unlearning emerge as concurrent and inextricable parts of the same process.

There are multiple examples within ethnographies of education that show how "unlearning" is an important part of developing the social or cultural capital necessary to successfully navigate educational landscapes. Girls may be encouraged to "unlearn" what they have learned about their own individual gender identities, in order to fit in with normative values put forward through education (McRobbie 1991); or "lads" may need to unlearn aspects of so-called working-class values and beliefs if they are to experience success in formal education (Willis 1974). But this unlearning is often framed in terms of students *failing* to learn these lessons, rather than *as part* of successfully negotiating teaching and learning. It is the "lads" or "ladettes" (Jackson 2006) who fall out favour with the education system that more frequently appear in ethnographies of unlearning through education. Much less has been said about the uncomfortable experiences of loss that underpin experiences of educational success, not least in the context of teaching anthropology. Arguably these unlearning "rites of passage" are particularly marked in the teaching and learning of anthropology, where ideally both the content and the process of teaching and learning explicitly challenge pre-conceived notions and received wisdom about social and cultural life. At the same time, teaching and learning anthropology is just as fraught as teaching and learning in any context. Political, disciplinary and institutional boundaries are continuously drawn and redrawn to control how knowledge is transferred and created.

The notion of learning unlearning remained contested throughout the conference. Some argued for a concept of learning based on better-established metaphors of construction – building blocks, scaffolding, of admixture. These provide a valuable means for framing learning and *re-learning* as well as (or in favour of) unlearning. Juxtaposing these different perspectives on the paradoxes of pedagogy fostered the intended critical dialogue between education and anthropology. Thinking about learning unlearning raised some difficult and at times uncomfortable questions regarding the limits imposed on critical reflexivity amidst the practicalities of teaching and learning. Are students and teachers of anthropology, for instance, *really* any more sensitised to the politics of their pedagogical practices than anyone else? How, we might ask, are these issues addressed within the context of university and secondary school teaching of anthropology today?

One good way of beginning explore such questions is to consider one's own experiences of learning unlearning through anthropology. Before introducing the articles in this special edition, I offer a personal reflection to pose a number of questions.

## Reflecting on Learning Unlearning in Practice: A Personal Narrative

In my first tutorial as a Master's student of Social Anthropology, my tutor thrust me his copy of *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard 1937) and gave me the following brief instructions: "Read this and see what you think." My immediate response, after digging into the ethnography, was confusion, attempting as I was to understand this text from the critical standpoint that my undergraduate immersion in postcolonial theory had provided me. After four years of developing a sense of academic identity located in this particular theoretical outlook, I was convinced that post-colonial theory represented the totality of social theory. I was also less aware than I had presumed about the historical legacies of these ideas, or the diversity of the disciplinary landscape of the humanities and social sciences. I therefore felt ill-prepared to make sense of the genre of ethnography, and my tutor's lack of guidance struck me as obfuscating and unhelpful.

Reconciling myself to the task, I was obliged to take a few theoretical steps sideways (and/or backwards) into unknown text, an unfamiliar disciplinary landscape, and an unknown area of social life. As for most students new to anthropology, the process was difficult and unsettling, and the awkwardness was only overcome through engaging with the broader conceptual and philosophical puzzles around rationality that framed the ethnography itself. In the end I managed to get my head around *Azande* and produce an essay, as so many students before and since. I was unlearning preconceptions about ethnography, as well as unlearning lessons, for better or for worse, about approaches to learning itself. By the end of the essay I had experienced one of those infrequent moments where something previously confusing and obscure had suddenly become clearer through my perseverance with a line of inquiry that also challenged my prior learning. And I had learned a valuable lesson about learning anthropology in this particular institutional context.

On one level, then, this particular instance of learning anthropology was completing the ideal of what teaching anthropology (or teaching generally) should do: it was challenging me to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, to independently unlearn my preconceptions about an aspect of social life and to develop a new way of thinking about it. This introduction into the world of anthropology had certainly inspired in me a critical approach in this sense; but I had to go through the "fog" of unlearning in order to get there. This was by no means a comfortable experience. Nor do I think it was the most productive or effective way to help me to unlearn, because it left me scant room to incorporate the analytical tools that I had already developed as an undergraduate. This particular vision of anthropology did not encourage the incorporation of postcolonial theory, and so I was obliged to leave it to one side for the time being. In the end, this meant that, while successful in completing the exercise, I was not being original or critical beyond what might normally be required from a postgraduate's first exploration of witchcraft and rationality.

Years later I eventually came around to teaching my own students about witchcraft, I tried my best to lift the "fog" of unlearning. I explicitly presented my students with the unlearning they needed to do to understand and critically assess the topic in a way that was enjoyable, constructive and reassuring rather than fraught and confusing. I incorporated simple strategies for making learning objectives clear, for providing historical or political contexts, and for incorporating a critical discussion of the learning process into the debate. I also encouraged students to draw where relevant on prior learning within other disciplines (English literature, history, sociology, biology, etc.) when writing their essays. On one level, I think this was successful, if not particularly ground-breaking. In this particular instance of teaching I was initially pleased with my ability to teach in what I considered an "anthropological" way – to reveal the familiar/strange in a way that also reflected on the pedagogical process by which this learning took place. But shortly afterwards, it was me that was again sunk into a fog: this time a fog of unlearning about the process of teaching and learning anthropology. While I had considered my approach engaging and thoughtful, as the term progressed it occurred to me that for some students this explicit, peer-behind-the-curtain means of teaching anthropology simply encouraged a learning of the "knack" or "trick" of understanding anthropological topics at the undergraduate level, and of shrewdly mastering the discourse of learning anthropology. For some, it just became about learning that the answer is: "it's all relative; everything can be deconstructed, and there's no simple answer." Of course this is seldom the whole answer. While this understanding of relativism and anthropological bet-hedging suggests unlearning on one level, it does not *really* challenge students to question the boundaries of what and how they are learning. I worried that this approach did not, in the end, encourage my students to establish opinions and arguments of their own. How then, I thought, would it be possible to encourage students to think anthropologically beyond this stage? How could they be encouraged to engage in unlearning on a deeper level beyond the surface-level "trick" of unlearning cultural pre-conceptions? Could I engage them in dialogue about their own learning of anthropology?

In my own teaching I now try to encourage students to be even more aware of what they are experiencing, both in terms of a tutorial approach to teaching at an elite university (that is, remaining reflexive about their experiences of "quality" education and institutional "privilege" in this context) and in terms of how they are learning to become anthropologists. In this respect I think I have been more successful in encouraging a healthy cynicism in my students. This is expressed in their constructive criticism of both their university and of anthropology as it is imagined at this institution. But at the same time, my students are also explicit in stating that they also *enjoy* becoming anthropologists; they *enjoy* developing a sense of disciplinary identity. They are also aware and, not surprisingly, quite happy about the fact that they are becoming anthropologists at an elite university with a long tradition of anthropological endeavour. So is it really possible to get people to simultaneously learn and unlearn disciplinary and institutional identities? Don't we all need to learn first to "be" something (anthropologist, educationalist, sociologist of education, junior academic, senior academic, teacher, student) before we can become critical of what it means to claim that identity?

These questions have led me to reflect on the idea of learning as loss – of learning as an experience that involves gaining new knowledge and experience, at the cost of losing pre-existing notions of self, of losing previous social ties, and of losing the sense of certainty and security that bounded notions of identity often afford. Was I being a "bad" teacher by not allowing my students to experience this loss, by not allowing them to travel through the "fog" of unlearning in order to gain some kind of ownership over the new, partially altered academic, disciplinary or institutional identities that emerge on the other side? Isn't that an important – maybe even vital – part of learning unlearning? The experience of learning unlearning through Evans-Pritchard's *Azande* was my first foray into a new disciplinary identity as an anthropologist. While anthropology was on one level helping me to critically frame the phenomena that I was learning (and unlearning) about, my experience of learning anthropology was

also forcing a reframing of that knowledge so that it could be articulated in reference to a particular construction of what it means to "do" anthropology. It was only after having learned what it means to "be" an anthropologist or "do" anthropology in this context that I was then in a position to think more critically about these particular disciplinary markers of identity, and begin to unlearn certain preconceptions of how I conceptualised the anthropological project. In the end it was the experience of doing my doctorate as an anthropologist within an Education department that allowed for this process of unlearning, through worrying about disciplinary and institutional identity, to take place. For me, the fog of unlearning was a fundamental, if uncomfortable, part of this process. This raises one final question: How can we better prepare students and educators (and ourselves) for the paradoxical, uncomfortable rewards of learning unlearning?

## An overview of the Special Edition

In different ways, the articles in this special edition address the question of learning unlearning. Gavin Weston's article presents interesting ideas about the usefulness of controversy as a means to teach about anthropology. Weston presents a model for using controversies for teaching anthropology, using the Carlos Castaneda controversy. This raises issues about gossip, scandal and implied intimacy, and asks how controversy engages students in critical thinking. Questions about teaching practice are raised by Nick Pearce's discussion of the idea of "clickolage" – a take on a more traditional notion of bricolage in the context of learning anthropology through new digital technologies and social media. Pearce argues that instead of presenting anthropology students with a coherent discipline through textbooks and readings, social media can be used to present a range of texts through which the student is encouraged to make sense of the discipline for themselves, and in so doing develop an "anthropological" imagination. A key issue raised is the need to facilitate the learning process for students by recognising their practices of media use and then providing ways for them to be critical about the veracity of the materials being explored within these practices, rather than attempting the impossible task of remaining ahead of the curve in terms of students' uses of technology to learn about anthropology.

A more sceptical view of learning unlearning is provided in the article by Kath Orlandi and Babs Anderson. Within the context of their study, Orlandi and Anderson suggest that learning unlearning does not accurately describe the processes taking place. Instead, they suggest a focus on *unravelling* and *reshaping* or *reconfiguring* existing learning, rather than on *unlearning* as such. In this way, they question whether it is necessary to "unlearn" in order to truly accommodate and synthesise new knowledge or practices. Perhaps we do not really "unlearn," but rather simply loosen some of the threads of our knowledge and experience so that they are not bound so tightly. Nevertheless, Orlandi and Anderson put forward an argument for a more anthropological approach to teaching and learning among educational professionals, in order that they might more readily recognise the 'strangeness' of their own practices.

In the section of the journal dedicated to reflections on teaching practice, this perspective is contrasted against Judith Okely's article entitled "Confronting Positionality destabilises and unlearns Ethnocentricism." This includes autobiographical accounts of unlearning from Okely's experiences of attending a restrictive all-girls boarding school, through to experiences of teaching anthropology in different disciplinary contexts. Okely focuses on gender as an aspect of learning unlearning, as much in her experience of escaping the confines of boarding school as in establishing courses on the anthropology of gender, and in negotiating power and agency as a female academic. Bonnie Vandesteeg provides a thoughtful and timely reflection on how anthropology and education intersect in her experiences of teaching, with a particular focus on the notion of transitions between secondary education and university, and on the new A-Level in Anthropology. Vandesteeg suggests that unlearning is an important part of transitions from secondary school to university, and from Year 11 (GCSE) into the sixth form (A-Levels) in the UK education system. In part this involves students adjusting to new approaches to independent learning, adapting to new regimes of assessment and renegotiating perceptions of educational success and failure. Teachers must also engage in unlearning when thinking about how best to teach critical thinking skills to students, while reconciling this approach with students' prior experiences of education. The value of learning unlearning as an idea emerges here in its capacity to encapsulate the uncomfortable paradoxes that shape pedagogical practice, not least within the context of teaching and learning in anthropology.

## Conclusion

In the end, the articles in this special edition raise more questions than they answer. This is indicative of the need for continued debate and reflection on the nature of pedagogical practice in anthropology, and on the ways in

which teaching and learning "anthropologically" can benefit pedagogy in other disciplines as well. Unlearning learning is a paradox at the heart of all pedagogical practice. Anthropology helps us learn just how to go about that unlearning. As the articles suggest, the challenge lies in transforming the theory of learning unlearning – a pedagogy that embraces loss and uncertainty as part of learning – into straightforward, pragmatic, effective practice that works in the day-to-day reality of the classroom and lecture hall.

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