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Students and Fieldwork Collide: Taking a Hands-on Approach to Teaching Anthropology

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Abstract
This paper discusses how students may be involved in a fieldwork learning process through supervised participating in the fieldwork setting of their supervisor. I focus on the issues associated with introducing undergraduate students to the practicalities of ethnographic fieldwork.

Introduction

Few anthropologists end up living and working in their field site after their designated period of fieldwork, and with good cause. Creating and maintaining physical distance helps facilitate the emotional and intellectual space, which has long been regarded as necessary for the writing up process. However, with transformative discussions surrounding post-modern anthropology advocating non-traditional approaches to fieldwork (see for example Faubion and Marcus 2009), the divide between field and 'home' is blurring. I have had the mixed fortune of living in the field for 10 years after the original year spent conducting doctoral research, and during that time became programme coordinator for Anthropology (until September 2012) at a university located right in the middle of my fieldwork area. My ongoing presence in the field has had some drawbacks in terms of constantly being exposed to new data and having to re-negotiate relationships with informants who are also now friends, neighbours and colleagues, but these are offset in part by numerous advantages which I have been able to utilise pedagogically. Indeed, having a network of long-standing informants on the doorstep has been beneficial for all concerned, and in particular for students at the university. It is this latter category who will be the focus of this piece. As a firm believer in the importance of embodied knowledge, and following Herzfeld's (2001) definition of anthropology as the practice of theory, at each stage of their academic training, I have taken anthropology students into the field and encouraged them to put the theory they have learnt in the classroom into practice. We have worked with and for informants on projects, and students have documented the cultural traditions of this area of Wales for the benefit of future generations. I will briefly discuss the successes and failures of such a 'hands-on' approach to teaching anthropology and doing ethnography, exploring the pedagogical and ethical challenges which arise when field and home collide, with particular reference to teaching anthropology.

Students and Fieldwork Collide

The area of Wales where I conduct fieldwork is very rural. Agriculture of some form or another, ranging from hill sheep farming to organic horticulture, constitutes the primary livelihood for many of my informants. There is also a long history of negativity towards England and 'the English' at a local level, and this informal antipathy has been fed by the formalised resurgence of Welsh nationalism, which culminated in the burning of holiday cottages and second homes in the area between the late 1970s and mid-1990s. This made my entry into the field difficult on some levels. As a *Saes* (derogatory term for an English person), and a townie to boot, it took a while for my informants to accept me. However, in many respects, my decision to study hunting went in my favour and opened doors into the community, which remain closed for the majority of incomers. Before returning to postgraduate study had I worked in publishing, as a marketeer for the pro-hunting magazine *Horse and Hound.*

This was not a reflection on my own attitudes towards hunting at the time (which oscillated between antipathy and curiosity) but the connection stood me in good stead, as did my abilities with horses (see also Cassidy 2002), and, in traditional anthropological style, my attempts at conversing in the Welsh language.

Working at a University (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, henceforth TSD) located right in the middle of my fieldwork area provided opportunity for involving my informants in the analysis and dissemination of research. As I wrote up my initial findings and began preparing papers and articles, I would run these past primary informants for comment, and if the papers were delivered locally, then I would try to extend an invitation to those who had expressed an interest. This led to a mixed audience on a few occasions, comprising informants in addition to students and academic colleagues. Nearly twelve years on, some informants have retained an active interest in my work, and still act as sound boards for theoretical ideas or proof readers of articles, as well as sitting in on lectures or attending papers, film screenings or other dissemination events if they are able, even now I have moved away from Wales to the University of Exeter.

On one occasion, in the wake of the 2004 Hunting Act, when I was preparing to give a paper about the impact of the hunting ban on my informants, I conducted an interview with a key informant to clarify some of the key points in my argument. After the interview had finished and we were chatting about the conference over a cup of tea she said "make sure you tell them all about us, so they know we're good people. All this negative press about hunting just isn't fair. You know we're not blood thirsty criminals. Someone needs to get that information out there." The question of advocacy and the ethical responsibilities of anthropologists to their research subjects is an ongoing topic of debate (see, for example Fuller, Layton, Parish and Rowlands 1995; Hastrup and Elsass 1990; Kellett 2009; Kirsch 2002), and one which falls beyond the scope of the current piece. Suffice to say that I have, often inadvertently, become an advocate for my informants simply by presenting a reflexive account of my experiences with them in publications (e.g. Hurn 2008a and b, 2009, 2011a and forthcoming) and in the class or lecture room.

The student body at TSD is international in its composition. Many come to this institution from urban areas because of the lure of the rural idyll, and as a result, attitudes towards the cultural practices of the local farming community tend to be mixed. By the time I left TSD in September 2012, only two anthropology students had hailed from the local Welsh-speaking farming community, which added an interesting and at times challenging dimension to the group dynamic (see also Pack 2011). However, by drawing on my own ethnographic experiences in lectures and seminars, and contrasting these with students' experiences and preconceived ideas about rural living in this part of the world, I was able to challenge some entrenched views, and encourage students to experience some aspects of the diverse cultures and traditions of rural Wales for themselves through participation in various field trips and research based modules. This exercise in making the familiar strange, or rather more transparent, has had significant pedagogical value for establishing the central tenets of the anthropological endeavour; the reflexive understanding of the human condition, as well as providing students with a practical and supervised grounding as they experiment with interview techniques and grapple with the issues associated with participant observation.

The anthropological study of familiar, or rather what appear to be familiar cultures and cultural institutions is nothing new, and has been subjected to extended critique and analysis (e.g. Jackson 1987). However, for undergraduate students who have yet to actually conduct fieldwork, and who are themselves often drawn to anthropology because of a desire to travel the world and experience 'other' cultures, it can be revelatory to engage in even a brief period of participant observation and discover things about a 'familiar' people or place or activity which causes them to re-evaluate their existing and often taken for granted assumptions. The following quotes are from the fieldwork diaries of first year anthropology students who participated in a module called *Research Experience* during academic years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. This module combined classroom based lectures and practical sessions on various different qualitative methodologies with a series of targeted field trips into the local farming community (including to livestock auctions, working farms, farmers' markets, conservation and local history centres etc.). In a bid to ensure parity of treatment for the entire cohort, the chosen field sites have also included an eco-community to provide the two students from farming backgrounds and who regarded this area as 'home' with exposure to social contexts and cultural institutions which were, to all intents and purposes 'unfamiliar' to them. Quotes A, B, C and D below relate to four non-Welsh students' experiences at a sheep auction, and quotes E, F and G relate to the experiences of one of the Welsh-speaking students in the cohort on visiting a sheep auction, a local Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*) conservation centre and an eco-village respectively. The fieldwork diaries were weblogs and students read and commented on each other's posts.

A. *I must admit that at first I was quite uncomfortable with the idea of going to a sheep auction and pestering people with questions. I feared that the people involved in the auction might be hostile towards us. I personally wouldn't be too happy if I was a farmer and a group of students came to my place of business and got in my way. When we got there, I realised that my expectations had been rather pessimistic. Everyone was friendly and they did not seem to mind us being there. I grew up in a big city, so a sheep auction was something completely new to me. I found it all really interesting and would have liked to ask the farmers a few questions, but I was perhaps a little worried that I would end up asking silly questions and embarrassing myself as I know very little about farm animals. Looking back now, I think I should have got more involved and asked the farmers some questions.* (MB)

B. *Our final trip of the week was to the sheep auction on Friday, which I was very excited about, as I have never experienced anything like it. At first it felt extremely alien and I felt that our presence was quite intrusive. It wasn't until the auction started and I began to be able to make sense of the stream of words flowing from the auctioneer's mouth, that it became more comfortable. It was as though everyone relaxed and began to blend in with the atmosphere. I didn't actually approach anyone myself, due to being too shy, yet I felt that out of all the trips I got the most out of this one. Just standing by and absorbing the atmosphere I was able to work out the mechanics of the auction and gain information from observing people. I also feel that now being familiar with the atmosphere, when we visit the cattle auction I will be a lot more confident.* (KB)

C. *In an experience far removed from my upbringing in London, today we visited the sheep auction in Tregaron. As a group of students observing I did feel that we stood out by quite some margin, yet at the same time we weren't made to feel unwelcome. Far from the auction being a place of business and only business, it seemed as if farmers used it also as a social occasion. They greeted each other and poked each other in a way you may expect in the pub, not at a location where money is the key reason for attendance. This showed me a side of the farming community that I had perhaps not considered up until this point.* (AW)

D. *The sheep auction was awesome, although not as formal as I expected. I learnt loads from speaking to a farmer who was there for pleasure, a member of DEFRA [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] who was there for the welfare of the sheep and a farmer who was a seller. I found interacting with these people was really useful to my work. By starting on a subject close to their hearts (farming) I gained loads of info on the way the mart works and people's motivation for being there. Trying to talk to people didn't come without drawbacks. The first blokes I approached promptly gestured that they didn't want to talk by turning around as I approached, leaving me feeling very silly indeed. The main aspects of the visit (for me) were to practise the base skill of anthropology, which is speaking to people to gain a deeper understanding of them and their culture. Sounds all well and good, but I was made to feel like a sore thumb or 'other' most of the time. I enjoyed it though.* (DT)

E. *Talking as we might with whom we liked really accentuated the merits of informal interviews for me. Here I could observe and seek clarification from those who are the heartbeat of the phenomenon, who have no agenda or obligation to me or anyone else but can talk freely and sincerely on matters relating to them and their lives. It is here among the hustle and bustle, yelps and heeve-hoes where you find what it means to the practitioners, or not! As I stood huddled amongst my three informants late into the morning's affairs, my greatest fears were slowly revealing themselves to me. These gentlemen were well and truly retired and their sons had decided to seek employment elsewhere, a story all too common nowadays. A simple glance around the complex would have done it, but I thought I'd clarify just the same. "Farming is a tricky business nowadays", offered one of the gents. "Nowadays they are not just farmers, but administrators, lawyers even", countered another. Laughter followed, but this was a sorry laugh, from all parties... Some thoughts for consideration to conclude with then. Role-play between myself and the guys I spoke with definitely took the form of teacher-pupil today and this was a good opportunity to experience some of the things I'd read about this last year. My incompetence was always received with generous grace by those directing me and so I'd like to take this opportunity to encourage those of you who are yet to speak with your subjects to do so, for you too have experiences which you can share with your informants and nine times out of ten they'd be all too happy to hear about these. Another issue, which came to mind was the possibility of isolating oneself from another faction of the community through contact with a certain individual. The man from DEFRA was truly helpful and gave us lots of perspectives and things to think about, but his role is a contentious one at the mart and I was more than aware of that during the time I spent in discussion with him. Fortunately this did not jeopardize any future contacts which I sought out; but I can now more fully appreciate the intricate challenges which present themselves to budding anthropologists in the field.* (RT)

F. *As the last of the group filtered out I struck up a conversation with Mary in Welsh, which I thought she'd appreciate. This really is an invaluable tool and I see why anthropologists stress the importance of learning the native language as proficiently as possible before heading into the field as it were. Another valuable ally I got on side and which helped the situation was the presence of Ivan her husband. He too was a Welsh speaker and was especially helpful in answering my questions in relation to the Kite.... having found some common ground with Ivan I commenced in putting those questions, which took my interest, to the pair, including the possibility of the Kite existing as a totemic animal among the Welsh people. This idealism of the Kite stems from the theory that due to our shared experiences [of hostility], we are in some ways forever bound to these birds and use their resurgence in the face of obscurity as a metaphor for our own cultural survival. Fair? I Don't know. Personally for me it rings true ... but then I'm a romantic and polluted by all this anthropological possibility, which keeps coming my way! For Ivan and Mary it is quite another thing... Who knows, maybe if we re-interviewed the couple tomorrow they may, having reflected on the matter further, return with a completely new perspective as to why they volunteer so hard to save and promote this animal above another. For now I'm left with their replies and must report them as sincerely and honestly as I found them; which is to say that presented with the above question they found no truth*

> *in the matter, in so far as a shared experience of persecution and survival, but rather more to do with the sense of obligation which they felt toward the bird, for whom Wales was the sole place which offered these animals a sanctuary in the whole of Britain. For this reason both Mary and Ivan felt so attached to them and for this reason they returned day after day to support the Kite in every possible way that they could.* (RT)

> **H.** W*hat a contrast to yesterday's experience. This eco-friendly village seemed alien to me as I walked within its confines. It made me appreciate how some of you must have felt yesterday and for that I am sorry. It was a humbling experience, because up until now I had not really encountered anything out of the norm, whereas this was a new experience entirely. Like many of you I too had to start from scratch and had little to rely on save my curiosity and willingness to ask questions of complete strangers.* (RT)

Being supervised during these initial forays into the field also helped students to develop their confidence as they had an experienced member of staff to turn to for advice about how to approach informants or a particularly unfamiliar fieldwork setting such as a livestock auction. I had the added advantage of being able to act as gatekeeper. This meant I could brief informants in advance and then line particular students up with specific informants who would either be very forthcoming and increase the confidence of shy interviewers, or would be more recalcitrant or even slightly obstreperous and challenge those students who at times verged on cockiness or who had particularly strong preconceived ideas! As the selection of student responses given above suggest, the approach worked well overall, with some students even starting to link their experiences in the field to published ethnographic examples (e.g. Gray 2002) and, in later posts as the module wore on, to situate their experiences in relation to contemporary theoretical discussions. As the two-weeks progressed, even the shyest had plucked up sufficient courage to engage in some form of verbal interaction in the field.

One of our field trips took us to the large working farm managed by one of my long-standing informants. The farm had been in his family for generations and he kindly agreed to the students descending en-mass for a tour of the farm, followed by a group interview focussed on agrarian change. All went well and each student came away having played an active role in the interview, and with plenty of material to reflect on in their fieldwork diaries. I had set up a Wordpress weblog to take the form of a collective fieldwork diary which facilitated reflexive discussion between members of the group and also enabled informants to read and comment on the whole process. However, it was here that what could have escalated into a significant problem arose. We had discussed the importance of transparency in ethnographic research at the start of the module and all had agreed that an open-access forum would be a way in which we could facilitate ongoing dialogue with informants. The students had also been carefully briefed about the implications of posting personal reflections in an open-access forum. Moreover, a great deal of time had been spent dissecting the ASA Ethical Guidelines, and the responsibilities of anthropologists to their informants had been emphasised.

The forums were monitored daily by staff teaching on the module (myself plus two postgraduate teaching assistants), but the students had also been encouraged to take responsibility for themselves as a collective, and for the most part things went smoothly. However, following the field trip to the farm, one of the student posts mentioned that in a bid to encourage Red Kite populations in the area, the farmer had, in the past, left out sheep carcasses for these carrion-eating birds to consume. First thing the next morning there was an e-mail in my inbox from my informant who was upset that this potentially compromising information had been posted. He was concerned that if DEFRA were to find out that he had contravened regulations governing the hygienic disposal of fallen livestock he could get into serious trouble. I apologised profusely, and at his request, and after consultation with the student responsible, removed that section of the post with no harm done. In fact, this actually served as a useful cautionary tale for the remainder of the module as students realised that their posts were indeed being read, and as a result were galvanised to carefully consider what came to be termed the 'four Rs'; a range of important anthropological issues subsumed under the headings Reflexivity, Representation, Responsibilities and the potential for Recrimination. Through directed reading which informed subsequent discussions back in the classroom the students were able to explore the ways in which professional anthropologists had encountered and dealt with comparable practical and ethical issues during the course of their own field work.

Conclusion:

The issues associated with introducing undergraduate students to the practicalities of ethnographic fieldwork have long been debated by ASA members (Mills 2011). Recent discussions concerning teaching anthropology have emphasised both the importance and attendant complications of embodied knowledge in anthropological training. Spencer (2011), for example, argues that emotions play significant roles in "knowledge making" during

the ethnographic process, and in relation to the examples provided above, students were exposed to emotionally charged situations. The most salient of these were the livestock auctions, where the students, the majority of whom were unaccustomed to such an environment, encountered animals who were not only being sold for meat but were also being treated roughly. Yet it was in relation to their interactions with the human subjects at the market to which most of their fieldwork diary and blog entries referred: the fear of rejection from being viewed as unwelcome outsiders, or the humiliation of asking the "wrong" questions. However, despite these fears, I was consistently impressed by the "emotional reflexivity" (Spencer 2011) they displayed both in their written work, as well as in our post-trip discussions. Their abilities to conduct themselves in an emotionally reflexive manner improved markedly as the module progressed and they became more confident in their own abilities as budding ethnographers to the extent that by the end of the module, all had managed to ask meaningful questions of informants in a fieldwork setting. Spencer also notes that emotional reflexivity is an important aspect of transformative learning, and this was clearly demonstrated in the final vignette provided above. The social and moral responsibilities of ethnographers to their research subjects became tangible as the students themselves had to respond to the albeit unintentional offence caused by their posting potentially incriminating information about an informant onto their weblog.

Admittedly this paper has only focussed on one "case study" module in a rather unusual context in the sense that I was able to share my "local" field-site with undergraduate students in a way that would not be possible for most professional anthropologists who work in geographically disparate regions. However, it is a model, which I have applied in other contexts to equally good effect. For example, in 2008 and 2009, I took small groups of undergraduate students with me to South Africa to participate in research in another of my field-sites (Hurn 2011b). While there may be some dissent over the value or indeed the wisdom of taking large groups of undergraduate students into the field, my experience suggests that it is a hugely rewarding exercise for all concerned. As embodiment is key to ethnographic understanding, I would argue that the sooner anthropologists are give the opportunity to "be" ethnographers, the more time they have to develop and hone the skills needed to be good ethnographers!

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