



## Growing Under an Acacia Tree: An Open Letter On How To Raise an Anthropologist

Kelsey Timler, School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia  
Sheina Lew-Levy, Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge

### To the teachers of anthropology

As you know, foundational to the production of ethnography is the concept of *the field*. Though not all anthropologists engage in fieldwork, few can deny that socio-cultural anthropology has been shaped by those who have chosen to rise from their armchairs to engage with other cultures, on both macro- and micro-scales. Though not all undergraduate anthropology students will continue in this discipline, many still find inspiration in a concept, article, or teacher during their undergraduate years. These experiences can have immense influence on students' ways of thinking and engaging with the concepts of culture and difference, which often carries into future endeavors. And yet, despite the prevalence of ethnographic film, text, and discussion within the classroom, fieldwork and its associated methodologies continue to remain partially hidden from undergraduate students. This is despite the many ways in which fieldwork and its correlated skills improve not only future employability, but a person's understanding of cultural differences, commitment to an overarching shared humanity, and the capacity to exist as a moral and reflexive individual (Coleman & Simpson, 2004; Lange, 2013; Okely, 2012).

We are some of the lucky few who have had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork during our undergraduate degrees, in our case as part of McGill's Canadian Field Studies in Africa program, a two-and-a-half-month field school through which we studied social and environmental sciences. In contrast to the long-term individual field experiences typical of many anthropology PhD programs, we lived and travelled with 36 other students, our professors, and a whole crew of staff, whose presence helped ease us into fieldwork. During our time in Kenya and Tanzania, we began to reflect on the ways in which we were interacting with anthropological knowledge. This gave us an opportunity to analyze how we had learnt back home in our respective classrooms, compared to and contrasted with how we were learning in East Africa. This letter is the result of these discussions<sup>1</sup>, through which we hope to persuade those of you teaching anthropology to incorporate field experiences into your undergraduate classrooms. We believe that this will facilitate experiences for students who, due to various limiting factors, cannot afford expensive overseas fieldwork programs. We will argue that there are many ways in which professors can incorporate fieldwork into their classroom teaching, and that this will empower students to deepen their understanding of the diverse applicability of ethnographic techniques, increase their knowledge of the multifaceted cultures within which they live, and gain technical skills that remain salient across various educational and career trajectories.

### Our experiences in the field

For us, participating in the Canadian Field Studies in Africa program was a fantastic inauguration into the practice of ethnographic fieldwork, far from our classrooms and our homes. As part of this practice, we had the opportunity to sample various ethnographic techniques: we participated in a homestay, through which we became short-term participant observers in Maasai homes, taking note of the structure of the household, gender roles, and local concepts of wealth; we studied the prescribed ways in which animals were butchered and divided based on age and gender; we learnt ethno-botany, looking at the various craft, medicine, and food uses of wild

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Anthropology Association's 2012 Annual meeting in San Francisco.

plants, their distribution, and the lore surrounding them; we participated in an exchange with students from Kenyan universities, comparing and contrasting the ways in which we are taught, learn, and live, and; we studied ornithology, wildlife biology, and went on safari with local experts, who explained the political and economic repercussions of conservation while exploring the factors that contributed to habitat destruction. We spent a considerable amount of time conducting our own independent research, exploring various topics, such as herbal medicine, maternal health, and human-animal relations. In order to conduct this research, the theoretical methods we had read about extensively, back home in our fluorescent-lit classrooms, were put into practice. While we did spend some of our time as tourists, we also had opportunities to discuss the environmental, economic and political impacts of tourism on both local and global scales.

One of the highlights of our field experience was trying our hand at conducting semi-structured ethnographic interviews. On various occasions, we would sit down with local people who had generously agreed to answer our questions, and stumble through a series of disjointed queries, receiving short, one-word answers as responses. However, we had many opportunities to watch our experienced professors conduct field interviews, noting the tactful wording and sequencing of questions, always asking for clarifications, and avoiding assumptions. This modeling of qualitative interviewing greatly enhanced our learning; we were able to try out these new methods, figure out what problems we were still having, and spend time once again watching our professors. Though we are far from skilled interviewers, we believe that this learning style empowered us to refine our techniques.

Another important field method we had the opportunity to practice was that of participant observation. Certain things you can only learn by doing. Thus, by spending time in the field, with local people who were willing to allow us to milk their goats, however poorly, and who invited us to go wildlife tracking with their children, we were able to observe, first hand, the socio-cultural, political, economic, and symbolic ways in which people in particular cultural groups behave, and the differences between and within cultural groups. With the emotional safety of having our peers with us in these different and often confusing cultures, we were able to delve in more deeply and participate more fully (Hurn, 2012). For example, since our homestays were conducted in the company of two other students, we had peers with whom to discuss how to participate in household activities in ways that were constructive and respectful. This prepared us for carrying out more formal fieldwork alone.

Next, as students in a moving classroom, we were lucky to be sharing our experiences with peers who came from diverse fields and walks of life; students in economics, international development, wildlife biology, and even neuroscience. Interacting with these students on a daily basis, as well as taking courses that might not have been available at our universities or within our respective disciplines, allowed us to explore the intersections, crossovers, and tensions between and within various ways of knowing. Our education became more holistic, incorporating various ontologies and epistemologies as a means to better understand individuals and communities within cultures (Okely, 2012). By having class out in the field, far outside the walls of our universities, we had to think about the theoretical assumptions that may hold true in the classroom, but that do not necessarily fit the reality of the field. For example, what we read about the gender dynamics in Maasai homes became far more complex and dynamic when discussed around the hearth with Maasai women of various ages. This act of learning from different viewpoints allowed us to interact with knowledge holders outside academia, experts who have varying and complementary ways of knowing and seeing the world. We were often taught, within the context of our courses, by midwives, herbalists, elders, children, students our own age, shopkeepers, and many others. This provided us with the ability to better understand how anthropologists situate ethnographic data within various theoretical contexts.

Lastly, watching our professors conduct themselves in the field was essential in shaping our understandings of the anthropologists' role in generating data, and in the ways in which a person's experiences and identity can influence their interpretation of cultural difference (Bastide, 2011; Okely, 2012). Though not a formal field method by any means, watching different anthropologists and other experts handle the uncertainties of formal research allowed us to see the inherent subjectivity of socio-cultural anthropology, a field in which the biases and positionality of the researcher are just as important as those of the 'others' being studied (Coleman & Simpson, 2004; Okely, 2012). This realization, far from turning us off anthropology, has instead led us to better appreciate the work done by ethnographers, work that involves constant mediation between one's self and the outside world.

Participating in this field school gave us the opportunity to learn in ways that we would have otherwise missed out on during our undergraduate degrees. We firmly believe that these experiences are not restricted to travel abroad. Since the teaching of anthropology occurs in universities, often situated in cities filled with socio-

economic, ethnic, religious, historical, cultural and political diversity, the classroom can, and should, become the field (Small, 2008). The vast majority of our field school peers came from upper middle class backgrounds, and had the economic and social support systems necessary to take part in extended international field studies. However, we believe that students from different economic backgrounds should have access to the benefits that field methods and ethnographic immersion can generate.

### **Teaching anthropology in the classroom**

The classroom offers a window into the diverse and dynamic cultures that exist within our social circles. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) called for an abandonment of localized views of culture, and for the study of people in what they conceptualized as a world of displacement. We believe that undergraduate education offers an exciting opportunity for students to play with and within the notion of the field (Lange, 2013). This would provide students with an opportunity to study themselves and the intersecting worlds they inhabit as they take the bus, work in local coffee shops, or board airplanes, through the lenses that anthropological theories and methodologies offer. Less than before, but still ideologically dominant within the discipline, is the idea that to be truly *out* of the chair and *off* the verandah anthropologists must immerse themselves into an 'Other' *more* exotic than the 'Otherness' found within one's own backyard. This myth is perpetuated within the classroom, increasing the barriers that students face when trying to engage experientially with ethnographic methods.

Personal experience and the transformation that occurs when engaging with the self is already dominant within anthropological pedagogy. We have both encountered individuals who, upon discovering that we had studied anthropology, explain with great enthusiasm that they too once took an anthropology course, an experience that they believe shaped the way they think about, and engage with, the world. Coleman & Simpson (1999) explain that many anthropology students incorporate classroom knowledge into their personal lives. Though not every student chooses this field with the intention of pursuing a career in anthropology, qualitative evidence suggests that, for some, the development of an 'ethnographic sensibility' leads them to challenge their presuppositions about the world (Mills & Spencer, 2011:1). This relationship works both ways; Small (2008) found that the majority of what undergraduate students, both within and outside of anthropology, learnt in university occurred outside of the confines of the classroom. When one considers this, a student's changing identities and novel life experiences can provide fertile ground for anthropological learning and ethnographic awareness (Lange, 2013; Mills & Spencer, 2011). The incorporation of a student's experiences into the understanding of theory is part of what Coleman & Simpson (1999) term the imaginationist approach, in which students come to embody ethnographic thinking. We argue that, while imaginationist teaching is an important component of developing a reflexive understanding of the self, critically examining various methodologies can provide applicable skills relevant throughout a lifetime. By venturing into the field, or alternatively, by bringing the field into the classroom, students can begin to develop the skills necessary for respectfully acknowledging difference while building bridges across the boundaries of culture to 'inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self' (Boler 1999:170; Macdonald, 2013).

### **Fieldwork in the classroom**

Our experiences throughout the McGill field school allowed us to develop our participant observation and interview skills, while engaging with the multi-disciplinary nature of our field. By practicing these methods, we were able to develop our senses of reflexivity, confront our privilege, and, importantly, contextualize the experiences of people different than ourselves. There is no doubt in our minds that such experiences can also be incorporated into the classroom through dynamic classroom activities, creative assignments, and day trips into the worlds surrounding our universities. In doing so, we believe that professors can easily demonstrate participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and the subjectivity of the field.

In order to create opportunities for participant observation, universities in general, and anthropologists in particular, can partner with various local organizations, such as cultural centers and food banks, which are always looking for volunteers. If ethics approvals are necessary, then this process can serve as an additional opportunity for students to observe and participate in the procedures that nearly all anthropologists must engage with, but which are rarely incorporated into the classroom (Hurn, 2012). One of the authors did a mock ethics review as a final project, helping her to become familiar with the language and format. If longer-term commitments are not possible, students can participate in day-long community events, such as food festivals or concerts, where shorter term observations can occur. One of the authors volunteered at an event at a Chilean community center as part

of an introductory anthropology class. Her experience of being a linguistic minority while struggling to learn Chilean recipes from community elders made strange her home neighbourhood. Lastly, students can participate in their own social world, changing their perspective from insider to outsider, through critical analyses of their workplace, classroom, or home. One of the authors, who worked full time as a cook throughout school, designed an independent course, with the assistance of a professor, which explored kitchen culture in her workplace. She conducted semi-structures interviews, exploring the role and positionality of being an 'insider' anthropologist. In fact, both authors designed independent courses during their undergraduate years, which allowed them to deepen their relationship with professors and try their hand at various methods and methodologies. We argue that the option of independent study should be made more explicit for undergraduate students. Group discussions can further add to this experience, by highlighting the ways in which students' subjectivities might influence how they interpret the world. In all of the above suggestions, there is opportunity for students to apply theories learnt in the classroom to the world around them.

Next, community members can be easily invited into the classroom for interviews, where students can watch how a seasoned anthropologist asks questions. Students can practice qualitative interview planning, transcription, and data analysis in a classroom-based, peer-supported environment. Having specialists from different fields enter the classroom, such as nurses or doctors in medical anthropology classes, or local Vietnamese community representatives in South East Asia courses, will not only enrich the lesson, but provide a link between anthropology and other disciplines. Neither of the authors took courses where semi-structured interviewing was practiced within the space of the classroom. Nonetheless, we believe that this is something that every anthropology student should experience.

Lastly, getting to know our professors within the context of their research provided us with concrete examples of how theoretical concepts are applied in the field. Both authors had professors at their home universities who shared stories about the highlights and hardships of their fieldwork, giving us a realistic account of the mundane aspects of being in the field. Incorporating personal storytelling in the classroom allows students to glean highlights and challenges associated with fieldwork, areas which are often underrepresented in academic texts (Bastide, 2011). Hearing personal accounts about why professors choose to continue in anthropology, and the challenges they faced both within and outside of the classroom, will help students make informed choices regarding their future.

## **Conclusion**

We are no longer undergraduate students, but the lessons we learnt during our field school greatly impacted the remainder of our undergraduate degrees, and continue to influence our current work and future career goals and prospects, both across and outside of academia.

Anthropology, both as a discipline, and as a way of viewing the 'Other', can increase students' awareness of the worlds they live in, and those they pass through. Reflexive and critical thought can work to ensure that academia produces well-rounded global citizens, not merely university graduates. While experience with field methods can add valuable skills to résumés, and will support new graduates in finding work in critical social sciences and beyond, we argue that the benefits of bringing the field into the classroom far exceed employability (Coleman & Simpson, 2004). The ability to acknowledge cultural differences, while finding a shared humanity, is pragmatically necessary for citizenship in this increasingly globalized world.

We write this letter as lovers of anthropology. Under the shade of an acacia tree, we had the fantastic opportunity to make mistakes, and in doing so, unravel assumptions about ourselves and those around us (Okely, 2012). We believe that the knowledge we gained during our field school should and can be available to all, irrespective of financial background; thus, professors should be mindful of incorporating these techniques into the classroom. We are so grateful to those professors who facilitated our experience, and to those who continue to contribute to the various intellectual traditions, based on lived experience in the field, that makes up the discipline of anthropology.

With respect and regards,

Kelsey Timler &  
Sheina Lew-Levy

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