'I believe in humanity': teaching anthropology and 'uncertainty competences' at a Chilean summer school

Alejandra Silva Ronc

Abstract

"Education as it always should have been". That was the motto of the summer school where I taught anthropology for a three-week programme aimed at secondary school students. The implications of this slogan went far beyond cognitive goals, aiming at the very acquisition of socioemotional skills and, in my case, the transformation of our idea of humanity and our role within society as human beings. This paper will discuss some of these teaching experiences to better understand the nature of an education for uncertain (but hopeful) times, and the value of anthropological theory and methods to address uncertainty as prelude for personal and social growth.

Introduction

During the summer of 2017, the Consejo de Curso Foundation held its third Summer Academy in three Chilean schools. The foundation strongly believed that summer schooling could be an effective tool to reduce the socioeconomic gap in Chile, based on studies that emphasize the importance of continued learning to overcome summer learning loss, a key component of the cultural divide (Alexander, Olson and Entwisle 2007). By providing free equal access to quality educational opportunities, the Consejo de Curso Foundation sought to strengthen students' skills and their motivation to learn, without discrimination. Students were expected to choose two academic courses from a broad range of options that focused on curiosity as a driver of the learning process. Courses such as 'Heroes and genetic regeneration' and 'Hacker culture and free software' strove for a more hands-on approach to science and humanities, closer to the students' interests.

At stake was the delivery of 'education as it always should have been', as the foundation slogan says; namely, an experience of learning that draws on natural curiosity and embraces socioemotional and cognitive skills towards wellbeing (Cooper et. Al. 2000; Borman 2000, Seligman 2011). In particular, my course 'We Humans' addressed the challenge of engaging secondary school students with anthropological theory. Throughout three weeks, we questioned the construction of our idea of humanity and unravelled different visions of it, understanding how they were shaped and envisioned. But to truly engage with these visions, I designed a series of experiences that went beyond the exposition of curriculum content to bring into play students' preconceptions and openness towards others. Over 80% of each class was comprised of activities that explored content knowledge through the somewhat unsettling arena of developing "uncertainty competences", as coined by Tauritz (2016). These competences refer to a

> specific sets of skills, knowledge, attitudes and capabilities needed to deal with uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity in diverse contexts' (Tauritz 2016: 91).

These activities included doing empathy workshops, watching documentaries, meditation, writing a blog, setting up a 'circle of animals' and experiencing a ritual of introduction to the bodily world of theatre. Using various resources to deconstruct, critically engage with and reconstruct the concept of 'humanity' in

its different meanings, I sought to provide an enriching course that would prepare my students for a future that would not be given, but constructed by themselves through their own personal growth.

Although the inclusion of personal growth in schools' syllabus is not new, much remains to be done in the field. At the beginning of the '80s, John Naisbitt (1982) was already proclaiming as 'megatrends' the emergence of self-improvement tendencies in education and the need for a reconceptualization of education. Decades later, these trends have made their way through personal growth programmes in schools, with a focus on counselling and guidance. In Great Britain, China, the USA and Singapore, for instance, primary schools have actively encouraged these programmes, which aim

> to promote whole-person development and life-long learning so that students can attain balanced development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics and be capable of life-long learning, critical and exploratory thinking, innovating and adapting to changes, thus preparing them to meet all the challenges towards adulthood (EDB 2012: 2).

These competences can be attained through the introduction of an environment that embraces uncertainty. Following the summer school's spirit, my course developed learning experiences directed towards the curious student, someone prone to 'recognize, pursue and become absorbed in novel and challenging experiences' (Kashan, Rose, and Fincham 2004: 292), which are vital elements if students are to embrace uncertainty as part of the learning experience. If uncertainty is welcomed in the classroom and explored through anthropological tools, providing a holistic learning experience that draws on curiosity, its outcome may well be preparedness for the challenges of adulthood and those that encompass a complex society.

Raising (cultural) awareness

The students that attended my class were eager to broaden their horizons and 'have a good time' –after all, it was a summer school meant to be enjoyable. However, that was all they shared in common, as they came from very different schools and socioeconomic settings. While some of my students attended private schools and had a middle- or upper-class background, others went to public schools and lived in children's homes. Many of them were somewhere in the middle, but still diversity was a significant ingredient of the classroom dynamics. There were also recent immigrants and other foreigners that already had already been in the country for a few years. In this scenario, the challenge was to provide an environment that would simultaneously allow the students to feel secure and confident to express themselves, while introducing contexts that would instil doubt as a way to open up a path for uncertainty and reflexivity in the learning process (English 2013). As English (2013) puts it, the experience of an interruption or discontinuity that counters our expectations is the prelude to a learning experience that is 'transformative', moving ourselves inwardly to think about our previous pre-reflective moment already made conscious, so then we can express outwardly the

> changed outlook on the world that arises out of coming to understand oneself—one's wishes, one's capabilities, one's questions, one's needs, one's feelings, and one's difficulties—and the world differently or otherwise than before the learning experience (2013: 125).

Working with a teacher coordinator, I developed different strategies that would help me introduce empathy as a key to raise cultural awareness, and learning how to think anthropologically. I taught two

classes every morning: one for younger students between the ages of 12 and 15, and another for the older ones ranging the ages of 16 and 18.[i] For our first class, we gathered different notions of humanity among the students and linked them to a thinker that had previously developed them. This exercise was very illuminating, because everyone was able to share their insight for the class and understand the roots of different strands of thought. They recognized with surprise how their ideas about humanity were easily traceable and realized how new research on the subject could contest their statements. The question was whether humanity was a matter of essence or degree; in other words, whether the boundary between humans and animals was definitive or whether it had an evolutionary complexity to it. Findings from primatology and ethology seemed to put at risk our self-assured singularity during the group discussion (Barbosa 2009). Some were even taken aback when arguments were raised on the transmission of culture, communication and development of complex societies among other species, endangering what they believed was obvious and thus, previously unquestioned.

The spirit of the course was set: 'humanity' was to be taken as a construct to be studied from varied viewpoints and tested whenever possible and necessary. Nothing was going to be taken for granted and substantial evidence, whether theoretical or practical, would have to be advanced in order to support an argument. From that point of departure, we began to grasp what it was like to think anthropologically.

Our following classes were devoted to develop an emphatic connection with other classmates and people from other cultural settings. We watched the inspirational documentary "Human Vol.1" by the French director Yann Arthus-Bertrand to initiate a transformative inward and outward dialogue, as English (2013) would say; or, in other words, the disruption that initiates a process of reflexivity preceding the sharing of a new insight. In this volume, people from all over the world tell stories on the topics of love, women, poverty and work. The students discussed in small groups about what makes us human, questioning, for instance, whether love can be defined culturally or in which ways people understood wealth. While older students expressed more concern about social injustice, younger students addressed the depth of the emotions in the stories of the documentary. Details about the film and logical thinking were very important, as they offered grounding for students' arguments.

However, the development of empathy was a priority, so we began our discussion by doing a revealing empathy workshop. We explored different modes of listening that compromised the possibility of a deep conversation and then redid the exercise, now giving advice on how to act and embrace the overall experience of active listening[ii]. Afterwards, everyone was asked to share in a circle a one-minute story just like in the documentary, applying the principles already learned. Funny stories, heart-breaking memories of childhood and migration, and profound moments in life received support from the group.[iii]

This was the groundwork for a truly enriching discussion of the documentary 'Human'. Once students were able to connect empathetically amongst themselves, talking about foreign people's lives took on a more nuanced approached, privileging the human-like quality instead of a differences/similarities approach. It was in the understanding of others without necessarily sharing their views where true empathy was at the service of anthropological imagination.

Embodying humanity

>After we addressed how to approach other people and their cultural background, exploring diversity as a concept, we studied Amerindian perspectivism as a radically different way to understand humanity. According to Amerindian perspectivism, animals and other beings view themselves as persons and develop social behaviours; their external non-human appearance is what denotes their particular points of view and their animality (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Humanity is thus associated with a reflective condition and culture itself. Due to its high degree of complexity, I tried to address the concept in a holistic manner that would make sense not only intellectually but also physically and emotionally. The exploration of the topic in its totality also paved the way for what Tauritz describes as a shift in thinking [that] encourages incorporating many sources of knowledge including creativity and intuition (Tauritz 2016: 98).

Since the body in the Amerindian world is of utmost importance, we developed a 'ritual of initiation' to the bodily senses with the theatre class. Merging both classrooms, the students had to open up to other people letting themselves be guided blindfolded into another room. The theatre students led them through a series of stations where they would taste, hear and feel different objects, such as salty peanuts, chicory, feathers and Tibetan bells. With Amazonian music in the background, they experienced every station and later, lying on the ground, they listened to a Trumai myth called 'A bloodthirsty and magical jaguar' (Merleau-Ponty 2009). Then we explored the aesthetics of conviviality in the Amazonian world and how this world is highly transformative (Overing & Passes 2000), addressing passages of the myth. Finally, they did a dramatization of the myth, thoroughly enjoying the progressive 'humanization' of the magical jaguar.

In the following classes, we developed the principles of Amerindian perspectivism with some case studies and then we did a 'circle of the animals' to reflect upon our own humanity. Every student had to sit in front of a card faced down around a circle and read the message of the chosen animal. Since 'humanity' could no longer be considered a unique attribute of human beings, animals could also teach us about 'humanity' by looking at their powers and wisdom. Thus, for example, crows are seen in shamanic tradition as a species that can see light through darkness and is associated with the ancestors. Using Malpica's (2011) "The Power Animal's Game", everyone was able to tune in with an animal of their choosing and reflect upon its personal message. This exercise encouraged students' mindful engagement with the topic of the class, in the sense that they exerted a flexible state of mind, dwelling in the present and attuned to their context, so that they would not overtly rely on a single perspective from the past (Langer 2000). As Langer's (2000) experimental research on mindful learning suggests,

>when we believe we are encountering something novel, we approach it mindfully. When we believe we know something well, we tend to view it mindlessly. […] there is power in uncertainty, yet most of us mistakenly seek certainty (Langer 2000: 220).

Students had to reassess their knowledge on the subject from a novel perspective that would encouraged the use of their intuition to connect personally with the message of the animal as a moral compass. In this way, this was also an exercise of trust in their inner guidance and their capacity to reflect on their so-called human traits.

Envisioning a new humanity

The last part of our course sought to reinforce students' identity, problem-solving skills and critical thinking, encouraging their active participation. We worked simultaneously on their self-definitions and their own insights to outline a notion of 'humanity' as a work in progress. Some situations put them in an uneasy position because they felt constantly tested, but this uncertainty allowed them to contest their own assumptions and develop new strategies in the face of complexity (Tauritz 2016, Kreber 2009). First, we addressed the concept of humanity from a Human Rights approach. We considered the constructed nature of the concept and the context it emerged from, so that we could begin to think how useful as well as complex the concept may be. From cultural relativism to universalism, the discussion dealt with the intricacies of this approach. Students worked in teams to gather and analyse data on cases of genocide, applying theoretical concepts previously developed. Then they watched the documentary 'The Salt of the Earth' by Tim Winders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, following Sebastião Salgado's stunning photography and his own approach to what makes us human. In a different format, students were asked to show their own photographs to portray their definition of humanity and explore their subjectivity. One of my older students, who rarely talked at all, even got up at 5am the next day to photograph people and places downtown and then came to class in the morning to show us his findings. He struggled to make his own definition of the concept, but in the end he emphasized the interconnection between people and their constructed places in his interpretation of 'humanity' as humankind and what it encompasses, stressing how the photographs portrayed the 'human touch' everywhere he looked. For him, 'humanity' lingered in every single photography he took.

We also worked on the construction of a complex geometrical figure, the *merkaba*, a star tetrahedron associated to Jewish mysticism and the ascension of the soul. The idea was to reflect upon our journey to become better human beings in a challenging and creative manner. Every side of the *merkaba* was used to write down a quality that was considered to be either a strength or a desire. While the younger students asked constantly for my opinion to describe them, many older students were more likely to look down on themselves and dwell on their weaknesses. The process of assembling the pieces also required a high tolerance of frustration and creativity, and many abandoned it after several attempts. Noticeably, the students who first completed the task were not among the more successful in traditional academic endeavours, but did show many strengths in embracing uncertainty (willingness to participate in unforeseen activities, strong empathy, etc.).

In the same class, we analysed the notion of *Homo Noeticus* coined by the consciousness researcher John White (1988). He argued that a new species of humankind was arising out of the crisis experienced by the society of the *Homo Sapiens*, which will focus on the study of consciousness. As debatable as White's ideas may be, the discussion of the notion of a new breed of human gave us a groundwork to use the knowledge acquired throughout the previous classes in order to assess the proposition and take a stand. Students had to evaluate different arguments and traits of the *Homo Noeticus* in contrast with their knowledge on the subject, using both reason and intuition as valid sources of information. Then they had to elaborate on the probable future of humanity, by speculating with arguments about how we will be as a society in a few years' time.

The outcomes of these reflections took shape in a blog written during the final week of the programme. The blog and the conversations that accompanied them reflected the students' re-examination of their

beliefs on the topic of humanity, in a way that proved the integration of differing frames of references and readiness to adjust their vision considering them (Kreber 2009, Tauritz 2016). By the end of the course, the students had acquired the basic anthropological tools necessary to deal with the challenging aspects of their social and personal life, with the deconstruction and reconstruction of 'humanity' as only their starting point.

Conclusion

More than preparing future anthropologists, this course was an overt invitation to study what makes us human in an exciting yet academically-challenging way. Overall, the question was how to immerse students in a learning environment that would help them grow as human beings through the lens and tools of anthropology. Most of the uncertainty competences developed by Tauritz (2016) coincide with the trademarks of anthropological thinking: empathy, openness to others, acceptance of the unknown, the fostering of an inquiring mind, use of critical thinking and one's intuition in front of complexity and uncertainty, among others. Learners in secondary education should not need to wait until higher education to develop these competencies, because they already have to deal with problems of uncertainty. For instance, during our summer school, Chile was suffering from the worst wildfires in decades, consuming up to 2,000 square miles by the end of January 2017. When Santiago started to appear covered in haze, students became afraid of their relatives in the south and behaved anxiously in the classroom. Most of our talks and a few short meditations helped them regain calm and we channelled these feelings through an awareness campaign in our school. These teaching experiences contribute towards our understanding of the multiple ways in which uncertainty can be a threshold to the furtherance of personal and social growth, by means of teaching anthropological tools. As research into the teaching of uncertainty competences is just starting (Tauritz 2016), particularly for primary and secondary learners, our efforts should be more focused on developing strategies that can address this 21st century concern, including the benefits that teaching anthropology can bring. Then we might begin to consider this learning scenario as a real step ahead towards an 'education as it always should have been'.

References

Alexander, K., Steffel Olson, L. and Entwisle, D. (2007), 'Public Schools and the Public Good', *American Sociological Review*, 72: 167–180.

Barbosa, V. (2009), 'El concepto de humanidad en las ciencias sociales', *Revista Sociedad y Economía*, 17: 215-228.

Borman, G. (2000), 'The Effects of Summer School: Questions Answered, Questions Raised', *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 65:119–27.

Cooper, H., Charlton, K., Valentine, J. C., and Muhlenbruk, L. (2000), 'Making the most of summer school: A meta-analytic and narrative review', *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 65(1): 1-127.

The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Education Bureau (EDB) (2012), 'Personal Growth Education Revised 2012', Retrieved 29 April 2017 from:

http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/teacher/student-guidance-discipline-services/projects-services/sgs/comprehensive-student-guidance/kla/1974_20120810_eng.pdf

EFE 24/12/2016, 'La llegada de inmigrantes haitianos a Chile enciende el fósforo del racismo', Retrieved 27 April 2017 from: http://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/la-llegada-de-inmigrantes-haitianos-a-chile-enciende-el-fosforo-del-racismo/20000013-3133479.

English, A. (2013), *Discontinuity in Learning: Dewey, Herbart and Education as Transformation,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gilard, F. (Producer), and Arthus-Bertrand, Y. (Director), (2015), *Human Volume 1*, France: Humankind Production.

Kashan, T., Rose, P. and Fincham, F. (2004) 'Curiosity and exploration: facilitating positive subjective experiences and personal growth opportunities', *Journal of Personality Assessment*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.: 82(3), pp. 291-305.

Kreber, C. (2009). 'Supporting Student Learning in the Context of Diversity, Complexity and Uncertainty', in Kreber, C. (ed.) *The University and its Disciplines: Teaching and Learning Within and Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries.* New York: Routledge, pp. 3-18.

Langer, E. (2000), 'Mindful Learning', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Blackwell Publishers Inc., 9(6): pp. 220-223.

Malpica, K. (2011), *El juego de los animales de poder*, Spain: Ediciones Obelisco.

Merleau-Ponty, C. and Monod Becquelin, A. (2009), *Cuentos y leyendas de los Trumai, un pueblo del Amazonas*, Madrid: Kókinos.

Naisbitt, J. (1982), *Megatrends: ten new directions transforming our lives*, New York, New York: Warner Books Inc.

Overing, J. and Passes, A. (2000), 'Introduction. Conviviality and the opening up of Amazonian anthropology', in Overing, J. and Passes, A. (eds.), *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, Bristol: Routledge.

Rosier, D. (producer) and Ribeiro Salgado, J. and Wenders, W., (directors), (2014), *The Salt of the Earth*, France: Decia Films, Amazonas Images, and Solares Fondazione delle arti.

Seligman, M. (2011) *Flourish. A new understanding to happiness and well-being – and how to achieve them*, London: Nicholas Brealy Publishing.

Tauritz, R. (2016) 'A pedagogy for Uncertain Times', in Lambrechts, W., and Hindson, J. (eds.), *Research and Innovation in Education for Sustainable Development. Exploring collaborative networks, critical characteristics and evaluation practices,* Vienna: Environment and School Initiatives, pp. 90-105.

Viveiros de Castro, E. (1998), 'Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4(3):469-488.

White, J. (1988), 'Jesus, Evolution, and the future of Humanity', in Grof, S. (ed.), *Human Survival and Consciousness Evolution*, Albany, New York: State University of New York

Notes

---

[i] Each group had the same curriculum with some modifications, emphasizing more reflexivity with the older students and connecting with others with the youngest.

[ii] Students worked in pairs with one of them being 'student A' and the other 'student B'. Both had to tell their partner a dream that they were passionate about, but while 'student A' was supposed to ignore his partner when he had to listen, 'student B' had to interrupt him and discourage his communicative efforts. In the first scenario, students felt awkward, mistreated and most fell into a deep uncomfortable silence altogether. In the other case, they felt diminished in their zeal and pushed over by their partners. All of them expressed the feeling of not being really listened to.

[iii] One case was truly revealing among the younger classmates. A Haitian student who had been living in Chile for almost a year was isolating herself and feeling uncomfortable with her classmates. Some of them even stared at her Afro complexity. Noticeably, since 2010, Chile has attracted increasing numbers of Haitian immigrants and issues of hidden racism have appeared in many classrooms (EFE, 2016). In this case, the student had finally allowed herself to open up during the empathy workshop and later told us her life story. Although some prejudices still existed after the workshop, some students tried to approach her and include her insight for group activities, while at the same time she had to learn how to work with others that did not necessarily accepted her authoritarian attitude. For all of those involved, it meant learning how to go outside of their comfort zone.