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Introduction: Teaching Anthropology in Uncertain Times

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Introduction: Conditions of Uncertainty

This issue encourages discussion of the discipline's long-standing engagement with uncertainty, both as a substantive theme and as a concept that informs the nature of anthropologically-informed pedagogy. Engaging thoughtfully with questions of uncertainty is crucial not just for engaged practice in teaching anthropology, but also for challenging the particular future-orientations of educative practices writ large. Kyle Harp-Rushing (2017) and our colleagues at Cultural Anthropology have described this kind of engagement with uncertainty as reclamation – as a way of embracing uncertainty not as something to be anticipated as part of an inescapable, impending future, but rather as a concept that can enrich and deepen the learning process in a way that in turn helps to positively shape the future we will eventually inhabit. In strange but familiarly uncertain times, the editorial collective at Teaching Anthropology hoped that this would spark discussion about how we teach and prepare students for futures defined by uncertainty, dislocation and rupture. Keri Facer (2013), among others, has pointed to the increasing use of the military term VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) to describe the current state of social, political and economic systems. Baumann, Beck, and Giddens in particular have helped to shape a more complex sociological understanding of how risk and uncertainty frame our experiences of social life such that future risks and opportunities are presented in an increasingly individualized form, and yet also become increasingly difficult for individuals to know, control, or pre-empt. And yet amidst this increasingly volatile uncertainty, education continues to be represented as a locus for certain future outcomes, whether economic, intellectual, cultural, or in terms of social mobility. In the everyday life of teaching anthropology, this raises tensions because it demands a reassertion of the critical tenets of anthropology as a discipline primed to make strange the familiar certainties of education, but at a time when the teaching of anthropology is embattled and beleaguered because it does not explicitly promise (even if it regularly delivers) a clear return on investment or pathway to employment.

Teaching Anthropology in Uncertain Times

The well-worn tension between creativity and constraint in teaching anthropology was the main focus of discussion at a 2017 Teaching Anthropology workshop with secondary school teachers and academics, focusing on the theme of teaching about culture and difference in uncertain times. The workshop, held at Oxford Brookes University and funded in collaboration with Oxford University and the ESRC, revealed a range of personal anecdotes, pedagogic strategies, and individual initiatives all of which articulated different elements of how uncertainty emerges in the mundane every-day of the classroom. Some shared affirming stories about successfully encouraging young people to engage with uncertainty in order to unsettle preconceptions and challenge the taken-for-granted. Others described circumstances where critical approaches to teaching anthropologically led to intense anxiety on the part of both students and senior management because the learning was not designed explicitly to aid in examination preparation. In the latter case, this led to a disciplinary hearing and job instability, highlighting another facet of uncertainty for teachers of a subject already at the curricular margins both in secondary education and in universities.

This tension leads also to the question of stewardship, focusing on the disciplinary legacies that teachers nurture and protect, and why they think it's important to do so. In exploring the kinds of futures we are teaching anthropology for, we are prompted to consider the pedagogic moments of rupture when teachers decide to challenge disciplinary pedagogies and carve out new directions in response to new challenges. Advocating radically new ways of teaching and learning may offer ways of reimagining what the discipline has to offer students in helping them to find a way in uncertain times. The articles and reflections featured in the forthcoming special issue of Teaching Anthropology reveal how a combination of innovative practice and time-honoured, ethnographically-informed pedagogy can help to

frame the teaching of anthropology in a way that makes uncertainty a powerful analytic tool for learning and living in uncertain times.

The articles and reflections featured in the forthcoming special issue of Teaching Anthropology reveal how a combination of innovative practice and time-honoured, ethnographically-informed pedagogy can help to frame the teaching of anthropology in a way that makes uncertainty a powerful analytic tool for learning and living in uncertain times. Importantly, uncertainty emerges in diverse guises, from challenging the certainty of students' preconceptions about the biological tenets of race, to embracing the uncertainty of anthropological knowledge through innovative digital pedagogy, to inculcating in students a critical stance towards uncertainty that will resonate into life long after school or university.

Alice Stefanelli sets the tone by considering the multiple different ways in which uncertainty is framed within teaching anthropology, in turn as pedagogic orientation and framework, as disciplinary positioning, as part of the experience of academic precarity and the neoliberalisation of Higher Education, and as a condition of the current political and economic moment. Working through these different aspects of how uncertainty is manifested in the teaching and learning of anthropology, Stefanelli makes a compelling argument for the importance of what she describes as the 'afterlife' of teaching anthropology: that is, the resonance of anthropological ideas and ethnographic sensibilities that students take with them out into the world, whether or not they engage explicitly with anthropology in an academic setting later in life. Echoing points made by Haapio-Kirk (below), Stefanelli argues that one of the most powerful potential impacts of teaching anthropology is to nurture public engagement with the discipline not only in a top-down way, through anthropologically-inclined media pundits or public academics, but through a groundswell of graduates who take anthropological ideas into their future lives, careers, and professions. Stefanelli makes the important point that most anthropology graduates do not become academic anthropologists, and it is important to give more explicit attention to how anthropological ideas 'travel' beyond the discipline when these graduates take up careers in other fields (and particularly those fields where individuals may have a role to play in mitigating the effects of contemporary political and economic uncertainty). With this in mind, and drawing on Comaroff (2010), Stefanelli suggests the profound value of teaching anthropology-as-praxis – as a set of reflexive, critical practices (or a 'critical estrangement') that graduates can take with them wherever they may go, and whatever the circumstances of uncertainty that characterise the future.

Crystal Dozier explores uncertainty as it relates to teaching about race at a university in the Southern United States. Dozier points out that race – always a controversial topic of instruction in a society with a history of entrenched racism and racial segregation – is made even more difficult a topic of discussion given the climate of racial tension prevalent in contemporary US popular and political discourse. Dozier's statistical analysis of perceptions of race at Texas A&M University explores profoundly important questions about the outcomes of learning about race and ethnicity: what do students feel they learn, and to what extent are deterministic preconceptions about race ultimately challenged? What strategies for teaching anthropology help to achieve this challenge? These questions have clear implications for nurturing tolerance and critical perspectives on race in the face of racialised populist discourse in the US political mainstream, and in response to incidents of racial violence (not least on college campuses) where the civil rights of people of colour appear increasingly uncertain. In this particular case of teaching anthropological concepts of race, Dozier's analysis reveals that students felt less certain of race as a biological and physiological quality after learning about race as a culturally contingent component of identity. What is perhaps more surprising, however, is the high number of students who maintain racialist or overtly racist views *in spite* of this change in perception. Racialist understandings of race remain the default understanding of human diversity in this particular case. This has significant implications for how questions of race should be more effectively addressed in the teaching of anthropology such that students are able to challenge the perceived certainty of their views on race in a supportive way. Dozier continues to explore these questions in relation to the extent of certainty or uncertainty that white students at predominantly white institutions feel about their racial or ethnic identity – if, indeed, they have a clear sense of 'white' racial identity at all. She concludes by suggesting a number of pedagogic approaches that may more readily provide opportunities for critical reflection on race, particularly (but not only) in predominantly white student populations. This message is made even more poignant by recent incidents of racially-motivated violence in the United States on the part of white supremacist groups.

Laura Haapio-Kirk's article moves this discussion of pedagogy forward by considering how publicly-engaged anthropology, evidenced in the *Why We Post* project, can serve as a productive and innovative means of facilitating open, critical discussions about culture and diversity – particularly at a time when conditions of uncertainty constrain this dialogue in favour of anxiety about the perceived risks and threats posed by 'others'. Haapio-Kirk makes the important point that anthropologists 'dwell in spaces of uncertainty', meaning that they are well-positioned to

champion uncertainty as a productive theme in anthropological approaches to education. Drawing on Comaroff (as does Stefanelli), Haapio-Kirk argues that anthropology is characterised by engagement with uncertainty, both in the precarious nature of the discipline as a contested body of knowledge and in its potential to unsettle the taken-for-granted, raising issues of profound and critical importance for society at large. The challenge is to frame the former in such a way that is accessible to public audiences, opening up new avenues for dialogue about culture, difference, and diversity. How, then, is this to be achieved? The *Why We Post* project signals a renewed engagement with public anthropology (Eriksen 2006), presenting themes on the anthropology of social media in a creative way to an incredibly wide global audience. Haapio-Kirk suggests that the rich array of dissemination tools used for the project, including a massive online open course (MOOC) platform, open access digital monographs, film, and traditional academic outputs, signals a way to more actively engage the public with learning anthropology. There remains the challenge of engaging in complex anthropological analysis while doing so through approaches to dissemination that are accessible and engaging to public, non-academic audiences. While this is accounted for through a multi-layered approach to dissemination, Haapio-Kirk also recognises that this is relatively uncharted territory: with innovation comes risk and uncertainty about the pedagogic outcomes of such an approach. The story so far, however, would suggest that *Why We Post* has been largely successful in framing anthropological engagement in a democratised way that anticipates and inspires new ways of thinking about education in the future (including new ways of thinking about the future-orientation of educative processes). Key to this vision is embracing uncertainty as a strength, and not a limitation, of anthropological analysis.

In our *Developing Teaching: Reports and Reflections* section, Charles Klein and Alejandra Silva Ronc explore in quite different contexts the value of reclaiming uncertainty as a tool for teaching anthropologically. Klein reflects on his experience of teaching 'Culture, Health and Healing', an undergraduate course at a US college that helps students to think anthropologically about health and social policy. Klein explores how students may find it much more difficult to engage in 'cross-ideological' dialogue in the classroom than they do engaging with the alternate worldviews of remote 'others'. In the current political climate in the United States, rapacious political and social uncertainty may encourage students even further to seek points of view that validate already held, certain beliefs. By encouraging critical reflection on divisive issues such as abortion, Klein emphasises the value of being able to empathise with political and moral perspectives other than one's own, and in so doing, to introduce a degree of productive uncertainty into one's own well-held beliefs about the world. Ronc presents us with a very different setting: an inclusive summer school in Chile where young people aged 12-18 are brought together to explore new and often challenging ideas. Ronc describes the range of activities that she undertakes successfully with her students to make less certain their convictions about how 'humanity' might be defined. As a result of the course, students are challenged to develop 'uncertainty competences' – that is, with the means to embrace and engage critically with the complexity of an increasingly uncertain but still hopeful future. As in the articles for this special issue, these reflections remind us of the importance of finding practical ways to teach anthropology (or to teach anthropologically) so that we reveal both the sociological nature of contemporary uncertainty and the profound value of unsettling knowledge, beliefs, hopes and prejudices that may otherwise remain taken-for-granted.

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