

Collaborative Possibilities: Reflections on the Experience of Teaching and Learning Anthropology

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Abstract

This reflective piece considers the pedagogical possibilities presented by centering collaboration in the process of teaching and learning anthropology. This piece explores the intimate, lived experience of an undergraduate student who completed their degree whilst participating in the TikTok Ethnography Collective. Written as an exchange between student and teacher, this piece reflects on what this experience might mean for how we can rethink the relationship between student and teacher, theory and method, teaching and learning, and what it might mean to truly collaborate within the academy.

Keywords: Collaboration; Learning; Teaching; Student/teacher; Possibilities.

A Reflection on Teaching - Elena

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy – bell hooks (1995)

The process of collaborating as teacher and student presents us with an opportunity to break down what we think we know about the process of teaching and learning. The organization of educational institutions often from the very beginning presents limitations to the possibility of teaching and learning well; this can be seen in the built environment of the classroom which places the teacher at the front of the class, the power hierarchies reinforced by processes of marking and assessment, or the racialized, gendered, ableist, and class-based dynamics which are reinforced, at times unwittingly, by educational structures. Within higher education institutions this extends even to job titles, with teachers being called lecturers – a title which implies a single direction of informational travel.

This assertion is not a new idea. bell hooks (1995) and Paolo Freire (1968), both recognized many years ago that a classroom, and a teacher, that does not recognize the presence, lived experience, or educational experience of students, is failing to do what an educator is supposed to do – namely, to provide students with the tools to interrogate, understand, and question the world around them. Rather, traditional educational models serve to craft future citizens, well-versed in the rules and customs of the societies in which they were raised, and equipped with the tools to enter the workforce. Schooling, does not equip the majority of students with the tools to question power structures, to debate ideas, or to critically engage with the social world. In the former Soviet Union schooling was recognized as essential in crafting *Homo Sovieticus* (Richardson, 2004), the ideal Soviet citizen, disciplined in the correct ways of conducting oneself in Soviet society. This can also be seen implicitly embedded within educational systems across the world. When students then enter university, students from working class or state-school backgrounds are faced with entering a classroom occupied by peers who have been educated in debating and constructing arguments, presenting their independent ideas, and confident in speaking up. This is reinforced by a system which awards those who are equipped with the skills to communicate insights and independent thought in the formal and traditional styles often expected in higher education institutions. As such, this presents yet another barrier to marginalised students. As educators and students of anthropology, this is particularly troubling. We are a discipline whose aim is to understand the lived experiences and social worlds of our participants, yet this generosity is often not extended to the space of the classroom.

If we are to accept hook's invitation to rethink the classroom as a space of pleasure and radical possibility, then rethinking our modes of teaching is essential. This is already taking place. Much exciting work has already been done which explores alternative possibilities for teaching anthropology (Weston and Djohari, 2018). Yet more work is needed to build upon these inspiring works, to rethink the hierarchies embedded within educational systems in order to expand methods of learning and demonstrating critical thought, so as to not reinforce the already embedded disadvantages that are present among students. Directly engaging with the possibilities offered by new and emerging technologies, and by processes of collaborating with our students as peers engaged in a collective educational endeavour, is one way of doing this. The TikTok Ethnography Collective (TEC), the space where this reflection has emerged from, presents us with one such re-thinking. Inspired by the work of Weston and Djohari and the Goldsmiths Ethnography of the Antiques Roadshow (GEARS) project, the TEC centres collaboration and takes as its point of departure the belief that all members are simultaneously teachers and learners of anthropology. It draws upon the expertise, whether that be academic, educational, or lived experience, of all members to truly collaborate to explore the social worlds formed on TikTok. This reflective piece has emerged through many conversations and exchanges that we (Georgia and Elena) have had over the last three years – our institutional relationship framed as student (Georgia) and teacher (Elena), but we prefer to rearticulate this relationship as one of collaboration. Written in the first person and responding to prompts written in conversation with Elena, this piece foregrounds Georgia's voice and reflections on her educational experience both institutionally and as part of the collective. In doing so, it illuminates the lived experience of education ethnographically, and offers some reflections on how we might rethink the ways in which we teach, learn, and do anthropology.

The Lived Experience of Learning.

Elena: Could you reflect on your experience learning anthropology for the last three years. What went well, what didn't? What sort of formats of learning worked for you?

Georgia:

Honestly, and as you (Elena) know, I have found learning on the BA very challenging. As someone who is naturally drawn to deep dives into topics of interest, the stimulation of constantly jumping around between modules comes coupled with frustration, and I often feel like I have to compromise, sacrificing one module for another. There are serendipitous moments of course, when topics across modules overlap, intertwine or suddenly click into place. But, these moments are rarely granted enough space to be fleshed out and thought through as the pressure of unread pdfs stacks up, and so tend to remain suspended in their clusters until classes have finished and the end of term essay crawl begins. There's also a sense of over saturation of knowledge conveyed with the consistent steady flow of transference, perhaps in line with a traditional pedagogical model that favours an 'inter-generational transmission of authorised knowledge' (Ingold, 2018). I've often found myself in much need of time to breathe, to look up from the page, to allow information to settle, to form meaning.

Meaning unfurls when knowledge intertwines with experience, where theory and practice co-emerge. Although always affectively mediated by the physical and psychic space of the institution, seminars, at their best, ideally give us an opportunity to think with this together and unpack ideas in real time. For me, the richest learning experiences arise when the seminar is relaxed and open, with all peers (students and lecturer alike) engaging and participating to this motion. In reality, the energy of seminars is vulnerable to the pressures of the institution and student life more widely (for example balancing finances of our minimal maintenance loans, sustaining motivation during strikes, dealing with a chaotic restructuring of administration processes, responding to structural discrimination etc.). As we know, a foundational element of contemporary anthropological practice is reflexivity, to refer back to our own beliefs and judgements, to scan through the layers of accumulated or conditioned biases, and how these affect our practice. Crucially, it is my understanding that this can only be done with and in relation to others. Listening to peers and engaging in conversation continues to open and expose to a diverse range of positionalities, possibilities, and potentialities. It is these generous gifts, extensions of self to others, that give rise to the educational encounters emerging from and through spontaneous conversation.

Much of my learning over the past three years has emerged from dialogic, conversational formats, either inside or outside of the institution, with fellow students or willing lecturers. Conversation is open to elements of undisciplined playfulness, of constructing ideas together, navigating segues, trying things out. Reverberations of conversation and learning in this way continue past the moment we physically part, and this is vital to take note of. For when it comes to doing assessments, the majority require a funneling of the experimental flow of learning into the rigid structure of the essay. This process has consistently presented as my biggest struggle throughout

the degree. Though I love to write, to carve out the time to attend to structuring my thoughts, the essay format itself endlessly evokes great frustration in me. As such, I often stumble and lose confidence over working out how to put the pieces of the puzzle together in a format that feels so synthetic and distanced, all too often overshadowing the intuitive tendencies that shape anthropological research. How to condense thinking with a discipline that aims to expand methodologies and practice into neatly formed referential paragraphs? How to craft experience into words that tick the learning outcome boxes? How to explore the ever-expanding parameters of the discipline within the confines of the academic essay and the grades that will determine our next steps in life?

Elena:

It is so interesting to hear your reflections on the ways in which learning emerges in the conversational formats between students, peers, and teachers. As an educator much of my time is spent on trying to establish the kind of environment where these conversations can emerge and flow unhindered, but often I've found myself frustrated by silence in the classroom, or what can sometimes be perceived as an unwillingness to speak. Over the years that I have been teaching what has struck me is that there seems to be a misalignment about what is expected in the classroom. Perhaps this stems from a particular, rigid form of education which often occurs in secondary schooling, which does not invite critical engagement but rather passive absorption. We then, as educators in universities immediately expect our students to know how to critique, or how to deconstruct an argument or formulate their own thoughts into a coherent argument, without taking the time to equip them with the tools to do so. Once that penny dropped for me, I began to adjust my teaching to be focused on *how* we teach and learn, spending lots of time on thinking through *how* things have been written, and *how* we might go about critiquing. This completely transformed my teaching and seemed to create a much more inclusive, welcoming, and enjoyable learning and teaching experience for everyone involved too. This approach also is about taking seriously all the skills and life experiences that all students bring with them to the classroom, rather than treating students as empty vessels ready to be filled with the knowledge that educations possess and transmit – an idea which never sat right with me. This is one of the ideas and philosophies which underpinned the creation of the TikTok Ethnography collective – that every single person has knowledge and insights which should be valued and taken seriously, regardless of qualification or formal training.

Elena: Could you reflect on your participation with the TikTok Ethnography Collective. How did you end up joining? How has it been for you over the last two and a half years?

Georgia:

I joined at the very start. Yourself (Elena) and Yathu gave an introductory presentation at Goldsmith's annual 'Anthropology in the Making' event, during which they extended an invitation to anyone who wanted to come to meetings and join the collective. My curiosity for the digital, and perpetual inclination to 'get lost' whilst meandering down YouTube paths as an enjoyable past time - jokingly telling myself that everything is research - meant that I was keen to take up this offer. As I was starting my degree in September 2020 when everything was to be delivered online with uncertainty surrounding as to how long, I knew I was sure to miss out on that specific blend of academic and social interaction that we all hope to garner from our studies, and so I could take it as an opportunity to get involved in something that could potentially offer this while we waited out the lockdown. I downloaded Tik Tok in the first meeting during which I was probably too shy to say more than my name. Thereafter, my engagement and interactions with both the app the collective quickly became solid companions throughout my degree.

When I look through my notes from the past 2.5 years - Scrawled on pieces of paper then folded and inserted appropriately between the scribbled pages of my notebook, or filed neatly in virtual folders...reading through these words, I recognise that what I have is a collection of field notes, an archive of thoughts, ideas, realised and explored or bullet pointed and brief. These notes are expanded on, added to with frequency and have been accompanying me since autumn 2020.

These field notes tell the tale of anthropology in practice, applying theory and method to something like real research. Engaging in applied research from the start of my degree has deeply enriched my learning experience so far, and will certainly continue to do so. The TEC has been a safe space for me to bounce out ideas, to experiment with them, unformed and unfinished. It has been a space to flesh out theory, to act out/enact/practice anthropological thinking notably absent from the majority of seminars (for reasons previously mentioned) and contribute to group theorising. It has gifted me with a space in which to develop my interest in the digital and dig into the realms of digital anthropology. The self-published content that makes up

the Tik Tok universe has consistently spilled over into and informed research for my modules, with any attempts to bring content creators into essays as interlocutors received with positive feedback. For me, learning anthropology with the TEC inspires the construction of bridges between the traditional theory of the classroom and contemporary articulations - ultimately humanising academic texts and building confidence which carries over into institutional contexts. With the TEC we work together as a group towards co-creating a more democratic and horizontal educational encounter, an exchange, one that nurtures curiosity, and encourages a turning away from the notion of learning objectives - ushering in a more organic, free-flowing dialogue.

Elena:

I love the idea of your notes as fieldnotes! I think that the notion of approaching education as a research endeavour or process of discovery is such a powerful way of thinking about it. For me, I've always seen everything that we, as anthropologists, do as a form of contribution to one enormous conversation that we are all having. Whether that's through a coursework essay, a peer-reviewed article, a group presentation etc. The TEC is all about making that conversation visible and emphasising that everyone's voice is equally valued. Anthropology feels particularly well placed to do this, as what we are interested in is grounded, experiential, lived forms of knowing and understanding – so why wouldn't we extend that to our teaching and learning practices? It's been such a joy to see the conversations flow within the space of the TEC, thinking through really classical anthropological questions in a supportive environment which is about learning *together* rather than a singular direction of travel. It makes me reflect on the title of lecturer – which has never felt right to me. Lecturer implies once direction of travel, information moving from me to you. I much prefer the term educator, or even interlocutor, which feels like it captures what we do much more accurately.

Elena: Based on your experience with your formal anthropology education and your engagement with the TEC, what reflections can you offer on the way we teach and learn anthropology? How might it be done differently from your perspective?

Georgia:

I can't help but smile when I reflect on this question. In our formal anthropological training provided by the institution we are taught to interpret the knowledge generated with our interlocutors through ethnographic processes with as much (if not more) importance as our own institutionalised knowledge. Ethnography focuses on situated knowledge, that which accumulates through the lived experience of the everyday. This is then transformed into academically recognisable knowledge through analysis, resituating it in conversation with other everyday narratives and academic texts. In this way, the very processes involved in anthropological research blur the lines between formal and informal education. And yet, the institutional pipeline is one that seems to continue to be deeply committed to upholding distinctions and enforcing binaries between the two, perpetuating hierarchies of knowledge, insisting on the exclusivity of a socially and bureaucratically normalised education.

I would suggest, then, that the collaborative nature of the TEC performs not only an alternative to the normalized expectations of the institution but acts as a mode of resistance against it. Realising a method of learning that highlights the importance of dialogue as a site of education potentially poses a great challenge to the institution and offers transformative solutions to learning towards a more 'liberatory practice' (hooks, 1995). While I certainly acknowledge the importance of the institution and academic tradition, it can often feel stale and almost irrelevant to the ways in which we produce and share knowledge now. Perhaps we can learn from the instantaneous nature of TikTok as a social commentator, providing an of the moment and (open) future making field site to think with. Such a field site requires anthropology to emulate its own ways of being and doing, to be open, fluid, ever engaged in negotiation and like the For You Page¹, constantly gathering and refreshing. It asks the discipline of anthropology to act in ways that align with its own, and as such we are learning new ways of doing anthropology through interactions and engagements with the app. Such is this process that we could question if we are co-producing a fresh-faced anthropology that has the potential to go along hand in hand with the future as we make it. Are we co-producing a fresh-faced education with the TEC? Truth be told, I can't even imagine my undertaking the BA without the companionship of the TEC. And so would propose then, that a collective research group be interwoven with any institutional degree.

Elena:

What is so striking about the conversations we have had about writing this piece, and throughout this journey we have gone on with the TEC is how the most valuable insights into the research we have done on TikTok and on

¹ The For You Page is the home screen of the TikTok app which feeds the user content recommended by TikTok's algorithm.

the educational process without fail come from students rather than those of us who hold academic positions. It's so hard to express that without sounding patronizing but it is an important thing to say. To briefly reflect on my own education, coming from a state-school in a low participation area, I have clear memories of feeling paralysed and out of place in the university setting, and this feeling has hugely informed the way that I teach. A core principle of how I teach is to try and ensure that no student in the classroom feels that way. The TEC has been such a refreshing experience where I as an educator have been liberated from the formal constraints of the classroom and we have been able to explore things organically in an exciting and original way.

I do my best to bring this into the classroom, but one constraint has always been the formal structure of the university institutional structures. In contrast to the TEC, the modules that I convene are constrained by formal learning outcomes, growing class sizes, the increasingly financialized model of HE institutions, and so-on. These all limit the possibilities of what the classroom can be. However, what the TEC, and my conversations with Georgia have taught me is to never underestimate the power of creativity. Since starting the TEC I have reformulated all my forms of assessment (within the boundaries of what is permitted) to allow students to demonstrate their learning and knowledge in the best way they can. Because what is the purpose of an assessment if not to provide a platform for students to demonstrate what they know? I have done this by adjusting all my essays to permit students to write their own essay question, conduct their own ethnographic exploration, and present their own insights and reflections. As a result, each submission takes the form of an original piece of research conducted with my support and with peer feedback built into the seminar time. This has served to break down the competitive, isolating nature of "answering a question" and transforms the assessment into a shared research endeavour. This has turned the space of the seminar into a space of collective support and discovery, of sharing ideas and words of encouragement, a space remarkably similar to the space created within the TEC.

Final thoughts.

Georgia:

Anthropology is a living discipline, and that to learn and contribute to the future of it, we need to participate in research that is living itself. Opening up individualised notions of learning to something that grows in collective spaces offers anthropology the opportunity to unfold in intuitive experiential ways that are akin to the lives that we study and the research that we do. It is a radical way of learning, of doing, one that not only disrupts the boundaries and hierarchies of the institution - of academia - but one that also disrupts traditional forms of education in society (transmission of knowledge). Here, in place of transmission of knowledge in the forms of lectures and seminars, there is a bouncing of ideas, of development and growth. There is the formation of bonds, of humane ways of being together in research and all the confidence that comes with knowing one is not alone. The TikTok ethnography collective has enriched my learning experience beyond words, and by directly putting into practice the theory and methodology taken on from my lecturers and seminar leads, my anthropological training is gaining a sense of holistic depth and preparedness for real world work that I would not have otherwise had. In lieu of burning down the establishments and starting anew, a hand in hand approach to learning that brings theory and practice together within the safety of a group setting would arguably benefit anthropology students of all levels, and help build an education that is peppered with play, with joy, with excitement.

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