PUTTING THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TOOLKIT TO USE IN INTERNATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

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In spite of the breadth and depth of anthropologists’ knowledge of and experience with intercultural and international dynamics, we have done little as a field to tout this knowledge and its relevance and insert it into broader conversations about study abroad, service-learning, and other kinds of experiential learning. The contributions we do make are more idiosyncratic and happen as a result of anthropologists being in positions of influence in their own institutions. However, we have much to offer these conversations; indeed, given the stakes involved—the increasing number of United States students participating in international study and intercultural service learning programs—one could easily argue that we have an obligation to engage in these conversations, sharing our rich methodological and conceptual toolkit to enhance student learning in international and intercultural contexts.

Before entering into the conversation, however, we need to know something about the conversations that are going on for the most part without us. Three specific conversations, which are only loosely connected to each other in a broader conversation, are especially significant: first is a conversation between those in adult education about transformative learning (e.g., Erickson 2007; Fetherston and Kelly 2007; Kiely 2005; Mezirow 1997); second is a conversation among those studying epistemological development that is focused on the concept of self-authorship (e.g., Baxter Magolda 1992; Kegan 1994; Pizzolato 2007); and third is the conversation taking place by those studying intercultural competence and focused specifically on important intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills (e.g., ACE 2008; Bennett 1993; Deardorff 2008; Paige 1993; Savicki 2008).

Adult Education: Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow (1991, 1997), transformative learning involves a change in one’s frame of reference. He defines frame of reference as “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” (Mezirow 1997:5). These structures of assumptions both shape and constrain our expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They provide our taken for granted, set our lines of action, and comprise our habits of mind and points of view. We anthropologists might go one step further and place Mezirow’s “frames of reference” into the broader “systems of meaning” that form the underpinnings of culture.

Mezirow (1997) suggests that shifts in frame of reference are often triggered by disorienting dilemmas that shake up one’s frame of reference and lead to a process whereby assumptions are questioned, assessed, and, perhaps, even transformed. Richard Kiely (2005) adds the concepts of low- and high-intensity dissonance to the conversation, arguing that disorienting dilemmas create dissonance when one’s experience is unfamiliar and incongruent with one’s present frame of reference. In his research with several cohorts of students on service-learning trips to Nicaragua, Kiely (2005:11) found that experiences of low-intensity dissonance (e.g., experiences associated with uncleinliness, bugs, food, or even language difficulties) “tend to be short-term and manageable by acquiring additional information or drawing from existing knowledge.” This kind of dissonance can be reconciled by adaptation. It is not likely to lead to transformative learning as long as new information fits comfortably into one’s existing frames of reference (Mezirow 1997). By contrast, high-intensity dissonance (e.g., extreme poverty or dramatically different gender relations) “often causes powerful emotions and confusions and leads [students] to reexamine their existing knowledge and assumptions regarding the causes and solutions to ambiguous and ill-structured problems such as extreme forms of persistent poverty” (Kiely 2005:11). Whereas the effects of low-intensity dissonance fade and/or are resolved, effects of high-intensity dissonance do not go away; they “create permanent markers in students’ frame of reference” (Kiely 2005:11).

As anthropologists and those working in intercultural experiential learning know all too well, cross-cultural interactions are often dissonance-filled and have tremendous potential for transformative learning. However, as we also know, not all encounters with high intensity dissonance result in transformative learning. Indeed, the ethnocentrism embedded in our structures of assumptions is a strong inhibitor of this process. Holding tight to one’s frame of reference and essentially annihilating ideas that don’t fit is all too familiar to those of us who teach anthropology and/or work in international/intercultural education.

Intercultural Competence: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills

In order to productively encounter and make their way through the dissonance they encounter in international and intercultural situations, students need to be equipped with the intercultural toolkit of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for capturing the learning from the study abroad experience. Much research and writing has focused on the elements of this intercultural toolkit (e.g., ACE 2008; Bennett 1993; Deardorff 2008; Ogden 2006; Paige 1993; Savicki 2008), and a general consensus seems to have emerged among intercultural scholars. Key tools in the knowledge compartment of the
intercultural toolkit are place-specific knowledge, knowledge of intercultural theory, and knowledge about self. The main tools in the attitude compartment are curiosity, confidence, suspension of judgment, and tolerance of ambiguity. The skills compartment of the toolkit is comprised of tools related to listening, observing, describing, interpreting, and reflecting. Clearly, the conceptual and methodological toolkit of anthropology has much use in developing this toolkit of intercultural competence. Our nuanced understandings of culture, as well as our rich theoretical repertoire on the dynamics of power and cross-cultural interactions are essential to equipping students with a theoretical and conceptual knowledge base. Additionally, ethnographic research involves finely honed observation and interviewing skills and the ability to write detailed, descriptive fieldnotes devoid of interpretation and explanation.

**Epistemological Development: Self-authorship**

In addition to possessing the necessary toolkit for intercultural learning, students must also be developmentally ready to take full advantage of the experience. The conversations about self-authorship that are taking place largely among those who study epistemological development have much of interest here. Robert Kegan (1994), credited for developing the concept of self-authorship, argues that there are three developmental phases that are particularly relevant to college-age students: the socialized self, the self-authored self, and the self-transformed self. For the socialized self, meaning is constructed and shaped by the values and expectations of others in one’s social environment; it is received, accepted, and understood as a given. The self-authored self, by contrast, is capable of generating and authoring meaning that is informed by one’s own values and beliefs. Self-authored individuals understand that their meanings are “made” rather than given and that they themselves are capable of making meaning. Finally, the self-transformed self is capable of understanding the structural systems that underlie meaning making and capable of seeing “our relationships and connections as prior to and constitutive of the individual self” (Kegan 1994:351). In general, scholars who work with the concept of self-authorship contend that most students begin their college careers in the stage of the socialized self, and ideally move into the stage of self authorship over the course of their college experience (Baxter Magolda 1992; Pizzolato 2007).

Diane Erickson (2007) links Kegan’s intellectual development stages to the transformative learning process. She argues that the ability to move through the process of transformative learning is constrained by one’s meaning-making capacity. For example, the socialized self will make sense of a highly dissonant encounter by understanding it to be caused by factors external to the self. They are the ones likely to interpret this experience through ethnocentrism, holding fast to their frame of reference and labeling the ideas causing the dissonance as weird or mistaken. Because they are unaware of the constructed nature of their own frame of reference, there is little chance of doing the kind of self-reflection necessary to move through the dissonance in a way that leads to transformative learning. In the stage of the self-authored self, however, aspects of the dissonance will be understood to be potentially connected to the self. The self-authored self may even perceive the dissonance as an opportunity for growth (Erickson 2007).

Self-authorship, then, is a prerequisite for transformative learning. To be ready to productively encounter the high intensity dissonance associated with international and intercultural learning opportunities, students need to understand themselves as meaning-makers and, more importantly, understand that the system of meanings they operate out of is itself made. As I discuss in more detail below, anthropologists have developed theoretical and methodological tools that are potentially very useful in helping students move toward, into, and, perhaps, even a bit beyond self-authorship. Equipping students with these tools will not only help them productively encounter and make their way through the cognitive and emotional dissonance they will encounter, but maximize the potential of transformative learning occurring in the process.

**Anthropology and Transformative Learning**

My own research has focused on the conditions under which students’ experiences of high intensity dissonance lead to transformative learning (see Cunningham and Grossman 2009). The conversations in the literatures on transformative learning and epistemological development discussed above combined with an analysis of over 100 interviews with Kalamazoo College juniors and seniors suggests that there are six key levels in the transformative learning process. These levels are:

1. Knowledge gains
2. Attitude changes
3. Changes in perspective
4. Deepening self understanding
5. Deepening structural understanding
6. Transformative change

The first two, gains in knowledge and changes in attitude, map neatly onto the knowledge and attitudes compartments of the intercultural competence toolkit discussed above. Changes in knowledge include, for example, knowledge about people and places, theoretical and conceptual understandings of culture and power, as well as clearer understandings of one’s passions. Attitude changes include gains in confidence, increased ability to tolerate ambiguity, and a willingness to “let go” of control. The third, changes in perspective, involves the ability to see things from others’ points of view and the development of empathy. Evidence of these first three foundational levels was very common in the student interviews.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth levels, however, were increasingly less common. The fourth level, a deepening self-understanding, is exemplified by an ability to critically assess one’s assumptions. If, following Mezirow’s theory, transformative learning is characterized by a shift in one’s frame of reference, a key step
along the path to that transformation is recognizing that one actually has a frame of reference. An ability to critically assess one’s assumptions is a clear indicator of movement in that direction as one not only has to acknowledge that one has assumptions, but that those assumptions are potentially problematic. While critically assessing one’s assumptions does not necessarily imply an understanding of the constructed nature of them, reaching this level of the continuum is a necessary step in that direction.

The fifth level, deepening structural understanding, is evidenced by an ability to contextualize one’s experience in broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks about, for example, the cultural, political, economic, institutional, or psychological structures at play in the intercultural experiences they are having. While students at this level may not yet see their own frames of reference as constructed within these overarching structures, they are nonetheless able to use them to make sense of their experiences.

The final level, transformative change, entails the kind of shift in frame of reference or habit of mind that Mezirow describes. At this point, students are able to connect their deepening structural understanding with their deepening understanding of their self, essentially making it possible for their own positionality to become a conscious element of their experience. They now understand not only that they have a frame of reference and that their frame of reference is constructed within overarching structures of culture and power, but that that frame of reference, much like Bourdieu’s *habitus*, propels them to understand their experiences in certain ways. This awareness, then, catalyzes the kind of shift in frame of reference and habit of mind characteristic of transformational learning.

**A Model of Structured Reflections**

Discussions with colleagues at Kalamazoo College, supported with funding from the Teagle Foundation, about how to catalyze transformational learning and self-authorship in our students led to the development of a model of structured reflection that incorporates these insights. Building on the research described above, I define structured reflection as intentionally designed exercises, activities, or assignments that help students (and others) make connections between (1) assumptions held and experiences encountered, (2) assumptions held and theories/concepts known, and (3) experiences encountered and theories/concepts known. The Structured Reflection Triangle in Figure 1, adapted from Anderson and Cunningham (2010), captures this definition and is a useful device for designing effective structured reflection.

This triangle can be used in a wide variety of contexts, both within the classroom and outside of it. I am currently working, for example, with a variety of constituents at Kalamazoo College to develop a repertoire of activities and exercises for use in the context of service learning, career development, as well as study abroad. I have also run a workshop on its use for faculty teaching senior seminars, courses designed specifically to anticipate students’ engagement in study abroad.

To illustrate the way this triangle can be used, I draw on one of these senior seminars, a course called “Culture, Religion, and Nationality” that I team-taught with Carol Anderson, a faculty member in the Religion Department at Kalamazoo College. One of the goals of the course is to help students develop the intercultural toolkit they will need to maximize the potential for intercultural, indeed even transformative, learning while abroad. Through readings, we focus on the concepts of culture, religion, and nationality and the (dis)junctures between them, and students do ethnographic fieldwork at immigrant faith communities in the Kalamazoo area to see how these concepts are played out in lived lives. (For more information on this course, its pedagogy, and its outcomes, see Anderson and Cunningham 2010.) A key component of this course is students’ field notebooks, which contain fieldnotes, discussions of readings, and an examination of their changing assumptions and expectations. These three components represent the Structured Reflection Triangle. We also ask students to engage in structured reflection along the sides of the triangle, describing, for example, how their observations at their field sites are helping them understand their own assumptions and preconceptions about religion, or how they see the dynamics between culture and nationality played out at their fields. By physically separating their fieldnotes, their readings, and their discussions of their own assumptions in their field notebooks, their observations, their assumptions, and their conceptual/theoretical understanding become visible and, consequently, available for interrogation. Moreover, the visibility of understandings at each point of the Triangle enables structured reflection to occur along each of the legs, and it is this reflection and analysis along each leg that is catalytic of transformative learning.

**Figure 1. Structured Reflection Triangle**

**Contributions of Anthropology**

The relevance of anthropology’s conceptual and methodological toolkit to the development of the intercultural toolkit, epistemological development, and successfully moving along the continuum of transformative learning are clear. As the other articles in this issue attest, ethnographic methods can catalyze this learning process in very significant ways. Specifically, learning the skills of observation, interviewing, and writing fieldnotes requires learning how to separate description and interpretation, which, in turn, requires...
developing the ability to bracket one’s assumptions and suspend judgment. This process of bracketing one’s assumptions makes those assumptions more visible for analysis in and of themselves. Being able to step back and critically reflect on one’s assumptions is not only an important intercultural skill, but central to the transformative learning process and to the development of self-authorship. And, our understanding of culture as a system of meaning tied into broader structures of equality and inequality pushes us beyond an essentialist approach to the other and provides students with the level of structural understanding so critical to transformative learning. Moreover, a key goal that most of us have as teachers is to help students understand themselves as cultural beings, as individuals whose “taken-for-granted”s are situated in structures of culture and power.

In sum, the conceptual and methodological toolkit of anthropology provides essential building blocks for transformative learning in intercultural and international contexts. As a discipline and as a profession, anthropologists are deeply aware of the importance of reflexive conversations about ourselves as cultural beings tied into systems of power. We know how to bring together students’ international and intercultural experiences with their emerging understanding of the structural contexts of those experiences and their emerging understanding of themselves as both reproducers and producers of meaning. In other words, working at the points and along the legs of the Structured Reflection Triangle is part of what we do. Our task now is to be more intentional and deliberate about applying our rich conceptual and methodological toolkit to international and intercultural education more broadly. As experiential learning generally, and study abroad and service-learning more specifically, expand and deepen their places in higher education, we have an obligation—perhaps even an ethical one—to contribute the wealth of knowledge and experience we have as anthropologists to not only the conversation, but the work of enriching student learning.

References Cited


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