

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY THROUGH THE CASE STUDY*

Sarah D. Phillips

Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, Bloomington

Cultural Anthropology is a field of study with a rich history and a copious toolbox of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. A major challenge, I find, of teaching courses in cultural anthropology is simultaneously conveying the diversity and richness of the field historically and in the present; doing justice to the specific foci of the particular course; and engaging students in the learning process in meaningful and, I daresay, personally transformative ways. I begin this short article with a brief discussion of the major challenges I have encountered teaching undergraduate and graduate anthropology courses, and offer some examples of what I have found to be potentially successful strategies for addressing them. I then describe in some detail a seminar course I recently taught, “Chernobyl: Legacies of a Meltdown,” to argue for the potential of single event- or topics-focused seminar courses to achieve a range of important instructional goals.

General Challenges of Teaching Anthropology

Courses for undergraduates and graduates present their own particular challenges. At large institutions such as Indiana University, Bloomington (IUB), undergraduate courses are often big lecture courses populated by students who may or may not be (initially!) excited about anthropology. One elementary challenge is to adequately engage those students who are taking cultural anthropology merely to fulfill a university division requirement. In large survey courses it is also easy to overwhelm students, who may feel disoriented by the enormous range of topics covered in the discipline of anthropology (and in course lectures). Finally, especially in today’s unfortunate atmosphere of conflict, mistrust, and cultural essentialism, instructors must be careful how we present the “culture” concept, lest the notion of “cultural difference” fuel prejudice and ethnocentrism among students. In my undergraduate teaching, I find the best way to simultaneously address these issues is to offer students a range of hands-on research and writing exercises. These activities allow students to carry out participant observation, surveys, and personal interviews in order to apply anthropological concepts to their own lives as they explore issues of gender, ritual, cultural stereotypes, narratives, and others. Mini-fieldwork projects can give class discussions a meaningful and manageable focus, and they allow students to begin

interpreting the seemingly mundane aspects of their everyday lives in an anthropological fashion.

Seminars for graduates offer a separate set of challenges. Many graduates are already working towards a specific thesis topic and may resist material that they believe does not quite speak to their own interests. My graduate seminars frequently include students from other disciplines, many of whom are looking to incorporate anthropological research methods and theories into their own work. This often leads to interesting and challenging discussions of varying disciplinary traditions. To complicate matters, as the discipline of cultural anthropology grows and the literature expands, it becomes difficult to “cover it all.” This means that earlier works and discussions of historical intellectual trends often do not find their way into anthropology courses. The move away from grand narratives, I think, has contributed to the tendency to neglect or inadequately engage the work of the disciplinary predecessors in some courses.

I believe students being trained in anthropology (undergraduate majors and graduates) should be provided with a good sense of anthropology’s rich intellectual history, not merely to criticize our forebears (though such critiques are certainly necessary), but rather to engage students in the rich history of ideas that has shaped the contemporary discipline of anthropology. In my teaching, I am beginning to rethink the traditional timeline approach—students tend to see “old” theories as merely irrelevant, rather than trying to understand the motivations (and contributions) of these approaches. One student has suggested the following appealing approach for future seminars: advanced seminars might be designed to encourage students to “excavate” recent articles in anthropology journals for theoretical influences. This would allow students to engage with cutting edge work being published in the top journals today, and simultaneously require them to seek out how new ideas might be rooted in and/or reactive to a range of previous approaches and historical influences. I hoped to do similar work by teaching a new book last semester (spring ’05) in my joint undergraduate/graduate seminar course, “Anthropology of Russia and East Europe”—Alexia Bloch and Laurel Kendall’s *The Museum at the End of the World: Encounters in the Russian Far East*

(2004). In this hybrid ethnography/travel book, the authors document their 1998 travels along the route of the original Jesup North Pacific Expedition of the early 1900s, as they interweave discussions of history, methodology, culture change, and culture work. Teaching works such as these is as an opportunity to introduce students to the work of the early Russian ethnographers (Bogoras-Tan, Jochelson), Franz Boas, and others, while helping them critically engage the history of anthropological research of native peoples of Siberia.

This course ("Anthropology of Russia and East Europe") is an example of the sometimes-fraught joint undergraduate/graduate seminar, a format that poses its own set of pedagogical challenges. How is one to address the intellectual concerns of the graduates without intimidating or losing the undergraduates in the process? How to ensure that students at both levels (and from diverse disciplinary backgrounds) contribute to and benefit from the course in ways that help them reach their own learning goals? Finally, a question relevant to teaching any anthropology course: how can we engender an appreciation of anthropology's diverse approaches to understanding human life in a way that is comprehensive yet focused and meaningful to students?

Anthropology through the Case Study: The Example of Chernobyl

These were questions that fifteen students and I struggled with in a seminar course during fall semester 2004 entitled "Chernobyl: Legacies of a Meltdown." My motivation for proposing this course was straightforward: I wanted to design a course that would introduce students to the rich field of cultural anthropology (and related disciplines) through the lens of a single, yet multi-faceted event. I had carried out research on Chernobyl effects in Ukraine during the 1990s, allowing me the opportunity to bring my own fieldwork experience to the course. I was familiar with the large body of literature on Chernobyl, work that covered vast disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical ground. Chernobyl, in short, seemed to present something for everyone. Although I did not know in advance which students would sign up for this new course, I predicted that area studies students affiliated with Indiana University's Russian and East European Institute (REEI) would be interested, as well as students seeking degrees at the University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA). I began designing a course that would be compelling to students from these disciplinary backgrounds, and that would, I hoped, introduce students with little or

no background in cultural anthropology to the seemingly boundless potential of this discipline to lend insights into human and technological tragedies such as Chernobyl.

In accordance with these goals, I tried to create a course that would offer students an integrated view of Chernobyl and other ecological and technological disasters. The course would cover the important environmental aspects of such events, but also other ways in which calamities such as Chernobyl reverberate locally and globally with persons and societies. I planned to take students through the rich field of cultural anthropology by highlighting anthropological ways of understanding the far-reaching and intersecting environmental, political, social, and health effects of Chernobyl locally and globally. We would interweave discussions of policy and international law with considerations of ethics, risk, social entitlements, subjective experiences of health and disease, and others. I envisioned a course that would utilize anthropological approaches to studying complex events such as Chernobyl via unique literatures and media sources that highlight local, humanistic interpretations of the disaster while placing the accident's effects in a dynamic, multidisciplinary, global context. Going beyond Chernobyl as an environmental case study, we would examine the symbolic uses of the accident, local interpretations of nuclear catastrophe, and Chernobyl as an example of various globalizing forces.

As expected, many of the fifteen students who joined the seminar had area studies and policy interests, but a range of other majors was also represented. Two PhD students were pursuing a degree in anthropology; a third was studying applied health sciences, with a minor in anthropology. Three students were pursuing joint MA degrees in REEI and SPEA. Undergraduate students were majors in the following disciplines: History (with a focus on Russia), Communication and Culture (specializing in film), General Studies, Theater, Biology, Anthropology, SPEA and International Studies, and Environmental Science. The format of the seminar allowed me to introduce anthropological approaches and theories through the example of Chernobyl, while also allowing students to connect readings and discussions with their particular disciplinary interests. During the course of the semester, students and I were able to explore in some depth the following anthropological approaches and bodies of literature: medical anthropology, anthropology of development, diasporas and migration studies, nationalism, ethnicity and identity, nostalgia and constructions of "home," environmental and ecological anthropology,

symbolic anthropology, popular culture, the anthropology of risk, political anthropology, economic anthropology, the anthropology of performance, and the anthropology of food. Readings for the course were varied, representing practically every point on the academic and popular literature spectrum. Students read policy reports, newspaper and other popular articles, classic anthropological literature, new ethnographic works, literary criticism, novels, plays, and poetry. A range of ethnographic and documentary videos complemented the course, as well as slides from my own fieldwork. Exposure to such diverse materials gave students an idea of the richness of cultural anthropology and provided them the opportunity to connect with those approaches that spoke most directly to their own experiences and scholarly interests. Over the course of the semester, I found that students became more invested and excited as they were given more responsibility for the course. Students were asked to choose another environmental issue in the region about which they gained some expertise that they then shared with the class (nuclear testing in Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan; the Ignalina Nuclear Power Station in Lithuania; oil shale in Estonia; and others). Online discussion forums outside class time on a range of issues also bolstered student interaction with the course material and with each other.

In order to encourage students to further engage the material and to allow them to pursue their own interests in their respective fields, I designed a range of writing projects for completion during the semester. Two short essay assignments presented students with a choice: they could pursue a “traditional” essay question, or choose a more creative approach to synthesizing their ideas. This strategy produced a range of insightful and artistic projects, including a Chernobyl fairy tale, a screenplay set in Chernobyl, an article on Chernobyl in the “Alien Times” newspaper (making the familiar, strange), and several book reviews. Students were also assigned a final research paper, for which they were expected to research in depth some aspect of Chernobyl or a related topic. Class presentations on these topics allowed students to teach each other about their library research, and several graduate students incorporated their preliminary thesis research into these projects. Students with expertise in languages other than English (in this case Russian, Estonian, and Lithuanian) were encouraged to use foreign language sources in their library research. Many of the students got caught up in current events in Ukraine, especially the tumultuous presidential elections of fall/winter 2004 and the ensuing “Orange

Revolution.” We began to devote the first fifteen minutes of each seminar to a discussion of these unfolding events. As a result of their active participation in these discussions, many non-area specialist students became more invested in learning about the region. In fact, during summer 2005 one undergraduate student, Paul Scott Thacker, traveled to Chernobyl (and Kiev, where I was doing research), to collect information for a senior thesis on Chernobyl and human rights. He shot rare video footage inside the Chernobyl “exclusion zone” that he has agreed to let me use for instructional purposes in future seminars. He created a web “blog” of his journals that will be engaging and educational for students.

Organizing a seminar around a key event such as Chernobyl allowed the students and me to benefit from the expertise of a range of scholars at Indiana University. We were fortunate to host several guest speakers during the semester. This served to complement the anthropological approaches that students were learning about with perspectives from other disciplines. Mike Snow of the IUB Physics Department gave a fascinating account of what went wrong at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant to cause the 1986 disaster. Jerry Hennefeld of the IU-South Bend Physics Department discussed research he carried out with immigrants to Ohio from the Chernobyl zones in Belarus. He described the physical effects of radiation exposure while highlighting the difficulties of determining individual doses. Matt Auer, from IU’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs, gave students an overview of environmental issues in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, and stressed the implications of EU accession for the environment. Finally, Steve Raymer from Journalism at IUB shared his experiences of covering Chernobyl for National Geographic’s “Chernobyl: One Year Later” issue in 1987, and discussed the difficulties Western journalists faced in the Soviet Union in general. Students also designed a virtual interview with Natalya Preobrazhenska, an environmental activist in Kyiv, about Chernobyl and the growth of the Green Movement in Ukraine. As a culmination of the seminar, students and I are creating a course web site, which will help us share the successes of our seminar with other instructors and students. The web site will also serve as an informational resource on Chernobyl’s social, political, economic, and health effects. We are including bibliographies, links to relevant sites, translations of little known research and creative works on Chernobyl, and students’ own writings from the course.

When I began designing the Chernobyl seminar, the idea of constructing a course around a single event was admittedly daunting. Colleagues continuously asked me, “Will there be enough material for a sixteen week course on Chernobyl?” Even I had my doubts, but in the end students and I found ourselves scrambling to manage the wealth of disciplinary literatures on Chernobyl, and to follow up on the many leads and new avenues for inquiry that our studies of Chernobyl sparked. Students began to connect the issues surrounding Chernobyl (the politics of risk and blame, health inequalities, secrecy and corruption, social welfare debates, disability politics, human-technology interactions, environmental movements, the symbolism of illness, and many others) to other social issues, to other disciplinary approaches, and to their own lives. Anthropology through the case study is a teaching strategy that I will continue to pursue, since I have found it an effective way to simultaneously focus, diversify, and enliven student learning about approaches to understanding humans and our lifeways.

Note: For a copy of the course syllabus for “Chernobyl: Legacies of a Meltdown,” please send a request to the author at sadphill@indiana.edu.

Notes

* This article will appear (in Russian) in a forthcoming issue of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture (Antropologicheskii forum)* as part of a discussion on “Teaching Anthropology and Cultural History.”



Photo: Paul Scott Thacker, a recent graduate of Indiana University who took Phillips's Chernobyl seminar, on a tour of Chernobyl during summer 2005.