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Teaching Anthropology: SACC Notes Volume 15, Number 3 Fall 2009

Teaching the Nacirema about the Nacirema

Dorothy Davis

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Two years ago I was asked to teach an anthropology course for the Freshman Seminar Program. Freshman Seminars are small discussion classes that introduce students to various areas of study in the General Education Program. Each seminar focuses on a topic, issue or problem chosen by the professor. The only requirement was that my course be Writing Intensive (Writing Across the Curriculum) and meet the social and Behavioral Science requirements. The rest was up to me. I saw this as a wonderful opportunity to experiment with different topics and teaching methods.

Last fall my school introduced Speaking Intensive (Speaking across the Curriculum) classes into the curriculum. I attended a few workshops and discovered that my class was definitely Speaking Intensive. We were already doing interviews, class discussions and oral presentations. However, the workshops were very helpful in developing assessment procedures.

Our library offers a terrific system for using Electronic Reserves. That means that we can pick articles for the students to download and do not have to rely on a textbook. It gives me the freedom to choose a wide assortment of articles. This semester, I have a total of 42 articles on electronic Reserves for this course. The students are glad that they do not have to buy a textbook.

So I was WAC’d, SAC’d, SBS’d and “loaded for bear.” The next step was to find a topic, start choosing articles and make up a syllabus. Since the course is taught in the spring, a few students have had an anthropology course. Most of those students had taken my course in Non-Western Cultures in the fall. I wanted to do a course that was complementary to that one, but did not have it as a prerequisite.

If I was doing Non-Western one semester, then American culture seemed a good choice for the next semester. Since some scholars still debate whether or not there is an American culture, I decided to bypass that issue by electing to title the course, “The Anthropology of U.S.”

My next step was to reread Strategies in Teaching Anthropology, edited by Patricia Rice and David McCurdy, to get some ideas about appropriate projects and innovative approaches to teaching. I saw this course as a wonderful opportunity to experiment with some of these teaching strategies using my freshmen students as willing, adventurous guinea pigs. This text offers plenty of activities to keep a class busy for a semester, but some projects were more adaptable to my course than others.

I also wanted to continue to develop some teaching strategies of my own and try a few new tricks. My only restrictions were that the course be WI, SI, SBS, US and ATY (anthropology). This also gives me the flexibility to change my course around considerably every time that I teach it.

On the first day of class we do the “Hot Dogs for Breakfast” exercise (Keys 2000: 164-166). This simple research project is a good icebreaker and serves to introduce students to anthropology. Students have an opportunity to gather data through interviews, tabulate them and interpret it all in one class period. In addition they have had a chance to speak up in class in a non-intimidating manner and to learn each other’s names. They also experience the fact that that their behavior is being patterned by their culture. It’s a perfect activity for this course.

The first assignments in the course are fairly simple. All the students are working on the same assignments. Eventually the projects become more and more involved as the students develop their skills and knowledge. All the projects are interrelated and build upon each other. The base skill that all students must learn is the SEXI Thinking format (State, Elaborate, Exemplify, Illustrate) for both written and oral presentations. Eventually students will be reading and reporting on different articles and then sharing the information in progressively larger groups. This format encourages students to understand their articles sufficiently to explain it to their peers and then to relate it to different or even conflicting approaches. The process really helps to develop communication skills and critical thinking.

In class we do some SEXI Thinking analyses of short articles working in groups. Eventually all students are required to do an analysis on Chagnon’s article, “Doing Fieldwork Among the Yanomamo.” It is a long article, but lends itself well to the SEXI Thinking approach. It also gives the students some information about what it is like for an American to live in another culture. They readily identify with Chagnon’s difficulties. And, yes, this does eventually lead to a debate about ethics and fieldwork, but that comes later.

In the next unit of the course we begin to discuss American culture. Do we have one? Is there an American college culture? How do outsiders see us? Eventually students are assigned a variety of “Nacirema articles. I’ve actually found nine, however the quality really varies. Groups of students are assigned an article and are required to present it to the class in the SEXI Thinking format.

They also have to make a vocabulary list from the article and put it up on the board. Then each student writes his/her own “Nacirema” article. These are usually fun to read and some of them are really good. As long as students understand the outsider point of view, with only a basic understanding of anthropology they can create some very good papers.

Students then progress to a section on foreign anthropologists doing fieldwork in the United States. Teams of students are assigned to one of six different articles on this topic. They prepare a SEXI Thinking analysis and present it as a group to the class. Then they conduct a series of in-class interviews with
foreign students from the ESI (InterLink) program at UNCG. Foreign students share their stories about coming to the US and their experiences here. My students also ask them specific questions raised by issues that they read about in their articles.

The final assignment for this section is an individual SEXI Thinking review of their article with a greatly expanded “I” section that deals with their interview experience and their findings. My students really enjoy interacting with the foreign students. For some of them, it is the first time that they have ever talked to a person from another country. The people at InterLink welcome any opportunity to help integrate their students into the university community and are wonderfully cooperative.

The next project comes from another suggestion in Strategies for Teaching Anthropology. I base this assignment on the article by Sam Pack, “Familiarizing the Exotic through Ethnographic Film” (Rice and McCurdy 2000: 159-163). It takes quite a bit of class time, but I find that it is well worth the investment. The papers that I get from this project are really pretty remarkable. The project involves the comparison of two films, one an anthropological film, the other a theater release movie. The students must look for similarities and differences between the two. They try to look critically at stereotyping and ethnocentrism.

In class we watch both Chagnon’s Doing Fieldwork (remember that they have already read his article) and the movie, Krippendorf’s Tribe. As Chalfen and Pack’s article (1998) demonstrates convincingly, one can trace all sorts of parallel themes in these two films. Once the students understand what they are supposed to be doing, I give them an option to use one of my pairs or find one of their own. Some film pairs work better than others, but I’m often amazed at what the students come up with on their own.

My list of pairs is getting longer and longer. Some of my favorites are Fast Runner and Eskimo Fight for Life, The Ax Fight and Goodfellas, Kypseti Men and Women Apart and Shirley Valentine, Yeah, You Right and Water Boy, The Earth is Our Mother and The Mission. The assignment forces the students to look at both the exotic and the familiar through a different perspective, hopefully a more anthropological one.

Of course, I can’t leave out kinship, and studying American kinship systems is a challenge. Once again I use Strategies for Teaching Anthropology as a springboard for this assignment. In “Exploring the Meaning of Family” (113), Matthew Kennedy presents an interesting approach to studying kinship that I have modified for my own course. The students learn about kinship systems in class with particular emphasis on our own patterns. They are required to make a four-generation diagram (they actually enjoy doing this) and fill out a questionnaire. They then compile the data from the questionnaires and the diagrams. They are working with raw data and drawing some interesting conclusions.

When I taught this section before, I had my American students do a second set of interviews with foreign students and attempt to diagram their kin. My students were simply not well-prepared enough to do this, and all the foreign students ended up having American kinship patterns. This semester, one of my students is second generation from Asia. Her father helped her with the project, but insisted that she diagram her family the “American” way. After all the work is handed in, we talk about how kinship reflects our cultural values. It makes anthropology very relevant to the students.

The last section of the course deals with one of my favorite areas of our discipline, bio-cultural anthropology. I have chosen sixteen different articles in this area and students get to pick one to work on. I like giving students the option to pick from a variety of articles because they can often find one that is related to their experience or interests. The students read their articles and prepare SEXI Thinking analyses. Then they work in groups determined by subject matter and prepare a presentation to the class. This can take a number of different forms, i.e., a debate, an interview, the Oprah format, etc. By this time in the semester, the students are very comfortable speaking in front of the class and working in groups. They have also become good SEXI Thinkers.

The final project can be done in a group or individually. All final projects are extensions of other projects done earlier in the semester. Final projects must be presented before the class and are counted as an exam grade. One final project that many students choose is to write an oral history. More often than not, a student will choose to interview one of his or her parents. At first, I thought that this would be pretty dull (those parents are my age!) but it is fascinating. Both the students and their teacher were able to see how their own boring parents represented history and exemplified culture.

Another project relates to the film section of the course. Students pick a family video and narrate it as if it were an ethnographic film. Weddings and family reunions tend to be popular subjects. These videos are usually long, and students need some one-on-one guidance, but the end project is pretty good.

One article that students read in the bio-cultural section deals with courtship gestures among college students. Students have done interesting group projects based on this study. They may interview the foreign students again on this topic or they may go out and collect data themselves through observation in a variety of settings. They love collecting the data on this one, but writing up their conclusions is challenging.

This is a unique course. Students are definitely learning anthropology by doing anthropology. If it appears that I have taken all the fun projects that I can think of and crammed them all into one course, this is simply not true. Each time I teach this course, I come up with new ideas. Obviously, it is a lot to do in one semester, and scheduling can be a nightmare. Students must learn to work on one project while I am introducing another. The syllabus has to be flexible. In North Carolina we often lose class days due to inclement weather. Students have to come to class regularly. Attendance is very important, but “if they like it, they will come!”

They learn to be academically responsible. We fill out all the appropriate forms when dealing with human subjects, and we are aware of ethical issues. Students learn useful skills in this course that should help them in their futures, not only the
short-term academic future but in their life-long futures as well.

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The Anthropologist as Missionary:
Preaching on Easter Sunday to the Un-churched
Bonnie Lloyd
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We should focus strongly on the practical value of anthropological knowledge—anthropology that can be used in everyday situations.

The following presents a synthesis of ideas regarding the introductory course in cultural anthropology—ideas hatched and honed throughout nearly ten years of teaching experience. Many of these years have been spent at the community college level. Therefore, I will begin with some descriptive data on the institution in which I teach, in order to provide a context for the points I will make.

Monroe Community College, located in upstate New York, is (like many such institutions) undergoing changes reflecting the overall economic and social conditions in our culture. As a result, we educate a student body that is increasing both in numbers and in cultural diversity. The total enrollment of matriculated students for the academic year 1994-95 was 13,730, more than half of whom were part-time. 1,978 degrees were awarded in 1995. Presently, our student body is comprised of:
• “Cream of the crop” honors students taking advantage of the economic benefits of receiving their first two years of college at substantial savings while living at home.
• Educationally disadvantaged students who enter college through a host of pre-matriculation “developmental studies” coursework.
• Economically disadvantaged students who are able to attend college through various federal and state aid programs.
• Returning students of all ages, many of whom are supporting families while in school. (The average age of our students is twenty-six.)
• Working students (including the above as well as students just out of high school), many of whom hold full-time jobs while taking full-time course loads.
• Minority students of many racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Native Americans. (Our minority enrollment was 375 in 1985; in 1994 it was 1,178.)
• Deaf students who attend classes with sign language interpreters.
• Disabled students who attend classes with a variety of need-specific assistance, academic and/or physical.
• International students and recent immigrant students, many of whom are speakers of English as a second language.
• Senior citizen students who audit courses under a county program that provides free access to our campus and course offerings for all county residents of retirement age.

The ideas I will present reflect, among other things, the fact that I am expected to teach all of these students together in the same class. I doubt that my experience is unique.

Teaching the introductory course in cultural anthropology is a little like delivering a sermon on Easter Sunday; we know at the outset that most of the “congregation” won’t be coming back next time. Only some of our students will return for a second course, and even fewer a third. Most will enter profes-