

ACTIVIST TEACHING:

THREE STEPS TO MAKE ACTIVISM PART OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LEARNING PROCESS

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Introduction

In the spring of 2018, the national conversation in Ireland was focused largely on the issue of abortion. After decades of campaigning and an elongated citizens' assembly process, a referendum was set for the 25th of May that, if passed, would allow the government to legislate for the provision of a general abortion service for the first time in the State. Although completing a PhD in anthropology, I was tutoring an introductory philosophy course at University College Cork at this time. I thought it might be interesting to organise a class in which we would examine the different philosophical positions underpinning the main arguments from both sides of the debate. Given the historical significance of the subject and the seriousness of the decision the Irish electorate were being asked to make, perhaps it is unsurprising that the students were far more engaged and animated in this class than any of our others that term. The class was a success, and towards the end I made an administrative announcement about an approaching in-class test. 'Pfff...' sighed one of the students in exasperation, 'if only we could just go and vote instead of doing the exam!'

Perhaps this is not a fair swap, but the student *had* referenced something significant – the disjuncture she perceived between her deepening knowledge and related passion for social and political action and the extent to which it was officially valued in her degree programme. This article is a reflection on my attempts to integrate activism into my teaching and allow students to use theirs as a source of knowledge to be explored in the classroom. In order to communicate the important sense in which scholarly activism and pedagogy are produced *between* students, teachers and members of the public, I try to be honest – reflecting on some of the mistakes that I have made and lessons that I have learnt while doing activism in the classroom and producing anthropology with activists. In what follows I ask: how can students be taught to collaborate with their research participants in order to co-produce social analyses; how might the classroom become a crucible for reforming a conservative disciplinary structure that understands activism and theorization as mutually exclusive spheres?

The term activism covers a broad range of political activities and orientations and thus is difficult to define simply. It can be understood as a collection of practices geared towards highlighting social, political, economic, or environmental injustice and bringing about a change in these conditions locally or at a more global level. Activism is emerging as a central anthropological concern in the 21st century, whereby researchers manage this complexity by focusing on aspects of particular activist movements. For instance, Merry (2005) compares the practices of human rights activists with anthropologists of activism. She remarks on how they share methods of data collection, whereas they tend to differ in epistemic practice. According to Merry, the activists emphasise individual stories of injustice, while the anthropologists focus more on the structural roots of these issues. This focus on the process of producing activism as opposed to discrete examples of political actions is picked up explicitly by David Graeber. In *Direct Action* (2009), he argues that actions, presented in the media as spectacular, perhaps quite random, events are actually the culmination of a large amount of deliberative work and planning:

When activists talk to each other, they tend to talk endlessly about ‘process’ – the nuts and bolts of direct democracy. When preparing for a major action, it seems all one does is go to meetings, trainings, more meetings. But, when one reads accounts of the same action written afterwards, almost all of this tends to disappear (Graeber 2009: 11).

Graeber also describes the tension between ‘activist cultures’ – with their own tastes, styles of dress, and slang – and the cultural practices of those whom activists try to help. For instance, is veganism: a cultural practice increasingly common amongst anti-capitalist activists in the US, a good example of prefigurative environmental politics, or something that makes it impossible to share a meal with many members of the American working class (ibid.: 240-262)? The anthropology of activism thus focuses on the production of activist identities, groups, and their relationship to larger political and economic structures.

Not only are an increasing number of anthropologists writing about the activism conducted by their research participants (see Aretxaga 2000 and Perry 2013 for other good examples). It is now common for anthropologists to become activists themselves during fieldwork, joining their participants in their attempts to influence a now-shared cause. This has given birth to ‘activist anthropology’, an approach that ‘involves a basic decision to align oneself with an organised group in a struggle for rights, redress, and empowerment and a commitment to produce knowledge in collaboration and dialogue with the members of that group’ (Hale 2007: 105). Perhaps due to the high levels of public debate surrounding Brexit in the UK and both the marriage equality and abortion referendums in Ireland, I have noticed a tangible increase in the social and political awareness of my younger students in both countries over the past few years. If this is the case then I wonder: (1) how might we encourage this interest responsibly and teach the kind of activist scholarship that will engage students while affecting issues of social justice, and (2) how can we make it such that activist scholarship is something that takes place *as part* of the learning process, and not just something students might do afterwards?

There has been much more written on conducting activist anthropology than reflections on how it might be taught responsibly, from the point of view of teachers, students, and research participants. Mariner (2018) provides an interesting reflection on recent activism-oriented changes she has made to her pedagogy. Having listened to her student’s frustration at the fact that their course on race was only taken by students who were already anti-racist, she decided to give the students the option of doing some on-campus outreach work on which they would write a report, instead of handing in a traditional essay. There are many pedagogical arguments for incorporating short stints of fieldwork into theory modules that have been traditionally imagined as class-based. The academic context of anthropology is changing as ‘[t]ime-limited study programmes, reduced teacher–student ratios, new collaborative and cross-disciplinary research designs and web facilities unthinkable twenty years ago make for a new environment for the professional discipline of anthropology’ (Bundegaard and Rubow 2016: 23). Such transformational contexts suggest that a reappraisal of field practices and pedagogy might be valuable. While there may be plenty of reasons to get students into the field early, it does raise ethical issues regarding responsibility and the protection of students and research participants alike. Below, this article will discuss some of the issues likely to arise and how, as instructors, we might plan to engage them.

While not explicitly about pedagogy, other articles mention various techniques that the authors employ to teach activist anthropology, such as challenging students to cite more authors from underrepresented groups (Goldstein and Perry 2017; Guarasci et al. 2018). These are excellent

suggestions and in what follows I expand on them and suggest some more by offering three steps for teaching activist anthropology that my students and I have been developing over the past three years. While I am an anthropologist, I have found elements of this approach to be equally valuable in the philosophy classroom. There is no reason why activist scholarship of some sort cannot be practiced across the social sciences and humanities.

Step One: Get Out of the Classroom

First things first: what activist anthropological teaching is NOT is the instructor using the classroom as a space to promote her own causes. In order to remain anthropological, it is the issues and causes articulated by groups in various field sites that become interesting, not our own. The distinction between our own politics and those of the people we study can be subtle. Regardless of my good intentions, it took me a while to find a methodology for separating one from the other in the classroom. The best way to find out about the issues affecting others is to get out of the classroom. In an introductory material culture course in University College London, we asked the students to conduct mini-ethnographies each week related to the course material, which would eventually be written up as a lab book for assessment. One assignment required the students to accompany friends on a tour of their home, student bedroom, or any space that they considered intimate and talk to them about aspects of the space. Several of the students arrived into class the next week with photographs of Palestinian flag stickers that appeared on a bookshelf, a desk, a window pane, or elsewhere in their friends' spaces. In our discussions we discovered that this had multiple meanings: some people displayed it out of solidarity with Palestine; others perceived the flag as a more general anti-authoritarian symbol; and others again simply found it there after moving in (demonstrating the necessity of asking questions during field work!). What this simple task made possible was the collection of information on the intimate lives of individuals, which we could then compare with the larger group – perhaps as research assistants might do in an official project.

Having discovered the issues that research participants consider significant, how might we teach students to develop their own and their participants' understanding of these in tandem? Drawing on Paolo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), McKenna (2013: 450) outlines an approach called 'critical ethnography', requiring that 'anthropologists, as transformative intellectuals, appropriate the references and referential contexts of research participants and then amplify the "dangerous words" or "generative themes" back to them for further dialogue and reflection'. In this way, the activism conducted in the classroom is a joint-product of students, teacher, but especially the people that help us in our research. This is a powerful tool, both for generating deep ethnographic understandings and for activist scholarly engagement (see also Muller 2012). It is also one that we can teach by encouraging students to conduct short but sustained outside-of-class engagements to supplement the learning process. They can begin by asking simple questions such as, 'I'm writing a report on this, what do *you* think it should be about?' By doing so, students learn not to consider 'those we study as "subjects" (or even "informants") [but rather] partners and collaborators' (Lamphere 2018: 64) that we involve in all stages of research, and not just data collection.

Of course, there are ethical concerns surrounding student engagement in coursework outside of the classroom. Anthropologists and other social scientists face unique and serious ethical dilemmas in the field, including issues of positionality (Herron 2018; D. Shoemaker 2019), political risks to researcher and participant (Ghosh 2018), and surveillance (Verdery 2018). Furthermore, it is increasingly agreed

that the university ethics approval process, with its genesis in biomedical research, ill-equips students for the challenges and contingencies of ethnographic fieldwork (Kohn 2017; Kohn and Shore 2017; Tolich and Fitzgerald 2006). There is a growing recognition that a particular approach to ethics and accompanying pedagogy is required for social scientific research in order to protect students and participants alike. It may be necessary, for instance, to think about and teach research ethics as a process that is constantly evolving as engagement with the field evolves. '[P]resenting research as a series of ethical moments which arise throughout research and on into the writing up of ethnography rather than as a single moment at its outset' (Simpson 2011: 377) allows for unanticipated transformations that take place during fieldwork to be ethically managed. During Herron's (2018) ethnographic research based in an Australian High School, for example, she found that even individual relationships between herself and her participants required ongoing ethical renegotiation. To highlight this is 'not to fall into the trap of claiming transformational influence over young minds but to highlight the limitations of ethical perspectives that focus on singular relationships and time points and that overstate a researcher's level of control in interpersonal encounters' (Herron 2018: 93).

This level of control is perhaps what the existing ethical review process takes for granted. In order to protect students and their research participants, teachers ought to approach ethics training as something that evolves along with the research context, the content of conversations, and the development of relationships in the field, and which requires constant reflection. Practices that may have been deemed appropriate at the outset of research may need reappraisal as the field situation shifts. For instance, although having participants sign consent forms may seem like a necessary practice at first, in politically volatile situations or areas with low literacy levels, the requirement to have participants put their name on paper might become rude at best, or highly dangerous at worst (Ghosh 2018).

It is also possible to set less invasive research assignments for more junior students. They may write reflections on their own experiences of certain events in order to develop their ethnographic voice and ability for critical analysis. They can also collect non-verbal material: I once had students who mentioned that they were attending an anti-Brexit march. I asked them to take photos of different protests signs that we could use in class to discuss the role of image and parody in political action. Regardless of student level or scope of project, there are always means of and good reasons for putting anthropological boots on the street, so long as ethics stays front and centre of an appropriate pedagogy.

Step Two: Diversify Course Material

The idea of ongoing dialogue between researcher and participant is important in activist anthropology in other ways – knowledge produced in collaboration with the people encountered during fieldwork must be shared with them. One way of doing this is to publish more work in non-academic spaces. For example, Fiona Murphy, whose research is based on asylum-seekers and the Direct Provision system in Ireland, recently wrote an article for RTÉ (the Irish state broadcaster). It examines how asylum-seekers circumvent their forced liminality by building community through cooking and sharing food in different locations around the country (Murphy 2018). The online article contains links to interviews with some of the women and men in question for television and radio. Such multi-vocal work that is published in a popular, open-access source resists the separation of theory from application by engaging audiences beyond the boundaries of academic anthropology (Borofsky 2000: 9). It also allows

research participants to become our co-authors and to take ownership of the knowledge that they give us (Lassiter 2008).

To train students capable of using multiple voices and producing texts multimodally, we need to draw on a range of material in the classroom to complement the traditional monograph and journal article. Courses in visual ethnography and ethnographic film making are becoming increasingly common, as is our understanding of 'the destabilizing potential of the camera' (Pinney 2015: 21) and the 'projectilic' effect of political images as they circulate freely online and are weaponized to advance political causes (Kraidy 2017). During the past year my students and I developed a movie club in which we would watch a film per week as homework and then discuss the week's course material through these films. In our investigations of feminism, we watched *Paris is Burning* (1990), a fabulous ethnographic film about the New York drag scene, alongside comparative readings of Judith Butler (2002) and Aiwha Ong (2006), who describe Western and Islamic iterations of feminism respectively. Not only did these discussions generate the highest levels of engagement, they facilitated the students in learning to appreciate popular cultural forms with a critical eye and understand the applicability of their course material to their everyday lives.

Clearly digital social media is an important part of this discussion. Not only must anthropologists learn how to analyze this like they do any system of cultural encounters, but, as activists, digital social media offers a permanent connection between researchers and the issues of their field sites in many regions globally. Of course, these new resources throw up a range of issues to which educators ought to give careful consideration and tuition time. Terry Shoemaker (2019) notes that his meta-study of first year college students shows, worryingly, that although students are increasingly exposed to more varied media sources, media literacy is increasingly deficient amongst this student body (T.D. Shoemaker, 2019). The benefit of building lessons around the critical appraisal of new media sources such as Facebook and Youtube is that it introduces students to the inherently multiple nature of what is generically and problematically labelled 'Fake News'. This category hides important distinctions between aggressive forms of advertising, opinion pieces, disinformation, and others (McDougall et al. 2019). By focusing on these distinctions and utilizing key texts such as the EU Commission's recent report on pedagogical approaches to combatting disinformation (European Commission 2018), educators can develop student capacities to distinguish between source-based journalism and opinion pieces; or between attention-grabbing headlines that lead to sponsored content (known as 'click-bait') and informal posts made by members of the public.

Apps like Instagram and Facebook are where many of my students now conduct most of their activism. We have examined the #WitchesofInstagram movement, in which women self-designate online as witches. This provided an opportunity to assess the range of feminist approaches that might analyze this phenomenon either as emancipating a feminine figure or potentially appropriating the image of the witch. Our classes coincided with #MeToo, as well as the #IBelieveHer movement, which organized and publicized opposition to the way rape trials are conducted in Northern Ireland. Sharing and posting on these subjects was activism in which the students were already involved. Navigating them in class using the approach described above challenged us to critically analyze different strands of feminist theory, but also required us to discuss source, register, motive, and bias as much as it did the issues themselves, creating the possibility of an increasingly responsible and informed activism amongst the students (and myself). If all this sounds like media overload, that is pretty much the aim: in the era of Twitter-diplomacy and when blogging is becoming more relevant than newspaper editorials, learning to wade through the profusion of media in their field sites with a critical eye empowers students to

advance their causes while thinking through their coursework, uniting student activism with theoretical production.

Step Three: Inclusivity in the Classroom

It is important to realize that the classroom is part of a society and not separate from it. In here, activist anthropologist teachers must practice what they preach in another way – by critically analyzing how the classroom itself could become a more inclusive space for learning. In contemporary European universities, classes are composed of an increasingly international student body. Allowing for mixed language competencies is thus an obvious place to start. In the past I have found that aside from making an extra effort to eliminate unnecessary jargon, non-fluent students are benefitted by inviting them to participate ‘in class’ by emailing questions or answers to their tutors, giving them more time to formulate their responses. These students also deserve more feedback on written assessments where possible.

An international student body presents a valuable opportunity for comparison in the classroom. In 2013, when I was a postgraduate student, our kinship lecturer asked us all to draw kinship diagrams of our families. Because this was in London and most of my fellow students were European, I clearly remember how many of us were intrigued at the striking difference between our own diagrams and that of a Chinese student, whose diagram reflected China’s one-child policy (which was still active at the time). What followed was a fascinating discussion of the history and logic behind this policy, its criticisms (stories of forced sterilizations and abortion), as well as its positive achievements (the increasing value of women in Chinese society due to the prevalence of families with only female children). Not only was this a thorough exercise in cultural comparison – a defining analytical feature of social anthropology – but by conducting it our class gained deeper, better-rounded appreciation of our new classmates’ cultures.

Finally, there are even ways for individual students to do activist anthropology while engrossed in their own writing, as the politics of citation has appeared on the scholarly activist agenda. The fact that reading lists for higher education modules in the Western academy are populated largely by ‘dead old white men’ is now an oft-repeated complaint of students and lecturers alike. Until recently a common response went something like this: ‘It’s unfortunate, certainly, but it reflects the historical lack of diversity in academic scholarship, and it would be irresponsible to run modules that did not give students a proper grounding in the classics of the discipline’. That may be so, but it is no reason that reading lists cannot be supplemented with alternative sources. The ‘Decolonize the Curriculum’ (DtC) initiative has spread widely during the last decade. With a long genesis in African postcolonial scholarship (Nkoane 2006), DtC-like initiatives promote the need for curricula in ex-colonies to reflect the needs of the local community and not that of previous colonizers (Council on Higher Education 2017).

DtC, however, is just as relevant to Western academies that also need to recognize the hierarchies of power inherent in the very design and facilitation of modules, programmes, even entire disciplines. As far as the classroom is concerned, critically analyzing reading lists is a good way to start. I ask my students to look at the reading lists for various courses and ask themselves, ‘what kind of voices are being promoted here; what groups are being silenced; what does this imply about power and expertise?’ I also challenge my students – and especially myself – to write within certain quotas: can

you cite at least 40% female scholars in an essay? If its subject is the silencing of female voices, can you write it without citing male authors? What about non-white and non-western scholars? If you are preparing an essay on environmentalism, can you do it without printing anything? These practices slow down the writing process and can be frustrating, but they transform the most monotonous aspects of scholarship – the time spent sitting alone at a desk – into a politically-significant activity. Anthropology begins in the classroom, but not just its study. Fresh-eyed first year and field veteran alike can put their theories and methods to practice upon each other and their learning environment to do scholarly activism without leaving school at all.

Post-script: Teaching to Create an Activist Academy?

Anthropology – and certainly its students in Ireland and Britain – are becoming more aware of their inability to assume the role of disinterested bystander to the social and political processes that they observe. On the contrary, my recent classes have been brimming with activists, and anthropologists have been producing plenty of scholarship regarding what anthropology can specifically contribute to the struggles of the people who populate their monographs and articles. I have described three aspects to my pedagogy for activist teaching and teaching activists that aims to do just this. By getting out onto the streets, performing critical analysis of diverse forms of media and text, and coming to understand the classroom and our texts as socially-differentiated and hierarchically-problematic spaces in their own right, my students and I are trying to learn about activist scholarship by doing it.

To finish on a speculative note: notwithstanding the growth of activist anthropology, its practitioners often remark on the disconnect between, on the one hand, the activism that they become involved in during their research and, on the other hand, the requirements of anthropology as a discipline, which does not necessarily recognise this activism as an academic undertaking (Hansen and Rossen 2017). The idea persists that the true fruits of anthropological labour are materialised in the texts that we write, although activism and texts are products of the same field work. Look closely at the disciplinary structure and the message is still: ‘you do your academic stuff, your institutionally approved work, and activist or engaged anthropology is what you do outside the academy’ (Goldstein and Perry 2017). It is my hope that activism in the classroom might change this. If we teach skills that complicate the traditional structure of disciplines, if we raise a generation of scholars who have never known the separation between theory and service, perhaps the discipline of anthropology will become as revolutionary as the fields in which it increasingly operates.

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