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Teaching the History of Anthropological Theory: Strategies for Success

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GLEANINGS FROM ACADEMIC GATHERINGS

Teaching the History of Anthropological Theory: Strategies for Success

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[Due to space considerations, this account was omitted from our June number.]

History of Anthropological Theory can be one of the most challenging anthropology courses to teach. The material is abstract, detailed and, for many students, just plain boring. One teacher describes her students' expectations as "one dead guy a week." The unenviable reputation of this course is unfortunate, because the course is at the core of college and university anthropology curricula throughout North America. Many anthropology departments consider their course in History of Anthropological Theory to be the "capstone" of their students' careers. If the course is ineffective, large numbers of students are being ill-served.

In November, 1995, at the 94th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Paul A. Erickson (Saint Mary's University) chaired a session on "Teaching the History of Anthropological Theory: Strategies for Success". The session, co-sponsored by the Council on General Anthropology and the Society for Anthropology in Community Colleges, identified challenges faced by teachers of History of Anthropological Theory and showed, by example, how those challenges can be overcome with success. The session comprised 11 papers followed by a commentary and discussion.

The opening paper by Erickson, "Teaching the History of Anthropological Theory: State of the Art", framed the session by presenting results of a survey of History of Anthropological Theory courses taught across Canada and The United States. Approximately 80 anthropology departments provided information on a number of course features, including purpose, level, prerequisites, enrollment, theoretical orientation, format, readings and manner of selection of instructor. Erickson found that while enthusiasm for the course varies, among both students and teachers, there are common challenges and rewards, most often "getting students to think".

Papers by Mark Moberg (University of South Alabama) and Mary W. Helms (University of North Carolina, Greensboro) showed how student resistance to History of Anthropological Theory can be overcome by teaching it from the perspectives of the philosophy of science and natural history. Moberg's paper, "Philosophy of Science in Anthropology: Overcoming Student Resistance to Disciplinary History", showed how the concepts of paradigm and scientific revolution help students understand major theoretical shifts in anthropology, and draw their attention to the historical and social contexts in which anthropologists produce knowledge. Moberg reinforces this approach with role-playing assignments in which students make team presentations of works that uphold or criticize past and present paradigms. In her paper, "Teaching Anthropology as Natural History: From James Hutton to Lévi-Strauss", Helms placed the history of anthropology within the broader framework of the history of natural science from the Renaissance through the 19th century. Helms helps her students understand the difference between faith and reason while she traces the history of the discovery of natural processes in geology, biology and, then, anthropology. This approach makes anthropology seem less exotic.

Papers by Jay K. Johnson (University of Mississippi) and Franklin O. Loveland (Gettysburg College) showed how Marvin Harris' widely used (and avoided) textbook The Rise of Anthropological Theory can be made more accessible to students. In his paper, "Fifteen Years of Teaching Anthropological Theory: An Evolving Strategy", Johnson characterized Harris' volume as "a demanding book that has an obvious theoretical bias which is presented in a style that invites disagreement." Johnson uses the book to teach critical reading skills by means of weekly assignments and research papers that inform classroom discussion. In his paper, "The Rise or Demise of Anthropological Theory:

Teaching Marvin Harris's Theory Book to Undergraduates", Loveland described accommodations to the book ranging from panel discussions and videos to an anthropological "quiz show" in the format of "Jeopardy".

Papers by Alan Sullivan (University of Cincinnati) and William R. Fowler (Vanderbilt University) addressed problems teaching the history of archaeological theory either on its own or as part of traditional four-field anthropology. In his paper, "Archaeological Theory in American Anthropology: Strategies for Teaching the History of Subfield Tensions", Sullivan contended that his students have difficulty adjusting to courses in archaeological theory because much of archaeological theory derives from theory in cultural anthropology. Sullivan overcomes this difficulty by showing students how archaeology can contribute to the solution of mainstream anthropological problems. In "A Dialogue with the Ancestors: A Strategy for Teaching the History of Archaeological Theory", Fowler explained how he teaches the history of American archaeology by having students critique papers published in American Antiquity and American Anthropologist. Fowler's course is organized chronologically, with these papers grouped into periods of approximately five years. In addition, each student assumes the identity of a major figure in the history of archaeology and argues from the perspective of that authority in a research paper and oral presentation.

The remaining papers showed how special strategies can make History of Anthropological Theory come alive in the classroom. In his paper, "'You Mean Lévi-Strauss Did More than Invent Blue Jeans?': Using the 'Field Guide' Approach to Teaching Anthropological History and Theory", James Stanlaw (Illinois State University) explained how he has students augment a handbook of key anthropological theories with biographies of major figures and summaries of seminal works. Stanlaw's aim is to let students know that the history of anthropological theory is not "static", but grows out of contested debates. Karen Field (Washburn University) began her paper, "Good Morning, I'm Dona Marina: Fostering Student Identification with a History of Theory Curriculum", by observing how students complain that the history of anthropological theory is "dry." Field responds to these complaints in a variety of ways: adding women and non-Europeans to the list of canonical theorists; asking students to convey the ideas of chosen thinkers orally "in character"; and inviting practicing social scientists to discuss the importance of theory in their lives and work. Fifteen years of course evaluations indicate that her strategy works.

In his paper, "Competing Paradigms and Hungry Hippos: The Search for the Elusive Marble of Truth in Anthropological Theory", Bruce Roberts (University of Southern Mississippi) discussed how an unusual pedagogical device – the children's game "Hungry, Hungry Hippos"—can be employed to illustrate the notion of competing paradigms in the anthropological quest for knowledge. Based on James Lett's book The Human Enterprise: A Critical Introduction to Anthropological Theory, Roberts' strategy invites students to employ this game as a metaphor for examining rival paradigms that appear incommensurable. In her paper, "Trying to Beat 'One Dead Guy a Week'", Julia Harrison (Trent University) described another unusual pedagogical device. Harrison has students stage, in writing, a conference on "Balancing the Local and the Global in the 21st Century", featuring three early anthropological theorists ("summoned from the world beyond") as speakers. Harrison finds that students respond to this exercise creatively and report that the course far surpasses the dreaded "one dead guy a week."

Discussant for the papers was Aram A. Yengoyan (University of California, Davis). Reflecting on the richness of teaching strategies presented, Yengoyan was pleased to observe that there *is* theory in History of Anthropological Theory courses and that many of the courses are designed to be capstones of anthropology curricula. At the same time, he was surprised that certain anthropological topics, notably kinship and cultural relativism, were virtually ignored. Yengoyan's comments led to a lively discussion among paper presenters and members of the audience, including Marvin Harris, who responded to some of the criticisms of his book.

HAN readers who want more information on the session can contact Paul A. Erickson, Department of Anthropology, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia (TEL 902-420-5627, FAX 902-20-5119, E-MAIL perickso@shark.stmarys.ca). Requests for copies of papers should be addressed to authors. There is widespread desire to have the papers published. Suggestions for avenues of publication are welcome.