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Uncomfortable pedagogy: experiential learning as an anthropological encounter in the Asia-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

This paper features a discussion of how educators can channel anthropological practices towards the enhancement of experiential learning (EL) teaching methods, particularly on the topic of religion across the Asia-Pacific. I argue that our capacity to achieve curricular objectives through EL calls for an attentiveness to the affinity between the empirical challenges confronted by ethnographers, who work to create rapport between researcher and subject, and classroom teachers who seek to cultivate a conducive learning environment beyond the classroom walls. I show the pedagogical implications of the ways anthropologists have operationalized their discipline's "critical turn" by highlighting two experiential domains: (1) through activities of "uncomfortable" stereotype self-inventory and (2) through a dialogic pedagogy that pursues meaningful learning outcomes through the "struggle" to recognize inter-cultural and religious agency among students.

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"Tell me and I forget; teach me and I may remember; involve me and I will learn" – a quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin

"Not having heard something is not as good as having heard it; having heard it is not as good as having seen it; having seen it is not as good as knowing it; knowing it is not as good as putting it into practice." – Xunzi (312–230 BC) recorded in the *Teachings of the Ru* (cited from J. Lee, 2005, p. 81)

The quotations above highlight the importance of a practical, experiential component in the ways in which we learn, evoking an epistemological principle that resonates with many educators around the world. This principle is a familiar one for proponents of a pedagogical approach collectively known as experiential learning (EL). EL comprises a suite of teaching methods premised upon the belief that merely acquiring knowledge in the confined locale of the classroom can be insufficient in maximizing the potential of curricular programs. This kind of teaching is one that seeks the total visceral immersion of student learners in the full complexity and diversity of human experience such that learning becomes a practical, physically engaged process which occurs through "the experience of action itself" (Dewey, 1938).

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This paper is dedicated to the late Dr. Pattana Kitiarsa, who was an inspiration and driving force behind many of the ideas discussed in this paper.

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But while the two quotes endorse the principle of EL, the “experience of action” alone does not, in and of itself, lead to learning that is meaningful and transformative. EL methods may involve the displacement of student learners from the regulated “comfort zone” of the classroom, which can in turn entail a relinquishing of a teacher’s supervisory control and authority. This compounds what Lu and Horner (1998) have described as “the problematic of experience” (1998, p. 261), wherein the focus on “presenting” experiences to students carries with it the risk of reducing the complexity, fluidity and instability of actual real-world scenarios into neatly simplified units amenable to academic consumption.

Anthropologists can make a positive contribution in addressing this problematic. As a mode of situated inquiry, EL is premised upon principles that resonate with the discipline’s paradigmatic practices and *modus operandi*. This paper is a response to the call for instructors to “cultivate the educational resources embedded within their respective disciplines” (Garnett & Vanderlinden, 2011, p. 2). In so doing, I discuss how anthropologist educators can operationalize those aspects of ethnographic empirical practice that can help enhance the pedagogical capacity of educators in a non-anthropology classroom. By enacting what Lu and Horner called a “constructive use of the tension between research and teaching” (Lu & Horner, 1998, p. 268), I address some ways in which anthropology’s best practices relate to facilitating effective and transformational classroom teaching. How can anthropologists meaningfully channel their disciplinary presuppositions, training and scholarly personas into a tacit pedagogical framework? Or, more specifically, how can ethnographic methods inform, configure and enhance EL-inclined teaching methods, particularly when these methods are applied to the curricular objectives of non-anthropology majors?

My argument is that the effective deployment of EL requires the sequential cultivation of two distinct yet mutually reinforcing experiential domains, both of which are deployments of the ethnographic ethos of fostering “critical dialogue with self and with others” (Gordon, 2002, p. xi). The first of these is a reflexive “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler, 1999) wherein curricular objectives are pursued through activities of personal self-introspection. In this domain, students are encouraged to see ontological awareness as a basis for the empirical strategies that would help maximize the benefits of EL. The second is a dialogic domain, cultivated *in situ*, through the facilitation of encounters between students acting and expressing their own perspectives as “intersubjects” of each other. It must be emphasized that dialogic domain is not tantamount to a radical or postmodern pedagogy which endorses the disempowerment of teacher authority, a method described by Zhao as “a more sophisticated sham that makes teacher authority invisible” (Zhao, 2009, p. 86). I argue, rather, for a pedagogic dialogism that channels how anthropologists handle the discursive politics of ethnographic practice such that meaningful learning occurs when students “struggle” with the mutually awkward, sometimes uncomfortable effort to recognize the agency of the people that they encounter in the course of EL-based curricular programs.

Both these “uncomfortable” experiential domains derive insight from anthropology’s “critical turn” in which an attentiveness to the vicissitudes of ethnographic representation has led to a skepticism about the ways in which methodological and theoretical frameworks across the social sciences have reproduced dominant, patriarchal and discursively oppressive ideologies. While a new generation of anthropologists have largely

adopted these critical stances in the production of their research, it is less common to see these deliberately channeled towards enhancing pedagogical strategies for wider, non-anthropological academic consumption. This paper is a step in that direction.

This discussion unfolds by providing “snapshots of practice” drawn from my own experience in running the South-East Asia in Context Summer Program (SEAiC): an EL-based field course based in Singapore which sought to address the cross-cultural and inter-religious understanding of religion across the Asia-Pacific. I begin by describing the principles of EL before tracing the ways in which the ethos of ethnographic practice has been channeled into the program’s educational exercises.

EL and its implementation

As conceptualized by one of its earliest proponents, David Kolb (1984), EL encompasses the range of educational platforms in which learning is enhanced through a student’s physical interaction with places, objects or phenomena. Typically, this is achieved through fostering a risk-assessed exposure to physical experiences that correspond to the curricular-specified learning objectives. These kinds of “Field Course Experiential Learning Models” (McLaughlin & Johnson, 2006) include (but is not restricted to) teacher-guided field trips, interaction with particular museum artifacts, people-to-people encounters and interviews or simply group observation *in-situ* (Jakubowski, 2003).

From a curricular perspective, EL-derived teaching methods effectively de-prioritize textbooks and data reference materials as the primary repository and source of knowledge. Its operational premise is a repudiation of the “dominant pedagogy” (Zhao, 2009, p. 87) described in the *Scholarship on Teaching and Learning* as “student-as-sponge” (Waldstein & Reihner, 2001, p. 7) or “banking” (Freire, 2000, p. 58), which assume that learning is primarily an exercise in bridging the knowledge gap between the teacher/expert and the student/learner through an authoritative, one-way transfer of information. Consequently, such rote or didactic learning entails the marginalization of knowledge stemming from the student/learner’s personal life experience, or at least rendering it secondary and peripheral to information deemed relevant by the teacher/expert.

Many scholars have attested to the effectiveness of the EL approach, citing its cultivation of learning that is “engaged” (Hooks, 1994), “transformative” (Shor, 1992), “critical” (Wink, 2000) and “community based” (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). Other studies have focused on how field trips enhance the motivation for learning, particularly in fostering direct knowledge, empathy and first-hand understanding (Kern & Carpenter, 1984; Ridley & Lingle, 1996). EL-based pedagogical practices have been shown to be particularly effective in classes where the objective was to enhance cross-cultural understanding in the Asia-Pacific (Hirsch & Lloyd, 2005; Marchioro, 2009).

Other scholars, on the other hand, have reported difficult challenges with regard to the implementation of EL programs. Commonly cited are the logistical problems of organization and scheduling, students fatigue from exposure to the elements, health risks and culture shock, gender imbalances and the difficulty of making accurate risk assessments. These issues do not so much refute the principle of EL but identify the practical and operational factors that could significantly diminish it. In a discussion of “preexisting spatial narratives,” McMorran (2015) has pointed out that field trip programs

can essentialize a prospective destination into rigid structures that correspond to specific learning outcomes, which effectively compress and reduce the complexity of novel encounters into easily digestible packages.

The drawbacks of EL are especially pronounced when applied towards fostering religious understanding. Teaching topics of faith often involve truth claims that are not merely factual and descriptive but form the basis of a range of ideological belief systems which are vigorously defended and promulgated. In that sense, EL-based programs that aim to expose students to religious traditions would seem to have an inherent volatility that renders even the most well-intentioned field-based educational strategies difficult to put into practice. In the remaining sections of this essay, I turn to specific case studies which demonstrate the challenges of utilizing EL approaches to teaching about religion across cultures.

Knowledge about South-East Asian Islam in context

In this section, I seek to demonstrate certain scenarios in which the operational and conceptual aspects of EL may well be counter-productive to the pedagogical objectives of even the most well-intentioned educational platforms, using the example of an American High School and its attempts to confront religious topics as a case in point.

For the past decade, the world studies course at Tennessee's Hendersonville High School in the USA has included a 3-week exploration of the five "world religions." In 2013, the class put EL methods into practice by organizing teacher-guided field trips to a mosque, where a religious leader had apparently showed students samples of Islamic scriptures, and to a Hindu temple where a spiritual practitioner demonstrated how meditation is conducted. One student in the Hendersonville program had opted not to attend the trips and, in lieu of attendance, the teacher had given her class notes from which she was to write an assignment (Starnes, 2013). Upon discovering that the notes had more coverage on Islam, the student declined to complete the assignment as well and had consequently earned a zero grade. The student's incensed father turned to the media: "The teacher was pushing Islamic tolerance," he told *The Tennessean*, "We did not want to make this about religion – they forced us to" (T. Lee, 2013). To *Fox News* radio, he was just as blunt: "Our kids are being indoctrinated and this is being shoved in their face," he said. Following weeks of media coverage, the Sumner County Schools board decided that all field trips to religious venues were to be taken off the class curriculum reasoning that "equal representation in regards to field trips for all religions studied in the course is not feasible" (Knowles, 2013).

The Hendersonville High case is more than just an issue of a school's responsiveness to parental complaints or of the commitment to providing fair and equal coverage of curricular topics. For all the positive attributes of EL, the school board's abandonment of the field school raises important questions about an educator's capacity to implement EL-based teaching strategies, particularly in relation to the advancement of knowledge about religious traditions. In this case, the deployment of EL teaching methods was intended to enhance students' knowledge by enabling them to experience religion's material and embodied forms. However, as the 2013 controversy indicated, the field trip had stirred up deep-seated anxieties about the likelihood of "indoctrination" or having other beliefs "shoved in their face." In effect, this case shows that EL can become

problematic because it was seen to dislocate the student from a “secular” learning space, thereby taking away the insulation from “dogmatic” influence that classrooms, at least in the USA, are constitutionally mandated to provide.

It would be reasonable to assume that the teachers at Hendersonville adopted EL methods in response to the very real problem of a lack of understanding about religion in the USA. A 2010 report by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) found that even well-designed EL programs could be undermined by the high level of “religious illiteracy,” at least among university undergraduates (Moore, 2010; Waggoner, 2013). Similarly, a 2010 *PEW Forum for Religion and Public Life* found that what young people around the world know about the Islamic faith in particular is not merely deficient but inflected with portrayals from a media culture that, in focusing on what is “newsworthy,” very rarely presents an even-handed account of the diversity of non-Western traditions and rarely depicts them as bound in the complexities of the historical and socio-political milieu in which they are found (PEW, 2010). Religious studies scholar Stephen Prothero (2007) argued that knowledge about Islam in the USA is dangerously skewed towards assumptions that “extremism” is the norm in that faith. At the PEW forum, Prothero opined that

We’re looking for moderate Islam. That’s been in the conversation since 9/11. Where are the moderates? Well, hundreds of millions of them are in Indonesia, but three-quarters of Americans don’t know that Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country and we wouldn’t know to look there because we don’t know that Islam is active there. (PEW, 2010)

The AAR task force stated that to address these skewed assumptions, “the pedagogical power of experiential encounters has to be taken seriously” as having a very positive impact in addressing religious illiteracy (Moore, 2010; Pinault and Bell, 1992). It is with this in mind that the SEAiC summer program was deployed in 2014. On that particular year, SEAiC program coordinators sought to tackle the ways in which Islamic traditions are often represented as internally uniform and static as opposed to them being characterized just as much by tolerant, moderate political and cultural values.

The program was originally established by a group of anthropologists in 2008 with the intention of fostering knowledge about South-East Asia’s cultural traditions by deliberately obliterating the gap between what is learned in the classroom and its actual manifestation in the social and cultural lives of those in the region (Chou & Platt, 2012). The class activities revolve around a 9–12-day intensive field session to South-East Asia (Cambodia, Thailand or Indonesia). The field trip is supplemented by a set of preparatory and debriefing assignments, which are designed to help students place themselves “in-context” through acting as “human instruments” sensitive to their visceral reactions to South-East Asian life worlds.

With an emphasis on learning about Islam in Indonesia in 2014, a cohort of tertiary students from the USA, Australia, Europe, and East and South-East Asia were brought to Muslim boarding schools (*pesantren*), tombs and pilgrimage sites in Java. Specific focus was placed on channeling ethnographic qualitative methods by cultivating two mutually reinforcing experiential domains: (1) a preparatory focus on reflexivity through uncomfortable stereotype self-inventory and (2) dialogic engagement through a mutual struggling with other students in the field. In the sections that follow, I elaborate upon how fostering of the each of these two domains drew from anthropology’s “crucial turn,” and how this has proven conducive to following through on EL’s pedagogical prospects.

Experiential domain 1: a pedagogy of uncomfortable self-inventory

Confronting the vicissitudes of researching and writing about the experience of another culture lies at the very heart of anthropology's "critical turn," which has been ongoing since the 1970s. Responsive to the discipline's complicity and culpability in European colonialism, many in the American academe have pointed out the "politics of objectification," in which the subordination of the "other" is reproduced through discursive strategies of spatial, temporal and textual displacement (Clifford, 1988). One of the ways ethnographers have addressed this issue is to endorse a continuing stance of critical introspection on how a researcher's *positionality* conditions what they learn about places, people and phenomena.¹

The way in which anthropological knowledge is acquired has been mediated by spectrum of perspectives on how reflexivity should actually be enacted (Kirsch and Ritchie, 1995). One can think of reflexivity in the Bourdieu-ian sense of situating an understanding of the *habitus* of one's craft as part and parcel of the analysis of cultural lifeworlds. There has also been more extreme and overly introspective approach to reflexivity that can result in a kind of navel "auto-ethnography" (Elis and Bochner 2000). These ontological matters notwithstanding, the critical turn has encouraged ethnographers to view reflexivity as part of the discipline's standard empirical practice, which is operationalized through the use of field notes and journals to record a wide range of introspective information, including the ethnographer's bodily responses, visceral experiences, moods or other quotidian observations.²

In the spirit of channeling this ethos to classroom scenarios, SEAiC program coordinators took on an approach in which reflexivity was, as Glass put it, "... planned as a scaffolding of pedagogical mechanisms and writing styles [which] must be incorporated during the course syllabus design stage" (2015, p. 82). In 2014, pre-trip activities proceeded upon the assumption that a student's knowledge about Islam would be conditioned by negative media-influenced assumptions, and not simply knowledge deficits or curiosity. The instructors, bearing in mind the ethos of anthropology's critical stance to the politics of representation, treated such assumptions as the ideal content for engaging a set of classroom activities designed to help students channel their skewed or deficient impressions about Islam towards a process of what Boler called an introspective "pedagogy of discomfort" (2015).

In one of the activities, for example, SEAiC students were asked to do a word association exercise in which they would list down all the most common ideas that came to their minds at the mention of the word "Muslim." During the period under discussion, uncomfortable and controversial topics were brought up. Words like "fundamentalism," "terrorism," "veil" or "jihad" were commonly suggested. At this point, the teacher deliberately practiced a level of restraint in not providing corroborations or counterfactuals to these impressions, but to use them as platforms towards adopting a self-introspective attitude to the field trip site, regardless of the level of discomfort students felt about their attitudes to these issues. As a pedagogical exercise, reflexivity, in this sense, meant encouraging a learning environment in which teachers help students recognize and deploy their own subjective resources towards a progressive educational constructivism. Students were asked to build up their stock of preexisting knowledge, let these percolate in their minds, and record them in their journals until

such a time that they can “test” or “interrogate” the legitimacy of this knowledge upon exposure to the actual field scenarios.

A student from Holland who participated in these uncomfortable reflexive exercises recalled a previous trip to Indonesia in her journal notes³:

I was constantly stopped by people who wanted to take a picture with me This kind of encounter with the Indonesians also made me rethink my position as a tourist – was I a tourist or an attraction in this situation? I am use (sic.) to that I am the one who takes pictures of the locals when I am traveling around, and suddenly I was in the opposite position.

The student had taken the memory of an innocuous act of photography to reflect upon the awkwardness of her experience in Indonesia. The reversal of the dynamic of observation complexified the position the student took in relation to the field (“Was I a tourist or an attraction ...”), thus challenging the centrality and privilege of the observer. In being reflexive about her discomfort, the student became aware of the agency of those she was observing – that Indonesians too were equally complicit in the formation a particular kind of knowledge encounter.

These exercises need to be conducted with an appropriate sense of awareness of what anthropologists have identified as the limitations of a reflexive approach. As Scheper-Hughes (1995) has argued, a fixation on confronting the politics of representation could lead to a politico-ethical paralysis, one in which every act of observation becomes subject to moralizing self-interrogation. An uncritical use of reflexivity runs the risk of essentializing cultural differences, locating the self as the main object of study and rendering those we study as characters ready for our academic consumption. In this scenario, as feminist anthropologist Abu-Lughod (1991) suggested, spatio-temporal distance is sustained between the self and the “other,” thereby replicating the very same asymmetrical power relationships that we seek to confront.

To address this, stereotype self-inventory was supplemented by exercises that scrutinize not just the self but the discursive and intellectual landscape in which the object of study is perceived. In this way, the classroom “can be used to overtly politicize the ontological,” as gender theorist Elspeth Probyn put it (1993, p. 16). Instead of simply asking “what do I feel about Islam,” APAP students were encouraged to inquire about What kinds of geo-political agendas are involved that makes me classify Islam in a particular way? What semiotic registers can be seen in a media culture in my country that associates Islam with religious fanaticism?

Being asked to connect one’s stereotypes of Indonesia and Islam with the larger political and discursive field had the effect of cultivating an inquisitiveness of a particular kind, as one American SEAiC student expressed:

I had never considered the historical and religious questions that our class has approached [during the pre-field trip stage]. Posing these questions changed what I looked for in my surroundings. I no longer limited myself to the mere aesthetics of my experiences in Java. During the field trip, I tried to appraise the experiences I was having and reconcile them with my impressions as an American and as someone who has spent time in Jakarta.

Uncomfortable stereotype self-inventory cultivated a deeper mode of observation that was not primarily concerned with the “mere aesthetics” of a foreign country. The student turned the analytical gaze back upon her own “self-in-context” – as “an American who

has spent time in Jakarta,” – as opposed to a complete outsider or foreigner visiting a new locale. This self-introspection, encouraged by direct encounters with “actual Muslims,” would go far towards a more humanized perception of “Islam” in Indonesia, rather than conceiving of the faith in terms of a set of categories conditioned by a prevalent media-culture of suspicion and anxiety.

The goal of stereotype self-inventory is not knowledge transfer per se but to “deflate the ‘epistemological’ hubris that often seems to accompany self-consciously reflexive claims” (Lynch, 2000, p. 47), thus preparing students for a second kind of EL milieu. As a prelude to going to Indonesia, the exercises invited students to view Muslims as intersubjective agents – or “as people whose ideas and feelings are just as worthy of attention as our own” (Richmond, 1999, p. 41), and who can, given the right conditions, contribute to their learning process. Inasmuch as self-reflexivity encourages an intersubjective engagement between ethnographer and subject, the potential is there for inciting in students the kind of epistemological elasticity necessary for them to re-orient their observational gaze in meaningful ways. We turn to these pedagogical aspects in the next section.

Experiential domain 2: experience as a dialogical “struggle”

Krista Tippet, a prominent American public radio broadcaster on religion, has suggested that what people need is not a better “cerebral” knowledge of Islam but a *dialogical process* of “knowing Muslims ... It’s that personal relationship. It’s faces. [And] engaging in relationships, engaging in service projects and then learning through that ...” (PEW, 2010). Critical ethnography’s focus on and critique of self-reflexivity lays the foundation for an ethnographic regimen that facilitates such a two-way communicative process. There have been a host of ethnographers who have extolled this approach.⁴ Marcus and Fischer capture this research ethic succinctly: “Dialogue has become the imagery for expressing the way anthropologists (and by extension, their readers) must engage in an active communicative process with another culture” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 30).

How can this dialogical approach be applied to the realm of experiential pedagogy, and what are its conceptual challenges? Merely facilitating a conversation between two parties is not enough. Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981) had warned against “monologism” which worked, as Moriarty, Danaher, and Danaher (2008) put it, to “consolidate the authority of the more powerful speaker in the conversation and to discourage further discussion.” In a similar vein, cultural critic Paulo Freire noted that “... [T]his dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the participants in a discussion” (Moriarty et al., 2008). Instead, the dialogism that ethnographers channel into pedagogy is conceptualized as an intersubjective domain of inquiry which “... characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task” (Freire & Macedo, 1999, p. 48).

To complement the preparatory activities of uncomfortable self-reflexivity, the SEAiC program fostered a dialogic approach through people-to-people interaction which took place during visits to Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). While the *pesantren* headmaster (the *kiayi*) facilitated the initial encounter, the emphasis of such gatherings was

on unstructured conversation sessions between small groups of SEAiC students and their pesantren counterparts.

The first and most obvious challenge to be overcome in this dialogic milieu was the language barrier. To be sure, students may not feel that they have a great sense of control of the learning process when they are placed in this situation. But rather than seek to address this discomfort through the use of translators, SEAiC educators again practiced a measured amount of restraint in allowed for that awkwardness to be the basis for the same kind of productive dialogism that ethnographers cultivate in their participant observation. This meant allowing students to “struggle” in dialogue sessions that they would describe as “awkward,” “fidgety” and even “excruciating,” at least in the first instance.

As anthropologist Ruth Behar writes in *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996), anthropologists are no less subject to feelings of distress and anxiety in the field. However, they draw from a discipline that has a relatively robust field of discourse and discussion on how such struggles can be channeled towards productive knowledge production and insight. As Pollard (2009) notes in her interviews of several ethnographers, aspects of the fieldwork encounter which may have been regarded as discomforting difficulties – feelings of loneliness, stress, powerlessness, angst, disappointment, frustration to name but a few – became key avenues for anthropological knowledge. Some classical works that have demonstrated this are Joann Briggs’ (1970) ethnography among the Eskimo, which derived insight from her experience of ostracization and depression in the field, and Renato Rosaldo’s (1989) work, which conveyed many important things about grief and rage among Filipino Ilongots from his own experience of loss from the sudden accidental death of his wife while on fieldwork. These ways in which these anthropologists dealt with the predicament of the field were the inspiration for cultivating those “awkward” student encounters into meaningful, cross-cultural knowledge pathways.

In SEAiC, the pedagogical value of difficulty and discomfort was put into practice through exercises of dialogical mutual language reinforcement where students communicate by teaching each other simple phrases, thus fulfilling roles of mutual knowledge-providers. While perfect communication was not always possible under these circumstances, it was, in fact, the mutual efforts to circumvent the language gaps – the “struggle,” as it were – that often resulted in the dialogic connections that proved pedagogically fruitful. One female student described the experience of meeting with the students of the pesantren:

This visit [to the pesantren] made a great impression on me. I had the opportunity to talk to some girls who unfortunately were limited in speaking English our last whole day in Indonesia. However, we managed to speak about simple things regarding their lives. While sitting there with them both parties being equally embarrassed by the difficulty in communicating, I got the feeling that they as much as I felt excited. They must have thought of me as unfamiliar and foreign as I perceived them. Furthermore they must have thought of my life as mysterious like I thought theirs to be. However, having sat there with them with bare feet and wearing my scarf as a veil I felt their belief being strong.

From this encounter, it can be seen that, in the absence of linguistic proficiency, the dialogic struggle was conducted on the basis of the “feeling” of mutual empathy. It was particularly interesting too that the SEAiC student focused on the visceral experience of “having sat there with them with bare feet.” Given the limited capacity of language, both students were made more sensitive to themselves as intersubjects, capable of feeling

“equally embarrassed,” reflecting on the mutually “mysterious” nature of their impressions of the other. In this way, transformational learning could occur by cultivating a relationship that resembled how the anthropologist Bielo characterized the ethnographic encounter as “seeking, cultivating, damaging, losing, restoring, remembering, and celebrating relationships” (Bielo, 2013, p. 2).

One outcome that was engendered in these dialogic struggles was to facilitate learning through a sense of empathic identification. An American student responded in this way upon encountering fellow students at the *pesantren*:

As in our other encounters with Islam, I detected some familiarity in elements of boarding school life. High schools that teach both religious and secular subjects cannot differ so greatly, whether they teach Islam in Indonesia or Judaism in Connecticut ... I could sense a similarity to my own religion Here, the side of Indonesia that I felt connected to merged with the modern reality I had been struggling to comprehend.

The very idea of a *pesantren* was previously associated with “terrorist training” in the pre-trip exercises. The dialogical struggle had helped to effectively humanize Islam through the student’s unstructured, intersubjective encounter with “real people.” In this process of empathizing with those at the *pesantren*, the student was able to utilize her intuitive knowledge of Hebrew high schools as a template towards a more nuanced understanding of Islamic institutions. This intersubjectivity made it possible for her knowledge of “home” to condition her experience of what was once thought of as “dangerous.” In the dialogic space constructed by the program leaders, stereotypes and media constructions of Islam became seen as cultural and social artifacts open to reconstitution and reevaluation.⁵

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that our capacity to realize transformative learning outcomes can be enhanced by an attentiveness to the affinity between the empirical and ethical dilemmas faced by ethnographers, who work to create rapport between researcher and subject, and educators, who seek to cultivate a conducive learning environment “beyond the classroom walls” (Gordon, 2002). The empirical and pedagogical challenges faced by educators and anthropologists alike are, as I have shown, particularly acute when there are significant knowledge deficits about religious topics. To address this, I have argued that there is great educational value in the ways anthropologists have operationalized their discipline’s critical turn in two particular ways. First, the methodological primacy anthropologists have placed on ethnographic self-reflexivity is indicative of a growing awareness of how the upbringing, cultural capital, feelings, emotions and positionality of an inquisitor can affect how they observe and what they write about other people. Through the example of stereotype self-inventory in the SEAiC program, I have argued for a mode of uncomfortable self-inventory, one that is aware of the limits of reflexivity, in order to expand the student’s field of observation.

Second, I have shown how curricular programs that seek to harness the pedagogical utility of discomfiting experience can be effective when facilitated as an immersive and dialogical encounter. I have used the example of the struggle posed by language barriers between students as an opportunity to foster a productive relationship between

“intersubjects” who, through their mutual attempts to communicate, are able to draw pedagogical value from inter-personal empathy across linguistic, religious and cultural divides.

The foundation of cultivating these two experiential domains – both of which are based on harnessing how anthropologists have channeled the transformative potential of discomfort – involves a deliberate adjustment in the way teachers interact with an increasingly diverse array of students in their classes. This entails, as the anthropologist Lave (1996) has argued, a move away from a pedagogy of individual cognition towards one that participates in communities of intersubjective practice.

Initiatives such as transnational, cross-border and borderless classes are becoming increasingly common curricular features, particularly in universities that seek to “internationalize” its institutional profile. Internationalization has come to mean the facilitation of an intercultural and multicultural dimension into the university’s teaching, research and service functions, not least because these aspects are now increasingly used as bases on which universities are competitively “ranked.” The objective of preparing students for learning anywhere in the world, developing cross-cultural competencies and global employability skills are often stated as ideal graduate attributes. As such, there is a growing demand for the kind of teaching deployed in EL programs, which help in fostering the ethical competencies needed for students to confront an increasingly global marketplace of ideas.

Notes

1. The South-East Asia in Context Summer Program was run at the National University of Singapore where I was a faculty member from 2005 to 2014. As program coordinator, I oversaw a cohort ranging from 20 to 50 students per year from partner universities in the USA, Australia, Europe, East Asia and South-East Asia.
2. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, there has been a vibrant discussion on what reflexivity is and how it should actually be practiced in the pursuit of ethnographic insight. On one end of the spectrum, reflexivity is understood as a critical awareness of the epistemological conditions under which the research was conducted, by whom, and what impact the author’s personal experience might have on the work that is produced. On the other end of the spectrum, reflexivity has been taken to imply a radically introspective approach to ethnographic data, one premised upon, and resulting in, a navel-gazing “auto-ethnography.” In this paper, I argue that pedagogical benefit can be derived by utilizing elements from both ideas of reflexivity.
3. Student journal reflection pieces were part of assessment requirements for the SEAiC program and were not solicited for the specific purpose of this article. The names of students have been either changed or omitted entirely. Parts of the data also appear in Bautista (2014).
4. Lassiter (2005) identifies a number of important anthropological works which were representative of an ethic of dialogism as part and parcel of the ethnographic process including: Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture* (1986), Marcus and Fischer’s *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* (1998), Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth* (1989), Crapanzano’s *Tuhami* (1980) and Briggs’s *Never in Anger* (1970).
5. The overall impact of these pedagogical strategies can be more fully evaluated by considering the corresponding responses of the Indonesian students in the *pesantren*. It is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to provide a full account of this since there was no opportunity to involve the *pesantren* students in both the pre-trip sessions and the post-trip de-briefing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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