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Student Kinship as a student motivator

(based on a paper given at the AAA Annual Meeting in 1985)

KINSHIP is not everyone's favorite topic in Anthropology. In fact, it is hardly anyone's favorite topic, particularly at an introductory level. Most instructors with whom I've talked spend as little time as possible on kinship. Some even skip it altogether assuming those who go on will get a stronger dose later if they really need it. This may reflect the de-emphasis of the importance of kinship as a major organizing structure in the United States. This may also reflect these instructors' cultural bias.

Not only are most instructors not enthused about kinship but most introductory textbooks do not build enthusiasm with their diagrams. The diagrams used in most texts are cold abstractions designed to show the particularities of certain peoples or kin processes. They are difficult to comprehend and have little initial relevance to students in our society. (A chart that illustrated Elizabeth Taylor's serial monogamy might prove more relevant, or at least more interesting, in a country where Dallas and Dynasty were so popular.)

In my teaching I see that students who have some corpus of experiential data are better able to handle conceptual constructs. I try to have students do something anthropological to gain some sense of the anthropological experience. It is my understanding that various learning theorists hold that most proportion to the experience gained. In other words, if you really want to teach something to someone, the best way is to devise ways to have them do it.

In introductory cultural classes I've tried mini-ethnographies, role playing, term papers, group projects and movie reviews. All seem to have value but have taken a great deal of time to teach the process and skills. I'm still having students do movie/video observation notes as a field note exercise as well as to combat the "T.V - turn off" syndrome. In the process of reviewing and redoing the course a few years ago, I considered kinship. Kinship was always enjoyable to me, because of the excellent way the topic was presented to me by Dr. William Davis at U.C Davis.

The primary obvious advantage about kinship is that almost everyone has it. This kinship experience can be utilized in the student's understanding of the concept. Relatively few students have ever thought about kinship. It is like grammar; whatever is there, is internalized, not overt. And, if you can ignore (at least initially) all the structural implications of lineages, clans, and phratry, kinship notation is a comparatively easy concept for the students to grasp by using their own particularizing data. Flexibility about symbols needs to be maintained as we have

“relationships” in our society that need notation but are not frequently found, or admitted, in other more commonly studied cultures. If such a situation arises in my classes the students are told to make up their own symbols. (Latest examples were a Valentine shaped heart symbol for a significant = other relationship and ≠ for a past relationship.) Kinship notation is presented then not as some magical system but as a system devised by people to illustrate real and specific human experiences. The student anthropologist is therefore able to devise specific notation as appropriate and needed.

Another big advantage is that most families of students like exploring the subject. The students frequently get much positive reinforcement, not only from their own immediate family but also from the extended family. Anthropology is seen as something relevant and a little closer to home than Samoa.

The structure and timing of this exercise is critical. The students need to get invested in the process during the 1st or 2nd meeting of the class, before their minds get corrupted with heavy concepts such as culture or kinship. Then, later in the semester, a more elaborate second project involving their families is required.

STEP ONE -

In the 1st week of class, I pass out blank sheets of white paper (usually legal size), go over the basic symbols, and then have them do their own kinship in class to the extent they remember. It takes about 15–20 minutes to go over the basic symbols as well as some symbols we have made up over the years; A–adopted; T; twins, etc. Each student starts this exercise by turning the legal size paper on the side and beginning with themselves near the center bottom and adding brothers and sisters, then parents, etc., as appropriate. Additional sheets of paper and tape are available, if necessary. I usually have pencils available so initial errors can be easily corrected. While the students are busy doing this, I move around the room and answer questions for individual students. Anthropology is immediately seen as something students can do, whether they are A or D students. The exercise is turned in to be checked off for points, but not graded. The exercise is worth 35 pts out of a 700 – 800 pt total for the course. This creates a small but immediate investment for those students who worry about such things. By the next week I have gone over each student's exercise, indicating areas of needed improvement. The most common errors, as you can probably guess, are horizontal and vertical spacing; keeping the generation gaps clear and comparable; lack of appropriate symbols; etc. The student is told to keep the exercise as it will be part of a second exercise later in the semester. I discuss the results of the assignment with the class on its return. One of the immediate discoveries from classroom discussion is that there is frequently a difference between how much men and women know about their kin. Also usually noted, is that the charts of ethnic minorities are more extensive than those of white Anglo Saxon Protestants. And we can begin to speculate as to the cultural norms that create this difference.

STEP TWO –

The second exercise is to have the student contact one or more family elders, on one or both sides of the family, to elicit and notate what the elders know of the family kinship. They are limited to obtaining oral data only – no previously done genealogies, or family bibles are to be used. This newly collected “field” data is added (in a different color) to the students original personally known data to correct and almost always extends their chart.

The due date for this exercise is scheduled late in the semester. The semester system works well for this exercise because there is always a “family” type holiday; either Easter, (now called spring break in most areas) or Thanksgiving. This usually makes it possible for direct student/family elder(s) access. Other students have time to phone or write if direct contact is not possible. By this point in the semester, I have discussed lineages, clans, etc. and we have practiced various exercises allowing exposure to a clear notation system model.

The total kin data known previously, and that gathered from the family elders, are then put in proper kinship format, paying attention to generational spacing and other notation detail. In addition, the student is to indicate in one color what they knew originally (and attaches original assignment) and show in another color what they have learned. Some use different colors for different informants. Any new notation symbols must be identified. The exercise can be handed in early for checking. Corrections can be made and the exercise re-submitted. Competency is stressed over testing. Size of chart or how it is drawn is not critical, as long as it is clearly understandable. This exercise counts 75 pts. With the first one for 35 pts, the total points allocated for kinship is about 100 points out of 700–800 pts total for the course. When these graded and corrected charts are returned, another more detailed discussion takes place of various concepts exemplified within the class.

What is achieved? Much that an anthropology professor would hope to have their students experience and accomplish:

- 1) Students use ethnographic techniques and notation and see the possibility of anthropological innovation and invention;
- 2) Students gain practical knowledge about kinship notation and process that is of personal interest and illuminates the theoretical models;
- 3) Students use self generated data;
- 4) Students see kinship as an important, basic, pan-human attribute and see themselves as part of that common humanity;
- 5) Students hear family folklore –(it is almost impossible to do kinship without hearing stories about their family) and develop an understanding of the richness and variation of truth in oral tradition;

- 6) Students frequently learn about some one famous or notorious in their family – usually at some distance in time and space. That data can be used to talk about lineage formation or totem significance in other cultures;
- 7) Students can (with some help) see differences in kin extension and how it is of different importance between generations and sexes in their own families;
- 8) Students are able to see from classroom discussions that there are differences in kin extensions between ethnic subgroups as well;
- 9) Students see that the family, however it varies from the ideal in American culture, is a very important structural component in the United States, as well as among the Yanamamo;
- 10) Students, especially in the fall semesters, are able to use a form of the final exercise as family gifts for the holidays.
- 11) Students are, I believe, better able to handle concepts that are basic to anthropology. The experience of doing this process makes other concepts more accessible; and,
- 12) Cultural anthropology is perceived as relevant and positive by the students and their families who, at least in the California Community Colleges, may influence other family members to take Cultural Anthropology in future semesters.