

On Enthusiastically Teaching the Relevance of Cross-Cultural Literacy

HARALD E L PRINS
KANSAS STATE U

Relecting on my wanderings since leaving my old village in the northern Netherlands, I recognize how my own lived experiences offer a window on my teaching philosophy and practice. That history—my story—reveals how closely intertwined this is to my ethnographic fieldwork, a lifelong fascination with indigenous peoples, commitment to human rights advocacy and involvement in visual media. These are spokes in the wheel of a career in which contingency has always played a greater role than original design—intelligent or otherwise.



Harald E L Prins

In America's Conservative Heartland

When joining the undergraduate program at Kansas State University some 16 years ago, I moved into the conservative American heartland. I welcomed the challenge of teaching cultural anthropology at a large public university on the edge of the expanding Bible belt, as it provided me with an audience that could benefit from the important insights of anthropology.

However, my first semester almost ended in failure. There were about 400 students enrolled in my large introductory course in cultural anthropology. Most of them came from small rural towns in Kansas and surrounding states and few had ever listened to a long-haired and bearded professor with a Dutch accent. But they were not so much irritated as completely bored. Many yawned openly and repeatedly, and some just fell asleep. It did not help that this class started at 8:30 in the morning. Obviously, I was wasting their time and mine. At my weekly meetings with the ten TA's assigned to me, I asked these anthropology seniors why most students in

my large class actually took this introductory course. They told me that more than 90 percent were enrolled simply because it was a requirement, had a leftover reputation of being easy, and would be the only course they'd ever take in anthropology.

Since a challenge can become an opportunity for creative exploration, I realized that I had to critically rethink my approach to teaching introductory students in order to capture their attention. This made me reflect on the essence in our discipline and its potential contribution to enlightening humanity. So I began to take fresh stock of what anthropology has to offer as a cross-cultural guide, redesigned the course, and adjusted my teaching style. My background in documentary film helped me in carefully selecting relevant ethnographic film clips and more recently in developing visually-compelling PowerPoint presentations.

I also realized that I needed to underscore the relevance of anthropology for my students. Here my own ongoing involvement in native (and human) rights issues and various other public concerns plays a major role as it shows how scholarly knowledge can and does make a difference in the real world. For students, my active involvement with the complex world outside the ivory towers is perhaps my major asset. Certainly, I bring that world into my classroom, talking about it and *showing* it.

COMMENTARY

In an Age of Globalization

As mentioned earlier, many students come from conservative and ethnically homogeneous rural towns and have seldom ventured outside the Midwest, let alone abroad. However, there is also a very large army base near our campus and substantial numbers of our students are military. In addition, our university has a ROTC training program. Especially in recent years, many of my students and even some teaching assistants have served or will

soon be in combat operations overseas. Confronted with today's bewildering cultural diversity and change, all my students must constructively deal with the challenges hurled at them.

Now that globalization is reaching even the most remote corners of the world, fundamental lessons of anthropology are no longer exotic luxury for our students but necessity. With its holistic perspective and commitment to documenting and analyzing different ways of life, past and present, anthropology is uniquely equipped to prepare our students to more realistically appreciate and effectively meet the challenges of our rapidly changing cultural realities.

Good teaching is not only about informational content or technique, but also about credibility and enthusiasm—perhaps even passion. My students respond to that intense emotional drive to pass on knowledge, a drive fueled by my conviction that anthropology is not only inherently fascinating but also very relevant and crucially significant in our modern world.

To get that knowledge across, I have developed several important concepts, including the "barrel model" of culture as a structured and dynamic system of adaptation, the "shamanic complex," and many other pedagogical devices. Much of that knowledge is now also translated into the textbook *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge* (co-authored with William A Haviland, Dana Walrath and Bunny McBride).

In my lectures and in this book, I emphasize that cross-cultural literacy is essential for professional success, as well as for personal wellbeing—and the wellbeing of the world. I prod students to be critically aware of cultural blinders so they can better recognize and challenge ethnocentrism and awake to alternative views on the human condition. ■

Harald E L Prins (New School PhD 1988) is a University Distinguished Professor who served as president of the Society of Visual Anthropology. His many publications include The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival.