Introduction and Objectives

- There is broad agreement in anthropology that positionality is a key concept to understanding the importance of context for the validity of knowledge claims.
- Positionality foregrounds the limitations that one’s own history plays in knowing and understanding the world.
- Rather than finding, testing, and verifying a final answer, this project’s focus has been upon creating teaching methods to promote students’ understanding of positionality and the implications for any kind of knowledge/information production.
- Questions addressed in this project:
  - How can instructors (of Anthropology) promote understanding of (self-) reflexivity?
  - How do course participants understand the role of positionality in formulating and engaging with arguments?
  - How do course participants understand the larger implications of positionality for knowledge/information production?

Methods

- In the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semester I taught a writing-intensive First-year seminar “Culture, representation and power”.
- Data for this project collected during the spring semester only.
- Teaching materials adjusted and developed after informal student feedback in the fall semester.
- 16 students enrolled in seminar (female = 11, male = 5)
  - Two international and four students from family backgrounds other than white.
  - Students came mostly from Colleges of Engineering, Arts & Sciences, CALS.
- No student had any prior knowledge in Anthropology.
- Materials considered in assessing students’ learning: in- and out-class writing, classroom discussions, students’ self-assessment, survey responses, pre and post course responses to a question.

Out-class writing assignments: Example

- Students had to write a total of six writing assignments during the semester.
- Assignments build on each other and increasingly asked students to work more independently: assignment one was a critical analysis of an article (recognizing an argument), assignment four was based on ethnographic research (turning observations into an argument) and assignment six asked students to choose their own source materials for analysis (choosing source material and formulating an argument).
- Assignment 3 asked students to write a letter to the director of the campaign “Kony 2012” analyzing the underlying assumptions of the campaign film.
- In-class discussion focused on analysis of humanitarian campaigns and the construction of difference and hierarchies in these campaigns.
- In addition, students watched a spoof video that upset hierarchies of donor and recipient.

In-class exercises: Examples

- Topic: cultural appropriations exemplified by Indian Mascot debate.
- Assigned article argued that debates around Indian mascots cannot be understood outside genocidal, historical relationships and strives for power and domination.
- At the beginning of class students needed to write a paragraph that summarized the argument of the article and needed to state the reason for their (dis-) agreement.
- During class debate students closely engaged with article.
- Encouraged students to share their opinions, but referred to article to evaluate their positions and asked other students how the author might respond:
  - One student said that “Fighting Irish” is an honor to her (she identified as part Irish) and therefore team names like redskins are honoring Indians. Other students identified responses:
    - It doesn’t matter what white people think, it’s up to the respective tribes to decide whether it’s an honor to them.
    - Hanging on to Indian mascots is a way of furthering domination over tribal populations.
- In addition, I showed video clip about Redskin debate and images about similar appropriations that students found unacceptable (e.g. blackface).
- Overall students recognized problems related to cultural appropriations (end of class time written responses):
  - I didn’t realize how truly uncomfortable tribal name and logo usage made tribes felt and how negatively it is viewed by society members.

Discussion & Conclusion

- Based on the evidence from student writing, observations from class discussion and survey toward the end of the course, students seemed better able to understand the importance of positionality in writing and reading about culture.
- Students seemed to appreciate the use of ‘real life’ and contemporary examples as these help them make connections.
- Repetition of key aspects of positionality (race, gender, class, etc.) and using different materials from at least two different contexts may help students to recognize their own positionality.
- Making points explicit inside the classroom seems to help students to recognize relevant situations outside the classroom.
- It is crucial to recognize where students stand in terms of their understanding of their own privilege and/or positionality when the course starts.
- It continued to be challenging for students to engage with criticism that might implicate themselves.
- While students readily accepted the larger implications for some topics (e.g. knowledge production in anthropology), the implications for other topics remained more difficult to grasp and understand (e.g. knowledge production in natural sciences).