

## Letter Writing and Learning in Anthropology

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### Abstract

Writing has special importance in anthropology. Writing fieldnotes is a central methodology for documenting and analyzing culture, and written personal reflections upon this process are viewed as providing insight into how knowledge is produced by a “situated” researcher. That said, there is little discussion in the discipline about the use of writing as pedagogy or a tool for popularizing the discipline. This article considers how old fashion letter writing to anthropologists can strengthen students’ learning to write and analyze culture. It also indicates how writing letters popularizes the discipline. Letter writing is communication, method, tradition, and now pedagogy in anthropology. This progression of uses has relevance to teaching and learning in other disciplines.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, letter writing, pedagogy.

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In anthropology, discussions about pedagogy appear in a few texts (Rice & McCurdy 2002; Mandlebaum, Lasker, & Albert, 1963; Hofman & Rosing, 2007; Kotack, White, Furlow, & Rice, 1997) and a special theme issue in the journal *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (see volume 21). Within these publications, writing is rarely discussed as a specific strategy for teaching anthropology to undergraduates (see Segal, 1990) on journal writing for an exception). Ironically, writing is especially important to the discipline. Writing fieldnotes is a central methodology for documenting and analyzing culture. And written personal reflections upon this process are viewed as providing insight into how knowledge is produced by a “situated” researcher (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Harstock 1987; Sanjek, 1990). Why, then, do anthropologists have little to say about pedagogy in general and writing pedagogy in particular? This paper seeks to fill this gap by describing an assignment that uses writing as a means to teach students about anthropology as well as strengthen undergraduate composition skills. The assignment is called, “My Dear Anthropologist,” and it involves guiding students as they write formal letters to the authors of well-known ethnographies in anthropology.

In the pages below I describe the details of the writing assignment and lessons learned about anthropology and writing. I provide excerpts from students’ and anthropologists’ letters to illustrate my points. In my view, the project’s power lies in the connections it fosters between students and anthropologists. Considering the misperceptions that the general public holds of anthropologists—they are all like Indiana Jones or esoteric and difficult to relate to—capitalizing on the connections is a means for popularizing the dis-

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cipline. In addition, letter writing gives students an opportunity to improve their writing skills. It helps to develop awareness of audience, purpose, and the notion that writing is a process among other skills. Often, instructors in the social sciences assume that teaching these lessons is the responsibility of composition instructors. However, these are core writing skills that students practice across the disciplines (and in emailing and tweeting as well); therefore, it is the responsibility of all instructors to provide students with opportunities to practice and enhance their ability to write. “Old-fashion” letter writing is one means to help students reach this goal.

### **Letter Writing in Anthropology**

Before describing the project, I outline the special place that letter writing holds in anthropology. In earlier days, letter writing was a tool for analyzing culture. Margaret Mead, for example, often recorded and analyzed her data in letters to her family and friends (Mead, 1977). Letter writing gave her an opportunity to reflect on and theorize her observations. For Mead, letter writing was part of her methodology.

Brownislaw Malinowski made his student, Camilla Wedgwood, write to him from the field. This was his way of ensuring that “headnotes” were converted into fieldnotes (Sanjeck, 1990, p. 111-112). For Malinowski, letter writing was a tool for teaching the novice anthropologist how to do fieldwork.

Letter writing was also one of Margaret Mead’s many strategies for disseminating anthropological knowledge. While in the field, she would type letters to her family on multiple sheets of carbon paper. Her mother would then retype her copy on a set of carbons and send them off to a broader circle of family and friends. In effect, one letter from Mead would be read by seventy to eighty people (Mead, 1977, p. 8-10; Sanjeck, 1990, p. 112). On the one hand, this strategy kept Mead in touch with a large group of friends and family. On the other hand, it was a means for Mead to share her knowledge and to test her ideas before engaging a broader American public in a dialog about culture and why it matters.

Today, letter writing plays a different role in the profession. With the rise of the Internet, there is hardly any need for researchers to hand-write letters from the field. Nonetheless, some do. For example, while I was doing dissertation research in a highly networked city in West Africa, a peer researcher proudly told me that she received a hand-written letter from her mentor in the U.S. On one occasion she showed me the letter from her mentor. Actually, she flashed it at me so I couldn’t read it. It was in a plastic sleeve and had been stored in a three ringed binder as if it were an archival document. In this moment, it occurred to me that this letter was more than a piece of correspondence, or even a tool for enhancing note-taking. It was a trophy or seal of approval that symbolized a beginning anthropologist’s legitimate entry into the profession. This story shows that letter writing is not at all a dying cultural form. In anthropology, it is part of an on-going tradition that some practice in the name of reproducing culture in the discipline. In this light, it is a cultural practice that is constantly being redefined.

Given the interesting history of letter writing in anthropology, it is therefore surprising that letter writing doesn't play a more prominent role in ordinary anthropology courses, especially those for undergraduates. Does its omission from undergraduate courses suggest that letter writing is a tool and cultural symbol reserved for the elite in anthropology? If not, how can letter writing be more broadly used in undergraduate anthropology courses for pedagogical purposes?

To be fair, some anthropologists are experimenting with letter writing as pedagogy in anthropology. Robert Borofsky's (2008) work with the Public Anthropology's Community Action website is one example (<https://www.publicanthropology.net>). At this website, classes of students post letters that they have written to government agencies, museums, and NGOs regarding exploitation of the Yanomami. Classes of students at other universities are assigned the task of reading and evaluating the letters according to a particular rubric. The highest scoring letters win awards of recognition. The peer review process prompts students to develop an awareness of how they sound on paper. It also motivates a deeper engagement with the problems of the Yanomami. In this sense, the Public Anthropology Community Action website represents a shift in the power relations of teaching and learning. Through the Public Anthropology Community Action website, students teach and learn from one another.

According to the undergraduates who participated in Borofsky's web-project at my university, writing and posting letters to the site was definitely a rewarding learning experience. Students enjoyed learning about the Yanomami, and they appreciated the opportunity to write a letter for an academic assignment instead of the traditional expository essay. Most of the students found it interesting to read others' letters, too. Some said they felt empowered by the opportunity to assess and evaluate peers' letters. Others were engaged by the notion of advocating for the rights of a cultural group in need of recognition and protection.

A few participants, however, did not enjoy the project as much as they expected. While they enjoyed receiving feedback from peers at other universities, they saw writing letters to an imaginary government official as an academic exercise more so than social action that helped the Yanomami. They had hoped for more direct contact with government agencies, students at other universities, and the Yanomami. Thus, in their view, the project had limited real-world reach.

### **“My Dear Anthropologist”**

Over the past couple of years I have been experimenting with a different approach to using letter writing with undergraduates<sup>2</sup>. My approach does not get students writing to government officials on the behalf of exploited cultural groups. It does, however, give students an insiders' view of the discipline, which generally gets them excited to learn more. It also provides students with an authentic writing experience which generally prompts students to care more about the quality of their writing.

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<sup>2</sup> I have primarily used letter writing pedagogy with students in introductory course, although I have also practiced it in 300 and 400 level courses.

Before including the assignment in my course syllabus, I make sure that authors are willing to respond to students' letters before the end of the semester. Most of the time authors write a one or two page letter to the entire class. In the body of the letter they address overarching comments and reference a few students' comments. I have had one author take a more personal approach. He addresses at least one comment or question from every student, and uses headings in the body of his letters to organize his responses. For example, his letters have headings such as, "Jessica, Robert, Rebecca: How Fieldwork Changed Me" and "Steve: Am I Still in Touch with My Informants?" Students are thrilled to see their names and questions highlighted in his letters.

In terms of guidelines for students, I ask that letters highlight their understanding of the book, reactions, and questions about issues that remain unresolved by the ethnography. In class, I review professional letter writing protocol such as appropriate greetings, closings, tone and formatting. Most students have been taught these skills in other courses, but it is good to remind everyone what readers generally expect from a formal letter. I teach at an urban university with students who come from many different cultural backgrounds, so I use discussions on letter writing protocol as an opportunity to teach about letter writing practices around the world. Students find it interesting to learn from Japanese classmates, for instance, that it is important to mention the weather and season in the greeting of a letter. Middle Eastern students share how it is common to use dramatic and emotional phrasings, and how long letters are seen as a sign of building relationships. These practices stand in contrast to the American approach where letters are expected to be cast in neutral language that gets to the point right away. Comparing notes on the cultural differences in writing formal letters gives students some insight into other cultures while clarifying the expectations and norms for this assignment.

I also use letter writing to convey the belief that writing is a process that entails revision. Like the Public Anthropology Community Action website, I have students critique each others' letters. But they do this in small groups in class where they can see and hear each other. This is very important because there is a difference between reading one's writing aloud to oneself and reading it to an audience. Allowing students to experience this is more powerful than lecturing about it, and the letters are short enough to be read in class without using too much time.

After students weigh in on each others' letters I provide a final round of editing. During this process I am very aware of the cultural dimensions of letter writing. For example, anthropologists show how missionaries and colonial administrators reshaped and muted expressions by introducing letter writing to the "natives" (Bensier, 1995). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, instructing students in the art of letter writing was a utilitarian means of disseminating the principles of Christian morality, definitions of the proper citizen, and other prevailing cultural norms of the time (Schultz, 2000). These works make me ask if editing the students work alters and silences their expressions. Does the whole letter writing exercise colonize their minds by boxing them into a particular linguistic format? Does it liberate by providing a non-academic approach to the critical analysis of a text? I share these questions with students and get them engaged in a conversation about the power of writing, genres, and the power that individuals bring to their own

writing process. I have found that this kind of discussion enables many to realize how anthropology can be useful for understanding one's own experience as a student learning to write and as one developing competencies in other areas of study.

### **Anthropological Discoveries**

The letter exchange conveys a number of important lessons about anthropology which gets students' interested in the discipline. Students learn that anthropologists are, in fact, "real" and human. They find out that anthropologists have emotional lives and make mistakes like ordinary human beings and therefore the discipline cannot be too far out of reach. One class discovered the human side of anthropology when a student asked in her letter, "If you could do your fieldwork over again, what would you change? The class was expecting to learn about methodological choices. Instead the anthropologist replied,

Good, hard question. Maybe I shouldn't even tell you this, but I will tell you that there's one thing that I still regret to this day: Letting one of my godsons give me money for a tape player that I gave him. I should have just given the tape player to him as a straight gift. To this day, I'm deeply embarrassed that I accepted money for the tape player. What was I thinking?!!!

Well, to recapture my thinking at the time, I had already given him many things, and with that tape player, in particular, I felt like I was being manipulated a bit—like he was forcing me to give it to him. This all sounds terrible, but I think many anthropologists who work in these conditions, with people with little resources, have to turn down some requests, and then they usually end up feeling guilty for doing that (or manipulated). In retrospect, I still think I was being manipulated, and it's true I was on a limited student budget at the time, but I just wish I'd given him the tape player as a gift. It's a small thing, but it's what hurts the most when I look back in hindsight.

Students were shocked by this anthropologist's response. First, they could not believe that an authoritative scholar would care to share such a personal story with them. Next, they were impressed by the level of honest emotion in the anthropologist's reply. They could fully empathize with his sense of embarrassment and regret. The opportunity to hear about this anthropologist's experience and to empathize with him created a rich "teachable moment." The story got students talking about what they would have done in this situation and about similar experiences of compromised ethics in their own lives. This led them to discuss the economic status of the community that the anthropologist studied, the community's social marginalization and their particular worldview of material goods. In short, hearing an anthropologist talk about his "mistake" in such personal terms gave students a more humanized view of anthropologists and led students to a deeper appreciation of the discipline.

At the time, I found this discussion to be very ironic. It seemed to me that students had already learned about these lessons from reading Richard Lee's "Christmas in the Kalahari" (2006 [1969]) which we tackled in the beginning of the semester. In Lee's article, he exposes a faux pas that he commits in the field and illustrates how he deepened his knowledge of the Ju/wasi by reflecting on his "mistake". The students immensely enjoyed Lee's article, and based on their quizzes and class discussions, they grasped his main message that hidden aspects of culture are revealed to anthropologists when they make mistakes. Reading about this lesson in an academic article had meaning for students; however, learning about it in the context of a personal letter made the lesson come alive. Seeing a difference in students' responses to an article and a personal letter highlights for me the importance of the relationship between human experience and knowledge. The closer one gets to experiencing something for oneself, makes knowledge more real and powerful. Anthropologists know that—that's why they do fieldwork. Letter writing, then, is a way of getting closer to the field. As a result, students begin to value of concept of fieldwork.

A more nuanced understanding of fieldwork is yet achieved through letter writing. Students in introductory courses often have two views of it: fieldwork is stressful because the jungles are thick and the natives are restless; and, fieldwork is like a party because it involves "hanging out" with people, drinking their food and listening to their music. These superficial ideas are revised when students begin to understand how researchers situate themselves in the field, and how one's social identity becomes a dynamic of research. In a letter to a female anthropologist, a student begins to see just this. She writes,

...I have a personal question: how did you feel while doing this research? I would like to know how you felt in the male-dominated culture of the parks. In Parque Central, did you ever feel uneasy doing your fieldwork? I understand that the women in the area did not like to visit the park during the week because of the men who filled the area. Did you ever have the same feeling being in the parks? The Plaza de la Culture has a huge male influence in its design [the author describes how the park is designed so that men can watch women]. Did you ever feel as though you were being watched by the men in the park? How did this affect your research?

This student's questions reveal an elevated understanding of fieldwork. They reflect an ability to imagine how gender shapes an anthropologist's personal experience of fieldwork and at the same time provides special insights onto local cultural behaviors. This student's question to the anthropologist prompted a class discussion on how gender and other social markers such as age and race/ethnicity might play into students' potential fieldwork experiences. The discussion afforded students a deeper understanding of fieldwork as a particular approach to research and it generated interest in learning more about other anthropological research.

A deeper understanding of the ethics of writing about culture also emerges when students correspond with authors. These lessons generate interest in the discipline because they get students thinking about their own cultural histories and structures of power that have created misinterpretations of their communities. In a letter to a white, male anthropologist, a Latina student writes,

....Another interesting part was when you explained the way North Americans/Europeans applied their culture to interpreting the Salasacas culture....North Americans/Europeans assume that Salasacas are naïve because they don't know how to read or write. This assumption is quite askew because the Salasacas value literacy but not as North Americans/Europeans do; they aren't naïve. Based on this observation, how did you make sure that you weren't too relativistic or ethnocentric in your writings about the Salasacas? I think it's easy to apply one's own cultural standards to others. At the same time, it could be easy to assume not to apply aspects of one's own culture to another culture and then miss something important...

This student's writing is interesting on several levels. Ethnocentrism<sup>3</sup> and the relativistic fallacy<sup>4</sup> are concepts that are explicitly discussed in introductory courses. Thus, it is interesting to note that letter writing provides an authentic opportunity for students to practice the language of anthropology. Strengthening one's competency with terminology develops confidence for new comers to a discipline. This increases the likelihood that students will engage anthropology instead of feel mystified by it.

On another level, the student's application of ethnocentrism and the relativistic fallacy reveals a deeper engagement with the ethics of ethnography. The student might have applied these words in her letter to talk further about colonialism, state education, or images of the indigenous in popular culture. These are all themes addressed in the ethnography. However, she chooses to apply the terms to explore the author's ethics. Her question, "How did you make sure that you weren't too relativistic or ethnocentric in your writing?," challenges the power of an accomplished anthropologist. Given the student's cultural background as a Latina, second generation immigrant, and working class youth, her comments underscore how letter writing goes beyond conveying lessons about anthropological concepts and the ethics of research. It gives students a means to interrogate the production of anthropological knowledge and to critically engage the discipline. Writing from this empowered position motivates students to want to know more about what anthropologists do and what they have to say, especially when the subject of ethnographies relate to their own cultural backgrounds.

Overall, I have found that the letter exchange gets students interested in anthropology because it validates their legitimacy as participants in an academic community, and makes

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<sup>3</sup> The tendency to judge the beliefs and behaviors of other cultures from the perspective of one's own culture (Robbins, 2001, p. 276).

<sup>4</sup> The mistaken idea that it is impossible to make moral judgments about the beliefs and behaviors of members of other cultures (Robbins, 2001, p. 278)

them feel welcomed in the discipline. I have found that often students do not feel that their questions and experiences are taken seriously despite the supportiveness of many caring colleagues. As a result of feeling out of place, some do not ask questions and hesitate to invest much effort into their work. This perception of being in the margins is revealed when a letter from an anthropologist is read in class. Students express surprise that an author took the time to write back (even though I assure students that the author will reply). On one occasion a student announced, "Had I known that my letter would get so much attention, I would have put even more effort into it!" This kind of comment reminds me that many students do not feel they are legitimate members of an academic community. When they find that their letters are considered important, however, they become more interested in their studies and are more willing to put time and effort into their work.

This brings me to an important point about popularizing anthropology through letter writing. I hadn't anticipated that the letter exchange would provide much for the corresponding anthropologist. One participant pointed out, however, that the letters help anthropologists to understand how their writing is received by the public. The author wrote in his letter to one of my classes,

"I feel incredibly lucky to be able to read these letters, to learn in detail about the various ways you have responded to my book. This is a special experience. My sense is that many academic authors never really know what readers are making of their books, outside of a small circle of reviewers and colleagues. I remember once, for example, asking the author of a theory book in anthropology what the response to the book had been, and he said, 'You know, there really never was any response.' How sad! This limited response might seem like par for the course in academics, but after spending 10 or 15 years working on a book, I think it has to be disappointing, even to the toughest soul."

In anthropology, some argue that anthropologists are not consulted in important debates on developing social trends because their writing is arid and esoteric; anthropologists do not effectively communicate with the public (Eriksen 2005). At least one author's experience with the letter writing project suggests that hearing from students is helpful to locating a style of writing and voice that can effectively reach a broad range of readers. Perhaps greater contact with readers can help inform writing in anthropology and extend the reach of the discipline.

### **Writing Discoveries**

Students make a number of discoveries about writing through the letter exchange. First, they learn about audience. Undergraduates know that when writing a professional letter one needs to keep their reader in mind throughout. For the letter assignment students tend to interpret the concept of "audience" as avoiding the use of "street" and extremely casual language in their letters, and writing with a voice that sounds positive and respectful. This



definition of audience complicates their ability to include constructive criticism of an author's work in their letters. Some feel that any kind of criticism would be disrespectful to the author; therefore, they avoid discussing confusing points in the books. Others who seek to please authors legitimize the avoidance of constructive criticism by arguing that the book is "perfect"—there is nothing to critique. In reality, students find it difficult to strike the right tone when critiquing an author's work. In early drafts, I often observe students using blunt phrasing and strong words to talk about issues they struggled to understand in an ethnography. After a round of peer review, these paragraphs often disappear from the letters. When asked what happened to these ideas, students say that their critique was confusing so they left it out of the final draft. Thus, conveying a critique of ethnography is an area that challenges students when it comes to writing letters to authors.

Not all students struggle to critique the books they have read, however. One student finds a simple way of communicating her critique. The anthropologist's reply provides an additional lesson on audience. The student writes,

...As much as I enjoyed reading your book, I did have a tough time reading parts of it. Of course, it had to be the parts where you went into depth about the politics of the culture. I began to get confused about the ideas you were trying to express what it all meant. Chapter Five had me stumped. I was completely lost. There were so many people and groups that were talked about that I had trouble keeping up....

The anthropologist replies,

Thank you for your honesty. You're right: some parts of the book are really hard to follow! I can especially understand how Chapter Five's "comparative perspective" would not make any sense. To be honest, that section was written less for undergraduate readers and more for anthro colleagues, who want to see how my findings fit into previous research. I was citing a bunch of studies there all at once, without going into detail on what they had said, so if you didn't already know those other studies, the section didn't make sense. ...This is just one of the compromises I had to make in trying to reach both audiences, undergraduate and anthro specialists. In writing the book, I realized that this is actually very hard to do; in trying to reach both audiences, you run the risk of creating a book that doesn't satisfy anyone. I'm just glad that you didn't find the entire book opaque!

Hearing this reply made students realize that all writers struggle to consistently address their audience, and that some pieces of writing must communicate to more than one audience. It underscored for students that learning to write is an on-going process. Rather than assume that one was not born to write, one must be patient with the process and be prepared to revise.

Depending on students' questions to the anthropologist, the letter exchange affords a look behind the scenes in the world of publishing. One anthropologist shares with students some of his experiences publishing his ethnography. He writes,

“Carmen and John, for example, notice that there was touch of humor in the opening scene of my book. I'm so glad you felt that! I say this because, yes, I agree: in retrospect, it WAS a funny, bizarre scene, running away. But I've always been afraid that the way I wrote that scene didn't capture any of the humor of it. In fact, I had a bit more humor in the first draft of that scene, but I was told by some editors to cut it out; just to make it serious. Ahh, editors! I did blindly follow those editors at the time, but I've regretted it in retrospect, which is why I'm so glad that at least some of you still got a taste of that humor...”

Students were surprised to learn that the ethnography they read had been written a different way. This led them to wonder what else had been left out of the book, and who else besides editors weighed in on the author's writing. This discussion allowed students to acknowledge writing as a complex act that is both social and individualistic, and requires knowing what one wants to say and developing the tools to say it. This prompted students to revisit the notion that time and drafting are important to producing good writing.

### **Explicit and Tacit Outcomes**

A grading rubric allows me to assess a number of explicit outcomes in students' final drafts. I often use the following criteria to assess the letters<sup>5</sup>:

1. Evidence of a critical understanding of anthropological concepts in the ethnography.
2. Awareness of letter writing genre and ability to engage a reader.
3. Attention to prose, structure, organization, and development of ideas.
4. Mechanics and Editing

The letter exchange, though, helps students develop other “skills” such as a sense of the relevance of anthropology, the practice of anthropologists, the cultural meanings of letter writing, and an awareness of their own writing process and identity as an undergraduate. Evidence of these gains is salient in classroom discussions, group work, and informal conversations with students. This knowledge is tacit, however, and not always possible (or desirable) to capture in a rubric.

In closing, letter writing produces a broad range of outcomes that benefit students of anthropology and undergraduates in general. There is a lot to explore in anthropology and in composition when undertaking the assignment. The assignment goes beyond teaching “content,” however. It also benefits the discipline of anthropology by helping to change the image of the discipline, and communicating that it is an inclusive area of study. In

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<sup>5</sup> The criteria is modified to meet the particular needs and skill levels of different courses and groups of students.

this sense, letter writing is dynamic pedagogy. It allows instructors to take student learning in many directions. For this reason, it is worthwhile to explore.

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