Teaching Authenticity (Strategies in Teaching Anthropology, 2010)
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The concept of authenticity is one of the more interesting topics that can be considered in a cultural anthropology classroom. Because of its inherent connection to the subject of culture, I have found that authenticity makes for an excellent analytical platform for classroom discussions and exercises. This strategy includes three separate exercises which each focus on the cultural aspects of authenticity. You can use any combination of the three, but I recommend that you at least include part I as a foundation. If you choose to use all three, I recommend taking two class periods; two of them can be completed in one class period.

Part I: Defining Authenticity
The first step is to present the class with an overview of the concept of authenticity. Because the concept grafts onto culture very well, I recommend that you introduce these exercises in the same week in which you cover culture (Lindholm 2008). Included in the appendix are some sample definitions of ‘authentic’ and ‘authenticity’ that you can use. As well, there are references for some texts that deal with the concept of authenticity, including Ralph Linton’s famous ‘One Hundred Percent American.’ If you like, you can ask your students to read any of those selections. After you present the definitions of the term, briefly explain why cultural anthropologists are interested in the issue of authenticity. You may wish to include points like the following: (1) Culture refers to the sum of material and immaterial things and ideas that can be applied to a given people. In many ways, culture refers to a ‘real’ that can be postulated to exist in the world. Like culture, authenticity focuses on a ‘real’—something that is authentic is said to be genuine, real, and not a fake. (2) Especially in the era of consumer culture, more and more people have raised questions about the authenticity of things—ranging from a band lip-synching at a concert, to fake memoirs and autobiographies, to counterfeit and knock-off consumer products like CDs, wristwatches, and home electronics devices. (3) The issue of authenticity, like the issue of culture, is a complex one that entails in-depth understandings of culture and the self. These three areas are only a sampling of the issues that can be raised in this exercise. This exercise should take 15 minutes.

Part II: Small Groups
Following the step of defining authenticity, break your class into small groups, ranging from 3-7 students. The purpose of this exercise is to generate impromptu student discussion on what role authenticity plays in their lives. Ask your students to work on the following discussion questions: (1) Can you think of something that you do that relates to authenticity? What makes it authentic? (2) Have you ever visited another culture and thought that your experiences were authentic? What made them so? (3) Have you ever eaten something or experienced something, such as a festival or cultural event, that seemed authentic? What made it seem that way? (4) Conversely, have you ever eaten or experienced something that was the opposite—inauthentic? What characterized its lack of authenticity? Have one member of the group act as a scribe, and after all of the questions have been answered, ask the group to generate a list with two columns—one labeled ‘authentic,’ the other ‘inauthentic.’ Ask them to write as many keywords as possible to identify each of the two categories. This exercise takes between 20-30 minutes.

Part III: Field Narratives
The concept of authenticity can also be used to teach the significance of participant observation and other forms of fieldwork. This exercise involves students going out into the field and collecting first-hand observations of a food, cultural tradition or event, hobby or lifestyle interest, and object of material culture. The goal is to ask students to consider what makes something in their culture authentic. You may assign the students to conduct individual fieldwork or ask them to join groups ranging from 3-5 students. Here is the assignment that can be given to them: ‘You are a cultural anthropologist interested in the role that authenticity plays in U.S. culture. Your task is to use fieldwork methods (including any combination of participant observation, surveys and interviews) to determine how authenticity relates to one of the following cultural categories: food; cultural tradition or event; hobby or lifestyle interest; an object of material culture. As you undertake your fieldwork be sure to seek out informants who can give you feedback on what makes the issue, thing or event authentic and what would make that thing inauthentic. Collect all of your data in a notebook and be prepared to provide a summary of your ethnographic findings to the class.’

To prepare your students for the ethnographic exercise, here are some tips as far as how they might frame each possible cultural category. **Food:** Any type of food will be appropriate, whether fast food, gourmet, coffee, or even home cooking. Students may decide to research authentic pizza, perhaps going to a chain pizza place and/or a ‘mom and pop’ establishment. The students’ field inquiries should be geared at the nuances of the food, such as: How is it made? Where are the raw materials from? How long does it take to learn how to make the item? How has making the dish changed over time and has that affected the quality of the dish?

**Cultural Tradition/Cultural Event:** Depending on your local community, students may choose an ethnic festival or holiday (Cinco de mayo, for example), a local tradition (Hot August Nights, a car festival in Reno, Nevada, for example), or a religious one (a Greek wedding, for example). Again, the fieldwork should target what makes the cultural event or tradition unique, how it has changed, and how people perceive the cultural tradition as it reflects their own identity.

**Hobby/Lifestyle Interest:** There are many hobbies or lifestyle interests that can elicit fieldwork on authenticity. One example would be interviewing a maker of fine cabinets. In the interview the student ethnographer could ask about the process of cabinet making and perhaps how it contrasts with mass-produced cabinets (like those of the popular chain IKEA). Other lifestyle topics depend on the demographics of your community, but possibilities include skiing, quilting, parasailing, etc.

**Object of Material Culture:** A product can be any form of material culture—a radio, oil painting, model train, wicker basket. Like a hobby/lifestyle topic, emphasis should be placed on determining skill, history, tradition, techniques associated with the item, but since it is a form of material culture, students should focus on the material conditions of the item: how was it made, what materials were used, etc.

The field narratives will generally take one hour to complete in the field. It may be a smart idea to assign this exercise over a weekend to give your students more time to complete it. During the next class, have your students share the fieldwork assignments with the class. When they present their data to the class, let them know that any form of presentation is welcomed: poster board, photography, audio and video recordings, etc. The presentations can be livelier with such use of media and depending on the topic, you may also want students to bring in samples if possible. For example, students in the class could taste ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ pizza or they could admire a hand-made holiday ornament and contrast it with a mass-produced one. The exercise
may take between one and two hours, depending on the size of your class and the time limits that you establish for each presentation.

Appendix: Definitions of Authenticity

Authentic, adjective (Merriam-Webster), http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic

Etymology: Middle English autentik, from Anglo-French, from Late Latin authenticus, from Greek authentikos, from authentēs perpetrator, master, from aut- + -hentēs (akin to Greek anyein to accomplish, Sanskrit sanoti he gains)

Definitions: 1. (obsolete) authoritative; 2 a: worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact; b: conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features; c: made or done the same way as an original; 3. not false or imitation: real, actual; 4a. of a church mode: ranging upward from the keynote; b. of a cadence: progressing from the dominant chord to the tonic; 5: true to one's own personality, spirit, or character


Definitions: The quality of being authentic, or entitled to acceptance, 1. as being authoritative or duly authorized; 2. as being in accordance with fact, as being true in substance; 3. as being what it professes in origin or authorship, as being genuine; genuineness; 4. as being real, actual; reality.

References

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