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Stitching Together (in) Anthropology Class

On the Use of Craft Practices in Higher Education Humanities

Abstract

As an anthropologist teaching at a German-speaking Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology Department (pertaining to a Humanities Faculty), it always struck me how much we know about the role embodiment plays in and for culture and how little we make use of this in teaching. For this reason, I decided to expand established Higher Education pedagogy by putting craft (as a) practice at the centre of my newly developed course entitled DIY in Times of Crisis and Beyond. As a result, my students and I developed our thinking through and while practising embroidery in class, weaving in the mandatory readings and narrations of (pandemic) crafting experiences along the way. Borrowing from the low-threshold approach to stitching in community-based creativity projects, our shared and mostly novice stitching facilitated the articulation of thoughts-in-progress, thus creating a space in which dominant views regarding social (craft) norms, quantifiable productivity as well as academic logocentrism could be temporarily suspended, giving way to embodied wisdom.

Keywords

Anthropology, embroidery, learning, epistemology, uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

As an anthropologist teaching at a German-speaking Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology Department (pertaining to a Humanities Faculty), it had always struck me how much we know about embodiment and how little we make use of this in teaching. While the Cartesian duality of body and mind may well have been rejected intellectually and philosophically, the separation continues to be dominant in cultural, educational and social practices (Pallasmaa, 2017) – even more so in Higher Education.

In a similar vein, the philosopher and mechanic Matthew Crawford (2009) writes that “[t]he disappearance of tools from our common education is the first step toward a wider ignorance of the world of artifacts we inhabit” (p. 1). Again, this is even more the case in academia and especially in the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften* in German, which literally translates as Sciences of the Mind). While design education is already attempting to introduce “handling processes” into their pedagogy (e.g.,

Mäkelä & Löytönen, 2017, p. 244), in the humanities, we still tend to forget that tools are important to think with and through. The French anthropologist François Sigaut goes as far as to claim that it is not the human who makes tools, but tools who make the human (Sigaut, 2012, as cited in Marchand, 2022, p. 230). Why, then, not bring them back into the *humanities*?

For my course in the summer term 2023, I was going to reconcile body and mind by allowing tools into my classroom. Based on my PhD research on knitting (Arantes, 2020b, 2021) as well as my interest in the role of crafts in times of crisis (Arantes, 2020a, 2022), I developed a course entitled *DIY in Times of Crisis and Beyond*. Students and I would not only discuss crafting; we would put crafting at the heart of pedagogy. I had already been aspiring to build epistemic uncertainty into my teaching, paying tribute to my observation that thinking, and hence learning (something new), always strikes me in moments of transitions, never at my desk, never in a designated learning environment. Thinking and learning happen peripherally if we allow them to (Arantes, 2021; Hackney & Settingington, 2022). For the purpose of this course, this meant putting something else at the centre of attention: stitching together. Temporarily relegating the more intellectual realm to the peripheral, we would allow it to gain momentum while stitching away on our embroidery hoops.

CRAFTING UNCERTAINTY

The workshop format seemed most suitable as organisational and pedagogical framework for the course, as it offers a “holding form” (Pahl, Steadman-Jones & Pool, 2013, p. 85) to allow our thoughts to emerge and let ideas get hold of us. As such, this format makes clear “that the ‘knowledge’ flow is not didactic or one way” and that there is “an element of transformation [involved]: of materials, of ideas or of people” (Graham et al., 2015, pp. 404–405). For this reason, the workshop sessions were conceptualised as *crafting circles*, embroidery being the central activity which was flanked by comments referring to readings, experiences and observations associated with the readings, to remarks stemming from our own (simultaneous) practical engagement, etc.

Each student was required to choose one of two suggested readings per week and was asked to read it, mark it and appropriate it. All in all, two texts ended up being read in preparation for each unit and their contents found their way into our thinking and debating. After each unit, students were required to write a reflection, paying attention to the reading as well as to the goings-on and experiences during the unit, indicating in which ways their idea of craft itself and its role in class had shifted.

In order to make this course as accessible as possible to students, I provided the canvas, the threads and the needles myself. Some of them, the thinner ones, date back to my youth when making friendship bracelets was popular, while the thicker ones were given to me by my aunt whose eyesight is deteriorating, which is why she gave up Hardanger embroidery. The only thing students were required to provide themselves were the hoops.



FIGURE 1. Evolution of the unicorn embroidery. (Regrettably, photos of the early stages were of bad image quality. Photos: © Veronika Steurer).

I opted for embroidery because of its technical simplicity. According to Settingington (2018), a professional embroidery-based practitioner and lecturer, embroidery is an appropriate technique for communal creativity as “it does not require complex prior knowledge and is open to all, young and old, experienced and novice ..., it is accessible and seemingly non-threatening” (p. 22). Even stitching around and about ‘blindly’, some *thing* would come out eventually, students and I agreed. This “freedom from fixed definitions” (Settingington, 2018, p. 17) of what counts as good embroidery helped lower pre-existing expectations towards crafting (and made it easier for me not to take on the role of a textile didact). Freeing us from these fixed ideas also freed us from fixed notions of ‘good academic thoughts’, which made us more open to freely articulating emerging thoughts without censoring them due to potential ‘half-bakedness’. In terms of motif, most students did indeed stitch away without following any patterns. Only one of them had a particular design in mind: a unicorn, which her daughter had ‘ordered’ from her (see Figure 1).

Drawing on Hackney and Settingington (2022), I had designed a rough tempo-spatial framework for the two-hour workshop sessions:

- 15 mins: arrival, informal talk
- 30 mins: getting into stitching, figuring out how to continue where one had left off (potentially without much chatter as concentration is required)
- 45-60 mins: *thinking through stitching* = weaving in elements of the readings into an emerging, mostly student-led conversation
- 15-30 mins: fade out, note-taking, picture-taking (in silence?)

It turned out that the formulation of this schedule was only important for myself so that I could fall back on a rudimentary form of structure (and security over the rather unplannable outcome of the workshop). As I had decided against using the lecture room as venue, holding these sessions on the cosy sofa in my office instead, we felt comfortable (enough to stitch) very quickly. Right in the first session, my six (all female-identifying) students took matters into their own hands, stitching away with their marked readings ready from the start, weaving in their comments whenever suitable, pulling out their notebooks whenever needed in order to jot down a few thoughts, and kept going until the very end of the two full hours (see Figure 2). Similar to Hackney and Settingington (2022) as well as Buchczyk (2019), we observed that critical-reflexive thinking made its way into the room almost naturally; it claimed space without having to work hard for it. It simply emerged. The few moments of complete silence over the course of the semester, which we graciously managed to sustain without feeling the instant need to fill them with words, were nonetheless dense in meaning, which was also recognised and commented upon in the subsequent student reflections.

As anthropologists employing ethnographic research methods, this communal stitching, talking, observing or even being-completely-silent not only allowed participants to slip into the bodies of actors but also of observers and those to be observed. An oscillation between stitching, the observation of oneself and that of fellow students nurtured the cultivation of one central aspect of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation: that of establishing proximity (through participation) while maintaining (analytical) distance (cf. Supper, 2023, who cleverly integrated the card game *Uno* into her classes on participant observation).

OBLIQUE LEARNING

Throughout the semester, memories of pandemic crafting and crafting experiences surfaced and made their way into the workshops while stitching away and weaving in perspectives from our readings. We jointly reflected the meaning of craft for the pandemic-and-other-crises-ridden Self through the process of crafting. In doing so, we not only ‘did our reading’ but also carried out fieldwork in our classroom. The classroom became our joint field site and constantly reminded us that the “personal is (indeed) theoretical” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 10).

Students' reflections on the hands-on approach in this course suggest that this 'liminal pedagogy', this making-oneself-vulnerable and opening-up-to-what-happens allows for a more holistic educational benefit beyond the content level. One first-semester student remarked that she was unsure at first whether she should remain in the course, as she felt uncomfortable with the choice of embroidery. In the light of what others were stitching, she said it was very hard at first to turn off her inner critic. But she "stayed with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) and learnt to let go and immerse herself.



FIGURE 2. Collage of photos depicting the workshop setting of our *thinking through stitching* as well as our work in progress (Photos: © Jette Schwormstede and Lydia Maria Arantes).

Regarding a more classical learning-related issue, another student remarked that she memorised so many more aspects of the readings and our discussions while stitching away (as opposed to more classic teaching settings). Our preliminary conclusion is that the spoken words are entangled with the unusually

dynamic environment and the artefacts-in-the-making. And so, the memory of the words can also be accessed through remembering our bodily crafting practices and the artefacts-in-the-making.

A special kind of power lies in stitching – a feminine and ‘merely ornamental, futile’ craft – within a masculine space such as academia, a space which furthermore has traditionally suppressed the body. Eschewing the pursuit of measurable productivity, we ultimately managed to create a micro-space of self-care – discursively as well as practically. In times of multiple crises and of the still “unfinished feminist revolution” (Federici, 2012), our joint stitching provided a safe space (cf. Rana & Hackney, 2018) and reminded us to not get tired of learning and improving to practice self-care.

Stitching together in an academic teaching context made room for more agency, both mine and my students’. In an environment, where neoliberalisation, increasing economization and digitization seem to be strengthening the idea that knowledge is prepared, delivered, and received, and where thus the educator more and more takes on the role of deliverer of ready-made knowledge, this kind of teaching felt like regaining sovereignty. With Ann Cvetkovich (2012) in mind, I would like to refer to this as “felt sovereignty” (p. 168), a kind of sovereignty rooted in our conscious corporeality. In this class, students had to learn to direct the group’s joint thinking in the ways they were most interested in, which did not come naturally to them at first. They learnt that learning happens proactively. Knowledge was not simply being made readily available by the teacher, it had to be sought actively. Armed with needles and threads, they learnt to take their learning (matter) metaphorically and literally into their own hands.



FIGURE 3. Embroidery front and flip side illustrating processuality of the stitching (Photos: © Julia Faßwald).

Changing the framework of learning also encouraged students to reflect on the circumstances enabling or disabling learning. While in ‘conventional’ learning environments the setting itself is rarely critically assessed by students, this framework invited, or much rather, incited critical reflections of its epistemological value. This became most evident in the unit dedicated to methodological texts. Upon my enquiry why nobody was taking their embroidery into their hands, one student burst out that she needed to concentrate and could therefore not stitch simultaneously. The more students became familiarised with the text terminology, the more they loosened up and even started stitching. This unit made us aware that while stitching together mostly fostered critical thinking, at other times it inhibited thinking altogether – at least in the beginning.

While all of us recognise the skill and dexterity required for ‘good embroidery’, liberating ourselves from fixed definitions and pursuing a playful, at times even ‘messy’ approach had the benefit of rendering visible our stitching trajectories. Threads and needles left traces of their movements instead of hiding them and thus rendered perceptible the processuality of stitching (see Figure 3). As such, they both symbolise and materialise the wandering of our thoughts-in-progress and their articulations which were literally jumping from one student to the next, gradually evolving over time.

Learning to tie the empirical to the theoretical and vice versa, learning theory through practice, learning to make oneself vulnerable, learning to articulate thoughts without fear, learning to practice self-care, learning to renounce the measurable productivity imperative for a short time window, learning to guide learning oneself and to take (learning) matters into one's own hands ... all of this might be referred to as "oblique learning", "the way of learning ... that happens serendipitously by happy coincidence" (Buchczyk, 2019, p. 185), as one of Buchczyk's interview partners formulated it.

CONCLUSION

Thinking through stitching provides a multi-dimensional setting for exploration, participation, observation and reflection, operating beyond the content level of craft as academic (research) subject. It also creates something akin to a condensed fieldwork lab which *en passant* allows refining the very skills and techniques ethnographers need when carrying out research in fields 'out there', which can also be utilised in courses with other-than-craft topics. Introducing *crafting* into the seemingly bodiless academic realm in Higher Education Humanities prompts students and researchers to consciously reflect the epistemic role of the body, which may contribute to a long-needed recognition of the researcher's subjectivity in a realm where subjectivity is played off against objectivity, neglecting that subjectivity is "the royal road to an authentic, rather than fictitious, objectivity" (Devereux, 1967, p. XVII).

Teaching and learning while stitching together contributes to ongoing debates about the role of art for research and education. Holding back logocentrism and bringing the body, tools and with them the experiential, experimental and performative into the anthropological classroom, offers ways to reconcile body and mind in Higher Education and for "embodied and existential wisdom" (Pallasmaa, 2017) to take over. Succumbing to learning as a non-structured and non-controlled happening further recognises "learning as the unpredictable and experimental process, opening up to new, emergent possibilities beyond the already known" (Mäkelä & Löytönen, 2017, p. 255). Crafting uncertainty therefore means reimagining the educator's role: from the transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of environments for emergent learning. Rethinking education as the provision of multifaceted learning settings, which rather than excluding the body uses its epistemological potential, also contribute to a more regenerative form of scholarship (Gatt & Allen, 2019). Reframed with Haraway (2016): "Perhaps it is precisely the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible" (pp. 23–24).

Stitching together while thinking and vice versa has come to serve as a low-threshold approach for students to learn to think, reflect and critique. It empowers them to develop their own voice without feeling judged. The multiplicity of student voices is given space and, one might infer, marginal voices will find it easier to articulate themselves and to be heard. Especially for students equipped with less eloquent cultural capital, this approach might serve as a vehicle for them to feel 'more up to the game' much quicker. Employing more of those pedagogies might therefore lead to university becoming more inclusive to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We might even draw the (preliminary) conclusion that a (re)introduction of tools and crafting into the academic setting contributes to a more socio-economically egalitarian university and academic education altogether.

Having ventured on this journey of stitching together (in) anthropology class, my students and I made an eye-opening discovery that had viscerally made its way into our Selves: Crafting helps us see beyond the given world. It allows us to conceive the world as mouldable and to imagine the human as an agent capable of shaping the material (and as I would like to imagine, also the social) world.

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