Anthropology of Education

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Anthropology of education as a tradition of inquiry

The anthropology of education can be considered a sub-field of the social science discipline of anthropology. In the United States, this sub-field has been institutionalized as the Council on Anthropology of Education, which holds annual meetings and publishes the Anthropology and Education Quarterly. We describe the principal questions and concepts of the field primarily from the U.S. perspective, while drawing in questions from other vibrant traditions of educational anthropology, such as those of Mexico and Argentina.

We must begin with the broader discipline before moving on to examine the sub-field of educational anthropology. Anthropology as a discipline asks the fundamental question, “How and why do human beings behave the way they do?”, and it pursues the answer to these questions along five analytic dimensions: historical, comparative, local, holistic, and cultural. Anthropology is first and foremost a historical and comparative discipline. The discipline studies the evolutionary dimension of human existence, the sweeping historical development of human society from early hominid origins to postindustrial globalization. In and through such a historical perspective, anthropology also constructs knowledge about human universals and particulars through systematic comparison of different societies. North American anthropology has been divided
historically into: biological anthropology, archaeology, sociocultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology and, more recently, applied anthropology. The anthropology of education is firmly rooted in sociocultural, linguistic, and applied anthropology. Sociocultural anthropology’s emphasis on local action and local meaning cannot be separated from its methodological preference for long-term participant-observation and ethnographic analysis. Related to this emphasis on local action is an insistence on understanding the context in which such action takes place. Yet even as the local is stressed, anthropology has long advocated the principle of holistic analysis. This means that whatever the particular activity or practice under investigation, it is important to understand how it is interconnected with other dimensions of social practice. In other words, nothing can be understood in isolation; each practice is part of a larger whole. Finally, anthropologists typically stress the cultural dimension of human society and action. Culture refers to the field of symbolic meanings that inform any observable social behavior or institution.

As a sub-field of the discipline, anthropology of education began by asking, first and foremost, “How and why do human beings educate the way they do?” Within this broad purview, the process of education can be defined as humanity’s unique methods of “teaching and learning”—that is, of acquiring, transmitting, and producing cultural knowledge for interpreting and acting upon the world. Anthropologists of education wish to understand how teaching and learning are organized socially and culturally.

Of course, education is much broader than schooling, which is an institution of more recent historical invention. Until the development of agriculture and the rise of city-states some 10,000 years ago, tribal societies educated their young through complex and
deliberate practices, but not in separate institutions like those we call schools. Rather, education was probably a seamless part of everyday life, and took place through the productive and ritual activities characterizing a society’s way of life. A school, on the other hand, is typically an age-graded, hierarchical setting where, as Judith Friedman Hansen puts it, “learners learn vicariously, in roles and environments defined as distinct from those in which the learning will eventually be applied.” Only since the beginnings of the modern period some two hundred years ago—a period characterized by the rise of capitalism, large-scale urbanization, the consolidation of the nation-state, and the ubiquity of the printing press—have mass school systems been created and much of human learning been confined to schools. So the second big question the anthropology of education asks is, “How does education occur in schools, and what relationship does that have to educational processes occurring in many places outside of schools?”

Finally, over the last forty years, anthropologists of education have developed a number of more specific questions. Such questions have emerged out of the encounter with the social movements, and the specific social and political realities, of the countries where anthropologists have found themselves working. Basic scientific questions have become entwined with political and applied questions. In the United States, the civil rights movements, racial de-segregation, and the growth of ethnic diversity through the “new immigration” of the 1960s brought forth the need to conceptualize the relationship between ethnic minorities and their schools. Thus, many anthropologists asked the question, “How do ethnic and racial minority groups organize their education in the community and home, and how does this education contrast or conflict with the educational practices of schools?” Much work driven by such a question came to be
known as the “cultural difference” or discontinuity approach. Then, by the late 1970s, anthropologists of education more frequently noted the entrenchment of race, class, and gender divisions in U.S. society. Though an engagement with feminism, neo-Marxist scholarship, Pierre Bourdieu, and critical theory, anthropologists of education pursued social justice through their work, and came to ask, “How do schools organize teaching and learning to reproduce social structural inequalities, and how do students and their families respond to such schooling?”

In places like Mexico and Argentina, of course, the questions have varied. Anthropologists of education in Mexico at an early stage drew together and critiqued theory from both the Anglo-American and the French traditions (e.g., “cultural difference” and “reproduction”), but soon developed their own concepts and questions. On the one hand, the ongoing denial of school access to millions of impoverished Mexicans prompted the question, “Whom does schooling serve, and why?” On the other hand, the prevalence of dominant assumptions about how schools and teachers worked brought forth the question, “How is the ‘everyday life’ of the school organized, and in what does ‘teachers’ knowledge’ consist?” This prompted a deeper historical anthropological investigation of the roots of local Mexican school structures and cultures, in relation to national reforms and policies. More recently, in the context of contradictory neoliberal education policies and the new discourse of the “pluralistic” nation, anthropological work has emphasized education in non-formal settings, youth cultures, interculturality, and the educational implications of class and racial-ethnic differences. In Argentina, meanwhile, questions of diversity and democracy have been foremost. The development of educational anthropology went hand-in-hand with the struggle against
military dictatorship and the restoration of democracy in the early 1980s. Argentine anthropologists of education have focused on mechanisms of power and control in schools, as well as class-based discrimination and exclusion. Among the key questions they have asked are, “How does power work in schools, and what is the role of the teacher vis-à-vis the state and the family?” More recently, with the rise in cultural diversity through in-migration from Bolivia and Paraguay, and the growing recognition of Argentina’s own indigenous and ethnic minorities, Argentine anthropologists have increasingly asked, “How are cultural differences amongst students negotiated in schools, and how can schools recognize such differences without using them as a basis for exclusion or discrimination?”

Organizing conceptual schemes

From an earlier anthropological perspective, the educational process in different societies fundamentally oscillates between an emphasis on continuity and an emphasis on change. This is because the challenges of evolution, broadly speaking, were thought to require a social group to adapt to novel circumstances through innovation, and then consolidate and perpetuate this adaptation through repeated inculcation. Education was seen as underwriting every human group’s ability to adapt to its environment and thereby reproduce the conditions of its existence. According to Jules Henry and others of his generation, education is, in this sense, a fundamentally conservative social process. What allows a society to adapt to its environment while retaining some historical cohesion and continuity? How does a society conserve essential features of its cultural and technological repertoire? Early anthropology of education largely sought to address these
questions through an analysis of the process of **cultural transmission**—the passing on of basic cultural knowledge and values across the generations. Most of the early contributors to the field were scholars whose roots lay in village or community-based studies of child socialization, “culture and personality,” or language acquisition.

After many years of focus on processes of cultural transmission and the achievement of cultural continuity, anthropologists began to question their functionalist assumptions, and to examine more closely how education contributed to change. If cultural transmission occurred smoothly, how did societies challenge their own inertia? If education mainly served to mold the young into the cultural patterns of a society, how did innovation ever occur? If children were educated “traditionally,” how did they respond to sudden and dramatic social change? In response to such questions, attention turned away from cultural transmission, and the role of “teachers,” and toward **cultural acquisition**, or the role of the “learner.” A related emerging question was, How did relatively novice individuals acquire the basic cultural knowledge of a society, and what distinctive interests and traits might they bring to the learning process? This question spawned a tremendously fruitful collaboration between anthropology and psychology, giving rise to the new field of “cross-cultural psychology.” The work of the Soviet psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, with its emphasis on the role of symbolic “tools of mediation” in the relation between individual and society, has become central to this field. More recently, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have proposed a powerful theory of “situated learning,” in which society is fundamentally composed of overlapping “communities of practice” that serve as the vehicles for cultural acquisition.
Hand in hand with the emphasis on cultural acquisition came the increasing recognition of cultural complexity. Rather than a body of “shared” or common meanings that one could identify with a particular society, culture was reconceived as a pool of symbolic resources, distributed unevenly across societies and social groups, which individuals can negotiate and appropriate with varying degrees of agency. An important overarching concept that has emerged to encompass the processes of cultural transmission and acquisition is that of cultural production. Education may be seen as a constant process of cultural production. Even in those cases where education is oriented primarily to the achievement of continuity, in a relatively closed social system, the theoretical possibility of modification and change always exists. In the process of acquiring transmitted cultural knowledge, individuals or subcultures can modify or extend the knowledge, in effect organizing the knowledge for themselves while producing and adding new knowledge to the common stock. And if this is true even in small-scale societies, it is all the more true in highly stratified, differentiated, and urbanized societies.

Directions and trends in the U.S. anthropology of education

As other theoretical traditions have informed a growing range of anthropological approaches to the study of education, the field has reaffirmed its fundamental commitment to social justice. Once anthropologists of education came to conceive of the complexity and full range of education as a process of cultural production, this allowed for a link to theories of schooling for social reproduction and for liberation. As we have seen, in the late 1960s and early 1970s U.S. anthropologists of education tried to
address persistent racial inequalities in educational achievement. One of the prevailing popular explanations for such inequality was that ethnic minority students were “culturally deprived” in relation to their White counterparts, and therefore needed a kind of cultural remediation. This came to be known as the “deficit” approach to educational achievement. Anthropologists quickly chimed in that it was not a matter of cultural deprivation, but rather of cultural difference. They argued that ethnic minority students tended to do more poorly in school because their cultures of origin used different epistemologies, styles of communication, and participant structures to educate children in the home. Such cultural attributes differed sharply from the mainstream, middle-class cultural rules governing school life.

The Nigerian-born immigrant John Ogbu developed a critique of this reigning “cultural difference approach.” He argued that anthropologists needed to take into account the “cultural ecology” of a group’s response to schooling. Making an important distinction between so-called “voluntary” or immigrant minorities, and so-called “involuntary” or castelike minorities, Ogbu showed that the question of school achievement could not be separated from the history of a group’s structural position in society, and the repertoire of attitudes and practices that had developed out of that position. Involuntary minorities, such as African-Americans in the U.S., had developed alternative and “oppositional” cultural forms and strategies—what Ogbu called secondary cultural characteristics. Their problems with school could not be reduced to mere differences in primary culture or linguistic style. The problems were more deeply rooted in the history of subordination and its consequences.
Both Ogbu and the cultural difference anthropologists accepted the liberal premises of schooling, and they believed in the positive opportunities for social mobility that increased school achievement might provide. Yet by the middle of the 1980s, work in the “new” sociology of education (e.g., Paul Willis, Pierre Bourdieu) and critical social theories of power helped anthropology focus a more critical lens on schools. Schools were often seen to serve dominant interests in the social reproduction of inequality, but anthropologists also explored the potential of schools to produce knowledge that might liberate individuals and groups from systems of domination.

There have been important advances in the ethnography of communication and the ethnomethodological approach as applied to the study of education. In a major work that culminates many years of fruitful collaboration, Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott extend this tradition by showing how “failure” is deeply and inexorably embedded in the U.S. school system through linguistic categories and interactional repertoires. Meanwhile, other work has taken up the basic insights of the cultural difference approach and the critique that John Ogbu made. Taking seriously the influence of historical experience and racial categories, new work has nonetheless tried to nuance Ogbu’s formulations and look more closely at institutional (school-level) effects. In a related development, another emerging trend is the anthropology of education policy and education reform efforts, which has yielded methodological models for studying processes and discourses across ethnographic sites and levels of social scale.

As educational anthropologists have become increasingly marginalized from departments of anthropology, they have taken up positions in Schools of Education. Their work often and necessarily involves teacher training. At the same time, educational
anthropologists have steadily undergone a process of self-critique which has led to increases in collaborative research design and the democratization of research relationships. Both of these trends partly explain the emergence and strength of school-based applied and action research. Examples of such work across a range of contexts include Hugh Mehan and colleagues’ attempts to study the consequences of a program to provide special support and mentoring to non-dominant high school students, Norma González and Luís Moll’s work on connecting students’ “funds of knowledge” with school curriculum, and Teresa McCarty’s study of language revitalization efforts amongst indigenous Navajo speakers. A similar stream of work has emerged from “native” anthropologists, which challenges many of anthropology’s traditional epistemological assumptions about the value of an “outsider” perspective. This work has explored the challenges and contradictions of education for historically subordinated groups, with an eye towards empowerment and the critique of dominant culture.

Another trend in the field is the engagement with globalization processes as constituted by global flows of people, capital, and ideologies. These flows are seen to be in constant contact, simultaneously merging and diverging, and anthropological studies of education have embraced notions of continuous change and transformation. “Multiple” subjects and “multiple” cultures bear out the effects of globalization, fragmentation, and hybridity. Thus students, especially children of immigration, diaspora, and transnationalism, are increasingly represented as syncretizers, selecting and hybridizing cultural practices from multiple discursive fields. Within globalization processes, anthropologists of education have shown even greater concern with the “interrelationships among power, knowledge and identity” (Hall, 1999, p.123).
References


