



NEAA NEWSLETTER

Message from the President

For those of us in academia, fall brings a new semester. For me this has always been a time of new energy, optimism, looking forward to engaging with students and colleagues in exploring interesting and important questions and subjects. These days, though, it seems that anthropology is in a rather precarious position at many colleges. The signs are many: colleges seeking to eliminate anthropology majors because they don't have high enough enrollments, or don't seem necessary to the mission of the college; students and their parents wondering what can they do with a major in anthropology; policymakers seeking ever greater accountability on the part of colleges and faculty to explain and justify the classes they teach and the content of those classes. While anthropologists can recognize how our perspectives are vital to citizenship in a multicultural and profoundly interconnected world, we seem to have some way to go in convincing others. I have been thinking about these issues in part because this fall, I will take part in a panel at the AAA sponsored by the Federation of Small Anthropology Programs, on how anthropologists in small programs reach out to their colleges and their communities.

NEAA members have made important contributions to informing people of the value of studying anthropology. John

Omohundro's writing on *Careers in Anthropology* (Mayfield Publishing 1999) and his and Jessica Skolnikoff's workshops at the last several NEAA meetings on the same subject are significant examples. Many of us teach in small anthropology programs, and by teaching general education and other introductory classes introduce many students, even those who never take another anthropology class, to the anthropological perspective. Applied anthropologists and service learning programs demonstrate to students and the community the power of the anthropological perspective. I'd welcome hearing from you about how you have been able to promote anthropology in your own college or workplace.

As we look forward to the NEAA meeting in Ithaca next April, let's think about both the fascinating and important work we do as anthropologists, and how we can make the importance of that work well-known within academic settings and to the general public.

Amy Gazin-Schwartz

**NEAA ANNUAL MEETING
APRIL 13-15, 2007
Ithaca, New York
See Winter Newsletter for details**

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Message from the Editor

Recently during an in-class group activity a student asked me if teachers can learn from students. I answered in the affirmative but what I was really thinking was: of course, all the time! I think if I stopped learning from the students I might stop teaching. I first started using PowerPoint because all my students were doing their presentations with it and I thought...how hard could it be? I learn about all the good and bad TV shows and movies. I learned this semester that it is not cool at Roger Williams to use a tray to carry your food in our campus dining hall. But what I really learn is how to become a better teacher. As all faculty know, and now the students will too, every class is different. I am always learning how to teach the material more effectively and always adding to the material, too.

In the same vein, I asked Dr. Thomas Batt to write an article for the Newsletter on engaging students to write. Dr. Batt is not an anthropologist but I thought it would be interesting to reach across disciplines and hear from a colleague who teaches writing. For faculty members, it is a chance to hear from a practitioner of writing. For students, it is a way for you to hear how much faculty do try to engage their students. For me, personally, I have some students who are very good writers and some who are weak. I find often that students do not apply what they learn in their writing courses to their anthropology courses and it was that curiosity that made me seek out Dr. Batt to write this article.

Please remember the NEAA publishes the newsletter three times per year (in Fall, Winter, Spring/Summer). We are always looking for submissions for the Newsletter. Please submit anything you think will be of interest to our community. You may wish to update colleagues on your recent projects or report on some significant research. You may want to discuss global events that affect us here in the Northeast. Or you may just want to offer your reflections on the field. If you would like to suggest a book for review or if you would like to review a film or text that has been recently released or published, please let us know. You may email your submissions to me (jskolnikoff@rwu.edu) or Alan Hersker (herskeal@potSDam.edu).

I hope everyone is planning to go to the NEAA Annual Meetings April 13-15th in Ithaca, New York. It promises to be a good conference and Ithaca is a fun place to explore.

Enjoy your holiday season!
Jessica Skolnikoff

Engaging Students to Write

By Thomas Batt, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Humanities and Communication at Maine Maritime Academy.

Colleagues in other disciplines often ask me what I do in my composition courses to motivate students to write. They say that many of their students hate writing, and turn in papers that are dull, hackneyed, and strewn with errors. How do we get them excited about what they write, to take pride in what they pass in? It can be treacherous to oversimplify, since the causes of bad writing and poor attitude range widely, but if there is a commonality I've noticed in my students, even the most successful of them, it's a deep-seated anxiety about their writing abilities. They don't like to write because they're afraid that their writing—and, by extension, they themselves—will be judged harshly. Ironically, the practices that arise out of their fear, such as waiting for the last minute to start an assignment, revising only superficially, and neglecting to proofread properly, virtually guarantee that their fears will be realized, which perpetuates the negative cycle.

My solution, to sum it up in a single word, is *play*. Although instructors in many disciplines make use of play strategies in their teaching, play remains a freighted concept in academia, associated with frivolity, silliness, and child-like games. But its unacademic nature is precisely what makes a pedagogy of play so effective in reaching students, whose eyes light up when something not-serious unfolds in an otherwise serious classroom, and who dive into writing assignments with energetic glee when given permission to have fun with them. Traditional schooling, with its emphasis on rote learning of conventions, often demands student compliance at the expense of creativity. So it shouldn't surprise us to find that our students view writing as a chore to be undertaken for other people's purposes, not their own. This attitude is so deeply ingrained that writing instructors at times must do more than simply invite or require an interested stance; they need to provide conditions that foster a creative stance.

In one assignment that might be of interest to anthropologists, I asked my freshmen composition students to reflect upon one of the subcultures they belong to, and how this subculture overlaps and conflicts with the academic community they had just joined. In the past, this assignment had evoked variations on the question, "What do you [the teacher] want?" followed by earnest but usually sterile efforts to comply with my expectations. This time around, I wanted students to find and articulate their own meaning; to say not "Is this what you want?" but instead (in the words of compositionist Peter Elbow), "Listen to me. I have something to tell you." As students went about writing their first draft, I asked them to break a rule of any sort. This request drew blank stares. What kind of rules? How does one "break" them? I turned the students' questions right back to them: What rules do you follow? Why do you follow them? Why *do* we write differently than we talk? Is writing from left to right really better than right to left, or up and down? And what's up with split infinitives, anyway? Slowly, as the students realized the possibilities open to them, the discussion grew increasingly animated. The "rules" of writing, I knew, were in for a comeuppance.

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Malagasy Gathering in Montreal

By Dr. Lisa Travis, Department of Linguistics, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Between July 17th and July 28th, five linguists working on the syntactic structure of Malagasy, a Western Malayo-Polynesian language spoken in Madagascar, met in Montreal for a series of workshops, Malagasy lessons, and fieldwork sessions. The event was hosted by Dr. Lisa Travis of McGill University and those participating included Ed Keenan (UCLA), Ileana Paul (University of Western Ontario), Matt Pearson (Reed College), and Eric Potsdam (University of Florida). There was also a two day visit by Jean Marie de la Beaujardière of Boston, webmaster of the online Malagasy dictionary. Two years ago a similar gathering occurred in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, in conjunction with CIRAM (Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherche Appliqué Malgache) at the University of Antananarivo. Montreal has a large Malagasy community and has over the past several years served as alternative field experience for linguists. Some members of the community have been working as native speaker consultants for more than twenty years.

Malagasy offers an interesting challenge to linguists. Like many Austronesian languages, it exhibits the rather rare verb-object-subject (VOS) word order, which poses an apparent challenge to theories of word order that posit a universal underlying SVO order.¹ Some Austronesian languages have both VOS and VSO, thus raising the question of which order is more basic. It is not clear what determines the variation between VSO and VOS across Austronesian languages as well as within a single language.

Like other Austronesian languages, Malagasy also displays an unusual ordering within the verb phrase (the “mittelfeld”): objects apparently shift rightward and adverbs show the mirror order of more well-studied languages.

Moreover, like many Austronesian languages, especially the ones spoken in the western groups of the family, Malagasy has a complex verbal voicing system. Voice morphology indicates the grammatical function of the syntactically and pragmatically privileged constituent which has been variously analyzed as a structural subject, an absolutive argument (in an ergative system), or a topic. The grammatical status of the ‘subject’ and the treatment of the voicing system remain controversial and call for more investigation, especially from the comparative perspective.

Finally, Malagasy, like other Austronesian languages, imposes unusually stringent constraints on the status of the sentence constituent that can be questioned, focused (“emphasized”), or topicalized (presented as background information). In a number of languages the only constituent eligible for these processes is the ‘subject’ mentioned above. The nature of this restriction is not well understood and poses significant challenges to existing theories of sentence structure. It is also mysterious why the restriction is so resilient within the family.

¹ The description of characteristics of the language family was taken from the website for the Workshop on Comparative Austronesian Linguistics to be held at the University of San Diego in October 2006 (<http://crl.ucsd.edu/workshops/20061008/>).

Participants in the gathering were also able to enjoy other aspects of Malagasy as well. Two Malagasy performers, Ramaka and Landy, who were in Montreal on vacation, gave a great introduction to some traditional dance and song. In addition, a number of Malagasy children living in Montreal danced and put on a play, and Malagasy food was served at the intermission. In addition, the only Malagasy to ever perform in the winter Olympics was there (visit him at <http://www.razalpin.org/>). The symposium included a number of talks by participating researchers and classes in Malagasy, as well as a presentation of the on-line Malagasy dictionary by its creator, Jean-Marie de la Beaujardière (<http://malagasyworld.org/>).

Montreal offers a good research opportunity for those interested in Malagasy but unable to travel to Madagascar, for there is a large Malagasy community.

Grants for the Documentations of Endangered Languages

The trustees of the Lisbet Rausing Charitable Fund invite applications for the 2006/07 round of applications for research grants for the documentation of endangered languages. The Endangered Languages Documentation Programme is a component of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, administered by the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. It offers up to £1 million in grants each year for the documentation of endangered languages in any location around the world.

There are two main types of grants:

1. Large Grants – major documentation projects and post-doctoral fellowships. Closing date 5th August 2006.
2. Small Grants – pilot projects, PhD studentships and fieldtrips. Closing date 9th January 2007.

For further information and application forms visit www.hrelp.org/grants
<<http://www.hrelp.org/grants>>

Northeast Anthropological Association 47th Annual Meeting April 13-15, 2007 Ithaca, New York

See Winter Newsletter for abstract and session submission deadlines.

Forms and Registration information will be available online at www.neaa.org

Continued from page 3 Engaging Students to Write

By the next class, the students had their essays—and the class was electric with laughter and energy. One student had written his essay on a paper mobile he hung from the ceiling. Another had written hers on her belly. A third had cut out the sentences and put them in a hat.

After we had read (and celebrated) the drafts, we discussed how the rule breaking itself shed light on the cultural clashes the students described in their essays. For the next draft, the students were to conform to the usual conventions, and I was afraid that the transition from “fun” writing to serious writing would put us back on square one: everywhere barren ideas and disjunctive prose. But I was delighted to find that our playful detour had paid dividends; in fact, the essays were remarkable for their freshness and depth. With no more than the usual prodding from me, students had revised their essays far more substantively than they had revised previous writing.

For example, one student from rural Maine, whom I’ll call Sally, had written about her working-class accent. In her “break-the-rules” first draft, she had composed a Jeff-Foxworthy-inspired piece of self-mockery. Here is the opening passage, written in multiple fonts, which she read aloud to the class with great gusto:

WELL, I GREW UP WITH A BUNCH OF MALE HICKS WHO LIKED TO GO
OUT AT NIGHT AND HIT MAIL BOXES WITH EMPTY BEER BOTTLES
FOR FUN. WHAT DOES THAT HAFTA TELL YA! Well, ain’t easy being
a red neck, theah certain rules ya hafta follow: An accent. You gotta have
the mainah accent. It ain’t hard to do just don’t say youah R’s that’s all y’all. 2)
A BIG truck. Y’all don’t have a 454 to have a redneck truck.
This is a beatah truck to go playing in the mud. She is
all lifted with big mud terrain tiahs. Oh won’t she go good.

With this draft, Sally proudly, even joyfully, proclaimed her identity as a “redneck” while simultaneously implying that this identity did not preclude her from being a college student like any other college student. She had control over this accented voice; it was part of her but did not define her. Like so many students before her, Sally had successfully negotiated the dual roles of academic outsider and insider, in her case by realizing that these roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Over her next two drafts, she articulated these insights and their implications, ending up with an essay that she sent home to her parents.

I should note that at no point did I reassure Sally that her accent was acceptable, a move that would have reinforced the notion that an accent such as hers is something to worry about (why else the need for, and the granting of, acceptance?). Nor did I identify or name Sally’s fear and suggest that she address it, which would have put me in the position of deciding which of her emotions were worth exploring. Rather, I offered up a space in which Sally and her classmates could break away from (and break down) expected ways of writing and thinking, and to experience the exhilarating creativity that play makes possible. To psychologist W.D. Winnicott, play is by definition a creative act, one that takes place in what he calls the “potential space” between the individual’s inner, safe reality and the outer world where one must deal with the expectations of others. Play—the creative transformation of experience—is a means of

reconciling these realities. In my classroom and through my assignments, I try to give students access to such potential spaces, so that they have at least the opportunity to experience the flights of creativity that make writing a satisfying, meaningful experience.

One need not be a wild-eyed “creative type” to initiate a pedagogy of play. Some of my best moments as a teacher have resulted from simple moves, such as handing out lollipops to students to encourage them to read their writing aloud, or having students brainstorm their own ideal course before handing out my syllabus, or using play-dough to illustrate the recursiveness of the writing process. I try to ask myself, “Is this assignment [or lesson, or activity] implying a creative stance on the part of the students—or a compliant stance? Do they have a chance to transform the material, or do I expect them to merely accept it?” I’ve been appalled to realize how many of my teaching practices demand compliance, what Winnicott calls “a dead, sick state.” Revising these practices in themselves has been relatively easy; more difficult has been revising how I think of teaching, from a one-way transaction to a mutual act of creation.

Citations

Bartholomae, David, and Peter Elbow. "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow. *College Composition and Communication* 46(1): 62-71.

Winnicott, W.D. *Playing and Reality*. New York: Basic Books, 1971.

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