

Faculty Preface: Notes on Note-Taking

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Why do people milling about universities these days have such little appreciation for note-taking? Some professors ignore it, awestruck perhaps by PowerPoint and other new instructional technologies. Undergraduates' eyes glaze over when instructors mention note-taking, and then sit through lectures without ever putting pen or pencil to paper in old-fashioned notebooks, rattling the keyboards of newfangled notebook computers, or thumbing the miniscule keypads of ever-larger cell phones. Graduate students "engage with" authors (living or dead) or subject-matters of all sorts, and "theorize" peoples, places, spaces, and things—too often without committing these fruits of mental labor to paper or digital files. Yet, note-taking is a pivotal activity, a critical skill, and a useful craft in intellectual work, the kind done in anthropology anyway.

It is difficult to imagine practicing any of anthropology's subfields without note-taking. The point holds for fieldwork based on participant-observation, excavating archaeological sites, tracking voices, discourses, or language ideologies, capturing insights about laboratory research on biogenetics or biogenesis that finds no place in logs, and applying anthropology in the quest for solutions to practical human social problems. Note-taking is indeed valuable and useful, as Angela Storey's editorial introduction to the first issue of "Notes from the Field" and papers by the ten contributors clearly show.

When I was a graduate student, the University of Chicago's Department of Anthropology offered a seminar called "Pre- and Post-Field Seminar." For ten weeks, two kinds of

ABDs engaged in purposeful face-to-face interaction: those just back from the field and scrambling to produce the dissertations that would facilitate their escape (at long last!) from graduate school; and those who, having jumped the last hurdle to ABD limbo (a two-hour oral Preliminary Examination) were chaffing at the bit to begin fieldwork, so that they, too, could eventually follow the escape route.¹

Under the watchful eye of a professor, the ABDs talked shop. How do you make theoretical abstractions about discourses, ideologies, codes, structures, and their connections to praxis—cultural constructions all—serviceable for asking questions, participating (with natives) in the ordinary and momentous goings-on of a place, observing snippets of talk and action, and making anthropological sense of it all? What do you do about contradictions between discourses and non-discursive practices, and about, if not contradictions, inconsistencies, disparities, or just noticeable differences between how the natives talk or act, on the one hand, and how the natives think, on the other? (To the extent, of course, that thought can be deduced, inferred, or abducted [guessed] from what the natives or, for that matter, the anthropologists, say about what they think, say, and do.) How do you manage interpersonal relationships with informants or, as some anthropologists prefer to say these days, research subjects or project participants?

1 In 1974, the Department of Anthropology's chair sent every first-year graduate student a long list of classic works in social thought—Marx, Durkheim, Tönnies, Weber, and Mauss; Boas and his students (e.g., A. L. Kroeber, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead); Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and some of their students (e.g., Raymond Firth, Edward Evans-Pritchard, Myer Fortes, Max Gluckman, and Audrey Richards); Lévi-Strauss; sociologist Talcott Parsons; semiotician Charles S. Peirce; and so on. A new student, the chair's cover letter rather ominously stated, was supposed to be familiar with the classics upon arrival in the Windy City and before encountering the Monsters of the Midway (a.k.a. the Chicago faculty). However, the faculty opted for an oral Preliminary Examination, because they could no longer agree on the form, scope, or content of a written Comprehensive Examination, once they abandoned subjecting third-year graduate students to a five-day ordeal featuring wide-ranging questions to be answered by hand in "Blue Books."

How do you link the local to the regional, let alone the global? Is gender relevant to every research project in the ways that anthropologists take race, ethnicity, class, and nationality or citizenship to be relevant?

But one enduring and perplexing question animated seminar exchanges: What is an effective way for an anthropologist to record observations, experiences, and pertinent insights? In the grand scheme of fieldwork, it mattered little whether observations and insights were motivated by a theoretical framework and a set of methods, or forced on the anthropologist by field experiences (often serendipitous) revealing theoretical or methodological gaps, oversights, blinders, or blunders. Here, the conversation turned to note-taking.

Professor Raymond Fogelson taught the “Pre- and Post-Field Seminar” in the fall of 1978, the last offering before I left Chicago to do fieldwork in Haiti. Ray Fogelson framed his answers to heady questions and his advice about puzzling fieldwork issues by using a metaphor—“the anthropologist as pencil.” Throughout the seminar, he elaborated on and contextualized the metaphor by talking simply, straight-forwardly, and informatively about doing three things in the field: watching people closely, listening to them carefully, and taking notes about what you see and hear. Description and analysis are separate though related tasks in anthropology, Fogelson emphasized. And, although anthropologists might value analysis more highly than “mere” description, Fogelson would remind the ABDs, both require good notes.

The take-away from my prefatory remarks is simple. Fieldwork experiences, like other kinds, may be pleasurable or painful “in the moment” and, thus, instructive for varied purposes. But just as moments pass, experiences become memories and memories fade. Good notes provide records of the inevitable transition from vivid experience to faded memory in anthropological fieldwork, and establish guardrails against

misinterpretation of the transition. Taken in detail, stored securely, and repeatedly reread, notes become touchstones for making the events, conditions, and experiences of anthropological fieldwork intelligible. Equally important, notes supply grist for the ever-turning mills of discussion and debate about anthropological understanding.

Enjoy reading and reflecting on "Notes from the Field"! Then, following the contributors' diverse examples, make note-taking a habit.

Suggested Reading

1951 [1874]. Notes and Queries on Anthropology. Revised and rewritten by a Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute. Sixth edition. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

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