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Toward the anthropology of general education: a Thailand experience

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Abstract: Thailand's general education policy has been intended to provide students with the necessary basic knowledge for their subsequent major studies, as well as to serve other important functions in daily life practices. The university has several reasons for requiring the general education program as part of degree completion. In this paper, I will discuss pedagogical languages of general education through the lens of anthropology of learning. It can be argued that the importance of anthropology of learning is rooted broadly in class traditions and fieldwork that once demanded students to develop a breadth of diverse knowledge. By reframing the question of anthropological fieldwork, I would like to use my teaching experiences in the general education program over the decades to discuss what and how to interact with students and academicians, resulting in improved teaching techniques and learning processes.

Keywords: anthropology of general education; problem-based learning; PBL; facilitator.

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Biographical notes: Siriporn Somboonboorana has recently the Director of Center of Geosocial and Cultural Research for Sustainable Development, Walailak University, Thailand. She obtained her research in marginal culture and migrant worker in Bangkok and the border city which were supported by many organisations. Her recent research interest is about knowledge production and the making of the commons in Asia.

1 Introduction

For more than 20 years after receiving my anthropology degree, I have shared my teaching experiences in universities, where I have faced a challenge in engaging both traditional instructors and anthropologists with undergrad students and learners. My career includes teaching, researching, and cultivating human qualities such as curiosity for knowledge, passion for learning, creativity and imagination, communication skills and problem-solving competencies, critical and scientific mind, public awareness, moral and ethical principles, and so on. Chambers (1985, p.13), a prominent applied

anthropologist said anthropological work should help to mediate the claim of scientific empirical knowledge and value. I agreed with his argument and the idea of ‘knowledge first, application later’, a notion that I undertook to explore with my students over the course of the last two decades.

My teaching experiences at Kirk University and Walailak University have provided me with a wealth of knowledge about the nature of social science, particularly anthropology, and have aided in the development of my critical thinking and teaching skills in the general education programs. The programs that I established allowed me to create various kinds of teaching and learning methods to convey knowledge and information to undergraduate students. I would like to propose the principle of anthropology of learning as a way to encourage and stimulate both instructors’ and the learners’ curiosities and thinking skills through the ‘flipped’ classroom approach that is under girded by applied educational tools.

From the start of my academic career, I have had the experience of teaching in general education departments as well as researching marginal communities. I am always keen to link these two sides of my experience to engage in active teaching and learning. Motivating thinking skills and the process of knowledge acquisition for 21st-century multidisciplinary learners has always been particularly difficult for me. The article, therefore, discusses ways that universities can develop their active learning systems, planning, and working strategies, supporting materials, active learning environment and climate for further efficiency of the active learning process that focuses on various notable learning outcomes among students. In the same manner that an educator can be an applied anthropologist, the paper offers examples for how the fusion of teaching and research manifests in complementary mutual roles as a teacher, educator, learner, and facilitator.

The interest in modes of education has focused on the differences in characteristics between school-based and non-school-based teaching and learning. These two modes have often been dichotomised into ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ education, based on many characteristics supposedly unique to each form. While formal education focuses on teaching by professionals, informal education focuses on learning by the learner’s doing. Borofsky (1987) provides a bridge between these two approaches: he connects not only the relative lack of questioning in learning and teaching process but also identifies the process as ‘informal’ educational in which questioning is infrequent because the context of learning is doing of the activities in whatever the available environments [Borofsky, (1987), pp.87–89]. Arguably, I wonder how the difference between pedagogical languages of formal and informal education in the anthropology of learning.

In this paper, I will discuss pedagogical languages of education through the lens of anthropology of learning. It can be argued that the importance of anthropology of learning is rooted broadly in class traditions and fieldwork that once demanded students to develop a breadth of diverse knowledge, but many students find fascination and exploration in fieldwork outside their classrooms (Blum, 2017). So most of them prefer to learn to know how to get into the scholarship disciplinary of anthropology by doing long-time fieldwork [Pelissier, (1991), p.87]. Therefore, the anthropology of learning seem to entail a focus on certain situations of knowledge acquisition rather than on the differences between modes of formal and informal education. I do agree with Ingold’s (2018) mention: “the principles of anthropology are also the principles of education.” By reframing the question of anthropological fieldwork raised by James and Marcus (2009)

and Moore (1996), I would like to use my teaching experiences in the general education program over the decades to discuss what and how to interact with students and academicians, resulting in improved teaching techniques and learning processes based on the questioning of the changing objectives of anthropological fieldwork (James et al., 1997).

2 Framing general education in recent decades

Since the 1990s, Thailand's general education policy has been intended to provide students with the necessary basic knowledge for their subsequent major studies, as well as to serve other important functions in daily life practices. The university has several reasons for requiring the general education program as part of degree completion. The required courses such as English, Thai for contemporary community, the present world, and global citizenship, appreciation of value and beauty, smart life management, creating quality of life, science and mathematics in daily life and IT for the present and beyond, etc. ensure that every university graduate has the same basic set of tools. The university wants students to graduate with a basic understanding of modern society with strong analytical and reading and writing skills.

Along with many improving policies for decades, the Thailand Higher Education Qualifications Framework 2009 is intended to aid in the implementation of the National Education Act's educational guidelines, to ensure consistency in both standards and award titles for higher education qualifications, and to make clear the equivalence of academic awards with those granted by higher education institutions in other parts of the world. The framework will aid in the provision of appropriate points of comparison in academic standards for institutions in their planning and internal quality assurance processes, evaluators involved in external reviews, and employers in understanding the skills and capabilities of graduates they may employ.

Programs established under this framework should incorporate not just the information, generic skills, and professional experience typically associated with studies leading to equivalent awards across the world, but also specific emphases reflecting Thailand's policy goals. These priorities include a focus on the transfer and application of cognitive skills in problem-solving, creative thinking, and entrepreneurship; familiarity with and support for national culture and traditions; and reconciling those traditions with the demands of competitive advantage in the knowledge economy. Graduates should have the ability and willingness to engage in lifelong learning, as well as the ability to communicate effectively, especially using information technology. They should also be able to take initiative in both individual and group activities. For each certification, the framework specifies the expected growing levels of knowledge and expertise in these domains. Developing these abilities necessitates the use of teaching methods that go beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills and emphasise their application in real-world circumstances regularly, in accordance with the graduate framework in the 21st-century world and UNESCO, which focuses on learning to apply knowledge to practical use throughout life and learning to live with others in peace.

“Education that is designed to develop learners' general knowledge, skills and competencies and literacy and numeracy skills, often to prepare students for more advanced educational programmes at the same or higher ISCED levels and to lay the foundation for lifelong learning. General educational

programmes are typically school- or college-based. General education includes educational programmes that are designed to prepare students for entry into vocational education, but that does not prepare for employment in a particular occupation or trade or class of occupations or trades, nor lead directly to a labour market-relevant qualification.” [UIS, (2012), p.80]

Thus, the general education program strives to provide basic knowledge on which students can develop an awareness of the intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and social contexts of their lives. Each university’s general education curriculum aims to make students well-rounded and aware of as much as possible about the world they live in, while students take general education to be a waste of time and not relate to their major studies. But sometimes, courses in GE help them prepare for specific situations that students have not expected before. Similarly, in my teaching of the general education program, I am quite concerned the student attitudes, which leads to understanding social change and transition with moral, ethical, and aesthetic awareness.

The next portion will go through my early teaching experience at Krirk Institute of Social Technology in the general education program. The following two sections will focus on problem-based learning (PBL) in general education and a course on ‘contemporary sexuality’ at Walailak University that is based on this educational approach. In the following two sections, I would like to discuss the anthropology of general education and how it relates to my decades of teaching experience as an anthropologist and educator.

3 The role of anthropologist in general education

When I started my career in 1996 at Krirk Institute of Social Technology University, one of Thailand’s oldest private universities in Thailand, it was renamed The Krirk Business College, Bangkok, and its objective was amended to include a business and social welfare model. At the time, I was a member of one of the program groups that designed the general education curriculum for full-time and part-time students. I was one of the program committees that had developed the general education curriculum for regular and part-time students at that time. Each semester, I was responsible for teaching the basic subjects to approximately 30–40 students per class at least. Our ages were not much different when I started my career 25 years ago, so I was an older sister for them. I designed the Thai society and culture and social problems courses, which are primarily taught in a classroom setting.

One day, I took my students to some ghetto in Bangkok and assigned each student to interview 2–3 people and then wrote the report to me. One of my students wrote a report in which she described her father’s harassment of her and I found that in the ghetto she got an opportunity to talk to the girl who also had the same happen. Having shared their problems and life stories, they understood their problems and my student learned how to start to solve her life problems. As a result, my student has grown and gained self-esteem in solving her family problem. In this case, I learned to know that the life experience of others could help to be a creative curriculum possibility in my professional teaching as well. Consequently, I paid attention to designing the teaching processes, mostly case-based learning, to support students’ learning by raising critical thinking through a group discussion. Students needed to learn from the real world outside their classrooms and curriculum. For formative assessment, students were assessed by weekly reports,

tests, and group discussion concepts from which I could learn and understand them more. At the same time, students would understand the contents, concepts, and learn from their friends as well. As a young lecturer, I found that the academic career was not only getting students to develop their fundamental knowledge but also developing my own. For nearly a decade, I taught in Krirk University's general education program. Aside from teaching, I participated in observational research on urban communities and was a member of the monitoring team that provided support and coaching for community welfare programs funded by The Social Fund in Bangkok and neighbouring provinces. Thus, my early years in the general education program at Krirk University taught me how to engage in anthropological footprints in teaching and learning processes both in and out of the classroom.

I moved to the School of Liberal Arts, Walailak University, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand South, in 2007, and was one of the general education program's committees to create new courses for 1st-year students. Since then, my academic career has taken on various roles in the Walailak's general education program such as lecturer, trainer, facilitator, and learner. In contrast to my previous teaching at Krirk University, Walailak University's General Education curriculum aims to provide a fundamental education on which most students enrolled in engineering, information technology, and health science develop an understanding of their lives through moral, aesthetic, and social understanding. It was a new challenge for me. Furthermore, because people in Thailand's southern region are in agricultural and fishing communities and seem more conservative than those in other parts of the country, I am more concerned about how to structure the teaching and learning process through crucial topics.

It was the 2008 workshop of PBL organised by WU that helped me to get more understanding of the creative learning process. PBL is the method of learning in which students first encounter a problem followed by a systematic inquiry and reflection process. The problems come first to stimulate and trigger students' curiosity leading to exploration and activation of pre-existing knowledge. Precisely, the tutor, not lecturer, of PBL helps students to identify their knowledge, what they know, and what they need to know. Moreover, I also did documentary research on PBL innovation in universities' curriculum both in Thailand and abroad, focusing on how to teach social sciences and humanities to students who are in other disciplines. I came to know that PBL is a learning method that is derived from the concept of constructivism in education studies. Lebow (1993) proposed the constructivist framework that the experiences serve to guide the reader's interpretation of our instructional principles as well as the interpretation of the PBL environment. The instructional principles deriving from constructivism encourage all learning activities to a larger task or problem and support the learner in developing ownership for the overall problem or task. Therefore, I found that the use of PBL case studies in teaching students who are not in the social sciences and humanities provides an effective strategy for helping them to acquire many of the social skills and understandings that are not yet in their disciplines.

PBL always starts with a problem, and I found a way to prove this to myself in 2013. Having got information about female students who have got pregnant to have some problems with their families who did not accept her babies and her boyfriends, I and my colleague, who is in the School of Nursing, seriously discussed these problems and then we decided to develop a new elective course on contemporary sexuality. The objectives of this course: to understand the concept of sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual identity; social and cultural influences on sex, gender, sexuality; individual differences in the

application of knowledge awareness and responsibility in the context of multicultural societies. Surprisingly, lots of students were enrolled in this course and they enjoyed learning by experiential-based learning and learned how to take care of their life more than in the past. It can be argued that the precise knowledge that students need comes when they are competency-solving practitioners (Margetson, 1997).

However, I am aware that PBL takes a different approach (Duch et al., 2001), but I believe that general education courses must shift away from the concept of curriculum as ‘documents’ and toward the concept of curriculum as ‘learning experiences’ based on constructivism to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning process. Consequently, I created a new course on the analytical review of art and culture course and then used PBL for this course. At the early stage, not only my colleagues disagreed with my teaching concept and assessment, but also my students. I tried my best to support and advise my students as much as possible and encouraged my students to create and show their works of art and performances in public spaces. That was a strategy of collaborative learning to open students’ minds and accept others. Finally, this course got a good reflection both in teaching and learning process from my students and colleagues.

Thus, the learning process in the first decade of my teaching at the general education program of Walailak University encourages the enthusiasm and engagement of students to open their minds to social environments. In addition, students could develop the intellectual ability, increase an idea connection, and learn to question to acquire analytical thinking and problem solving through cross-disciplinarians. Therefore, the general education program of Walailak University was a new trend of education for educational practitioners in Thai universities, which aims to strengthen students’ ability to learn individually, thinking skills, self-esteem, and respect others. This also enables me to be able to be responsive to my transformative career as a lecture and tutorial. The next section will discuss more on a changing role of an educator in the new general education program for the 21st century.

4 Engaging the role of facilitator

As head of the general education program in 2015, I took an active role in a tension between ‘instrumentalism’ and ‘critical skills’ of educators. As a university representative, I attended the National General Education Network meeting and presented the problems we found at Walailak University. From the lecturer’s side, it lacked a teaching technique and method that encouraged students to take action on their own. From the student side, they need the lessons as the context for learning to help my students achieve skills in critical thinking and problem-solving. Starting with these problems is to encourage students to use different methods of acquiring knowledge from diverse sources of knowledge for problem-solving. And the instructors will be turned into facilitators, which is something I am passionate about and want to see happen. This is also my next footprint in the field of anthropology of learning.

There was a joint session for Thai lecturers who taught in the general education program to not only share opinions and skills but also develop guidelines for various academic curricula, including trials to identify the problems, weaknesses, and strengths of such courses. Consequently, the general education program setup and provided training programs about team teaching methods, participatory learning, project designs and PBL

by the 21st-century learning skills. Importantly, the needs of the instructors for social science and humanities in the general education program were one of the most serious problems. Precisely, when applied to the teaching PBL to 'social sciences', that facilitator should focus on techniques such as questioning, interpreting and analysis of the social environment. The first course that I use PBL is 'analytical review of art and culture'. This course was designed for the 1st year students, about 300 students per semester. It meets the requirements for the humanities and social sciences inquiry. This course is to develop the students' ability to interpret and analyse issues/phenomena using a social sciences and humanities frame of reference.

Consequently, I have to adapt to the role of facilitator and not a lecturer, to help the learner to get their understanding of the content. The emphasis turns away from the instructor as well as the content, and towards the learner markedly. The comparison of roles implies that a teacher tells and lectures from the front, whereas a facilitator asks and supports from the back; a teacher provides answers based on a set curriculum, whereas a facilitator provides guidelines and creates an environment for the learner to arrive at their conclusion; a teacher mostly gives a monologue, whereas a facilitator is in continuous dialogue with the learners (Rhodes and Belly, 1999). A facilitator should be able to adapt to the learning experience, which can be multiple roles, as a consultant and coach. The facilitator needs to develop good questioning skills. When students are working on their learning cases, an important task for teachers is to use questions to help the students: expand their thinking (through open-ended questioning); frame their ideas and make evidence-based inferences; develop a sceptical mindset about information that lacks supporting data.

For me, the challenge of designing and implementing units on a wide range of humanities topics in ways that are interesting, engaging, and effective for student learning is enormous. I planned that I would introduce a PBL model for group problem-solving at the beginning of the course by providing problems that would serve as opportunities for them to practice using this PBL model. This course is designed for innovation which makes students take an active, task-oriented, and self-directed approach to their learning. It is an instructional approach that uses problems of art as aesthetic and art as a social agency to help students learn both critical thinking and problem-solving about everyday life practice. It also helps them acquire a core understanding of the concepts of art and culture. There is no right or wrong answer. There are suitable solutions based on the application of knowledge, learning and skills deemed necessary to address the issue.

5 Designing course for educator and learner

I would like to talk more about the contemporary sexuality course which I designed in the elective module as PBL class. Learning about 'sex' may be a difficult topic to discuss or communicate directly. At the same time, it is considered a topic to discuss secretly or privately. I and other teaching staff on the team see this as a significant problem, thus 'sexuality' has been discussed and ways to introduce it to the classroom have been brainstormed. As a result, the course design, course specification, and the teaching and learning process have been developed for a course entitled 'contemporary sexuality' by using the process of experiential learning, which takes the learning from abstract to concrete experiences, the process that is appropriate for a practical or a skilled course. Because of this, the public has often formulated their understanding of the topic which

leads to wrong practices. This problem, in turn, is not only a personal problem but also a social and public problem. When adolescents become adults, they are equipped with their free-thinking and self-confidence, so they tend to naively believe that their thoughts and behaviour are proper, especially those concerning sexuality. The negative effects of such orientation are, for example, teen pregnancies, abortions, unwanted pregnancies, HIV infections, and others.

One of the tasks in this course is the WU LOVE Project. It was designed for students to survey or study the situation of students at Walailak University. To be used to define learning management and design activities that lead to behaviour change and understanding for yourself/others and to develop life skills following the real conditions in society. It is not easy for professionals familiar with traditional teaching to use PBL as a conventional lesson tends to start by providing information, and then expects students to use the information to solve problems. The problems in PBL are not typically in the form of narratives of teaching but challenges common to the discipline being studied. Traditional teachers are unable to acquire 'real-world' situations that will make them lifelong problem solvers and help them to become active learners.

The basic argument here is that the 'need to know' is the basis of learning. It is how students learn in everyday life. Problems are therefore seen as providing a stimulus for learning. As a result, in a PBL approach, the problem comes first. Then my students define the problem and gather information to explore it actively. Working in self-directed groups, students are provided with an opportunity to take a proactive and systematic approach to define and explore a definite, preferably 'real life' problem. They are not expected to reach a 'right' answer or an answer that incorporates a specific body of propositional knowledge. Their task is to address the problem and in doing so, identify their learning agendas. I think that the way of facilitator helped not only students to be more active and more interested in learning but also guided teachers to know the way how to make a better classroom environment to be more attractive. Practically, each instructor could not use these principles in the same way. The efficiency of these five principles directly affects the character of the instructor and expertness to use them. Hence, the importance of the five principles use is to develop instructors. Fewer learners had a problem using these principles of instructors. While the learning process has been managed, the lecturer becomes a facilitator in the classroom, to create learning in the classroom with five elements of facilitation's classroom.

I would like to add that one task of this course is self-reflection writing; every student has written an essay on *Journey of Myself Book*. Self-reflection writing is an effective tool that students can use for self-reflection, create their awareness, and realise their own needs. The activity helps students to deepen their learning and stabilise their knowledge. In this course, the students are being asked to look at themselves and write down what they do not or often tend to do. I have found out that students' writings could reflect on specific events and some incidents which they integrated into and the learning process. Their writing can refer to critically thinking and ideas. A conceptual framework of the self-reflection writing model was used to analyse the learning of students' experiences was also perceived. Assessment is participation in class, quizzes, writing assignments and joining the 'be myself' activity. Particularly in 'be myself' activities, students have to develop and learn through the designed activities: drawing the closest person in their life, sculpting the animal's character which is similar to themselves, cutting the paper-like whatever things that their hate and analysing themselves to discuss and exchange their

ideas with their friends. The last activity is a wrap-up where the facilitator listens to their reflections and conclusions about their activities.

This course focuses on practical activities. It makes students take an active, task-oriented, art therapy, dialogue and self-directed approach to their learning. Adaptation of the instructional approach that uses the ‘real-world’ and students’ experience help them to learn critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and public awareness. Besides, this course has been a huge impact on student learning by varied formative assessments such as a one-minute quiz, think-pair-share, and weekly writing. I also use the rubric score as the tool that represents the performance for the assignment and piece of work and provide formative feedback to support learning outcomes. It also helps them to acquire a core understanding of the concepts of the course. There is no right or wrong answer as there are reasonable solutions based on the application of knowledge and skills deemed necessary to address the issues.

Among a variety of important learning components, they need to develop themselves as a self-directed leader, being a well-known person, having the problem-solving ability and is working as a team leader or member. They have to adaptive themselves as a creative and critical thinking person, love of learning synthesises and sharing their knowledge, application it’s for their working and daily living as a happy person. The critiques of integrating these two learning processes, which influence students learning of their understanding of individuals and society. The learning process and the process of lifelong learning will be used to develop active learning for the general education program.

6 Considering on anthropology of general education

More concerning Pelissier’s (1991) anthropology of learning, I think it should be integrated the learning process of general education contribute student’s capacity to be learner, responsive informant, and responsible citizen. The anthropology of general education can be used by an individual learner as well as in a group. The principle is that the facilitator should setup a learning experience plan, triggering the learners to reflect and discuss what they have learned through their experience. This PBL-based learning process has been adopted as a model for other course designers who may be looking for a proper design for dealing with or integrating with other issues related to the learners’ lives and experiences. The facilitator’s task perception is found to have a substantial impact on learners’ engagement in social and emotional guidance. The facilitator’s perception of whether addressing the social and emotional needs of students is part of their responsibility has a significant influence on their engagement in social and emotional guidance. Specifically, the learner’s task perception serves as a facilitator’s task (Jacobs and Struyf, 2015; Tnay et al., 2020).

The ability to trend imagination in social sciences and interpretation and analysis of the problems of the real world must be strengthened. The scenario that is a need as a trigger needs to be carefully selected emphasised. However, I always found that the difficulty thus is in the step of ‘problem definition’. Then the importance of using anthropological questions in the study of social reality is to define ‘the problem’. The result of this will be understanding the problem of anthropology to explain the reality of the phenomenon happening in society as well. Does this acknowledgment imply that we

are any less free than we thought of this kind? Ingold (2018, pp.43–44), an educational anthropologist, said not at all.

In sum, I think the activities of the teaching and learning process such as the case of *Journey of Myself* course is a good example of anthropology of general education that helps students to reflect on their knowledge in different ways. However, the analysis reveals that there are specific pedagogic difficulties in using self-reflection writing to enhance and explore learning in students to draw. It found that my students in the general education program pleasantly studied these courses and were responsible themselves for their tasks. Then, a learning atmosphere was better than in the past, not boring. These reflections on my stance involves how I respond to and uphold specific realities, ways of knowing, and values in my classrooms and how I enable their inclusion. More importantly, focusing on these ideals will likely raise my awareness of how I already support my students' learning and engagement, allowing me to focus on areas where I can improve.

Thus, I point out that the importance of the anthropology of general education used by the PBL method in the general education program is to let the student think and see the world that reflected their modes of thought [Pelissier, (1991), p.76]. The students are supposed to flourish in intelligence, skills, attitude, morals, ethics as well as arts and sciences which would create the characteristics of being well-educated, holding a leadership personality, becoming good followers in the democratic society, changing world, and globalisation era. For the next step, I would like to suggest that, Thai anthropologists should be as open-minded and active in public education as they can.

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