

INTERVIEW

Doing and Teaching Anthropology: An Interview with David McCurdy

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David McCurdy is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Macalester College. After receiving a BA in anthropology from Cornell University (1957), an MA from Stanford University (1959), and a PhD from Cornell University (1964), he taught for two years at Colorado State University. He spent the next thirty-eight years at Macalester College, where he founded the anthropology department and served off and on for eighteen years as its chair. He, along with Barbara Joans, was the first recipient of the American Anthropological Association/Mayfield Award for Undergraduate Teaching (1997). He also received the Macalester Distinguished Teaching Award (1995) and, along with colleague James Spradley, was profiled in *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* (1978) for innovating teaching in anthropology (Special Report on Innovative Teaching, No. 6, 1978).

His long career is distinguished by his dedication to furthering teaching within the discipline and supporting undergraduate learning of anthropology through student ethnographic research. Dave is the author, editor, or co-editor of a number of publications that focus on teaching anthropology, including the *Strategies in Teaching Anthropology* series, *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* (15 editions), *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society* (2 editions), and *Issues in Cultural Anthropology*, among many other books and articles. His ethnographic research includes an ethnographic study of a Bhil community in Rajasthan, India, explorations of an American environmental movement (1968-1969), a study of a Jehovah's Witness community in Minnesota (1973), a study of stockbrokers in the Twin Cities (1980), and a long-term continuing study of a national motorcycle association (1983 to present).

I [Katie Nelson] attended Macalester College in the late 1990s, where I had the pleasure of taking courses with Dave McCurdy. He served as my academic advisor until his semi-retirement in 2000. As chair of the newly formed anthropology department, he insisted on having both a comfortable common space where students and often faculty could hang out and an ethnographic lab containing computers and recording equipment. I recall a distinct sense of community in the Macalester anthropology department. At nearly any time of day one could find students working and chatting in the ethnography

lab space, which was a narrow corridor lined with computers and transcription equipment. Bookshelves of anthropological textbooks and manuals outlined an adjacent room, framed by overstuffed chairs, faculty offices, and the department's mascot, an articulated human skeleton named *Bones* who habitually wore an anthropology department t-shirt and tie. Dave McCurdy's down-to-earth yet methodologically rigorous, community-centered approach to student learning penetrated every corner of the anthropology department. It was a remarkable place to receive my undergraduate training in anthropology.

I spoke with Dave about his contributions to teaching and learning in anthropology on a bright summer morning in 2018 at his home tucked into the quaint, meandering neighborhood surrounding Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

DM: I want to thank Katie Nelson for helping to found this online journal on doing and teaching anthropology. Teaching is a complex process and strategies for doing it vary. Learning how others teach is essential to the formation of one's own teaching style and success.

KN: You have had a long and productive career. Describe some of your work that has focused on elevating teaching within our discipline.

Let me avoid that task for a moment and say something about my personal history. I knew early in my academic career that I wanted to be a teacher. My decision to take this direction in my professional life had (and still has) its costs. Academic prestige for anthropologists did not, and to some degree, still does not depend on teaching or writing for students and the general public. Instead, research, engagement with theory, and contributions to professional journals are the gateways to tenure, promotion, and academic reputation. Despite this, I decided to focus much of my professional career on undergraduate teaching because I learned I was better at it, I enjoyed the challenge, I wanted to spread the value of anthropological knowledge to a wider public, and I liked the personal association with undergraduate students. I also believed that teaching about what anthropologists know, especially about culture and cultural misunderstanding, is a moral necessity in today's complex world. And that's why I ended up at a liberal arts college where teaching and writing for undergraduates is possible, appreciated, and rewarding.

Now to Katie's observation that I elevated (I prefer contributed to) teaching through my publications and participation in committees such as the American Anthropological Association Task Force on Teaching. If these activities have affected the way my colleagues teach, then they may represent contributions, but their effect can only be measured by the extent to which other anthropologists found them useful, and I can't speak to that. But I can say something about work that might seem useful for readers of a new journal.

My interest in teaching strategies originally emerged from problems I faced as a TA for an introductory course on cultural anthropology at Cornell University. My job there was primarily to lead student discussions about course readings and secondarily to decode some aspects of the instructor's lectures. Reading selections for the course consisted of articles drawn from anthropology's professional literature, and students often lacked enough background in the discipline to understand what these were about. So what to do? I noticed that articles in those days usually contained a question about human behavior that authors sought to explain: Why are cows sacred in India? What accounts for beliefs in witchcraft? Why do brothers and sisters avoid each other in some societies? I tried to help students decode articles by pointing out that most of them had a structure. Articles first described a question of interest to anthropologists and usually then reviewed explanations advanced by other anthropologists. The body of the article would consist of a new explanation and the data to support it. I had students look for this structure and the ideas it contained before coming to class, then I had them present what they found to the class. Using this approach seemed to help the students and discussion improved. (It also seemed to raise their test scores.)

Later, I tried another idea. Instead of assigning individual articles about a variety of questions, I chose a limited number of issues that concerned anthropologists and assigned sets of articles that illustrated different ways to explain them. I thought this worked even better and that it served to reduce complexity. In 1979, and reissued in 1987, my colleague Jim Spradley and I edited a book, *Issues in Cultural Anthropology*, that took this kind of structural approach.

As I began to teach my own courses, I tried to find more accessible readings. I picked what I considered to be especially well-written and intimate books on the lives of people belonging to other societies for students to read. These included Collin Turnbull's *Forest People*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Margery Wolf's *House of Lim*. Again, this approach seemed to increase student interest and gave them a better feel for how culture shapes people's lives. Accessibility was also a major consideration when Jim Spradley and I set out to produce our introductory reader, *Conformity and Conflict*. A warning: If you take accessibility seriously, you may be accused of dumbing down anthropology. For your critics, asking students to wade through difficult material is a virtue.

Now let me turn to my part in developing undergraduate ethnographic field work. I was the first anthropologist at Macalester College. When I arrived there in 1966, the college had instituted a January term called an "interim." Students were to take only one course for the month and experience something in depth. I took this opportunity to introduce students to ethnographic fieldwork by having them do it. They were to go out to find cultural scenes on campus and interview students about them. As an aside, this approach resembled my own field work experience in India. There was no course on how to do fieldwork at that time. Our only guide came from reading ethnographies before we went out to the field. You read Malinowski and you read about Franz Boas and you jumped right in. I guess it worked, although it required full immersion in a cultural group

and lots of time. The only structure I could provide for the course was to have students try to conduct interviews then meet and talk about their problems as a group. I soon learned that students were confused about what to do. They would ask questions like, What is a cultural scene? How do you ask questions? What do you do with the information once you get it? We worked together on these issues, and in the end, we produced some interesting information about student life. But the approach lacked sufficient structure and it was difficult to evaluate the results.

An answer to these problems arrived with Jim Spradley, who joined the program in 1966. I had talked the administration into hiring another anthropologist, but I wasn't sure who to hire. I kept hearing about this guy out there: Jim Spradley. People said, "oh, you have to meet him, he is an ethnographer." And I'd say, "yeah, yeah, well we are all ethnographers." But they would insist, "no, he is really an ethnographer." So I met with him at the national meeting, that year it was in Seattle, and we really hit it off. I was impressed by him. (A sad note: Jim tragically died at the age of 48, a victim of leukemia, but his presence at Macalester changed my life and my approach to undergraduate teaching. If you google him, you will be impressed by the number of books he wrote and edited. At least four of them are still in print.)

It was Jim who suggested that we put together a book of readings for introductory anthropology. Up to that point, the intro "readers" in anthropology mostly included articles taken from professional journals. As we looked for materials to include in the book, we discovered that some anthropologists published for more general audiences and that these articles could serve well to illustrate anthropological interests and perspectives. A prime example is George Gmelch's piece, "Baseball Magic," which in revised form still graces the 15th edition of our reader, *Conformity and Conflict*. We also began to write our own articles and asked other anthropologists to do so as well, and we included more material on US society. Today, there are several popular readers that use this format.

Jim arrived at Macalester with a technique that could provide students with the structure they would need to do ethnographic fieldwork. He had held a joint appointment in anthropology and psychiatry at the University of Washington and had received a grant to study alcoholics in Seattle. As he began to interview residents at a local alcoholic treatment facility, he discovered many patients called themselves *tramps* and had been sent there for habitual public drunkenness. Their lives captured his interest and he began to interview a few and observed them in public places. Then, a University of Washington anthropology graduate student, Pere Hage, told him about a new ethnographic approach to interviewing called ethnoscience (I call it ethnosemantics now). Pere illustrated this approach to Spradley by interviewing one of Spradley's tramp informants for a couple of hours. Jim later told me that he learned more about tramps at that session than he had in the previous six months. Excited by the structure that ethnosemantics gave to interviewing, he learned, adopted the approach, and used the resulting data to write *You Owe Yourself a Drunk: An Ethnography of Urban Nomads*. The book is a classic and is still in print.

Spradley's ethnosemantics became the basis for our student ethnography program at Macalester. During his first semester with us, Jim offered an intermediate course based on ethnosemantics. Students were to find an informant living near the college who was part of a cultural scene. Restaurant cooks, firemen, dog show participants (not the dogs, however), morticians, and gay bar regulars are examples of informants students chose. Then students were to interview them using a series of steps to discover their "inside" culture.

Since I had no idea what ethnosemantics was, I sat in on his class all semester and took field notes. I documented the questions students asked and how he answered them. I also tried the techniques out myself. I first interviewed my daughter when she was out jumping rope. I ran into all the problems you run into with ethnoscience. For instance, if you are not clear about your cover terms, you run into problems. I first asked my daughter if there were other terms for jump ropes. But it turns out that was the wrong question. The questions I really should have started with were "What are the games?" and "What are the names?" I was imprecise at first. I didn't understand why this one thing that my daughter did with the jump rope could be such and such move. I understood them to be equivalents when they should have been contrasting terms, and so on.

Jim and I went to lunch together every day to discuss the teaching problems associated with the course. I learned the method as well as I could and introduced it to my own students. Impressed by the results, we wrote a book, *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*, which teaches the method and includes several student-authored ethnographies as examples. A revised edition of the book, co-authored with Dianna Shandy, appeared in 2005. Using ethnosemantics to teach ethnographic research continues to be a feature of Macalester's introductory and advanced research courses to this day.

Finally, as Katie noted in her introduction, my other contributions to teaching concerned committee service and efforts to publish articles about teaching. Patricia Rice and I also founded, and for 23 years served as editors of, the *General Anthropology Bulletin*⁴, which was designed to include articles on teaching and on subjects that might be useful for teachers. I hope that some of these efforts did contribute useful information for teachers.

KN: Why did you encourage students to do ethnographic research early on in their anthropological training?

Doing anthropology is important to how I thought anthropology should be taught. I wanted my students to *do* anthropology, and that was not usual at the time. That was just

⁴ See <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/19393466>

not what you did. But I thought, "hell, if you are a chemist or a biologist, you have a lab and that lab work is part of learning. We should have our students doing this, too."

And I discovered that they can do it successfully. We had some excellent honors projects that came out of student ethnographic research. One student started interviewing Hmong women weavers during her first year at Macalester. By her senior year, she had produced an ethnographic honors paper that was so well done the Minnesota State Historical Society asked for a copy to include in their permanent library. The paper was highly descriptive and detailed every move and every stitch and their associated meanings. This type of anthropology remains important in my opinion, and students should be encouraged to produce it. I still think it's useful to document and classify the way people live. I think Boas died thinking there really is no right way to explain things, you just have to classify stuff.

Ethnographic research reveals culture in a way that reading about cultural differences can't. Often the behavior of others only makes sense in a particular cultural context and ethnographic research reveals that. In a sense, it is a road to empathy. Doing ethnographic research is an exceptionally effective and useful way to teach anthropology, especially if its design is clear enough to enable students to do it successfully. And Macalester anthropology graduates tell me that it has helped them as they pursue further education or engage in their occupational work. As an example, I encountered their opinions this year when I gave a talk about anthropology and business to reunion attendees. I emphasized the growing use of ethnographic research in business and government. When I was done speaking, graduates who had taken anthropology began to give personal testimonials about how the ethnographic methods they learned at Macalester were so essential and useful in their various jobs. I was delighted.

KN: Why do you think teaching and learning have not received the attention they deserve within our discipline?

Teaching, as I have noted, is a complex and often personal art. It's difficult to codify. Its requirements may vary among disciplines. It depends on one's experience and interests and the educational level of its audience (if audience is the right word here). It involves the personalities and motives of its practitioners. And different courses and audiences present different teaching challenges so that one person's teaching solution may not work for another. Because of this, the study of teaching may founder on a sea of detailed differences and appear useless, so anthropologists may find it difficult to do.

A second reason is that our academic reputation tends to rest on our professional research and writing. Teaching is simply a necessary feature of employment, not a subject for our professional inquiry. Research on teaching might be nice, but it is not viewed as a contribution to the discipline and is thus seen as a waste of time.

Additionally, teaching is hard to measure. Today, many faculty feel the pressure to publish and their work in the classroom is harder to evaluate. I think this trend in anthropology started at the end of the the second world war when research began to be

supported by the US government and other agencies and institutions would take a big chunk of it, sometimes as much as 40%! So research grants and the resulting publications became important to institutions financially; they became a way of measuring anthropology faculty that didn't exist before. Before, you could dabble, in a sense, and try out new things. You could study something simply because it interested you and you were not necessarily compelled by the financial element or the push to publish.

KN: One of the characteristics of your teaching I remember the most from when I was a Macalester College student many years ago was your storytelling. Why do you think storytelling is so important pedagogically for anthropology?

There is an old adage I ran across years ago: psychologists have experiments, sociologists have questionnaires, and anthropologists have stories. Stories hold interest and serve to make points. They often convey an inside feel for other cultures. So I and several of my mentors use or used stories to teach anthropological points. And I think this is a good way to remember things. I still recall my instructors' stories from my undergraduate years (and even the points they were meant to illustrate). Also, I can't help myself. I have always talked that way.

One story I often shared with my students was from when I was out in the field doing research in India. I was preparing for my wife and nine-month-old daughter to visit me. In a bazaar in town, I found a modest, used wooden crib. I bought it for our daughter and brought it back to the village and to my hut so they could visit. Carol [my wife] brought Vicki [our daughter] out and all the women were amazed by our fat baby. She was bigger than many two-year-olds in the village. People were very curious. I had this house made out of stripped bamboo and we put the crib in it and villagers came and asked "what is that?" and I said "well, the baby sleeps in that." They looked at me quizzically, looked at my wife, and then said, "well, how does your wife fit in it?"

This story helped illustrate my points about how culture impacts the way people see the world. In Indian culture, babies don't sleep by themselves. They always sleep with their mothers, and the idea of a baby sleeping alone made no sense to the Indian villagers. I told my students that this was an example of an insight that got me more and more into the villagers' world view.

Telling stories of cultural misunderstandings is a great way to help students understand what culture is and how it shapes our thinking. I used to tell my students another story about my fieldwork in India. One night, while walking to the latrine during the rainy season, I nearly stepped on a pit viper. Carol wrote home about the incident and her father sent me a pair of massive engineering boots. It took about two months for them to arrive. Once they did, I would wear them around the village and people were just amazed by these boots. One day someone in the village asked me, "where did you get these boots?" I told him that my father-in-law sent them and they were absolutely shocked. They could not believe that I had taken something from my father-in-law. In India, the male family line is so important, and it would be humiliating for a man to take

something from his wife's family, much less from his father-in-law. So I quickly said something like, "oh, well, you know, I paid him for those," which wasn't true of course. But it's small interactions such as these that impressed on me the importance of understanding culture. I found a lot of value in sharing these stories with my students.

DM: Katie didn't ask for suggestions about teaching, but I will throw some in any way since I tried to live by them during my active life as a professor.

- Get a sense of your own style and teach in a way that fits it.
- Identify teaching problems and look for answers.
- Find materials that include current interests.
- Choose course materials that students can access.
- If possible, regularly discuss teaching with a colleague or colleagues.
- Read student evaluations and try to address negative assessments.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help or advice.
- Assess the background of the students in your classes and design what you do accordingly.
- If possible, design classes that enable students to do research or present findings in class.
- Think of ways to reduce the tension between helping students and evaluating them.
- Don't be afraid to change things that fail to work.
- Get to know your students personally if possible.
- Try to keep positive.
- Don't over complexify. (My thesaurus says this is not a word.)
- Do one thing at a time.
- Don't blame students for things that fail to work (except when one student in your class is spiking it for everyone else, and that's a whole different problem).
- And have fun!

Further Reading

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