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Don't worry if you fail to save the world on your first go

Guest editorial by Stuart Kirsch

ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY has published a series of editorials in recent issues that raise the same underlying questions: what is anthropological knowledge good for, and how can we put anthropology to good use? In short, the question of engagement. After the publication of my recent book, *Engaged anthropology: Politics beyond the text* (Kirsch 2018), a number of readers asked for practical advice. In response, here are a dozen suggestions for conducting engaged research, which may come in handy during these tumultuous times, when many of us wish we could do more to make a difference.

(1) Don't be afraid to 'do the right thing' or 'speak truth to power'. Your senior colleagues or professors may discourage you from getting involved or offering your support. But I've found that acknowledging my position on key issues has opened new doors, providing access to individuals and meetings that would not otherwise be available to me. For example, I've criticized the Ok Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea for its environmental impacts, supported the rights of West Papuan refugees and helped to protect indigenous land rights in several legal proceedings. In contrast to what anthropologists ordinarily assume, taking a stance on important issues can lead to new opportunities and stimulate conversations that strengthen ethnography rather than limit it (Kirsch 2002; Loperena 2016). ***Don't be afraid to take a stance on important matters.***

(2) Stick to what you're most knowledgeable and passionate about. I received this advice from a senior colleague early in my career. She advised me that if someone is passionate about a particular topic, and even occasionally intemperate, others will forgive them, and may even come to respect them for it. But should they start to complain about multiple things, people may conclude that they are a grouch, and no one wants an angry grouch as a colleague. Although it may be tempting to speak out against all the injustices of the world, especially since so many of them are interconnected, to do so would be exhausting. No individual can solve all of the world's problems on their own, which is why we need a division of labour. ***Figure out what's most important to you and stick to it.***

(3) Don't exaggerate. Tell the truth as best you can. I learnt this lesson while working downstream from the Ok Tedi mine. The environmental impacts from that project were substantial, and there was no reason to overstate them. While telling the truth is its own reward, your critics will constantly be testing you, looking for what you've got wrong and trying to use that information to discredit you. Once, before agreeing to meet me, the managing director of the Ok Tedi mine showed one of my articles to an employee of the mining company who was from the area where I conducted my research, to check whether my account was correct. The man read the article and informed his employer that what I had written was true, which led the managing director of the mining company to grant my request for an interview. ***Your reputation for accurately representing the situation matters.***

(4) Sometimes you have to relinquish control. For a recent project on indigenous land rights in Guyana, I had planned to conduct one-on-one interviews and organize small focus groups, but the community leaders insisted that I introduce myself and my research at a community-wide meeting and have people answer my questions in a public forum. So I conducted a mass interview at a public assembly with between 60 and 80 people listening. They also asked

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me to share my preliminary findings with the entire community before departing, so I frantically scribbled a summary of my report to share with everyone for their consent and feedback, and literally missed the boat back to the capital while presenting it to the village assembly. While ethnographic methods matter, it is possible to do research under conditions not of our own choosing. ***You don't have to be in charge***.

(5) Don't be afraid to talk to people with radically different points of view. I recently spent a summer working with a group of engineers who design machinery for the mining industry. We were participating in a think tank on the future of mining and we collaborated on ways to reduce the industry's environmental footprint. Some people might be critical of this kind of engagement with the 'other side'. However, I learned a great deal about their perspectives and blind spots, and by working together, we were able to devise a number of promising interventions. As Henk Ovink and Jelte Boeijenga (2018: 143) describe in their book on collaborative design, solving problems does not result from establishing an 'alliance of like-minded people but partnerships that bring maximum diversity, with room for different perspectives and interests'. This kind of cooperation is necessary to develop solutions that work for most people. ***Listen to people with different perspectives***.

(6) What to do if your relations with the people who you are collaborating with 'blow up' or 'go south'? The short answer is to remember who you're fighting for. Charles Hale (2006: 97) defines activist anthropology as 'a method through which we affirm political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle', although the people with whom anthropologists work are not always organized or in agreement with one another. Several years ago, I participated in an interdisciplinary review of a proposed bauxite mine in Suriname that would have significant social and environmental impacts on the indigenous communities located nearby. Although we had been working closely with these communities, their leaders signed a compensation agreement with the mining company the week before we were scheduled to visit. My colleagues were stunned by their decision, which felt like a betrayal of our collaboration, and wondered whether we should pull out of the project. I argued that we should go forward with the review, because we had a mandate to work on behalf of those people who can't speak or don't have a voice, including members of future generations, not just the leaders of the group.

In response, we prepared a memorandum of understanding, or MOU, stipulating that as a condition of completing the review, the leaders agree to consult with us before signing any new contract with the mining company. We were surprised by the response, which was to express their gratitude. They explained that they had been under pressure from members of their own community who had gone into debt in the run-up to the project and consequently demanded that they sign the compensation agreement. They told us that the MOU would give them the leverage they needed to 'pause' before making any future decisions that would affect the well-being of the community. It is important to recognize that the people we work with aren't likely to be in agreement about everything, or even most things; they are likely to have competing interests and opinions. ***Remember who you're fighting for and why***.

(7) Opportunities to do engaged research may arise at inconvenient moments, but take advantage of them anyway. This advice came from a colleague after I received a request to compose an affidavit about a Freedom of Information Act case against a mining company and the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC). The mining company was trying to stop OPIC from releasing information about pollution downstream from the mine on the grounds that it was protected as proprietary business information. My colleague encouraged me to agree to the request, even though I had to put other commitments on hold. Although it wasn't a make-or-break project for my career, it fuelled my sense of urgency about tackling these issues in a much broader way than I had previously considered. ***Take advantage of opportunities to expand your frame of reference.***

(8) Not all requests for your time and assistance are appropriate. I am currently finishing an article about a natural scientist who was indicted on racketeering and corruption charges for allegedly 'ghostwriting' the testimony of a court-appointed independent expert in a developing country. Although this person had commendable motives – to support the indigenous plaintiffs in the case, who had been negatively affected by widespread contamination of their lowland rainforest lands and territories – she should have paid more attention to whether the lawyer's instructions were lawful and proper. ***Don't assume that every request for help is legitimate.***

(9) It's not about you. Rightly or wrongly, activist anthropologists have a reputation for exaggerating their achievements. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995: 438) has acknowledged, it is difficult to assess the consequences of one's own actions. You will also find that when a collective intervention is successful, a great many people will rush forward to claim a share of the credit. You don't need to be one of them; emphasizing the contributions of an outsider may undermine the achievements of your counterparts. ***Be modest when attributing credit.***

(10) Learn to write for multiple audiences. Engaged anthropologists need to write in multiple genres to reach different audiences – the local community, policymakers and different publics, not just readers of *The Guardian*, which is akin to preaching to the choir or pushing on open doors. But remember that public-facing scholarship cannot replace peer-reviewed publications, despite its value in an Internet-mediated world. ***Reach out to new audiences***.

(11) Always try to do new things; avoid repeating yourself. One risk of being an engaged scholar is that you will want to collect updates on long-running problems, preventing you from doing other things; another is that you may be asked to replicate your earlier work in new contexts. It is important to experiment with different methodologies and try to link your research to new questions. One of the cardinal sins of academia is to repeat yourself, even if the problems are similar to what you've studied before. Academic knowledge emphasizes novelty, so push yourself to try new things. ***Don't let your political commitments impede your intellectual growth as a scholar.***

(12) Don't worry if you fail to save the world on your first go. The problems we face in the world today are dauntingly large. Some of the solutions proposed by academics are appropriately ambitious: that we should dismantle capitalism, save the planet and ensure universal equality. But these are hard asks. We shouldn't let our long-term hopes for the future stand in the way of more practical and immediate measures undertaken on a more intimate scale. There's a lot we can do by working with the tools of anthropology, in contexts where we've done or are doing our ethnographic research, and with communities where we've already built or are building relationships. ***Dream big, but consider starting small.***

In conclusion, here are my top 12 suggestions for doing engaged anthropology: (1) stand up for what you believe in; (2) stick to what you're knowledgeable and passionate about; (3) protect your reputation by telling the truth and eschewing exaggeration; (4) accept that you won't always be in charge; (5) listen to people with different points of view; (6) remember who you're fighting for and why; (7) seize opportunities when they arise; (8) recognize that not every request for your assistance will be appropriate; (9) remember it's not about you; (10) write for different audiences; (11) try new things; and finally, (12) dream big, but don't worry if you fail to save the world on your first go. ●

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