Teaching Empathy and Reflexivity in General Education Courses

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Abstract

This research article explores how empathy and reflexivity, the keystones of contemporary pedagogical philosophy, can be taught, learned and applied through general education (GE) courses with an anthropological approach. General education courses aim to offer students foundational, interdisciplinary and reflexive knowledge of human cultures and societies. Anthropological theories and methodologies provoke researchers to understand cultural differences from a holistic, comparative and relativist viewpoint. Drawing on focus group interviews with students of the GE courses at BNU-HKBU United International College, the article argues that an effective and affective way of teaching empathy and reflexivity in general education courses is to raise a sensitive understanding of peoples and cultures at the margin of society and to encourage critical analyses of the historicity and complexity of social issues.

Keywords: empathy, reflexivity, general education, anthropology

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Introduction

This article discusses how empathy and reflexivity, the cornerstones of modern pedagogical philosophy, can be taught, learned and applied in general education courses. General education (GE) is broadly defined as "education programs that are designed to develop learners' general knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as literacy and numeracy skills" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics, 2012, p. 14) at college level. Since the 1960s, GE has gradually developed into an innovative and integral part of liberal arts education in the United States and beyond. As Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) General Education Office defines, general education "foregrounds the essential elements of Whole Person Education, such as integration of knowledge, acquisition of multiple perspectives, empathy and critical thinking, and aims to nurture our students to become responsible and responsive citizens" (Hong Kong Baptist University, 2021). At BNU-HKBU United International College (UIC) where the authors teach and study, general education courses on the theme of history and civilization taught by faculty of the General Education Office (GEO) serve the goal of offering "an

educational experience that encourages students to think beyond their academic or professional specialization, develop critical thinking skills, and be aware of human aspects of scientific and business professions" (UIC General Education Office, 2021).

As reflected in HKBU's and UIC's general education program philosophy, empathy and reflexivity are important pedagogical goals of such programs. Empathy refers to the compacity of understanding and feeling the experience and oftentimes sufferings of the distant other. Reflexivity, on the other hand, refers to "the process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth"(Schwandt, 2001, p. 224). Nevertheless, we have witnessed a great lack of empathy and reflexivity of college students across the world. A lack of understanding or tolerance of cultures or behaviors different from those of their own can be easily identified in the students' school work, social activities and speech on the social media.

According to a meta-analysis of 72 studies of 14,000 American college students done in 2009, Konrath and colleagues (2011) find a sharp decline in empathy among the students (cf. Ma, 2021). A recent study also shows that most Chinese college students suffer from the lack of

empathy especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ning & Huang, 2021). Such a deficiency in empathy has limited the students' capacity to grasp the complexity of social issues, led to their emotional fickleness, as well as rendered them ignorant and intolerant of other people's feelings or opinions. Unfortunately, also lacking is the research on how empathy and reflexivity can be taught in college-level humanities and social sciences courses, and simultaneously how students learn about and apply such ways of thinking in their life and study (Singleton et al., 2022).

Drawing on focus group interviews with 18 students who have taken foundational and free elective GE courses with an anthropological approach offered by the GEO at UIC, this article showcases how students are introduced to and learn about the principles and perspectives of empathy and reflexivity through the course lectures, readings and assignments. Empathy and reflexivity are defining characteristics of the discipline of anthropology, which adopts a holistic and cultural relativistic viewpoint to examine and extoll the diversity, complexity and heterogeneity of the human world. Particularly, anthropological studies pay special attention to peoples and cultures regarded as "marginal" or "other" and are devoted to exposing the historically entangled ecological, economic, po-

litical and social processes which lead to the unequal treatment of such marginality or otherness. Thus, the paper argues that an effective and affective way of teaching empathy and reflexivity in general education courses is to raise a sensitive understanding of peoples and cultures at the margin of society and to encourage critical analyses of the historicity and complexity of social issues. The article first discusses how anthropological perspectives can help the teaching of empathy and reflexivity in college general education courses. Following a discussion of the paper's research methodology, we analyze how the ideas of empathy and reflexivity are taught and learned in the GE courses at UIC. The paper concludes by suggesting ways in which GE education with empathy and reflexivity can facilitate the pedagogical visions of modern education programs at Chinese universities.

Teaching Empathy and Reflexivity with Anthropology

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, empathy is "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts and experience

fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). As "Einfuhlung," the German root of the word empathy, reveals, empathy means "to protect yourself into what you observe" (Titchener, 1909, as cited in Ma, 2021, para. 1). Psychological research has shown that empathy includes two basic components including cognitive empathy and emotional empathy (for a review of related research, see Ding & Lu, 2016). While emotional empathy may be an innate ability to feel and experience others' emotions, cognitive empathy refers to the ability to rationalize and evaluate such emotions. Researchers argue that cognitive empathy is possible only when higher cognitive processes are involved (Rameson & Lieberman, 2009, as cited in Ding & Lu, 2016). Thus, cognitive empathy is a skill and capacity which can be nurtured through learning and appreciating the complexity, diversity and inequality of the social world created by particular economic and political power confrontations.

A genuine empathic way of thinking should be not only thoughtful but also critical. Reflexivity is a keystone of critical thinking which takes scholars and students to "assess the conditions under which knowledge has been produced," to "consider the well-being or 'co-presence' of those they encounter during research," and to allow "identification of blind spots in research programs" (Singleton et al., 2022, p. 73). It is an important capacity for people to effectively comprehend the heterogenous and yet increasingly connected social world. Specifically in the learning process, reflexive empathy allows students to feel the experience and often suffering of the research subjects, to apprehend the different sociocultural traditions and conditions which lead to the diversification of world views, and to be more willing to collaborate with rather than hurting one another in society.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold in his book *Anthropology and/as Education* (2017) proposes that the discipline of anthropology and education share the similar mission of studying, and leading the lives of the others. The discipline of anthropology can provide important theoretical and applied frameworks to promote empathy and reflexivity in the study of socio-cultural issues. Central to anthropological teaching and learning is the theory of cultural relativism. Proposed by the founding father of American anthropology Franz Boas (1887), cultural relativism asks us to perceive cultures as being different but equal, arguing that no absolute standard should be utilized to evaluate them. Cultural relativism is a theoretical framework to bring to light and fight against the harms of cultural essentialism—the reduction of cultural diversity

across societies and the harms of cultural imperialism—the shading of inequality or structural violence in the process of imperial and/or capitalist expansion.

In anthropology, empathy has been the pivotal motivation and mission of generations of scholars to give an objective, comparative and caring examination of peoples and cultures different from the Western imagination of the world ordering. The discipline has provoked scholars to recognize and reconsider the biases, structural violence and representation crisis embedded in the research and writing of the "other" cultures and groups often at the margin of the society. As anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2018) argues, anthropology provides a "realist position" anchored in social reality which can help to explore the political implications of postmodernist critique of culture in the quagmire of positivism and scientism. Such a cultural critique of anthropology has made reflexivity a defining character of the discipline, which calls for a critical analysis of the histories of colonialism, patriarchy, global capitalism, political oppression and cultural alienation in relation to the knowledge-and meaning-making process. Importantly, reflexive thinking opens up space for interpersonal, compassionate and cross-cultural communication and sense making. As Yu and Ai (2022) ar-

gues, "this research and teaching reminds students to be aware of social experience and recognize the con texts and contingencies of all knowledge" (p. 8).

Methodology

The present study is a qualitative research. The main method used in the paper is the focus group interview method. Focus group interview as a research method was initiated in the mid-20th Century, and since then, it has been increasingly used in different sociological research projects. According to Lederman (see Thomas et al., 1995, as cited in Rabiee, 2004), focus group interview is "a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily repre sentative, sampling of a specific population, this group being 'focused' on a given topic" (p. 655). Rabiee comments, "Partic ipants in this type of research are, therefore, selected on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, are within the age-range, have similar socio-characteristics and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other" (see also Richardson & Rabiee, 2001, as cited in Rabiee, 2004, p. 655). David Morgan (1996) points out, the interactive form of focus group interviews helps to gain more insights and

data, in which interpersonal relationships play a very important role. In focus group interviews, each interviewee can obtain new ideas from other participants to supplement or broaden their thinking, an effect not easily to be achieved using other interview methods.

In this study, 18 students of different majors and grades volunteered to participate in the focus group interviews. They have all taken the GE courses offered by Dr. Zhang, an anthropologist in training and assistant professor of GEO at UIC (Table 1). The GE courses are in the history and civilization GE course category which aim to equip students with basic and yet inter-disciplinary knowledge of histories and cultures of the world. The courses include two GE foundational courses History of Popular Culture 1900-2000 (HPC hereafter) and China in Western Perspectives (CWP hereafter). The syllabi of the foundational courses were designed by two other scholars of GEO, Dr. Mark Perry and Dr. Wei Chin Wong respectively, when the courses were first offered before Dr. Zhang joined UIC. Dr. Zhang has been given the flexibility to teach the courses based on her expertise while following the requirements listed in the syllabi. Some of the students also took two free elective GE courses designed and taught by Dr. Zhang. They are Risk and Disasters in Modern Society (R&D hereafter) and Understanding Cultural Diversity (UCD hereafter) courses which adopt anthropological and interdisciplinary approaches to introduce students to the various sociocultural responses to major events and changes in individual life courses and the larger society. All of the four courses use teaching methods including lectures, in-class reading exercises, group projects and presentations, research essay writing and final examination.

Table 1

Information of the Interviewees

Interviewee	Program/Grade	Course(s) Taken
1	MCOM/Year 1	Risk and Disasters in Modern Society; Understanding Cultural Diversity
2	MCOM/Year 3	Understanding Cultural Diversity
3	ELLS/Year 4	Risk and Disasters in Modern Society; China in Western Perspectives; Understanding Cultural Diversity

4	PRA/ Year 3	Risk and Disasters in Modern Society
5	PRA/ Year 3	Risk and Disasters in Modern Society
6	ELLS/Year 2	History of Popular Culture 1900-2000
7	CST/ Year 3	China in Western Perspectives; Understanding Cultural Diversity
8	PRA/ Year 2	History of Popular Culture 1900-2000
9	SWSA/ Year 2	China in Western Perspectives
10	MCOM/ Year 2	China in Western Perspectives
11	MAD/ Year 2	History of Popular Culture 1900-2000
12	MCOM/ Year 2	Understanding Cultural Diversity
13	ATS/ Year 2	Understanding Cultural Diversity
14	ACCT/ Year 2	China in Western Perspectives
15	GAD/ Year 3	Understanding Cultural Diversity
16	ELLS/ Year 2	Risk and Disasters in Modern Society; History of Popular
17	GAD/ Year 3	Risk and Disasters in Modern Society
18	ATS/ Year 2	China in Western Perspectives; Understanding Cultural Diversity

Note. Explanation of the abbreviations of the program titles: ATS (Applied Translation Studies); ACCT (Accounting) CST (Computer Science and Technology); ELLS (English Language and Literature Studies); GAD (Globalization and Development); MAD (Media Arts and Design); MCOM (Media and Communication Studies); PRA (Public Relations and Advertising); SWSA (Social Work and Social Administration).

The students are from different majors across the science and social science disciplines (see Table 1). Nine of them are male while the other nine are female. The focus group interviews were conducted by using semi-structured interview questions. Two sets of interview questions were used to get the interviewees' perspectives on how

GE courses teach empathy and reflexivity. The sets of questions are:

> Set 1: On empathy
> Q1: What do you understand empathy?
> Q2: How do the course lectures, reading materials, group activities and assignments help you to learn about empathy?
> Set 2: On reflexibility
> Q1: What do you understand reflexibility?
> Q2: How do the course lectures, reading materials, group activities and assignments help you to learn about being reflexive?

The interviews were conducted both online and offline due to the impact of the epidemic. The students taking the GE foundational courses and free elective courses were put into different groups so that they could be interviewed along with their former classmates. All interviews were conducted in Chinese for the ease of communication. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder or recorded online, and all recordings were transcribed into texts for further analysis. Every interviewee was informed before the interview that the recording would only be used for this research and the author would abide by a confidentiality agreement that this recording would not be released or used commercially. In addition, at any time during the interview, the interviewees could call off the interview and withdraw if the interviewees had any ethical considerations regarding the interview. At the end of the recording, the interviewer showed gratitude to the interviewees and repeated the confidentiality agreements. The authors transcribed the recordings into text for further analysis using the online software iFLYTEK. The English translation of the interviews was provided by the authors with the acknowledgement of the participants.

Findings and Discussions

Teaching and Learning Empathy Through Diversity and Marginality

In the focus group interviews, Dr. Zhang, the interviewer, first introduced the concept of empathy to students and asked the students to give examples of the course teaching and materials that have helped them to relate to other people's experiences in the process of understanding the key concepts and theories in the courses. We have discovered different ways in which students learn to be empathic. Then we analyze the key factors which can arouse students' empathetic thinking in the learning process.

***Learning Empathy by Being Exposed to
Cultural Diversity***

When asked how they learned about the
idea of empathy as feeling or understanding other people's experience in other people's shoes, many interviewees responded
that they first realized the importance of
empathy when reading or studying cultural
events or social issues very different from
those of their own. Students confessed that
only when they were asked to analyze the
existence of the different peoples and cultures they felt the responsibility to make
sensible judgment of them.

As can be inferred from the course titles, the GE courses are designed to expose
students to different perspectives and cultural histories. Students of the CWP course
commented on how the learning of Western perspectives helped them to understand
both the Western and Chinese culture in a
more comparative way. One student mentioned about how the discussion of the
concept of orientalism "enlightened" him
to realize that Western perspectives on China were never just "one perspective" but
that different groups of people had different opinions on China. He said, "One kind
of empathy may be just not to perceive
Westerners as simply others." Another student recalled how the analysis of Chinese
immigrant history to the United States in
the 19th Century helped her realize the
difficulty of the early Chinese immigrants
in a foreign country. Students learned the
American racial history in the HPC course
as it focused on introducing the development of entertainment industry and leisure
culture in the United States. They were
particularly drawn to the history of racial
and gender discriminations and its relationship with the development of the American
society. Students of the R&D course were
asked to read, analyze and write reports
of disaster response of different people
across the world. They were impressed by
the fact that people of different economic,
political and cultural backgrounds suffered
from even the same disaster in radically
different ways. One student recalled that
it was an "illuminating" moment when he
first learned that disasters were not merely
"natural." The definition and impacts of
the disasters are actually determined by the
politically influenced media coverage and
the vulnerability of the affected population.
Students of the UCD course were taken to
explore ethnographic case studies of non-
Western cultures and societies historically
regarded as "primitive" or "backward."
Several students shared similar empathy to
indigenous populations like the Peruvian
indigenous population, the Yanomami, the
Azande and others when learning about the
clashes of cultures in their respective strug-

gles against the powerful state intervention.

One student's comment of his reading of the article The Body Ritual of Nacirema (Miner, 1956) in the UCD class is very representative of how students can try to be empathetic through learning about other cultures. When he first read the article, he thought that the Nacirema people were so weird and strange. He said, "I was so confused of how they would live because I felt that they could toss themselves to death very soon." Then later in class, he learned that when reading the world Nacirema backward, the group was actually one very familiar to us. All the descriptions in the article started to make sense. He thus reflected, "It shows that if you do not have even the most preliminary research about them [the other people], you must think you cannot understand them. But when you have more and more contact [with them], you would feel that they have their reasons to do things."

Learning Empathy by Attending to Marginality

When asked when they felt the necessity and power of empathy in their learning experience, students admitted that they were provoked to being empathetic to those being ignored, discriminated or misunderstood. Such groups and cultures are oftentimes marginalized in their own society and on a global scale. One of the issues which greatly interests the students is the problem of race and racial discrimination. One student of the HPC course said that she was particularly "shocked" when learning about the history of Blues, and especially urban Blues made popular by a group of African-American women in the 1920s. She said,

> For example, like the Black women, the sound that they made was through some of the side [channels]. For example, they did not speak out from some vintage points as did the higher classes, but they created something new and fresh to make people aware that they were being oppressed. Then I think I feel that they were bursting with life. The freshness was very different from that brought by the so-called refined culture.

The student summarized,

> They [black women] wanted to find their own culture by creating something. I think that's what I empathize with the most. Invisibly, I can feel their hearts. *If something is very distinctive, it is easy for me to empathize with…to feel the shock [of it] and therefore empathize with them [the creators].* [emphasis added]

Another issue that deeply concerns the student is the experience of those who are economically or physically challenged. Several students of the HPC course said that they were most impressed by the story of Sam Patch, a poor mill worker who became the first fall jumper in the US. Patch became rich and famous by jumping from great falls across the country and died during the fatal drunk diving from the Niagara Falls. Nevertheless, Patch's short career jumpstarted the entertainment business in the US when people learned to purchase fun during their leisure time. In the eyes of the students, Patch's story was heroically tragic. A student said that this made her "feel especially sad" that such a poor person "had to die to earn money and attention." Another student shared her idea that poor people like Patch were so limited in their career opportunities that to amuse people, which was quite a humiliating thing in Patch's story, unfortunately became their only way of moving up the social ladder.

Many students have the most empathy for the marginalized gender groups in society. Several interviewees recalled that they were most interested in learning about how the women and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) groups responded to the cultural changes and disaster situations when taking the courses. In the interview, two students

of the R&D course coincidently chose to research on how the female groups responded to COVID-19 in India and China respectively. One student wrote an essay about the situation of Indian women who needed to seek work facing the danger of the pandemic and the other reported on the experience of female nurses volunteered to work at hospitals in Wuhan, China when the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out. When sharing the reasons why they selected such topics, one of the students said that she was intrigued to learn "how people on the other side of the world live," something that she had not cared to know before. She thus emotionally concluded:

> Then I thought it was quite interesting at the time. If I learned about the development of a situation that might be completely different [from my own], I can jump out of my own stereotypes. I just jumped out of some of the behaviors or thoughts of my own circle. *In the process of researching, I felt the distant cry of people....* [emphasis added] Maybe in the future, when I hear similar news or something and when I actually know something about it, I can better know that they are indeed experiencing such hardships. It then may deepen my understanding of empathy.

Learning Reflexivity Through Critical Thinking

When discussing about the examples of empathy in their learning processes, the interviewees would also reflect on why and how they would have certain feelings and ideas towards certain people or cultures. During the interviews, Dr. Zhang, the interviewer, tried to explain to the interviewees the meaning of reflexive thinking, interviewees would also reflect on why and how they would have certain feelings and ideas towards certain people or cultures.

Students propose that the effective reflexivity lie in the ways in which we understand otherness—people and cultures different from our own which are consequently prone to be regarded as being bad or weak. Some interviewees compared reflexive thinking with critical thinking. Several students in the same focus group interview were asked to give definitions of critical thinking. One student said that critical thinking was "to understand others using their own reasoning" rather than giving simple judgments of right or wrong. Another student complemented that critical thinking was to "see the multifaceted nature of things."

Reflexivity as a Critique of Biases and Inequalities

After hearing the interviewer's and other interviewees' discussions of reflexive thinking, students shared their reflexive moments in the GE courses. Most of them agreed that being reflexive directed them to pay special attention to biases and inequalities in society. One student of the R&D course shared her concern with the disabled people in disaster situations. She ardently responded:

At that time, through the concept of otherness, I deeply felt that, in fact, many times in society we may have prejudice and discrimination against some groups. So I actually think this is a kind of risk in modern society, such as marginalizing the minority groups. We mentioned some mixed-race people in class, and the LGBTQ people, or some physically or mentally disabled people. …Especially for the disabled people, I also learned that we should not even call them disabled, but physically challenged. In fact, I think this [denomination] first is a kind of understanding and respect for them. And the loving aspect of it actually makes the society more inclusive and diverse. … In fact, it does not mean that if they have disabilities on the bodies, they are different from us.

Another touching story was shared by the student who wrote an essay of the Chinese female nurses who volunteered to work in hospitals of Wuhan city during the

early outbreak of the COVID-19 in China. After learning that disasters may actually exacerbate inequalities in society, she decided to research on what a particular female group would experience in a time of crisis. She found that the nurses received much unequal treatment but their stories were not reported. For example, even though 70% of the frontline medical staff in the world are women, sanitary napkins are not listed as daily supplies to be sent to the quarantined hospitals on regular bases during the emergency situation. Instead, protective suits were daily supplies but not sanitary napkins. If one did not listen to the nurses, one would never know such a thing. When the female nurses posted the lack of sanitary napkins at work online, they even faced cyber violence. She thus poignantly concluded:

> So I think it necessary to keep a record of the events. *Then I think anthropology is also a way to observe and record things. I think this part very important because things keep disappearing* [emphasis added]. It is very likely that people would leave them behind and forget about them very quickly. So I think it is necessary to record them and then analyze them.

Students of the R&D course resonated with the aforementioned students' observation. One student recollected that he was especially drawn to the fact of how media reports of the disasters shadow our conceptualization of the world's inequalities. He said:

> There are many disasters in the world every day. But if they are not noticed or reported by the media, those risks and disasters will not seem to exist. This is also a very important point. I think risks now need to be discovered [by the media] and are actually politicized. Many times they do not objectively present the real things, but some governments or the media deliberately selectively report [the disasters] to achieve some of their goals.

Reflexivity as an Embracement to Complexity

As anthropologist Yuan Changgeng said in his GE course Understanding Death, "Seeing complexity is the starting point to the truth" (Luo, 2022, Act out a Funeral section). During the interviews, one student shared with us that his major program director once told him that "all things are complex." He was told to "embrace complexity," and to "see the same

thing from different perspectives, that is, to see its pose and cons from different perspectives." Nevertheless, students found it difficult to develop such a vision in the learning process. The same student gave his explanation of why:

> Because in my discipline, when we talk about some governance policies, we talk more about a kind of unity or consistency. Then it doesn't say that it pays special attention to each group, or some particularity of each country and nation. In our governance and political science discipline, in fact, it is a discipline from a very Western perspective. *In fact, it ignores some perspectives of non-western countries and cultures, so it leads to many policies that cannot be well implemented or achieve some results all over the world* [emphasis added]. I think this concept of otherness is very important to policy makers. They need to consider the backgrounds of different groups, different ethnic groups, some of their cultures and so on.

Reflexive thinking is indeed a capacity to be trained and tested. The starting point may be to realize that different historical and socio-cultural contexts will give complex meanings and significance to the same cultural concept or social issue. One student who took both the UCD and CWP courses shared his important learning journey of the concept of the Chinese nationality, especially the concept of zhonghua minzu. He confessed that when he first read the article *Where are the "Han"?* (Leibold, 2009), he did not even realize that being an ethnic Han as he was would be "a problem of concern" because he thought it was just a reality. Then as he was preparing his presentation on the topic, he began to think that being a Han, as the majority ethnic group of China, did not only mean that they consist of a great portion of the Chinese population, but also was a result of the contested negotiation among the Han, the ethnic minority groups, and the concept of Chinese. Then in the CWP course when he was coincidently assigned to read Sun Yat-sen's famous statement Fundamentals of National Reconstruction, the student further realized that while some people argued that the concept of zhonghua minzu may imply a danger of Han cultural imperialism, he was able to see that Sun wanted to uphold the unifying national identity to fight against the invasions of the Western powers in China during the early 20th Century. The student concluded that "the concepts are indeed born of history."

Reflexive thinking prompts us to fight against the harms and problems of the essentialist or homogenous way of understanding the world. It calls for a persistent

battle against the inequalities and hegemonies in domestic and international politics. One student of the R&D course gave a vivid example of how he reformed his view on developmentalism through analyzing the Paris Agreement on climate change:

> According to Paris Agreement, our world has a unified goal. Then there is an argument between developing countries and developed countries. The developed countries think that all countries are part of this world, and they should bear the same responsibilities. When assigning [greenhouse gas emission reduction] tasks, the tasks of the developed countries and developing countries should be the same. But the developing countries think that the developed countries have already developed for many years, while the developing countries are still developing. *One cannot use the same scale and dimension to measure all countries.* [emphasis added] In fact, it is obvious that the countries of the global North do not use an equal measure to consider the countries of the Global South.

More importantly, reflexive thinking is a capacity and compassion to seek common grounds while reserving differences. It broadens one's vision to acknowledge differences and also brings to light the shared destiny of humankind. A number of the interviewees of the UCD course mentioned that the reading Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight (Geertz, 1972) was a learning experience of such a kind. All of them openly admitted in the interviews that they initially regarded the Balinese men's zeal for the cockfights as unnecessarily insane, and the connection between cockfights and social status shaping mechanism too far-fetched. One student said, "I think this is quite novel because in our current society it is completely impossible to use this way [cockfighting] to [show status]." Then the interviewer half-jokingly asked the student if there was any difference between the Balinese men fighting cocks to win respect and UIC students competing their GPAs to get ahead of others. After some thinking, the student replied, "When it comes to cockfighting and GPA competition, I actually don't think there is any difference between them. The essence is the same. Just the forms of expression are different."

Interestingly, the student's classmate carried out a research on how UIC students played the board game "Werewolves of Miller's Hollow." The classmate was stunned to find out that the game players, like the Balinese men in cockfights, would develop their own jargons and friend circles to play the games. In addition, every-

one indeed took the game very seriously. Then this student shared his experience at the focus group interview by saying, "They [the games] can reflect the power relations of a society including the construction of the family and social relations. …In this case, the cockfights and Werewolves game are mutually understandable."

It would be considered as a fruitful teaching and learning experience if students can use what they have learned in class to gain new perspectives and live a better life. As several students propose, once embracing the complexity of society, they have become more tolerant and rational in dealing with life issues. One student said that he actually learned not to interfere with other people's issues as "everyone thinks differently." A student emotively shared that he had solved his issues with a classmate that he did not like for a long time. Yet last time when the classmate did something that he initially found unacceptable, he asked himself to really think in that classmate's shoes. He later realized that the classmate "just wanted to voice his different opinions." The student paused and said, "There is no excuse to criticize him [of doing something different]."

One of the most resonant moments of all interviews was when one student said that after the UCD and R&D courses, she started to talk to janitors and cleaning workers on campus. Several students then actively shared their own stories of talking to different workers on campus. The student said:

I feel that I am willing to chat with some groups of people now [emphasis added]. One day after finishing my classes, I saw an aunt collecting garbage on my way to my dormitory. Then I thought that the garbage sorting issue was under heated debates recently that many teachers voiced different opinions. So I decided to chat with her, and that day's chat turned out to be very meaningful. She talked not only about garbage collecting, but also what was happening on campus. She talked about her career as a garbage worker. She shared how she interacted with other workers at work, especially how they tried to swindle each other. She even complained that some worker would always want to kick her out, and commented how her supervisor helped her. I found the conversation very meaningful.

The interviewer followed up to ask them what they thought of the use of talking to others and knowing their experiences. The same student said that she once tried to change the government officials' discrimination against the disabled peo-

ple during her internship after the R&D course. She firmly claimed:

> I think this is very important. Even though I am a student, I think we all should communicate equally. I want to tell them the useful things I learned in class which can also be helpful for society. I also hope that the government staff, the so-called key influencers, they should do something that is really helpful for society, rather than just following the orders of their superiors. I think this is very important. *I think if one day I can become such a key influencer or if everyone [of us] can become such a key influencer, we should all do it. I think it is a very important matter.* [emphasis added]

This we think may display the most helpful and hopeful achievement of the GE education, which is trying to lead the students to wisely and warmly accept and adapt to themselves, the others and the world.

Conclusion

This article provides a qualitative study of how empathy and reflexivity, the keystone of the pedagogical philosophy of the GE, can be taught and learned through the light of anthropology. The GE courses designed by the GEO at UIC aim to offer integral and interdisciplinary teaching and learning experience for the students to explore the great histories and civilizations of the world. Anthropological theories and case studies provide us with comprehensive and convincing tools and examples to recognize and discuss different cultures and societies in holistic, comparative and reflexive ways. An anthropological approach can be of important value for the teaching and learning of the GE courses. In terms of the course content, it adds lecture and reading materials of the peoples and cultures often at the margin of society to draw the students' attention to the hardships and yet vitality of the groups facing structural violence and cultural biases. In theoretical reflection, anthropological approach introduces the students to the harms of inequality and ethnocentrism, and teaches them the merits of relativist and humanistic way of thinking.

Adopting the focus group interview method, the article reveals that students of the select GE courses have developed deeper understanding and appreciation of the power of empathy and reflexivity. Students have learned that the basis of empathy is to see the others as specific and lively human beings rather than numbers or words. Empathy is provoked when the economically, politically and socially chal-

lenged people's "distant cry" can be heard and felt. A meaningful empathy is also a reflexive one. Students have realized that the capacity to face squarely the biases and inequalities in society and the readiness to embrace complexity will make them not only smarter but stronger.

As the article is being written the GE courses are being restructured at UIC and across China. Chinese universities have increasingly emphasized the importance of the GE for its historical and humanistic values despite the great pressure of offering more practical courses. Anthropologists have repeatedly pointed out the potential harm of the "audit culture" which upholds "auditable numeracy" (Herzfeld, 2018, p. 135) as the sole measurement to evaluate professional and political performances (Kipnis, 2008). Our research has demonstrated once again the indispensability and importance of the humanistic GE courses at the university level. We would like to end the writing with a comment of professor Yu Hua on GE courses that she shared with the authors, "Teaching is a process of intersecting and colliding teachers' life trajectories with students' life experiences. Together they devote their hearts to understanding life and the world, and take actions to make people in this world better. Should it be the goal of education" (H. Yu, personal communication, April 18, 2022)?

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