When the participants of this year’s postgraduate reading group at St Andrews University were asked to give an informal group presentation at the ‘Ways of Knowing’ conference held in January 2005 to talk about our own experiences and perceptions of ‘knowledge’ and how they had changed since coming to St Andrews, we decided to divide our papers up and present them in the form of a conversation rather than read them out one at a time. This worked very well, despite us all coming from considerably different backgrounds: there were always points in each one’s personal account the others could somehow relate to and then expand on by contributing their own experiences. What we ended up with was thus a polyphonic (if necessarily incomplete) account of the St Andrews postgraduate experience of knowledge acquisition, whereby the stress on the personal paradoxically functioned both to separate our different voices and as a common denominator on which we could base our conversation.

Listening to the speakers at the conference, what was happening throughout was much the same on a larger scale. Papers differed greatly in how they approached and interpreted the topic of ‘ways of knowing’, but speakers soon began to relate back to each other’s papers to demonstrate a point or give additional angles to their own work. Depending on their own research interests, speakers were drawing on sources from subjects as varied as science, art and philosophy, thereby providing other conference participants with the opportunity to gain insights from outside their own domains of specialisation. This kind of ‘interdisciplinarity’, i.e. looking to other (academic) disciplines for insights relevant to anthropological inquiries, is one that makes a lot of sense—perhaps even common sense—for the study of people and societies. After all, all these disciplines deal with issues feeding into people’s daily lives, which do not generally tend to be divided into neat categories. I personally particularly appreciated Greg Downey’s paper on the plasticity of perception, as it used scientific insights into bodily manifested knowledge in an anthropological way rather than, as is so often the case, demonising the natural sciences as the enemy of anthropology (a strategy that surely has its roots in the history of academic politics, but needs to be questioned more thoroughly).

The theme of embodied knowledge, or learning through the body, was discussed by several other speakers, such as Tony Crook (on knowledge stored in the skin in Papua New Guinea) and Cristina Grasseni (on children learning future professional skills through play). I found these attempts to collapse the Cartesian mind/body dualism important in that they drew attention to the fact that knowledge is not purely a ‘mind thing’ that stands above and can be separated from all physical experience. We not only learn through reading about things, an activity where sensory perception is limited to a minimum, but also through experiencing them, through putting the mind/body into situations that affect them in certain ways. The
body changes with absorbed knowledge just as the mind does, which adds importance to the practice of ethnographic fieldwork: just as reading a recipe will not tell me what the dish tastes like, solely reading about different societies can only provide one with an abstract knowledge that leaves much to the imagination. Tim Ingold’s presentation on his experimentation with incorporating observation outside the classroom and presentation of results in different media (such as building models) impressively demonstrated the possibility of integrating a more experiential facet into the university curriculum. This approach—although, as was pointed out, it might not provide the answer to every problem faced in the teaching of anthropology—seems to me to be well worth pursuing, as it promises to prepare students more comprehensively for their experience as participants and/or observers in the field.

Paul Stoller’s paper on his own experience as a cancer patient in the ‘village of the sick’ provided another example of embodied knowledge, but additionally drew attention to the importance of the person of the anthropologist to her or his work. Despite the influence of the ‘reflexive turn’ promoted by the Writing Culture movement, many authors still seem to feel that their ‘I’ has no place within their writing and will refer to themselves in abstract terms such as ‘this author’, if at all. However, the fact that not everybody has access to every kind of experience means that not everybody will be able to gain the same insights into any particular issue. It is impossible to take every possible thing into account in any study, but we can learn from each other (this ultimately being the point of academic institutions in the first place). In my mind, consciously and overtly incorporating a personal element into one’s work is therefore extremely desirable in that it gives one’s readers a clearer idea of ‘where one is coming from’ and makes one’s position more ‘related’ to others. I have started this reflection with the account of a conversation used as a means to convey and exchange knowledge. Being a supporter of the idea of a ‘dialogic anthropology’ that attempts to avoid hiding dialogic processes in the field behind the monologic voice of the investigator (cf. Tedlock 1983; Tedlock and Mannheim 1995), I would also suggest that putting oneself in one’s writing establishes a more dialogic relationship with one’s readers. Further, it will be beneficial to anthropology to also increase its dialogue with different disciplines within academia.

This approach admittedly leads away from the search for all-explaining metatheories, but it does not necessarily imply the kind of postmodern fragmentation that futilely ‘deconstructs into dissolution’ (King 1999). On the contrary, getting away from metatheories can sometimes be crucial to the understanding of a society’s situation, as my own research interest in Guaraní perspectives on the recent titling of TCOs (original communal lands) in the Eastern lowland region of Bolivia indicates. Today, Guaraní rights and land claims are represented by the CIDOB (Indigenous Confederation of Eastern Bolivia) and the APG (Assembly of the Guaraní People), which were founded in the early 1980s. The INRA Act, an agrarian reform law passed in 1996 at the behest of the National Agrarian Reform Institute (INRA), for the first time made it possible for Guaraní communities to apply for communal ownership of the lands which they claim as their ancestral heritage. The titling of a TCO involves the prior completion of a Spatial Needs Identification Study, which uses an algorithmic formula to add up the amounts of land considered necessary for a community’s economic, sociocultural and conservation needs (de Vries 1998).

The aim of my study will be to find out about the meanings the Guaraní attach to the land on which they live, and how these relate to the approach of the state-defined land reform. The INRA Act’s general approach to different groups’ land claims throws up questions about its consequences for any particular community that can only be answered by studying their particular circumstances. By what criteria,
for example, is the ‘original communal land’ of a traditional migrant people established (Albó 1990), both by the state and by themselves? How can Guaraní ownership of lands be reconciled with state ownership of natural resources located on these lands? And are there any alternative ideas for a more suitable assessment of land claims from the side of the Guaraní? The reclaiming of ancestral lands is one of the currently most hotly pursued objectives of indigenous organisations all over South America. On a practical level, I am hoping that my research will provide the chance to establish more meaningful and mutually beneficial dialogues between Guaraní communities and government agencies in the future. On a theoretical level, it ties into the debate within anthropology that has pitched those opposed to special rights for indigenous people against those arguing for them. By studying Guaraní perspectives on land and land titling, I will bring a new angle to the debate that should have been considered in the first place, namely that of people directly concerned by these issues.

Veronika Groke is an MA student in the School of Anthropological Studies at the University of St Andrews. Her email is vg6@st-andrews.ac.uk.

References

Albó, X. 1990. La Comunidad Hoy, La Paz: CIPCA.