

Minestrone Stories

Teaching anthropology through serendipitous cultural exchanges

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ABSTRACT

Serendipity should not be restricted to cutting-edge science and research alone. A proactive approach to the unexpected can also strengthen classes in anthropology and the humanities. But how can you teach if classes are influenced by accidental arrangements and discoveries not sought or considered? I shall tap into two projects of teaching-by-serendipity through indirect cultural exchanges. The two projects in question were named *Minestrone Stories*, referring to the Italian minestrone soup, usually made of the vegetables available and thereby providing each village in Italy with its own variant. However, the two 'Minestrone soups' in question included more ingredients. The teaching-by-serendipity projects targeted what students, teachers and citizens in confined areas of Copenhagen had available, inciting them to indirectly exchange vegetables, songs, services and stories with each other, thus stirring them together. In this article, I reflect on how this stirring provoked an unusual teaching experience and moments of unexpected learning.

KEYWORDS

dogme ethnography, indirect exchange, learning the unfamiliar, serendipity, teaching anthropology

The teaching experiment I shall reflect upon grew out of a joint effort to try and create some events where teachers, students and local citizens in Copenhagen who did not know each other were able to meet and discover things unknown to them by participating in a series of indirect cultural exchanges. What began as a social project also thus came to structure a rather unusual teaching and learning experiment. *Minestrone Stories* (in Danish *Minestronefortællinger*), as the project was called, gained momentum in autumn 2015



among humanities students and their teachers on two different courses in anthropology and among residents in a city quarter in Copenhagen. In 2016, it was replicated with other participants in another city quarter. On both occasions, an NGO and an international theatre group facilitated the series of exchanges between the participants. Tapping into my experiences with the two *Minestrone Stories* projects, I shall reflect on the pedagogical benefits and pitfalls of teaching through serendipitous indirect cultural exchanges.

I frame this teaching and learning experience within the notion of 'serendipity'. We have become used to thinking of serendipity as an explanation for accidental scientific discoveries (e.g., penicillin, Velcro, Teflon, X-rays, dynamite). Many find such discoveries hard to conceptualise as more than lucky strikes that defy methodological explanation. Some researchers have elaborated on concepts to explain such discoveries as more than just lucky strikes. Most famously, Robert Merton and Elinor Barber tapped into the notion of serendipity in their classic work *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* (2004). For them, serendipity was an ideal notion with which to capture the creative pattern of discoveries due to researchers' special ability to embrace both *accident* and *sagacity*.¹ The crucial point for Merton and Barber was to understand the environment in which scholars are able to see and take advantage of the lucky accidents that happen when searching for other things.

Merton and Barber were mostly concerned with the sociology of knowledge in natural sciences, probably because the most famous accidental discoveries are found in natural science. However, there is nowhere that serendipity as a scholarly approach has been more pronounced than in ethnographic research. Students of anthropology are taught that their founding father, Bronislaw Malinowski, would very likely not have discovered the Trobriand islanders' Kula ring exchanges if he had not been accidentally stranded on their islands at the outbreak of the First World War. He wisely turned this mishap into an advantage and subsequently institutionalised long-term fieldwork as the discipline's most important method. The core of this method can roughly be boiled down to a durable skilled form of waiting in the field, whereby the unfamiliar – not yet seen, perceived or conceptualised – can be approached (Bandak and Janeja 2018: 21–25). Regardless of the criticism that emerged in the writing-culture debate in the 1980s (Clifford and Marcus 1986), skilled waiting and long-term ethnographic fieldwork are still the most defining aspect of anthropological research and self-identity today, distinguishing anthropologists from more hypothetically driven social



scientists, or travellers and the like who also spend time and effort in the same field sites.

Despite ‘skilled waiting’ or ‘deep hanging out’ being praised as a crucial aspect of ethnographic research, it has been largely overlooked in teaching, probably because it is mainly evoked and cultivated when in the field. For the same reason, I have heard professors claiming that the best course on anthropological methods is ‘no course’. For them and their like, it is better not to be too formalised in one’s scientific methods in order to be able to appreciate the unfamiliar. This is in line with how Merton and Barber quoted Leslie Hotson in their work: ‘Serendipity’s chief enemy proudly calls itself “scientific method” . . . instead of admiring the qualities that make for unexpected discoveries – curiosity, spontaneity, imaginativeness, a sense of adventure – they frown on them’ (Hotson cited in Merton and Barber 2004: 226).

As David Mills argues, however, it is a long shot to claim that anthropologists should be especially averse to teaching scientific method. Mills convincingly demonstrates that anthropologists have historically been pre-occupied with the proper form of textbook and teaching, and yet they have simultaneously and widely recited, invoked and half-believed in the myth that there is a strong reluctance in anthropology to see teaching as a professional practice worth discussing (Mills 2011: 12–13). This dichotomy in anthropologists’ approach to research (from ‘go and see what you find’ to detailed research plans and hypotheses) and in their teaching (from ‘do-it-yourself’ or informal peer-tutoring to rigorous methodological training) has hence been the cause of fierce debate among scholars from the very beginning. Historical changes have, however, disadvantaged the more informal, peer-tutoring driven research and teaching. Over the last few decades, many scholars and students at universities have struggled with the decreasing time available to conduct their ethnographic fieldwork and increasing numbers of students in their classes. This loss of time for ‘deep hanging out’ in the field and writing-up, as well as for peer-tutoring, has – to some extent – been counterbalanced by more rigorous methodological group training and detailed methodological study plans. ‘Learning goals’ and ‘alignment’ nonetheless fit badly into the idea of cultivating approaches to serendipity, where ‘you may capture a fox thanks to accidental circumstances while searching for hares’ (see note 1). Research schemes and demands for data registration also tend to favour hypothesis-driven research at the expense of the more open, explorative approaches.

There are, however, important exceptions. These are, not surprisingly, found in the ‘teaching-based research’ approaches to learning (Hurn 2012; Rubow et al. 2017; see also Turner and Turner 1987 for an earlier case). There is also a growing interest in ‘wild thinking’ (Pedersen and Nielsen 2014; Willerslev et al. 2017), which encourages a more experimental take on concepts, things or thoughts outside the traditional long-term fieldwork setting. However, such approaches towards the unfamiliar differ widely from the traditional ethnographic skilled waiting in the field. First, those initiatives are usually designed as a collaborative approach to the unfamiliar (contrasting the individual ethnographic research on fieldwork). Second, time (duration but not necessarily intensity) is radically reduced compared to the fieldwork. Third, there are habitually some strict methodological constraints to follow (contrasting the more open approach to methodology in ethnographic research). Hence, there are crucial methodological differences when comparing the traditional ethnographic researching-by-serendipity with the fewer cases I have known of scholars venturing into teaching-by-serendipity. The experimental approaches to teaching-by-serendipity should therefore not be conflated with the particular anthropological ‘skilled form of waiting’ in the field and in their writing. Rather teaching-by-serendipity is another way of collectively cultivating learning conditions outside the traditional fieldwork setting that allows students and teachers to be sensitive to the unfamiliar.

The irony is that our teaching-by-serendipity approach in the two projects of *Minestrone Stories* was similar to Malinowski’s findings when serendipitously stranded on the Trobriand Islands. The indirect cultural exchanges we set up in those projects followed, in large part, the rules of the Kula ring exchange that Malinowski discovered, analysed and described (Malinowski 2000). Like the Kula ring, the *Minestrone Stories* also consisted of a series of indirect cultural exchange whereby A gave to B, who gave to C and, at a point, someone in the exchange ring returned a gift to A, thereby providing the indirect exchanges with a social and political dimension beyond mere reciprocal exchange between A and B. The series of indirect exchanges in the *Minestrone Stories* was, however, not confined by social and political hierarchies of value and age, neither were the exchanges restricted to specific non-use items, as was the case in the Kula ring, much less did participants follow prescribed customs. Rather than approving social and political conventions, the indirect exchanges in the *Minestrone Stories* intended to break with them in order to provoke serendipitous social contact. Hence, Malinowski’s serendipitous finding in Melanesia was used to instigate our



teaching-by-serendipity in Copenhagen. In the following, we shall tap into how we intuitively used Malinowski's serendipitous finding (the meanings embedded in performing indirect exchanges) to break with social customs in confined areas (exchanging and teaching) by installing a number of other rules (prescribing how to exchange indirectly) with the hope that it would make the participants more sensitive to the unfamiliar.

The Minestrone Stories: Instigating indirect cultural exchanges

The Minestrone Stories started by serendipity. In summer 2014, my wife Claudia Adeath and I enjoyed a dinner with Kai Bredholt and his wife Erica Sanchez from the Odin Theatre Group² in our little apartment in Nørrebro, one of Copenhagen's multiethnic quarters. The talk fell at one point on the small, empty sweet shop on the other side of our street. 'How can they live off those shops?' Kai asked me. He had noticed there were far too few customers for the many sweet shops that literally littered our street. I told Kai that it was a typical tax-evading construct that some foreigners entered into to make ends meet. They illicitly import some of their sweets from Eastern Europe or elsewhere and sell them cheaper without declaring those sales. It should be noted that sweets are highly taxed in Denmark. This way they do not need to sell large quantities to sustain an income.

Kai felt intrigued by these people and their walks of life. 'But who are they?' he asked me. 'Who knows?' Embarrassed, I realised, I could not answer his question. I had only guessed about their illicit import and tax evasion; in fact, I hardly knew my closest neighbours despite living next to them. 'It can't be fun standing the whole day in an empty shop', Kai continued. 'Why don't we create something to make you guys meet each other?' (Kai lives in the provinces.) I hesitated and replied with something like: 'I have a lot of work teaching anthropology, you know, no time ...' 'You've got it all wrong', Kai interrupted me abruptly. 'You have to make your students work for the project, and it becomes much easier'.

Until then I had never thought about teaching students by letting them participate in real-life projects with many stakeholders; at least, not anything as big as Kai was proposing to me now. He wanted to engage the neighbours, the organisations, the local shopkeepers and university students in an intertwined series of rather unusual forms of cultural exchange. I liked the idea though. So did my wife, and she quickly involved the local NGO CkulturA³ of which she was a part, and the Minestrone Stories took off.

Fundamental to Kai's idea was that each participant should exchange something. The exchanges should not, however, be on a one-to-one basis. Neither should they be economically balanced. Rather they should take the form of a series of indirect exchanges (following Malinowski 2000 and Mauss 1993) between several normally unconnected stakeholders in the same neighbourhood. In this series, each participant exchanges what he or she has at hand. In the Nørrebro Minestrone Stories, Kai and I asked the local choir to sing a psalm under the balconies in the quarter's inner courtyards instead of practicing their singing in the nearby church. In return, we encouraged the residents to give my students some of the vegetables they had in their kitchen, which they threw from the windows or balconies into some white blankets my students held out in the courtyard. We further arranged for the vegetables to be cleaned and peeled the next day by children aged between five and ten years old from the nearby youth club, guided by a group of Middle Eastern women who happened to be taking Danish classes that day in some rooms above the youth club. In this way, they practiced Danish while the kids had fun cutting with knives and starting water fights. A father and local musician came to pick his daughter up and ended up playing his trumpet with the musicians from the Odin Theatre and CkulturA, and so began a party. One thing led to another, some planned in advance, others arising out of serendipity and incorporated. On the third day, a Spanish chef prepared a minestrone soup from the peeled and cut vegetables, and served it at the local community centre (named VerdensKulturCenter), where all who had participated, one way or another, were invited.

Kai's experiences of former minestrone projects in Europe with the Odin Theatre Group were that these indirect cultural exchanges opened the residents' eyes. They saw their neighbours in a different light, and it piqued their curiosity to know more about each other and about what was going on in their neighbourhood in general. In other words, the minestrone part of the project was basically to create a soup consisting of the vegetables from the residents' kitchens, 'paid' for by other residents' songs, and cleaned and spiced by yet more residents, before it was finally served at a feast held at the community centre: all indirectly exchanging what was available in order to get the residents to know each other and laugh together. Every city quarter in this way holds its own flavour soup: a 'taste' of the people living there, just as every village in Italy has its own minestrone.

By including the students' work, we were able to instigate another series of cultural exchanges on top of this *vegetable-song-soup* series of exchanges.



The *interviews-narrative-performance* series became the second part of the Minestrone Stories. As in the former exchanges, we encouraged the students to indirectly exchange what they had, in this case their training-work.

At that time, I taught humanities students on an anthropological course entitled 'Histories, Myths and Narratives' while my colleague, anthropologist Martin Demant, taught the course 'Qualitative Methods', also to humanities students. There were around 15–20 students on each course, who were in their second, third, or fourth year of study. The study programmes on these two courses were set up to cover elementary takes on anthropological theories and methods respectively. The fifteen ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) semester course on Qualitative Methods includes lessons on fieldwork methodology and training before the students are eventually sent out to conduct a short piece of fieldwork on their own (two to three weeks) and write an essay on it, while the fifteen ECTS course on 'Histories, Myths, and Narratives' is a fourteen-week lecture course (three hours a week), circling around different takes on storytelling and mythology and also ending with the students writing an exam essay on a subject of their choice.

Since the aim of the Minestrone Stories was to get people in my neighbourhood to meet and know each other in new and amusing ways, Martin told his students to conduct their initial field training among the people living in the vicinity of my apartment. They were told to focus on the interlocutors' lives and to let the interlocutors speak about their neighbourhood in general. Subsequently, each student would send his or her transcribed interviews to their fellow students attending my course on histories, narratives and mythology. Those students had, by then, read some literature on this neighbourhood (its history, older stories from residents, and popular myths about the neighbourhood). Some of them also had first-hand knowledge of the neighbourhood (through living there or having family or friends living there), although they did not know the students on the other course, nor the interlocutors interviewed.

Receiving the interviews, my students transformed the transcripts into first-person narratives in line with some editing rules I had given them. These narratives were then passed on to Kai, who used them in the final minestrone-feast-performance in which my students also participated. They read the personal narratives they had prepared aloud, not knowing if the person whose story they were reading was sitting listening to them in the audience or not, while Kai and his team played music and performed.

The two series of cultural exchanges – *songs-vegetables-soup* and *interviews-narratives-performance* – were thus closely intertwined, one enhancing the other, and together forming the Minestrone Stories of the blocks surrounding my inner Nørrebro quarter.⁴

There was also a third cultural exchange sequence connected to the students' work in Nørrebro. Two days after the feast, CkulturA arranged a celebration related to the Day of the Dead at the same community centre. The association wanted to expand this annual Mexican tradition of celebrating dead family members and friends to other ethnicities living in Nørrebro. They therefore took advantage of the situation and asked the students to persuade their interlocutors to tell them about a close neighbour, friend or family member who had passed away. Through this work, five of these stories were incorporated into CkulturA's celebration of the Day of the Dead. On that occasion, Eastern European visual artists, some of them living in Nørrebro, were asked to interpret the Mexican tradition through the students' stories and create their own personal altar for each of the deceased residents, erected for this celebration in the community centre's front yard. In this series of cultural exchanges, the stories told about the former residents thus obtained a material aspect, connecting a Mexican tradition to departed Danish citizens through the interpretation of Eastern European visual artists living in Nørrebro.

First series of indirect exchanges (shifting hands for each arrow):

Songs → vegetable → peeling/talking/playing → cooking → eating

Second series of indirect exchanges:

Stories → tape-recorded interviews → textual redaction → performance/
reading → seeing/listening

Third series of indirect exchanges

Stories (and things) of the deceased → CKulturA's interpretation → altar
installation → seeing

(The third series was not repeated the second year in the Østerbro quarter.)

Serendipity and hard work

Taking into account the workload most university teachers face, it is understandable that they may be wary of entering into such endeavours. To begin with, it definitely sounded far too work-intensive for me. And yet it somehow became the perfect combination. One exchange enhanced the other (planned



and by accident), and Kai clearly had a point when he told me that I had it all wrong. The students, far from being the time-consuming, wavering individuals that I was scantily paid to guide through a curriculum and to enable to pass an exam, now provided the helping hands that made the *Minestrone Stories* possible and the teaching became more fun and rewarding albeit also more unpredictable.

There were challenges to be overcome and surprises along the way. First, there was more coordination needed than on an ordinary course. The different stakeholders had to be found and encouraged, and the activities had to be coordinated. Second, the project had a cost: paying the Odin Theatre Group and CkulturA for transport, housing, production costs, and so on. Extra funding thus somehow had to be secured. Third, the activities had to be integrated into the courses' curricula to ensure that the students' participation in the project became an important enhancement to their learning instead of an awkward appendix to the study plans.

The first challenge was hard to overcome because of the nature of the project itself. Finding, convincing and coordinating the different participants' activities was labour intensive. Kai and I had no idea what we would find in my neighbourhood (we walked around searching for people, groups, backyards and associations like minor detectives). When first found, it was not always easy to convince people or groups to participate in the series of exchanges. Just to get a local choir to sing under the balconies took its toll. We asked several before one accepted. My efforts were therefore considerable compared to teaching a normal course. However, already being an active member in the local NGO CkulturA, which ended up coordinating the exchanges between the different participants, I would have been doing this work anyway. By combining my social activities in Nørrebro with some of my teaching chores, they were both enhanced. But it does not have to be like this to become a win-win situation. CkulturA or the Odin Theatre Group could have taken on the bulk of the community project coordination, which is in fact what happened the following year. It reduced the teachers' extra coordination tasks considerably.

The second challenge was solved due to a lucky stroke, which we strategically turned to our advantage (another case of serendipity). Normally, at least in Denmark, it is not a teacher's job to acquire extra funding for his or her classes. The *Minestrone Stories*, however, had a price that exceeded normal costs. I was lucky in that, in 2015, the Institute for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, where Martin and I taught, had allocated funds for

improving students' studying environment. Since we were combining work efforts between students on two different courses, we had the perfect match for applying for those funds. The application was no more than a short email and, soon afterwards, we were granted 50,000 DDK for the project. We still needed another 13,000 though. By this stage, I had involved CkulturA in the project. My fellow members of this local NGO were eager to participate and took charge of the remaining fundraising. Eventually, the local administration of the city quarter of Nørrebro gave 10,000, and the final 3,000 was provided by the World Music Foundation Denmark. This fundraising became a big advantage the following year because CkulturA was now able to find the entire funding for another *Minestrone Stories*. In 2016, Østerbro City Council provided the funding to make them a *minestrone-stories-feast* (Østerbro is another city quarter in Copenhagen), making it possible for that year's students on the two courses to strengthen their learning at no extra cost to the university.

The third challenge was to integrate the students' activities in the *Minestrone Stories* into both courses. Compared to the previous courses, the most fundamental change was that some of the students' exercises and readings were now an important part of a larger project sequence: students on the 'Qualitative Methods' course were responsible for providing the transcribed interviews to their fellow students on the course on 'Histories, Myths and Narratives'. In turn, they were responsible for converting those interviews into narratives and passing them on to the Odin Theatre. They were also responsible for reading those narratives aloud to the audience at the final feast for the interviewed residents, the students that had interviewed them, and for anyone else who had participated in the project and found it interesting to attend. This evidently gave a much more serious approach to the exercises than Martin and I had experienced on previous courses.

There were also more profound changes. In the case of the course on 'Qualitative Methods', it changed the fieldwork from what had normally been an individual exercise in which each student followed his or her favourite themes or, more often, chose a field site where he or she had easy access. These initial ultra-short visits in the field were usually poor in quality and conducted simply for the purpose of training the student. Now, the short training exercises were directed towards the same neighbourhood with a common focus on certain themes and with a final goal. Individually, they might very well still be shallow, ultra-short field visits; however, added together they became a more comprehensive exploration of the neighbourhood.



One way of looking at it was that each student conducted a shallow three-day fieldwork exercise or completed a rapid writing exercise. Another way of seeing it is that thirty to forty students collectively conducted the equivalent of three to four months of fieldwork-based research on a city quarter (15–20 students × 3-day fieldwork exercise and 15–20 students × 3-day writing-up exercise).⁵

The course on ‘Histories, Myths and Narratives’ also saw notable changes. In previous years, the students had not produced ethnographic texts. The only texts they produced were the occasional individual exercise and their final exam essays. This changed as they were now participating directly in ethnographic text-making. The attractiveness of this writing-performance-project was that it gave them a shared experience in which to discuss the course’s overall topics (textuality, narrative, myths and representation) and everything that emerged unexpectedly (the themes of materiality and performance).

The project also provided me with the opportunity to explore a research method that I had worked on to enhance my ethnographic writing. I had played with restrictions to remove the scholar’s voice from the text (see Candea 2007 and Willerslev et al. 2017 for discussions on the creativity in constraining the anthropologists’ hands), aiming to enforce the immediacy between the reader and the people studied, without exhausting them with academic discussions and self-reflections. In order to guide my students about how to meticulously arrange the transcribed phrases of the interlocutors, I used an ethnographic manifesto inspired by the Danish Dogma 95 Movement (Kristensen 2016).⁶ The *Minestrone Stories* thus gave me a welcome chance to try out the analytical and literary power of following an editorial manifesto. Instead of the usual anthropological practice of collecting fieldwork material in individual projects, the students worked collectively in two groups in which the fieldworkers were separated from the text-writers. I wondered what would happen to the ethnographic sensibility when produced under such extreme conditions.

I therefore told my students to follow ten strict editing rules when cutting and pasting the interlocutors’ phrases into monologues. At first, I told them to simply cut out everything the interviewer had said (their fellow students’ questions and explanations) and concentrate on weaving together what the interviewees had said. And yet, seeing how differently Martin’s students had approached the interviewees, I changed my mind, and told them to edit two different kinds of monologues, one exclusively made out of the transcribed

voice of the interviewer, and the other exclusively out of the transcribed voice of the interviewee (the answers from the resident). No words could be invented by them when accommodating the phrases. Repeated words could, however, be deleted, and they were allowed to cut and paste as they felt necessary, as long as they only moved or deleted half or whole phrases at a time in the transcribed interviews. Following the same editorial restrictions, each student's stories were then passed on to another student to improve the narrative's readability. Finally, we chose the best stories and set them up in a meaningful sequence. One month after the students on 'Qualitative Methods' had started their training, we sent the selected stories of the interviewees to Kai and printed a pamphlet with the selected narratives for distribution at the final feast.⁷

Two weeks later, Kai came with his team and, together with CkulturA, facilitated the cultural exchanges discussed earlier. Classes were cancelled this week to give the students time to participate in at least one of the three days. Indeed, many of the students participated in several of the activities, which culminated on the third day in the feast at the community centre. In fact, the many activities could not have been carried out that week without their helping hands.

Emerging opportunities for reflection

If you, as a reader, are by now dizzy with the many different levels of exchange and how they intermingled, then imagine my students. How should they make sense of all the things stirred up in this soup? Most students, unsurprisingly, had too many things going on in their lives to take advantage of all the themes that emerged from the Minestrone Stories. Indeed, I was overwhelmed myself. What happened was perhaps not entirely unexpected, and yet a good number of things intrigued us and gave us space for further reflection.

In the classroom, I followed up on the following themes.

(1) *Representation and truth*. Academically, we used this first-hand knowledge to reflect on and discuss the dilemmas of ethnographic truth and authorship in class (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fassin 2014; Geertz 1988). This classic writing-culture dilemma was accentuated when the students from the 'Qualitative Methods' course met with their fellow students on the 'History, Myths and Narratives' course. They were directly confronted with the transformation from fieldwork to writing, which also raised questions



about the truth of the stories told at the feast. Not all of Martin's students agreed with how their interlocutor's story was cut and presented by my students (remember that my students at this stage neither knew the interviewee nor the interviewer). Even though the student interviewers' questions were never meant to be merged into a narrative, in the narratives my students constructed from the transcribed interviews, the personalities and backgrounds of Martin's students shone through strongly. The awkward, poetic narratives my students produced of Martin's students' edited voices revealed far more of themselves than one would think possible. By teaching-by-serendipity (using exclusively the students' questioning to make narratives about them), we were hence able to embrace the anthropological dilemma of representation in another way; at least, a person does not seem so easily altered in a text when it is fully based on that person's own words. Problems with representing the 'taste' of Nørrebro were also highlighted by some of the commentaries we received. Some residents found that the mixture of stories read aloud was perhaps not completely how they saw themselves and the neighbourhood. Still, they found they were not 'unlike' them either. Such comments gave us material for discussing the productivity in, on the one hand, 'not being', and, on the other, 'not not being', an ambiguity that Kirsten Hastrup also elaborated on after the Odin Theatre Group had taken her up as the main figure in one of their plays (Hastrup 1992).

(2) *Performance*. The reading aloud also had an unintentional serendipitous effect. Kai's idea was that the students should merely read the stories in a scene without pretending that they were anything other than the humanities students they were. They should, in other words, be themselves. And yet several of my students were approached by people afterwards who had thought the stories they had read aloud were their own. Without wanting to, they had somehow performed the person whose story they read. It gave them a lot to think about and gave me reason to include literature on performance in the coming year to follow up on this and discuss academic aspects of creating 'play frames', enacting them, and the effects of performance as such (Benjamin 1996; Butler 1988; Turner and Turner 1987).

(3) *Exchange*. Kai's focus on indirect forms of exchange provided the students with hands-on experience to help them understand the ample literature on exchange in anthropology. We discussed Kula exchange, the obligation to return a gift, use value and exchange value, the time difference between receiving and returning a gift, and exchange between equals and unequals (Bourdieu 1990; Graeber 2011; Malinowski 2000; Marx 1990; Mauss 1993).

Some students were surprised by the fact that some of the residents had thrown money instead of vegetables down from their balconies or windows (especially as the event was clearly announced in advance as a ‘song for a veggie’). There were also fewer participants than expected who came to the final minestrone-stories-feast (approximately 80 the first year and 160 the second). This offered material for discussing whether people had misunderstood the invitation or preferred a balanced one-to-one exchange to avoid being pushed into social debt, or if it was simply a too unintelligible kind of exchange. An older resident gave my students another clue. Apparently, decades ago, street musicians had also entered the then industrial backyard to play music for a coin thrown out from the residents’ windows. Different economic, anthropological and sociological theories about exchange and its historical aspects were hence offering competing interpretations.

(4) *History and myths.* The stories that residents told us about the neighbourhood revealed a strong inclination towards a nostalgic kind of storytelling. Nørrebro has historically been a rough, working-class neighbourhood, an image that was enacted in present-day stories of multiculturalism, tolerance and insecurity. Hardship, tolerance, frivolity and violence went hand-in-hand in the stories, and gentrification was seen as something threatening these old values. But why did some prefer a story of violence? This gave space in which to discuss the mythological nature of violence and draw links to how myths have been analysed and understood elsewhere (e.g., Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1963; Obeyesekere 1992; Sahlins 1985).

(5) *Text-Materiality.* The personal altars erected to celebrate the deceased residents (a by-product of the students’ work due to CkulturA’s involvement with the Day of the Dead) provided a first-hand opportunity to discuss materiality (Gell 1998; Keane 2007; Sørensen 2011). Despite not looking for it, we had an opportunity to discuss death and different ways of relating to death and dead ancestors in classes (Block and Parry 1982; Kristensen 2014; Lomnitz 2005). The Eastern Europeans’ material interpretations (their altar installations) of the dead residents were, however, probably more interesting for me than for my students. It was rather among the students on the ‘Qualitative Methodology’ course that the death theme raised a methodological discussion. They had found it particularly hard to get the residents to speak about a dead family member or friend. This offered itself up for reflections on why death is such a difficult theme to discuss in Nørrebro (and in Denmark), and why the very same stories about the dead were also the most powerful at the final minestrone-stories-feast.



(6) *The restrictions.* Despite constraining students' work severely, and in spite of separating 'the fieldworkers' from 'the writers', the project's collaborative outcome was remarkably convincing. One-to-one, the stories were received among many of the students as short stories sanctioning more or less stereotypical ideas, feelings and myths about people living in a city quarter; however, when they were stirred together, and read aloud, they gained added value.⁸ Most participants I asked stated that the Minestrone Stories had converted the more or less recognisable neighbours into a collective soup the 'taste' of which had the power to surprise them and yet still be recognisable as the local residents' 'flavour'. For me, the power in this approach was a big surprise that raised reflections concerning the potentialities of self-inflicted constraints and creating with rules of exclusion and inclusion (Kristensen 2016). I even tried it out later as an analytical method when investigating and counselling the Teaching Center for Humanities on selected study environments at the Faculty of Art, University of Copenhagen.⁹

Reflection on the afterlife of teaching-by-serendipitous exchanges

I guess my enthusiasm over the Minestrone Stories emanates from my writing. One thing led to another and created what I thought was a perfect project capable of linking teaching and students' work with social activism and personal research. I had definitely not seen that coming when my wife and I enjoyed our dinner with Kai and his wife. Throughout the project, we exchanged things and services that already existed right in front of us, and yet no-one had seen them or thought of them as easily exchangeable. The series of indirect exchanges created this momentum of social energy, a 'perfect storm' that shook us up and forced us to be more sensitive towards the more unexpected sides of the lives, conventions, concepts and customs surrounding us (in classes and in specific neighbourhoods).

It was therefore all the more surprising to realise that teaching-by-serendipity after the Minestrone Stories quickly returned to more recognisable forms of teaching. The students quickly left the energy stirred up in the Minestrone Stories behind them. A mere one-third of those attending the 'History, Myths and Narratives' course took up and discussed themes emerging from the Minestrone Stories in their final exam essays. The rest largely chose the same theoretical subjects (exchange, representation, history, narratively, myth, and so on) but avoided tapping into their lived experiences

from the Minestrone Stories when discussing them. Instead, they handed over traditional exam essays discussing conventional theoretical problems, for example, the different views on mythology epitomised by the dispute between Marcel Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere over what happened to James Cook on Hawaii (Sahlins 1985; Obeyesekere 1992). It could not have been further from the Minestrone Stories in Copenhagen. On the 'Qualitative Method' course only one student in the second year followed up on the Minestrone Stories. The other students preferred to tap into other sites when they conducted their final three-week fieldwork at the end of their course.

The second year was largely the same. The exchanges first boomed and then faded. I was not teaching any more but still coordinated the activities for CkulturA and also taught the students the part related to the editorial restrictions framing the narratives. However, Katinka Schyberg, who took over the teaching of 'History, Myths and Narratives' had the same experience. She also found that the Minestrone Stories were fundamentally connecting real-life experiences with themes taken up in classes as well as being academically rewarding and fun. Residents in Østerbro (an upper middleclass neighbourhood) also welcomed the cultural exchanges this year and the Odin Theatre and CkulturA were once again happy to combine the students' interviews-narrative-performance with the vegetable-song-soup series of exchanges (for those interested, the Minestrone Stories in Nørrebro did 'taste' different from that made in Østerbro). Yet again, despite students being happy with the project, only a minority of them took up the Minestrone Stories for discussion and further reflection in their final exam essays.

Why this sudden loss of momentum? I had expected a long lasting, visibly transformative impact on my students' learning. I felt that this 'return to the usual' somehow dismissed my implicit idea of successful teaching: ideally one that helps form self-conscious students with the methodological awareness to approach the unfamiliar that is not yet seen, perceived or conceptualised. The whole idea of this experimental teaching was never to achieve certain predefined learning goals whereby the teaching activities become a question of alignment. Nonetheless, that was what I found the second half of the courses had turned into.

How can we understand this change? One fundamental feature of a 'perfect storm' is that it rarely lasts very long because it depends on a rare and powerful combination of circumstances that can easily be dispersed. Resonance turns quickly into dissonance; circumstances that do not contribute to the storm's power often work counter-productively to rupture it.



I find this a powerful metaphor to explain the strength and, at the same time, also the weakness of these co-creative, indirect exchange projects. It may be highly spectacular and forceful to connect crosscutting competences, thoughts and things in indirect series of exchange and yet it is not easy to maintain the force that the storm stirs up for more than a short period. In the aftermath, the lack of time to reflect on the things we were looking for, and on those we did not expect, also probably weakened the learning experience of my students. It is one thing to get surprised over unfamiliar teaching and unexpected results but quite another to be able to reflect on and understand disruptive social and cultural phenomena in any depth. Tellingly, I am writing this article three years after the first *Minestrone Stories* took place.

However, the biggest weakness in the *Minestrone Stories* was probably not a lack of time in the final part but rather that we were missing the fundamental characteristics of teaching-based-research and so-called wild thinking discussed in the beginning. The strict conceptual approach to exchange and ethnographical editing and the collaborative working faded away in the second part of the courses.

The courses started with Kai breaking suddenly into the classroom with his noisy accordion. He forced me to dance a Danish folk dance together with my students. In Martin's class, on the other course, the same thing happened. It was a perfect icebreaker and a warning to the students to expect the unexpected. Moreover, on several occasions, Martin moved his 'Qualitative Methods' classes to a room at the Community Centre in Nørrebro and, the year after, to a party room in Østerbro. Students were thus taught in the very same neighbourhood they were supposed to be becoming acquainted with. Without it being my initial intention, the strict editorial rules also forced my students on 'Histories, Myths and Narratives' to work under alternative frames for the first period of the course. They exchanged texts with unknown students and worked longer hours together in odd circumstances. The project in this period hence provided a frame for alternative, collaborative spaces for teaching and learning that forced us to become familiar with unexpected sides of ourselves and our surroundings. Very often I felt I had lost control of the situation. There were simply too many things in play.

After the *Minestrone Stories* feast, the format of the classes became more classic (lectures, student presentations, discussions, etc.). The series of indirect cultural exchanges that empowered the collaborative efforts and stirred up the social storm in the first part was not present after the feast. In short, students went back to the conventional classroom. They worried about the

approaching exams, stopped exchanging work between themselves, and did not return (bar one) to the people they had interviewed or narrated. The latter part therefore lacked the crucial collaborative form of constrained cultural exchanges so characteristic of the former. Instead, the students spent their time reading, writing and learning individually, with little social activity outside the discussions we had in class.

Anthropologists normally describe the distance between the field site 'being there' and academic 'being here' as a predicament for anthropological writing and analysis (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Others have argued that this distance between 'there' and 'here' is a detachment necessary for anthropologists to be able to produce ethnography (Hastrup 1990). However, when the field site 'there' and the academic writing and analysis 'here' are spatially and temporarily instantaneous, as they were in the first part of the *Minestrone Stories*, this predicament (or anthropological requirement) does not exist. In this case, the simultaneity of the 'there' and 'here' created the space for a moment of pedagogical creativity on the two courses. The students were able to participate, write and perform at the same time. Moreover, we took advantage of the unexpected that emerged in this creative process (e.g. making narratives of the students' questioning).

These collaborative efforts were, in the second part, replaced with a less restricted teacher-to-student situation that more closely resembled the classic individual 'being here' period of anthropological research (the writing-up period). However, most scholars know that it is one thing to be surprised by disruptive forms of thinking and social interaction in the field and yet another to be able to reflect on and understand such phenomena. To elaborate on serendipity in one's writing simply takes time and, probably, also much more guidance by a teacher or fellow students than was the case. The time constraints in the second part evidently encumbered students' possibilities of taking proper advantage of the insights acquired through participating in the indirect series of exchanges.

To counteract this, I was initially tempted to change the two courses' curricula and study structure to make them more attuned to the collaborative frame of the *Minestrone Stories*. It apparently worked in the first part so why not extend the collaborative learning to also include the second? With smaller changes, students could be forced to write their essays in groups and the free choice of subject could be altered to a directed exam question. This would, however, break with the idea in *Minestrone Stories* of merely connecting people and students by inciting them to exchange what they already



have available right in front of them. Moreover, it could hamper the whole idea of teaching-by-serendipity if I stuck to not only the methods in the first part but also the subjects in their writings. There would not be much room left for grasping the unfamiliar, accidental surprises then.

Another explanation of the loss of momentum may have been the distance between the cultural exchanges that were instigated and the everyday exchanges in which students and residents normally engage. There were, in reality, no relationships between the *Minestrone Stories* and the participants' everyday life, despite the events being framed as real-life exchanges of what neighbours and students already do. The illusion of a certain naturalness was only possible as long as the format of the exchanges was carefully controlled. And, even when carefully confined, the cultural exchanges that formed the brief, intense social experiment were taken as a performance rather than a real-life exchange. In many ways, it more resembled an organised ritual performance, as in Victor and Edie Turner's teaching experiments (1987), than teaching-based research into everyday cultural understandings in a multi-ethnic urban quarter of Copenhagen.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this article, we have seen that teaching-by-serendipity takes a good amount of accidental luck (a combination of conditions must be present) and also a good level of collective willingness to take the advantage of connecting them; in this case through indirect exchanges. It is hard to know where such a teaching experiment will take those involved. I am not in a position to know if my students' hands-on experiences from the *Minestrone Stories* have been carried with them elsewhere or whether the cultural exchanges have enhanced their general ability to allow themselves to be surprised and to capitalise on unexpected results. I simply do not know if it has helped them form a durable ethnographic sense of social curiosity and cultural intimacy that will help them approach and understand the unfamiliar not yet seen, perceived or conceptualised (as skilled waiting does in ethnographic research).

What I do know, and this still surprises me, is that we actually managed not once but twice to create the conditions for stirring neighbours, teachers and students together and allowing them to open up, listen and act in ways they never imagined. It also showed us that unexpected discoveries can be provoked, perhaps because the framing of them was strictly confined and

the efforts collaborative. Realising it was possible to create a social environment open to the unfamiliar by instigating indirect exchanges, I had plans to organise *Minestrone Stories* every autumn in a different quarter of the city over the coming years. For me personally, therefore, the projects clearly had a transformative effect on my teaching. I became much more open to experimenting with the unfamiliar in classes, a huge change for a rather conservative and socially introverted teacher.

Kai, however, had to withdraw due to other projects at the Odin Theatre and Martin, Katinka and I were leaving the Department for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies due, among other things, to financial cutbacks. It was not even certain that the two courses in question would be continued. So, the *Minestrone Stories* stopped because the things and thoughts to exchange no longer existed. The students' work, which was a vital part of the second series of cultural exchanges, was no longer available. Had I continued teaching, I might have looked into what students on other courses at the Institute could offer up for exchange with another community. There is nothing that really hinders teachers from inciting and coordinating indirect exchanges between students and external participants in similar co-creative projects. Connecting-what-is-already-present-in-a-indirect-constrained-series-of-exchange is surely an inspiring way to teach anthropology. Its very charm lies in the fact that the outcome is hard to predict and is the whole point of the discipline's main force. Not only does teaching-by-serendipity collapse momentary conventional social and educational boundaries, it allows us also to briefly approach the unfamiliar and unexpected as well as making teaching and learning fun and adventurous.

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Notes

1. ‘[Merton showed] that scientific inquiry cannot be metaphorically represented as hunting a hare (searching for a specific applicable scientific theory) with a rifle (the rules of scientific method). Indeed, if you are clever enough to take advantage of the opportunity, you may capture a fox thanks to accidental circumstances while searching for hares’ (Merton’s student Riccardo Campa 2008: 78).

2. The Odin Theatre Group is a vanguard theatre group in western Denmark characterised by cross-disciplinary endeavours and international collaboration. In the course of the Minestrone Stories, Kai from the Odin Theatre drew on his experiences of a specific Odin culture, founded on cultural diversity and the practice of ‘barter’ (see more at ‘Odin Teatret’, <http://www.odinteatret.dk/about-us/about-odin-teatret.aspx>).
3. CkulturaA is an NGO promoting cross-cultural integration in Copenhagen through social art projects (see more in Danish at ‘Om Ckultura’, <http://www.ckultura.org/dk/index.php/om-os/vores-sjael>).
4. For more information on the Minestrone Stories project, please see CkulturaA’s webpage with the uploaded stories and photos of the events: ‘Minestronefortællinger’, <http://www.ckultura.org/dk/index.php/vi-har-lavet/minestronefortaellinger>.
5. Conducting collective ultra-short student fieldwork is also teaching practice at the Department of Anthropology in Copenhagen. Every year, a hundred students do a one-day collective fieldwork on the same theme (ecology and utopia) in urban Copenhagen as part of their training in a course on anthropological qualitative methods (Rubow et al. 2017). Minestrone Stories does not, in this case, differ much in the directing of a collective effort in the qualitative method training. It differs largely by going much further in the post-production of the collective results gathered from the students’ fieldwork training.
6. ‘Dogme 95 was a Danish filmmaking movement started in 1995 by the Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, who created the “Dogme 95 Manifesto” and the “Vows of Chastity”. These were rules to create filmmaking based on the traditional values of story, acting and theme, and excluding the use of elaborate special effects or technology’. (‘Dogme 95’, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogme_95).
7. See ‘Minestronefortællinger fra Nørrebro: VerdensKulturCentret den 29. oktober 2015’, <http://www.ckultura.org/dk/images/minestronefortaellinger-fra-norrebro.pdf>.
8. For stories and pictures, see ‘Minestronefortællinger’, <http://www.ckultura.org/dk/index.php/vi-har-lavet/minestronefortaellinger>.
9. Internal unpublished report provided to TEACH (2017), Faculty of Art, University of Copenhagen.

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