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THE VALUE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

The Value of Anthropology



Paula K Clarke
W Ted Hamilton

Noticing and Challenging the Magic Counting Dragon

This is the first of the three-part essay “The Value of Anthropology” by Paula K Clarke and W Ted Hamilton. To read the next two installments, “Less Than Disinterested Observers: Noticing and Challenging the Magic Counting Dragon” and “What Anthropology Can and Should Do: Notice and Witness Magic Counting” visit the Academic Affairs section of anthropology-news.org in mid-January. AAA members are invited to post comments to continue Clarke and Hamilton’s discussion online, and anyone can rate, share, or just read the series through April.

The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor

—Campbell’s Law (1988, p 360)

We must educate people on what nobody knew yesterday and prepare people in our schools for what no one knows yet, but what some people must know tomorrow.

—Margaret Mead

An important essay “The Value of Anthropology” written by Lloyd Miller appeared in *Anthropology News* in December 2011. The essay, addressing the marginalization of anthropology offerings in higher education, proposed as a remedy a strategy that might best be described as hitting the target while also missing the mark. If, as the essay suggests, the goal is to demonstrate anthropology’s contributions to the development of collegiate competencies (eg, reading, writing, speaking, reasoning, thinking critically) this outcome is unlikely to result from simply providing “more American citizens with an anthropological knowledge and perspective.”

As the December 2011 article in part describes, the marginalization of anthropology is a symptom of a much larger endemic problem throughout higher education, namely the speed and convenience values associated with larger market forces that have essentially captured institutions in recent decades. The proposed remedy mistakenly ignores this larger matter. If anthropology wishes to demonstrate its contributions to the development of what are commonly recognized as college competencies without challenging these larger market driven values, its efforts are likely to realize limited success.

In reviewing the history of institutional assessment practices, aka outcome-based-assessment (OBA), Francine Jacobs points out these speed and convenience models were not designed for the conditions to which they are now being applied (*Applied Developmental Science* 7 [62–75]). In fact under current conditions, marked by extreme strain in many instances, the practices are likely to produce false positive as well as false negative assessments; wrongly suggesting successful outcomes (eg, college graduates with high grades and limited competencies) and wrongly suggesting failure as well (eg, failing and dropping out can be and often is a part of eventual success), a subject we return to in detail in Part Two. In other words, focusing on short term, easy to measure, attainable rather than desirable goals represents more of a barrier than a conduit for understanding the development of the competencies in question. As a result, strategies aimed at competency acquisition that do not challenge the hidden-in-plain-sight features of what we are calling “the magic counting dragon” (mcd) are stymied from the onset.

The “mcd” is a symbol representing the cultural forces that confer a kind of security and legitimacy in human activity. In an era of scientific inquiry marked by what has been called “the statistical style” (Kwa, *Styles of Knowing: A New History of Science from Ancient Times to the Present*, 2011) numbers are a central feature of our magic system, the human effort invested in virtually all cultures in increasing the efficiency of a desired outcome (eg, in farming, love, sports). The numbers tell us how we should feel about our world, how much we should worry—are Stock Market numbers going up or down, are job growth numbers up or down, is

the economy growing, stagnant or slowing? The dilemma in all cultures is that the magic chosen for efficiency and mastery can and often does become the master (Alexander, *The Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control*, 2008). We keep feeding the magic dragon what we believe it wants because we fear the consequences of failing to do so. But often, when times change, the dragon has lost the influence that it once had. In these conditions, though human effort fails to realize the expected outcome from feeding the dragon it continues with the familiar practice: As an example, the foot binding (magic) in pre-modern China that increased the value of a female and the chances of a good marriage continued even after Chinese society began to change, even when it became a disadvantage. More college degrees, speed through the institution, creating success by removing challenge all feed the quest for 'numbers,' but they do not feed the development of collegiate competencies.

These numbers are not proxies for college competencies because they no longer have the power that they once had. The mcd represents the source of *real cultural power*, what is counted. While numbers may very well be pure and true what is being counted hardly ever is (Blastland and Dilnot, *The Numbers Game*, 2009). What is counted (graduation rates, grades, matriculation speed) and what is not counted (eg, college competencies) *both* represent cultural choices with moral implications whose consequences may be subject to changed conditions. The mcd represents the power of the forces behind the numbers.

Under these circumstances, what anthropology can do and is uniquely suited to do involve demystifying— unmasking—market incentives and naming them for what they are, a “magic system” of counting designed to achieve mastery and control in an institutional setting rapidly losing what it claims to be securing. In other words, we suggest an additional strategy to the remedy proposed in the 2011 *AN* article so that efforts have a better chance of hitting both the target and the mark. Much like magic dragons in general, the power of this magic counting dragon is largely a function of a reluctance to notice and challenge it. This is what anthropology is uniquely suited to do.

The subjects of the second (Less Than Disinterested Observers) and the third (What Anthropology Can and Should Do) part of this series describe how we arrived at our conclusions and some specific recommendations for anthropology.

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Less Than Disinterested Observers



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Noticing and Challenging the Magic Counting Dragon

We do *not* write as disinterested observers of the Magic Counting Dragon described in our first essay. We are colleagues (husband and wife), one of us an anthropologist, both of us sharing an interest in the development of the college competencies described in [Part One](#). We share an office, often mentor students together regardless of the courses in which a student may be enrolled, and we team-teach. In our experience, which we will likely be unable to document until after retirement, the current preoccupation with counting short term, easy to measure attainable goals is a barrier to learning about and understanding the goal of developing critical collegiate competencies for the 21st century. Teaching in a small rural community college, our experience concurs with research associated with programs in strained institutional settings; what appears to be a less than successful undertaking when assessed in the short term is something altogether different when assessed with different metrics in the long run.

High Demand x High Support Pedagogy: More Challenge and More Support

During the past almost thirty years we have incrementally built a High Demand x High Support (HD x HS) teaching pedagogy designed to challenge more than accommodate common limitations of entering college students. Although we do not know if our interpretation of HD x HS is exactly what educator Nevitt Sanford (*Where Colleges Fail: A Study of the Student as a Person, 1967*) had in mind when he described HD x HS in the 1960s, we believe that the pedagogy bears sufficient resemblance to bear the name. The pedagogy represents the foundational anatomy in all the 20+ courses that we teach spanning the biological, physical, social/behavioral sciences. Importantly, as there are alternatives at our college to courses taught in the HD x HS format, student enrollment and retention in these courses reflects choice and decision-making

As the label implies, the demands of HD x HS courses are considerable when compared with the expectations and experiences of most students. However, as the label also implies, support in the interest of authentic student success are also diverse and generous. Feedback from students who have completed these courses and moved on from our institution routinely endorses the support as the most supportive or among the most supportive of environments they have ever experienced, in fact many continue to draw upon the HD x HS environment after leaving

HD x HS and Misleading Measures

Our experiences with HD x HS courses strongly suggest that measuring short term, easy to measure, attainable goals is misleading. When viewed from the perspective of the currently in place counting model the HD x HS approach is a failure; enrollments are often low and drop rates are invariably high. However, when assessments of HD x HS courses are counted in other ways the picture is more complex. Regardless of whether they perform well from the start (a small

but consistent minority of individuals who have often *not* been traditionally successful) or initially experience bouts of course avoidance, dropping, inconsistent performance, and failure (the most common model) those students who persist in two or more HD x HS courses often move on from our institution to beat the odds on multiple fronts. These students chart pathways that would *not be expected* from backgrounds marked by rural conditions, starting college at a small rural community college, and often a variety of social challenges as well. In fact, these individuals are poster children for why short term assessments of student performance in community colleges should not be cast-in-stone indicators of student ability and/or motivation. And, conversely, they also demonstrate why course expectations should not be dumbed down in order to manufacture short term success.

What we have learned about individuals who avoid, drop and/or fail HD x HS courses is also instructive. Virtually all are, at the time, socially and/or developmentally strained. Affordable housing, transportation, work, and caregiving demands are among the common social strains in our small rural community. Common symptoms (eg, poor impulse control, authoritarianism) that some may associate with *Arrested Adulthood* (Côté, 2000) and others may associate with mental illness (Morrow, *Mental Health of College Students*, 2008) also mark this population. Many of these individuals self-report earning better than average, if not exceptionally high, grades elsewhere.

Another way in which the currently in place counting model misleads is via assumptions about professional commitment and effort. Small enrollments and high drop rates are assumed to reflect low levels of professional investment, even professional incompetence and/or lassitude. Once again, the truth of the matter is more complex; if HD x HS classes attracted more persisting students we would be hard pressed to know how we would meet their demands. If otherwise ignored indicators were counted and presumed to matter, the professional involvement and/or commitment picture would look quite different. For example, otherwise hidden and presumed not to matter in the existing assessment culture are such indicators as time with students outside the classroom (we each hold at least 30 office hours per week and those hours are invariably filled with one or more students), time spent with students after transfer, and substantial personal funding in the absence of institutional support.

The Harm of Misleading Indicators

Those most harmed by the short term, easy to measure, attainable rather than desirable goal approach to assessment are those individuals more willing and able to commit and engage as well as those on the cusp of doing so. Contrary to the assumptions of some, this is *not* an elitist perspective. Both groups can represent a wide range of demographic backgrounds. Also contrary to some assumptions, these groups are not fixed and concrete. Individuals can and do change, the more willing and able includes those who at earlier times were less willing and less able, often demonstrably so! Sometimes such change emerges from improved life conditions (eg, work, family, transportation, health), from what appears to be internally driven reassessments of life commitments (eg, “when I was in your class right after high school I was mostly there because my friends were there.”) and sometimes from the HD x HS experience itself. Some of the most [amazing stories](#) in the long run would have been difficult if not impossible to predict from short run performance assessments.

Others harmed by the short-term approach are the institutions themselves. Populations that consistently show up (that includes those who have avoided, dropped and/or failed previously) in the HD x HS courses provide a glimpse of ways in which community colleges (perhaps parts of higher education in general) might redesign a vision of themselves in the 21st century. As many if not most students on our campus go out of their way to avoid HD x HS courses, those who do otherwise might shed light on new direction possibilities.

There are also costs to society in the current magic counting system. Talent development not only takes time, it is not always a smooth unfettered journey. A preoccupation with short-term, quick and uncomplicated fixes represents a failure to invest in long term talent development, what might be called [The Long Now](#), thinking in the future tense. Furthermore, as Marc Freedman, author of *The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage beyond Midlife* (2011) reminds us, the readiness to embark on the development of talent is not as tied as it once was to the younger periods in the life course. Given the nature of current novel conditions, decisions about success and failure based on short term, easy to measure attainable goals have limited traction for individuals, institutions and society.

HD x HS and Damned Strange Coincidences

A final point about the HD x HS teaching pedagogy and its association with otherwise unexpected success stories. While the correlation between unusually successful outcomes and persistence in HD x HS courses does not constitute ‘causality’ in the technical sense, the association does represent what Paul Meehl (*American Psychologist* 50 [266-275]) and Wesley Salmon (*Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World*, 1984) would describe as “damn strange coincidences,” or alternatively what Bent Flyvbjerg (*Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, 2001) describes as “critical cases;” instances that may have strategic importance to a general problem. In other words, while HD x HS may not represent *cause* in the technical sense, it is likely of “strategic importance” to the general problem of learning about desirable outcomes from otherwise strained institutional settings and populations (eg, in our situation, a small rural community college). This observation is particularly likely as the unusual successes associated with HD x HS do not represent isolated instances but rather a small but nonetheless steady stream of similar successes over a period of now almost fifteen years. While the HD x HS approach may not be a sufficient condition for launching unexpected successes, it may very well represent a necessary condition for understanding them. Standing in the way, of course, is the magic counting dragon.

We did not develop the HD x HS approach with a deliberate oppositional goal in mind. Rather, it was developed in order to provide individuals with both the burden and the privilege of addressing widely recognized limitations to success, in education and elsewhere. Over time we found ourselves in the midst of the tensions between what is counted as institutional success and what we were learning from [the HD x HS approach](#). Our third and final piece offers suggestions

about what anthropology can and should do in order to contribute to an understanding of this dilemma.

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What Anthropology Can and Should Do



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Notice and Witness Magic Counting

In this final part of our three part response to the December 2011 *AN* column, "The Value of Anthropology," we offer suggestions for the contributions that anthropology could and should make to the dilemma at hand.

Laura Nader once urged anthropologists to study the powerful. Well, here is the chance to do so! If power means protection from scrutiny, higher education enjoys a good deal of it. In spite of the reams of data produced about this institution, it remains an enigma even to itself. As one emeritus observer recently noted, "the scandal of higher education in our time is that so little attention gets paid, in institutions that claim to provide an education, to what it is that college educators claim to be providing" (Levine, *Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America*, 2006).

Ignore Implicit Rules

A first necessary step is to break with the unspoken but widely understood rules that define what can be studied and how. Such rules go a long way in explaining why researching home-turf, that is higher education, is conspicuously slim at this time of institutional and cultural strain. Senior anthropologists with established reputations, along with those choosing to take advantage of inevitable uncertainty, could help here by treading where others are understandably unlikely to do so. As will be pointed out further along, this is likely to be a demanding task.

A Public Perspective: Fearless Spectator x Witnessing

Anthropology can bring a public perspective. Leaving aside tensions between the "public" and the "applied," the aim is to frame the speed and convenience values in higher education as a broad social issue of our time requiring a more public conversation than currently prevails. Part of this perspective should involve what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (*Current Anthropology* 36 [409-440]) describes as "witnessing," positioning the anthropologist "inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being." The latter is important. Modern complex institutions like education have countless mechanisms for Orwellian-like doublethink, lying to themselves about themselves and then inducing unconsciousness about doing so. While the anti-institutional thread of US culture tends to treat such conditions as inevitable, those familiar with healthy institutions recognize that this is clearly not the case. Anthropologists are likely to be among those most adept at pulling back the curtain, demystifying how prevailing normative mechanisms are maintained and alternatives resisted and/or penalized.

In this situation, a public anthropology commitment means that the anthropologist likely functions in three positions that together are demanding. First, as a likely functioning member of the institutional setting the anthropologist is in the position of (1) participant (teacher, researcher, advisor). Next, a public anthropology commitment would also mean simultaneously occupying the position of (2) passive spectator—what Scheper-Hughes describes as "fearless spectator" and (3) active/responsive "witness." The fearless spectator records conditions while the witness makes moral commentary about deeper layers of possible meaning and/or their implications.

Witnessing is noticing with a capital “N.” It means noticing that the demands of the magic counting system involve also noticing its contradictions; serving-the-dragon involves a commitment unintended though it may be to abandoning the mission of higher education. The contexts normalizing the creation of short term easy to measure success by removing the challenges most likely in the long term to authentically bring it about requires exposure (eg, in our institution we hear “keep them happy, keep them moving, and keep them graduating”). Accomplishing such a task requires occupying more than position of (1) participant and (2) fearless spectator.

Scheper-Hughes describes “witnessing” as an anthropology that can “think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms.” Witnesses should be “the producers of politically complicated and morally demanding texts and images capable of sinking through layers of acceptance, complicity, and bad faith.” This form of anthropology notices places of silence. The mission is to create a body of knowledge about “undiscussables” (Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*, 2006), things associated with fear, shame, and embarrassment, where deeply held values and commitments are in conflict and/or have perhaps even run their course. It should look at institutional resources committed to creating and maintaining ignorance (eg, meetings whose primary function is avoiding subjects most in need of attention).

Goals of Noticing and Witnessing

One goal of such a venture would be for anthropological insights to contribute to higher education in the way that they have contributed to health related matters. TM Lührman’s *Of Two Minds: An Anthropologist Looks at American Psychiatry* (2001) and the work of Didier Fassin, Richard Rechtman and Rachel Gomme entitled *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Culture of Victimhood* (2009) represents two such examples. These works unpack layers of meaning in institutional rhetoric, routine rituals, power relationships, and gossip. In so doing, they expose the complexity and out of awareness drama behind the otherwise unremarkable.

Another goal would be to forge, or further, already initiated linkages between existing areas of overlapping investment and/or scholarship. For example, current destabilizing conditions have public health implications. In fact, an existing literature in public health in part alludes to such a relationship (Schoeni, *Making Americans Healthier: Social and Economic Policy as Health Policy*, 2008). Also pointing this direction is the “[Educated Citizen and Public Health Initiative](#)” of the Association of American Colleges and Universities as well as the [National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement](#).

Anthropology could also begin to assemble a body of alternative indicators about the relationship between exposure to anthropology and the development of the competencies in question. Much like uncertainty itself, anthropological knowledge can be disorienting. This is particularly the case when course performance requirements emphasize reasoning and application of anthropological knowledge and insight to complex essential questions. Such disorientation, though discouraged by the magic counting model (it neither expedites matriculation nor guarantees early success), is invariably an essential part of the road to competency acquisition. Student responses to anthropology may not only reveal something about how different individuals and/or circumstances weather the late modern transition, they may also reveal, in fact are very likely to reveal, an inverse relationship between success in the magic counting model and the development of collegiate competencies.

Accountable to History and to Science

Though Scheper-Hughes describes the “fearless spectator” and “witnessing” anthropology in different almost non-overlapping categories, in this instance we believe they would overlap a good deal. We believe this type of anthropology would be (could be) accountable to history as well as to science. In her model the “fearless spectator” is aligned with the natural sciences and is a “passive act that positions the anthropologist above and outside human events as a “neutral” and “objective” (ie, uncommitted) seeing I/eye.” She describes this type of anthropology as “accountable to science.” In contrast, the “witnessing” anthropology is aligned with moral philosophy and is an “active voice,” positioning the anthropologist inside human events responsively and reflexively, one who will “take sides” and make judgments. However, we offer the following alternative.

In an historical era of scientific inquiry that often confuses statistical significance with “the end of an argument” (Ziliak and McCloskey, *The Cult of Statistical Significance: How the Standard Error Costs Us Jobs, Justice, and Lives*. 2008), the historical and the scientific converge; the statistically insignificant may be highly significant scientifically and conversely what is statistically significant may simply be an accurate description of a nonetheless hidden but powerful prevailing bias (Ioannidis, *PLoS* 8[e124]). Thus, if science in the current historical era is marked by ending arguments at points (of statistical significance or insignificance) where arguments should begin, then the contexts that produce and maintain such activity (higher education) require both “spectator neutrality” as well as “reflexive witnessing.”

Where Should “Fearless Spectator” x “Witnessing” Anthropology Focus?

Most of higher education is in need of demystifying attention, including highly selective institutions. Former Harvard president Derek Bok has written both about the dilemmas of higher education (*Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More*, 2006) and market values (*Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, 2003). Other presidents of prestigious colleges and universities (Donald Kennedy of Stanford, Harold Shapiro of the University of Michigan and Princeton, Frank Rhodes of Cornell) have also written (after leaving office), albeit often

in veiled terms, of similar concerns.

Also in need of demystifying attention is the other end of what might be described as the privilege spectrum, America's conspicuously ignored public community colleges where almost half of all US undergraduates receive some part of their early post-secondary education. In spite of their many strengths and advantages, community colleges have been described as in need of "fundamental internal reforms and a new vision of their role in higher education" (Bailey and Jacobs, *The American Prospect*, October 29, 2009). Although fragile under prepared students and students in socioeconomic distress are no longer isolated in community colleges, no other institution is marked by the contradictory mission of offering quasi-political equality on the one hand and preparation for economic inequality on the other. Furthermore, no other institution is as likely to "serve" a population as uncritically accepting of such a contradiction. As this entanglement takes on increasingly troubling dimensions in the midst of growing inequality, the 21st century community college student is essentially a foot soldier of late modernity. When institutions "serving" such populations direct efforts toward accommodating rather than challenging the magic counting model, it is much like the band playing on as the Titanic went down. While "playing on" was perhaps the only thing that could be done on the Titanic, such an attitude from institutions that produce cultural knowledge, educate citizens, and prepare professionals for institutional stewardship suggests at the very least a shortage of imagination.

The value of anthropology to 21st century adulthood and citizenship, including whatever shape work may take, lies in its unique capacity to rescue the goal of competency acquisition from the magic counting dragon. To do this requires exposing the limitations of what is counted and therefore presumed to matter *along with* the strengths of what is not counted, and presumed not to matter. When this knowledge is lacking or ignored, the world that we think we know is likely to be a neat and tidy illusion (Blastland and Dilnot, *The Numbers Game*, 2009).

To demonstrate the contributions of anthropology to the development of the competencies described in the December 2011 *AN* essay will involve more than simply providing "American citizens with anthropological knowledge and perspective." It will be also be necessary to expose and challenge the magic counting values that function to marginalize it. Marginalizing anthropology offerings is undoubtedly the result of consulting small numbers in terms of enrollments and/or persistence. This is where analytical work should begin rather than end. Numbers that stand out offer good clues, for better and for worse. On their own, however, numbers don't tell us much until we investigate the "magic" behind them.

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