LESSONS FOR LIFE: STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON THE TEACHING OF SUE BENSON

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> In a way her lecturing didn't feel all that different to how she was in her kitchen or in a supervision. She was just totally there. (Rosie)

This paper collects the reflections of seven of Sue's former students (the two authors included) on the originality of her teaching and its diffuse but nonetheless very tangible legacy. Those who speak in this paper are all now in their late twenties or early thirties and were all contemporaries as undergraduates. In some cases our relationships with one another were themselves products of Sue's teaching, forged through the practical ways in which this brought us together and the common ideas and viewpoints that we came to recognise. In other cases, the process of the interview itself reconnected relationships that had been severed by the end of university. As undergraduates we had different and sometimes conflicting views on Cambridge and on anthropology, and since graduating we have gone on to work in a range of occupations: from advocacy to documentary film-making. We all had different relationships with Sue, yet for all of us her teaching exerted a profound and lasting influence. For some this directly affected the professional paths that our lives have subsequently taken: Olly, Tom and Matt were taught by Sue as undergraduates and went on to do PhDs in social anthropology; Jo was Sue's PhD student and is currently a research fellow in Cambridge. Others, such as Rosie, who works as an advocate for survivors of domestic violence, feel Sue's influence on their professional life is just as pervasive without being so explicitly traceable. In this sense the account is not only a testament to the personal qualities that made Sue a remarkable and inspirational teacher, it also illustrates the influence that she continues to exert, and the many ways in which she lives on in the thoughts and actions of others.

Sue was many things to many people, and there is certainly no attempt to synthesize in these few pages 'what her students thought about Sue'. This is no more than a partial and situated snapshot of an extremely complex person. Sue's colleagues, her family, and students who were taught by her at other points in her long career could complement this picture or offer contrasting views. But what struck us

both throughout our interviews was the ubiquitous sense of solidity, of wholeness, of integrity – a sense which reflected our own recollections of Sue's presence. As Olly, one of our interviewees, suggested, one could picture ideas running through Sue like veins through a rock: surface always pointed to depth. It was perhaps no coincidence that part of her work on embodiment was concerned with challenging the assumption that representations of self could ever be merely skin-deep (Benson 2000). No fronts, no tricks: Sue tied her ideas to her physical presence in such a way that, as Rosie, another of her students, put it, 'when she was with you, she was with you.'

Our conversations arose out of our often longstanding relationships and echoed sentiments expressed in conversations we had as undergraduates. They articulate feelings of intimacy and attachment which as supervisees we keenly felt but rarely knew how to make explicit. In this paper, we present some of the themes which emerged, without any attempt at an exhaustive or coherent picture. Rather, these fragments of student recollections stand as clues to a broader coherence: the coherence and integrity which allowed Sue seamlessly to connect her teaching and her research, her intellectual and her physical presence, which allowed her to 'just be totally there'.

Making things relevant

As both a lecturer and a supervisor, Sue had the ability to make complex ideas seem both accessible and important. For a variety of students, her teaching was inspirational, making evident how academic ideas need not be 'academic' in the pejorative sense. Indeed for a number of students Sue's teaching, rather than the subject as such, led them to choose anthropology. Having been admitted to study Social and Political Science, Rachel described her uncertainty as to which direction to take at the end of the first year: 'I had absolutely no idea what [social anthropology] was and thought it sounded a bit odd. But basically I really enjoyed Sue's supervisions, really enjoyed talking to Sue, found the stuff that she was lecturing on really, really interesting.'

Part of her strength as a lecturer was in being able to relate highly complex ideas in ways that made them widely comprehensible, without reducing their essential point. Rosie described her capacity to 'cut through' ideas, as a lecturer relating how, 'it was as if nothing, no idea, was too complex to be reduced to something that she was going to tell you.' For her, Sue's capacity to reveal 'the essence of the thing' was both inspirational and highly reassuring, leading to a sense that anything and everything was potentially understandable.

Part of her effectiveness in conveying ideas came from ability as a performer. Reflecting on the factors that made her teaching so enjoyable, Rachel said: 'She was a really good speaker, a really eloquent lecturer. And the way she approached subjects, you know, there was a very practical, real world perspective on the stuff she looked at.'

Sue generally spoke from notes and often totally off the cuff, which made her lectures direct and engaging. In talking about complex social theorists she illustrated these with the examples that were close to hand: theories of 'the body' were sometimes exemplified by reference to her own; the installation of CCTV in the centre of Cambridge demonstrated the continued relevance of Foucault's ideas of the panopticon. In her lectures abstract ideas were brought to life through their concrete and tangible application to novel situations. This made them seem relevant to those who might otherwise have had little interest. Her lectures were often compelling because they seemed an extension of her life. 'She didn't need to preach her ideas, she *was* her ideas', Rosie reflected. 'In a way her lecturing didn't feel all that different to how she was in her kitchen or in a supervision. She was just totally there.'

Sue's extensive theoretical and ethnographic knowledge gave her an authority and, for many, a reassuring sense of solidity and robustness. Yet as a supervisor she was often playful in the way she discussed ideas and this elicited playfulness in her supervisees. As a teacher her ability lay not only in her skill in relating ideas but also in her capacity to draw out the ideas already latent in students. 'She flirted with you mentally' Rosie explained, describing how this could be intellectually satisfying and exciting: 'With Sue it felt like you could push. I got so excited with working with her and I remember being really, really fizzed up just being with her – hanging onto her every word; wanting to write everything that she said down.'

Her playfulness with ideas had its counterpart in her playfulness more generally and supervisions were often humorous and fun occasions. As Rachel recalled, 'we laughed a lot. We just thoroughly enjoyed Sue's supervisions. It was a very sort of informal, cosy sort of a thing.' Sue's supervisions were generally good humoured and friendly. Lucia was supervised with two friends from New Hall and recalls:

> I think we probably appeared like a dastardly trio because we were very...you know we turned up to supervisions, and we lived together, so we would probably speak our own language to a certain degree, and Sue would have to kind of interrupt us to make us talk one at a time instead of three at once [...] I think she might have taken kindly on us [because] she enjoyed mischief, I think, [...] you could see a kind

> of mischievous smile of her own, she could, maybe, see a bit of herself in us.

Rosie recalls how this freedom itself produced ideas:

> When I was with her I felt I could be totally cheeky, I could swear – which I didn't do with my other supervisors – I cursed and blinded with her. I could be kind of casual and careless and try ideas on, then just cast them off. You could really play with her in a way that you never could with other supervisors. I was always much more considered with other supervisors. And I almost always had great ideas when I was with Sue.

Sue's lectures and supervisions nonetheless carried a serious message. Reflecting upon her time as a student, Lucia talked of the inspiration that Sue provided in terms of encouraging her to think about things politically: 'it was great to have a supervisor who was political [and] she had a radical side to her as well. She wouldn't take it lying down, she wouldn't take no for an answer.' This sometimes meant pursuing ideas that went against the grain or challenged received wisdom: 'if there was something you wanted to do that didn't necessarily fit the box, she'd encourage you to do it, and perhaps gently suggest how, how you might fit it into the box'.

Sue valued the pursuit of difficult and original ideas as an end in its own right but often sought to draw out their practical and political implications. This was not because her thinking was 'applied' or 'pragmatic' but rather because she recognised the inextricably political nature of ideas. For students her teaching often seemed exciting because it made this explicit and in doing so drew connections between domains of life that might otherwise have appeared un-related. It was common to leave her lectures feeling not simply that ideas had been learnt but that the world itself seemed like a slightly different place.

Supervisor, Friend, Mentor

One of the themes which returned throughout our interviews was the richness and 'thickness' of Sue's relationships with her students, relationships which, like her ideas, effortlessly crossed domains. Lucia was asked to describe her relationship with Sue, and her answer weaves in and out of what was specific about Sue and what pertained to supervisors in general. Of Sue she answered:

> Well, supervisor, friend, mentor... as New Hall students we felt privileged, because [...] she was to a certain extent a... a mother figure even though I'm sure she'd have hated that [expression]! [...] It's

> definitely a relationship which is unlike the standard student-teacher relationship, it's more personal, it's intimate in some way, they [supervisors], ultimately they want to make sure you're doing the work, without offloading all your emotional trouble, or trying to bluff your way through lectures because you've been out partying too hard the night before... she was quite understanding of some things like that, you know, she seemed to take a more holistic approach to study. She'd be pleased if we'd been out to parties perhaps but we'd also managed to do the reading...

As a teacher Sue was a formidable presence and did not suffer fools gladly. Yet she could also be gentle, caring and supportive. Rosie reflected, 'she had so much charge about her. And she was really, really kind. Despite being so formidable she could also be really, really still'. For Rachel, there was no doubt that Sue was:

> ... razor sharp [and yet] she encouraged your strengths, instead of challenging your weaknesses. And I think, you know, other people might work in a different way, [...] but I was someone that didn't work very well by being challenged or criticised, I quite liked being nurtured, and Sue was a very nurturing kind of supervisor, really.

It follows that as a supervisor and teacher Sue was greatly admired and appreciated, not only by students who were bent on academic success but also by those who were less enthusiastic about their study. Her popularity was such that while, as we shall see below, Sue was very resistant to being idolised and put on a pedestal, undergraduates often spoke of 'the Cult of Sue', and at one point she even appeared in the student newspaper *Varsity* as 'Hero of the Week'. The long queue of students that often appeared outside her office door not only reflected her own commitment to teaching but students' commitment to her. For some, this had to do with Sue's ability to put the obsessively work-centred world of Cambridge into perspective. As Rachel put it:

> So many people became so obsessed with work [...] when it came to revision, so obsessed with whether they'd get a first or a 2.i, and Sue, she was like 'it really isn't that big a deal', you know, 'it's really not the end of the world'. She had a very sensible outlook on life, and she was so interested in all the other stuff of life, you know, *as* interested, kind of thing. So many people in Cambridge, academia is their world, and Sue had a much bigger world beyond that.

Yet for all that, Sue never lowered her standards and never made life seem like a choice between the academic and this wider world. On the contrary, her ability to see beyond the narrow definitions of academic success highlighted the continuity between the two, made the academic

relevant for those students who might not see its point 'for its own sake'. Kindness notwithstanding, excellence was still expected. Rachel continues, reflecting on the time she walked out in the middle of her final-year exams:

> When I walked out of the exams the first time, she was very adamant, [...] she was one of the people who was saying, you know, 'you really should not leave Cambridge with anything less than a good degree', you know, 'you've got a really good brain, you've got to put it to use, you should come back and show people what you can do.'

For some, the key to Sue's ability to be supportive and kind and yet simultaneously to get the best out of students was her level of commitment. As Jo put it, 'one of the things that she would do unfailingly is to be incredibly committed to her students [...] she would go above and beyond for people, and because of that, as a student of hers, you had to as well'. This support was not simply confined to academic affairs but also extended to a more general concern with personal wellbeing. Rachel described the unusual amount of help and support that Sue gave:

> I was going to talk to Sue a lot of the time about stuff, nothing to do with anthropology...I'd just knock on her door and she was the first person that I went to talk about things when I wasn't doing great. I didn't talk to people at [college]...so she had a very, very different significance for me than, you know, just an academic.

Sue's relationships with supervisees were often unconventional too, in her refreshingly direct and candid approach. Rosie noted: 'it was [an intimate relationship] and I was always surprised by that – every time I met her. I was always surprised by the directness of the connection.'

Sue herself wrote about the capacity of names to frame and index relationships (Benson 2006) and it is perhaps a measure of the affection in which she was held that students universally spoke to and of her on first name terms. Respect for Sue was based on intimacy and connection. As Rachel put it: 'I think everybody felt like they had this special relationship with Sue because she was...attentive and giving when you were there with her and she was just such a strong presence...'

Supervisor, friend, mentor. Sue's relationships with her students were multi-stranded and complex, drawing different registers into one powerful connection that took in and nurtured both the person and the ideas. For Lucia:

> [Sue] was a very experienced supervisor who really knew what she was doing, so she saw things in you, she could predict certain things

> about you that you didn't have a clue about yourself. You know, she'd seen so many undergraduates coming, turning up [at] her door, looking terrified or whatever, [so] she knew how to handle you, in a very kindly way. But she wouldn't mince her words. If you said something that was wrong, she'd listen. There wasn't necessarily a wrong in Sue's book, she'd be open to everything... but at the same time, she had an encouraging way of correcting you. If you really said something that was way out of line, she wouldn't intimidate you.

Sue did not use her considerable influence to indoctrinate, and the goal of these powerful teaching relationships was, as Weber might put it, 'self-clarification', not moulding students into her own image. As willing as Sue was to let her students 'in', therefore, she also made an effort to allow them to distance themselves. Rosie reflects on the disambiguation of relationships in her current work with survivors of domestic violence: 'there is a sort of idealisation [of me] with some of my clients, as I did with her [Sue] and which I always try to discourage – as she did actually. She didn't like being idolised'. As Rachel put it, 'you knew it was a kind of transient thing and that you were just one of many, many people passing through and that there'd been many before you and there'd be many after you'. That knowledge, above all else, made one feel grateful and privileged for the time one did get to spend with her. Rosie notes:

> She was totally dedicated to her students. Absolutely, fundamentally dedicated to her students. You know, you always had to wait ten minutes because there was somebody else in her bloody office! You did feel slightly like you had to fight for her – which I think made the kind of prize of being with her seem all the more...Kind of like feeling you were one of many! It's funny actually...

Rachel recalls: 'when I left finally in the fourth year I got [her] this card which said 'just divorced' – I mean it really did feel like... because I'd seen so much of her and we'd been so much in touch.'

Sue's places and presence

Part of the power of these relationships was enshrined in the physicality of the spaces in which Sue taught and in her own physical presence. For many the support that Sue offered became synonymous with the places that she inhabited. Supervisions were often held in her house at New Hall; with an intriguing range of artefacts and books it was both exotic and familiar. Rachel described this exciting mix:

> When you went to her place it was great. It was this kind of Bohemian seeming kind of slightly ramshackle [place] – exactly what you'd

> expect from an academic with West African influences and all these sorts of things. There was great art on the walls and books strewn everywhere.

Rosie vividly remembers Sue's kitchen, an oasis of domesticity in what for her was an otherwise rather impersonal academic environment:

> [The kitchen] was always the first thing you saw when you came into the house. These shelves and wonderful jars. And the vanilla pods – I remember the vanilla pods more than anything. But why was it important? It was warm and it was her. [...] I remember her being in those kind of sterile environments [her various offices] and then to go into her kitchen was just like, aah. And it smelt so wonderful. And it was so not a surprise what it was like. [...] I remember there were lots of textures everywhere and thinking to myself, 'this is what I want my kitchen to be like when I grow up.' [laughing]. Yeah. And definitely feeling like I'd been let into something [...] because in other circumstances she had been this kind of formidable figure in this sterile academic environment. So then to see her in her home and like all the cats jumping up and her pushing them off the chair and...do you know what I mean?

For Rachel, on the other hand, the warmth of Sue's home somehow extended to every space she inhabited:

> She always migrated around the anthropology building, sometimes monthly, she was always in a different room, but her rooms were always cosy and comforting and welcoming and, you know, whatever door she was [behind] there was always this lovely little picture on the front of the door, and [...] there was something kind of welcoming and warm about going to see her, and it was exactly the same when I went to both of her houses and they were exactly the same, they exuded this lovely sort of comforting warmth.

In 2000–2001, Sue occupied a basement office in the Department of Social Anthropology, and Rachel and Matt recalled the gravitational pull that her window exerted. Wherever one was headed, one would always take a peek to see whether Sue was in as one walked past. For Rachel, this continued after she left Cambridge.

> Normally when I went back to Cambridge I would go and see Sue. It was weird it was just like a habit, you know like how you'd wander past the anthropology department, and if I ever went to [one of the local coffee-shops] I'd just wander past and I'd just look down in the basement to see if Sue was there, or I'd just go and knock on her door, just to say hello.

If there was something comforting about the spaces Sue inhabited, and if her window turned into a beacon, this was also something to do with her own physical presence. Memories of Sue as a real, solid, embodied presence loom large in our interviews. Rachel:

> She was really kind of statuesque wasn't she? She always wore black top to toe, so she had this very mysterious... sort of like a French mime artist or something... I loved when she was telling us all that stuff about matriarchal society in West Africa because she was really like a matriarch to me.

Lucia:

> She was pretty impressive person to be greeted with as your classic Cambridge don that she is not. Super stylish, gorgeous, obviously the toast of the town when she was a student, I mean, gorgeous young lady and erm, arriving as a slightly scruffy 19-year-old, it's quite an impressive vision, really, always well-dressed and [...] well kempt, you know [...] oh, and laughing, she laughed a lot!

Rosie: 'She was absolutely gorgeous! Beautiful and... queenly. Beautiful and she had the most amazing posture. She was always, you know, like this [sitting upright]. She was just really regal.' For Rachel,

> She was just the opposite of what I thought of as the Cambridge professor, you know because she was this sort of big, bold, brash, kind of brassy woman [...] she did have an extremely strong presence, you felt kind of safe, she was very much an in-control kind of person.

As Rosie puts it, 'she did feel solid and robust and present... When she was with you, she was with you.'

Posture, beauty, strength. Sue's incontrovertible physicality emerges from our interviews as an anchor in the unmoored world of student life. It was – once again – in life and not only in her work, that Sue made clear the incontrovertible realness of bodies and their considerable power (Benson 1997, 2000).

Remaking Cambridge

To students, Sue often seemed radical and refreshingly indifferent to certain aspects of the Cambridge system. 'It's weird because my impression is that she had lived in Cambridge for most of her life,' Rosie reflected. 'But you had this kind of sense of her being totally worldly and...she was so metropolitan and urban. She had none of the stuffiness of Cambridge about her. She was a kind of counterpoint to all that crap...She had a freshness about her.'

Sue's radicalism originated in a very genuine commitment to a particular orientation to the world: 'most people who wanted to be funky in Cambridge, it was totally affected – they were only funky by, you know, Cult Clothing[1] or listening to a bit of rap. But Sue was constitutionally funky...It felt like she had her finger on the pulse of life.' Lucia described Sue's distinctive style of teaching in similar terms:

> Even though she did spend a lot of time in Cambridge which can be a kind of closed literature-centred place, she...transcended that really and was inspiring in terms of encouraging us to look outside, look outside the bubble or look outside the standard way of thinking...She encouraged independent thought which was good for me.

Although students often saw Sue as the antithesis of the sometimes stuffy and insular orientation of the Cambridge system, paradoxically, many came to see her as the very personification of their more positive experiences of the place. Reflecting on her initially negative impressions of student life at Cambridge, Rachel came up against this paradox in our interview:

> I really didn't like Cambridge...I didn't like the kind of fussy old buildings and the bumbly old professors and it was all really antiquated and backward to me. And I think Sue, she was just much more colourful and kind of modern and engaging. And she was just very anti-Cambridge to me. Even though it's kind of funny because she came to symbolise Cambridge to me...She was very Cambridge actually, you know, she did kind of run around on her bicycle and she loved the Cambridge system...But Sue was just, like, a breath of fresh air.

For students Sue stood apart from the Cambridge system as somebody who was radical, un-conventional and approachable. In doing so she came to embody a set of values and ideals that characterised people's actual experiences of the place. Rachel concluded 'Sue was a kind of Cambridge that I could potentially see myself in, you know, that I could get comfortable with. It was this much more exciting, aspirational, "oh I'd like to be like that" side of Cambridge'.

Living Ideas

The contributions to this volume show the influence of Sue's anthropology on a range of her students and colleagues. But more than simply teaching a set of anthropological concepts and ideas, Sue's

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1 A trendy clothes shop in the centre of Cambridge.

teaching led people to question the fundamentals of their own beliefs. As such her influence on students was often profound. For some this was relatively direct. Rosie now works as an advocate for survivors of domestic violence and reflected on how Sue both influenced the choices she has taken in her career and the perspectives that she brings to her current work:

> I became partly what I am through those [supervisions] with her and she was really important to me in terms of feminism and in terms of what I do now; basically of trying to give women a sense of the political nature of what they are going through and of being part of a social movement.

In this way she related how in dealing with clients, she often draws on her own experiences as a student of Sue's:

> I can see myself sitting with her and talking about *Ain't I a Woman* (hooks 1981) – which I did for my feminist paper – and then I can see myself doing my work with my clients and I can really see the connection...I can see her and me and how I felt at that age being inspired by this woman and being made a feminist...in my relationship with her. And then my relationship with clients – and I think I have some of the physical presence that Sue had. I like to think so!

In addition to the ideas she developed through her supervisions with Sue, Rosie learnt through these about the nature of teaching. Similarly, Jo and Matt, who went on to supervise in Cambridge, often discuss the way in which, faced with a difficult situation, our first question always seems to be 'what would Sue do?' In other words, we have not abstracted from Sue's teaching an explicit set of principles or guidelines, rather she, as a whole person, remains a very tangible anchor for thinking about what it means to be a teacher.

Other continuing influences are less easy to map. While Rosie saw a very direct influence in terms of her own political views and her feminist beliefs, she also related how Sue has affected her personally in ways which are both less tangible and more profound. For Rosie as for others, Sue is often in her thoughts:

> I think about her loads actually and there's not necessarily a particular reason why I think about her. I might think about her when I walk down the street and I see a really gorgeous middle-aged woman, or I might think about her when I'm cooking – I think about her at any time if I'm honest...It didn't ever feel like she belonged in any particular domain. She belonged in all sorts of domains. The ideas just kind of ran through everything really.

Similarly Rachel described how the extent of Sue's influence made it difficult to quantify:

> The kind of influence of someone like Sue has is kind of, diffuse and intangible, in that everyone remembers her so fondly and with such – you know she was such an amazing this, that and the other, she was so great, she had such an impact on me. But when you actually try and ... pinpoint things, you know, incidents, moments, subjects, I think it becomes much harder. She was just a very strong presence in people's lives but particularly because at that time in our lives we were so impressionable. You know, we'd just come to university and there was this great, dynamic, powerful person.

Precisely because Sue's influence was so profound, it is difficult to isolate its specific manifestations. Yet for many her ideas and her presence remain highly tangible. Elaborating on the nature of her influence, Rosie reflected, 'Sue's still very physically present in my memory.'

Final Thoughts

Teaching is sometimes viewed as a subordinate activity to research. Yet for Sue there was no neat separation between the two. In her teaching she drew on ideas and examples that came from her research and, indeed, from other parts of her life. By the same token teaching was itself a form of research: an area of interest and exploration in its own right and the wellspring of much of what she did.

One anecdote neatly encompasses this seamlessness – and the way it can become invisible. When Rachel told Sue that she would like to write a third-year dissertation on Vietnam and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Sue gave her a large pile of notes which she had once made for a projected article on 'shell-shock' during the first world war. In the end, Rachel did not write the dissertation, and Sue did not write the article on shell-shock. But Rachel recalls how privileged she felt when Sue gave her those notes, which stand in her memory as a mark of Sue's faith in her. These moments at which research, teaching and human relationships are rolled into one, become invisible in the fragmented optic of either research or teaching indicators, of measurable 'outcomes'. And yet it is at such moments that students are made to feel they are worth serious academic consideration, that research and scholarship can be revealed as a natural extension of undergraduate life, that one person's knowledge is offered to another who, in the process, is transformed.

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