

Abstract

This brief essay makes the case for effective online teaching and learning in anthropology. It addresses areas of traditional faculty resistance to online teaching and suggests that online teaching has unique strengths and possibilities that can be used to encourage excellence in teachers and students in online anthropology courses.

There are many reasons that college educators are suspicious of online education and/or report finding online teaching unsatisfying (Mitchell et al. 2014; Stickney et al. 2019). Some faculty concerns come from administrative pressures to create online courses as a way of maximizing revenues, and others come from well-known cases of for-profit colleges, poorly designed MOOCs, and other ventures in online learning that have had questionable or deleterious outcomes for students. Online teaching also tends to be viewed less favorably by faculty in environments where there is a lack of training and support (Johnson et al. 2012; Stickney et al. 2019).

While studies have examined the beliefs and assumptions faculty hold about teaching to understand faculty attitudes towards online teaching (e.g., Mansbach et al. 2018; McQuiggan 2007), I would suggest that some of the faculty resistance towards online learning also comes from a very different place: particularly people's attachments to the types of college and university experiences that they remember, cherish, and prize. I often have heard colleagues dismiss online learning because it doesn't recreate the kinds of connected community experiences that are more typical in face to face learning environments. Online learning does not facilitate students going out for coffee or a beer after class to continue conversations, it does not allow for campus-centered extracurricular activities to broaden one's educational experiences, and it does not inherently support the creation of cohorts and friendships and social networks around learning. For faculty who loved college so much that they never left, the idea of a college education without all these things that they value and love is largely unthinkable.

This nostalgic concern focuses almost exclusively on the platform used to facilitate learning rather than the pedagogy, course design, content, assignments and assessment that fill the platform. Teaching online is not simply picking up a face-to-face course and placing it in the digital realm; it requires a careful consideration of the particular strengths offered by an online platform and developing courses that maximize those strengths. Can we create high quality, socially meaningful, and intellectually rigorous learning environments online? I would say absolutely, yes. To do so requires embracing what the platform of online learning enables and facilitates rather than trying to translate campus-based, face-to-face college experiences.

Some Things Aren't So Different

You can be an excellent teacher (or a terrible one) in any context- including online (Palloff and Pratt 2011). Many of us who teach online feel online teaching is our best teaching. Online teaching requires a rigorous process of course design. The need to create an effective course architecture and cohesive content for an entire class before it begins leads to some of the most careful and thoughtful course planning in which one can engage. When the course begins, all of the course preparation is complete and the focus on teaching and student engagement is 100% of your effort. Giving extensive feedback, making connections with students, and reacting to student learning is a teacher's entire focus when the course is running. Online teaching also affords incredible insight into the struggles and successes of each student. The chance to offer a more personal, proactive education is one of the best parts of teaching online.

You can also be an excellent student (or a terrible one) in any context- including online. Students have struggles in online classes that parallel those of students in face-to-face courses. Issues of student interest, time management, and, in some cases, academic integrity arise, but there are also mechanisms to combat these issues in an online environment just as professors in face-to-face courses work to confront and address these issues in the classroom. Students who are motivated, engaged, and excited by content are just as common as they are in face-to-face courses. These positive traits can be cultivated and amplified in an online course. Part of cultivating a positive dynamic is through creating community as an integral part of course design.

Creating Community Online

Online we cannot replicate or simulate the experience of playing Frisbee on the quad or a pizza-fueled study session in the wee hours of the morning, but we can create unique online community experiences for students. We can cultivate the creation of community online by incorporating in the course architecture exercises and spaces for students to collaborate with one another. Giving students agency in representing themselves as a person online helps create an online community of real people. Having students view and create audio and video mediacontent can support this aspect of online learning. These types of collaborative, appreciative, and engaged experiences online are essential preparation for future careers and workplaces that are not synchronous or rooted in a brick and mortar space, but rather are global, digital, and asynchronous.

Teaching anthropology online is particularly enhanced by the creation of communities. When we teach anthropology, we rely on the diversity of our students as a component of the learning process. Undergraduate learning is inherently self-referential as students test ideas against experience and "try things on." Each student in a class takes new ideas and experiences and considers them in relationship to their previous

experiences and existing worldviews. It is for each student to determine if those views should remain unchanged or be modified by their learning. The diversity of student backgrounds and experiences allows single, common assignments such as readings, videos, and exercises to be put back into a shared class experience in ways that underscore the anthropological values of understanding and appreciating the diversity and similarities of human experiences. In this way, our students are always helping us co-teach our courses in anthropology.

One of the potential pitfalls of online learning is that students can become isolated. How do we break that isolation down? Creating interactive spaces in a course, particularly those that aren't moderated by the faculty member, can be really important for student engagement. Having students do introductory discussions and choose photos or avatars that represent them in discussion help to break down anonymity. Requiring students to create audio and video content to upload to a course site rather than simply doing written discussion posts is another key element to creating community. Online courses are often constructed around reading as the primary way of accessing information, even before assigned course readings are addressed within assignments. Having students listen to podcasts and videos in lieu of some reading assignments, and having them produce such content for their classmates can create a more personal, dynamic, and multi-sensory online learning experience. Trying to capture many aspects of the human experience in an online format can be a challenge as students are extracted from multi-sensory environment of a brick-and-mortar classroom, but creative pedagogies and innovative uses of the technologies afforded by online platforms can provide exciting and dynamic spaces for students to connect, for peer teaching and learning, and for instructor engagement.

The creation of authentic, interactive online learning communities is indeed possible, and while not the same as on-campus engagement offers students a broader understanding of collaboration and connection in a world where more and more essential interactions are remote and online. Embracing the platform while minding the gap enables the creation of meaningful, interactive learning experiences in the present that are focused towards our students' most likely futures.

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