

Abstract

Anthropology is not just a discipline or a body of knowledge. It also contains a different “ethos” for seeing and being in the world. It is often this “ethos” that is what anthropology teachers are actually trying to “teach.” Anth101.com is a free and open textbook, and a hub for anthropology teaching resources, which are dedicated to this kind of transformative learning. The course and text are broken up into 10 lessons that connect to 10 challenge assignments that allow students to practice and embody the core ethos of anthropology.

For 15 years I have started every year by walking into the largest lecture hall on campus to stand in front of over 400 students who have no idea what “anthropology” is. I weave my magical gyromouse through the air, making over 8 million pixels dance on 4 screens, desperately trying to hold their attention as I invite them into the story of all humans in all places in all times. I put several days of work into each 50-minute multi-media extravaganza. And for many years, it worked. Students almost unanimously loved the class. Teaching evaluation scores were near perfect and students raved about the course to their friends. Attendance was strong and engagement was high, even at 8:30 in the morning. And then something changed. There were more and more empty seats. Engagement plummeted. The students who did show up were often tired, distracted, and stressed out. More and more students were checking out of class and checking their phones instead.

Meanwhile, my colleague Ryan Klataske (see Klataske, this issue) was earning a reputation as a star teacher in his own right while teaching the course online. He was working with a wide range of non-traditional students of all ages and all walks of life. Rather than just teaching an “online” class he was, as he says, finding ways to connect their online learning to their “offline” living. We started sharing notes, experimenting, and envisioning a platform that could reach learners of all ages and backgrounds, an “anthropology for everyone” as Ryan calls it, that could move anthropology from the classroom and out into the world, a class that could tear down the traditional classroom walls and transform phones from distraction devices into knowledge machines.

The result of this collaboration is anth101.com, a free and open textbook, course, curriculum, and a hub for anthropology teaching resources. Rather than focusing on memorizing content and terms, the course is organized around 10 big lessons that attempt to help students embody the “ethos” of anthropology, including such life-

changing skills as the ability to ask big questions, try new things, see patterns, see the big picture, see the little things that matter, and overcome fear, hate, and ignorance to empathize with others and understand cultural differences. The course starts from the premise that precious anthropological chestnuts like “participant observation,” “holism,” and “cultural relativism” are not terms to be memorized. They represent a re-orientation to the world that can help you live in it.

We built from basic principles of andragogy (teaching methods for adult learners) rather than pedagogy (methods for child learners) (Knowles 1980), as summarized by Caulfield (2011) and further applied to blended and online learning by Kathryn Linder (2017). This means building a system and assessments that apply to real-life situations, build on intrinsic motivation, are clearly meaningful for the learner, and place the primary responsibility for learning on the learner rather than on the teacher.

To facilitate this transformative learning, each of the 10 lessons is paired with a challenge that allows students to live their way into this new way of thinking. Challenges include (1) talking to strangers, (2) seeing the strange in the familiar, (3) breaking habits and learning new things in the 28 Day Challenge (to explore our evolutionary drives and propensities), (4) inventing new words and metaphors (to explore the impact of language on thought), (5) the UnThing experiment of giving up a key technology for 7 days (to explore the impact of technology on our lives), (6) getting uncomfortable in a different cultural experience, (7) trying to empathize with someone radically different in a deep interview, and (8) nurturing global citizenship by connecting deeply with someone from another culture. Each challenge involves a preparatory workshop to clarify expectations, help students succeed, and most importantly, to help them see that the real “product” of the challenge is not the assignment, but themselves. The last two challenges give students a chance to reflect on the impact of the challenges and their larger life path, asking students to (9) re-write their values or life story, and (10) write a manifesto for how they will contribute to the well-being of the world.

To meet these goals, we do not think of this as just an “online” class, but as an “out in the world class.” All the materials are mobile-friendly for anytime anywhere learning. Assignments invite students out into the world to actually do anthropology and live anthropologically. “Lectures” are often replaced by videos featuring us actually doing anthropology and showing how the ideas, theories, and methods change our lives. For example, in Lesson 8 on globalization, I try to track down the creators of my suit that is “Made in Vietnam” by vlogging a family adventure through the garment industry of Vietnam. We meet up with one of the TAs for the class, Ben Adams, who helps us navigate this fast-growing communist-capitalist economy. Eventually we find a family-owned shop and interview workers making \$1/hour producing suits much like the one I own (video available at anth101.com/lesson8). Even the TAs are “out in the world” as we give them travel funds to go anywhere in the world where they produce content for the site and run online discussions. While I went to Vietnam to explore globalization,

one of the TAs (Garrett Wilkinson) visited an abandoned copper mine in Zambia where locals scrape together a living through illegal mining in a toxic environment while large multi-nationals next door make billions of dollars while paying almost no taxes (video also available at anth101.com/lesson8).

We have found that we do not have to go far to create engaging “out in the world” videos. Closer to home, I kicked off our discussion on structural racism and segregation by walking with former student-turned documentary filmmaker Nathaniel Bozarth from the mostly white and wealthy Country Club Plaza in Kansas City to the mostly black and poor neighborhoods east of Troost Avenue just one mile away, discussing the history of racially restrictive covenants and redlining at key landmarks along the way. Our video went viral on Facebook, where over one million people viewed it, most of whom were Kansas City residents who did not know this particular history of their city or why the so-called “Troost Wall” of segregation existed. It also ignited a sometimes heated but productive public discussion that fleshed out some aspects of the problem and historical background that I had not been aware of. I found a rich oral history and many different perspectives on the problem that have not been documented, giving students first-hand evidence of the value of ethnography and public engagement.

In both cases, these experiences and the discussions that followed forced me to re-think my own ideas and positions on large issues. In Vietnam I had to re-think the virtues and vices of capitalism and develop a more nuanced view of the global economy. In my own backyard of Kansas City, I had to re-think much of what I thought I knew about the roots and reasons for ongoing segregation. While it can be frightening and uncomfortable to wrestle with such issues in public and in front of my students, in the end it helps students see the virtues of anthropology in action. It helps them see that anthropology is not just a body of set knowledge (or worse, a rigid political ideology), but is a “discipline” in the true sense of the word as it requires the discipline to overcome our own fears in order to expose ourselves to new and difficult situations that test our biases and assumptions.

To elevate engagement and the sense of community, students are invited to share their challenges on Instagram using a system of hashtags. The global #anth101 hashtag allows students to see student work from universities all over the country. More specific hashtags for their particular “classroom” allow them to create smaller communities (e.g., #anth101kayla1 is a hashtag for one of our TA-led groups from summer 2019). Each post is also tagged with the challenge number so #anth101challenge1 allows students to see over 1,000 examples of other student work, and faculty can re-post the best submissions using #anth101bestofchallenge1 to create an archive of exemplary work for students to follow (see <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/anth101bestofchallenge1/>).

The course has been a hit with students, with near perfect evaluation scores. Student comments demonstrate a consistent pattern of students taking the course to cover a Gen Ed (General Education) credit, and then being surprised to find the material so relevant and meaningful. As one student noted, "I've been challenged academically many times in my life, but your class proved that learning can be personally challenging as well. The weekly challenges really helped to realize who I am as a person, and I now have a greater appreciation for various cultures and people."

A non-traditional student back for a second degree noted, "This class was completely different from any other course I have taken in my entire life." A seasoned top student, she did not expect to be challenged. But each challenge helped her come to know herself better and to re-imagine her place in the world. "Compounding these 10 challenges into 8 weeks was just super-awakening," she said about the summer version of the class. "I didn't expect that to happen. I'm 27. I've been out in the world. I've experienced things. Yet this 200-level anthropology class has given me tools for dealing with things that I either didn't know I was still dealing with or have not dealt with in a healthy fashion." Her comments echo those of many others who found the course to be life changing. "This class changed my life. I can't even put into words how incredible this class is," one student noted, and continued, "I have learned and experienced more in this class than I did the last three years at K-State. Phenomenal."

The popularity of the course has helped create a surge in online enrollments, which has been essential for our program to survive through a difficult budget crunch across our university. Tuition and fees from the course have helped to pay for faculty lines that would have otherwise been lost

Anth101.com is open and free to the public and the content is shared on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Over a million people have viewed materials from the course and over 10,000 people have joined in social media discussions. And though the course is only just now completing its "beta" phase, the materials are already used by dozens of faculty members across the US. We have complete question banks, discussion guides, handouts, a full teacher's guide, and a Google Group for faculty using the course. In the coming years we hope that more faculty will get involved and start contributing their own articles and videos, helping us create a vast collection of outstanding teaching ideas and materials. We also continue to evolve the structure and content of the course to make it more useful for anyone interested in teaching and learning anthropology in the way that best suits them.

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