Abstract

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 crisis precipitated an abrupt and unplanned shift to online instruction that is unlikely to completely reverse once the pandemic retreats. Thus, the academy and, by extension anthropology, stand at a COVID-19 accelerated crossroads between a corporeal tradition, a “virtual” present, and an unknown but transformed future. This article briefly explores existing tensions of anthropology and the academy online with the aim of informing a reflexive, equity-minded, and viable way forward. I draw from personal experience, empirical inquiry, and extant literature to examine the challenges and opportunities of online education, with a view to the potential future(s) of anthropology online. Issues explored include institutional trends and imperatives to go online, faculty resistance, student engagement, and the role that online instruction may play in disrupting/maintaining inequities in higher education.

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) in 2018, 35% of students enrolled at degree-granting postsecondary institutions were enrolled in at least one online course and just under 17% were enrolled exclusively in an online program. Between 2002 and 2013, there was a 20% increase in online enrollment and although overall enrollment in higher education declined, online enrollment continued to grow (Allen and Seaman 2013). In March of 2020, COVID-19 campus closures across higher education precipitated an abrupt and unplanned shift online that is unlikely to completely reverse once the pandemic has retreated. Thus, the academy and by extension anthropology, stand at a COVID-19 accelerated crossroads between a corporeal tradition, a “virtual” present, and an unknown but transformed future. For this reason, it is imperative that we explore the tensions of anthropology and the academy online to chart a reflexive, equity-minded, and viable way forward.

Broadly speaking, online education serves as an instrument of educational access, providing a point of entry for students whose ability to pursue higher education is constrained by geography or circumstance. In addition, and relevant to anthropology, it softens the divide between classroom and field-site, allowing students to pursue field-based and experiential learning activities in conjunction with structured academic engagement. However, while anthropology is largely progressive in mission, it is deeply conservative in many of its methods. Anthropologists critically examine regimes of exclusion and vigorously call for increasing equity in higher education, yet we also tend to view online learning technologies warily - criticizing online learning as an expansion

of the neoliberal academy and an impoverished educational experience (Straumsheim 2014). In this paper, I explore some of the tensions of online distributed learning with a view toward the future/s of anthropology online. I begin by presenting longitudinal data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) to bring attention to institutional trends and enrollment patterns in online post-secondary education. I then explore faculty perspectives of online teaching and employ my personal experience and research to describe tensions regarding student engagement and success.

Higher Education Online

To provide insight into the trajectory and current state of higher education online, I analyzed longitudinal data collected through the NPSAS from accredited, degree granting, post-secondary institutions for academic years 2003-04 and 2015-16 (Table 1.). As described in the following paragraphs, enrollment in online courses and programs has dramatically increased over the course of the twenty-first century. A particularly salient point demonstrated by the data is that online programs disproportionately enroll students who identify with one or more groups that continue to be marginalized in higher education, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, adults, working students, and students with dependents.

Table 1. Percentage of undergraduate students enrolled in online classes/programs, by selected characteristics, 2003-04 and 2015-16.

	2003-2004		2015-2016	
	Any online classes	Online degree program	Any online classes	Online degree program
	% (SD)	% (SD)	% (SD)	% (SD)
Total *Selected Characteristics*	15.6 (0.29)	4.9 (0.17)	43.1 (0.31)	10.8 (0.21)
Sex				
Male	13.6 (0.31)	4.3 (0.19)	39.7 (0.42)	9.2 (0.27)
Female	17.0 (0.40)	5.4 (0.23)	45.7 (0.42)	12.2 (0.28)
Age				
15 to 23	11.7 (0.32)	3.8(0.20)	38.5 (0.44)	6.0 (0.28)
30 or older	22.4 (0.65)	8.3 (0.42)	53.8 (0.58)	24.9 (0.58)
Race/ethnicity				
White	16.2 (0.33)	5.0 (0.19)	45.5 (0.39)	11.1 (0.27)
Black	14.9 (0.59)	4.9 (0.37)	42.5 (0.72)	14.9 (0.47)
Pacific Islander	19.1 (2.37)	6.9 (1.69)	42.2 (4.02)	12.0 (2.44)
American Indian	15.5 (1.85)	6.2 (1.41)	47.5 (3.08)	12.2 (1.71)

Table 1 Continued.

	2003-2004		2015-2016	
	Any online classes	Online degree program	Any online classes	Online degree program
	% (SD)	% (SD)	% (SD)	% (SD)
Worked during AY				
Yes	16.8 (0.34)	5.5 (0.22)	47.1 (0.39)	12.9 (0.28)
No	11.9 (0.32)	3.3 (0.32)	36.8 (0.44)	7.6 (0.25)
Dependency status				
Dependent	11.1 (0.24)	2.9 (0.13)	35.1 (0.37)	1.9 (0.10)
Independent, dependents, not married	20.0 (0.70)	6.9 (0.49)	52.5 (0.80)	22.9 (0.74)
Independent, dependents, married	25.1 (0.79)	9.7(0.53)	57.8 (0.89)	27.1 (0.89)
Institutional control				
Public	16.2 (0.35)	4.7 (0.18)	43.9 (0.37)	6.3 (0.21)
Private, non-profit	12.3 (0.79)	4.1 (0.48)	35.9 (0.68)	17.8 (2.97)
Private, for-profit	15.3 (1.08)	8.6 (1.06)	48.1 (0.94)	33.5 (1.22)
Field of study – behavioral/social science	12.5 (0.63)	3.4 (0.33)	42.0 (1.05)	19.1 (0.54)

Note: Data drawn from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04, and 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study.

Shown in the table above, in 2003-04 under 16% of undergraduate students were enrolled in one or more online classes and 5% were enrolled in entirely online programs. In 2015-16, of the more than 19 million students enrolled as undergraduates in higher education, 43% were taking at least one class online and 11% were enrolled in online degree programs. The 2015-16 data show that students over the age of 30 are overrepresented in online programs (25% versus 4% for students aged 15-23). In addition, 12% of female students enrolled in online programs (compared to 9% of males). Further, 15% of Black students and 12% of American Indian students were enrolled in distance education programs in 2015-16 (compared to 11% of White students). Thirteen percent of students who had a job during the academic year and between 23% and 27% of independent students with dependents were enrolled in online degree programs (compared to 2% of dependent students).

Analyzing institutional control indicates that online programs are being offered across all sectors, including public, private not-for profit and for-profit institutions. Of significance, however, one-third of students attending private, for-profit institutions were enrolled in online programs, more than five times the proportion of those at public institutions (6%). This data is consistent with findings that independent students,

students with dependents, and working students – groups more likely to enroll in for-profit bachelor's granting institutions – also enroll in online programs at higher rates (Radford et al. 2015). Relevant to the discipline of anthropology, 42% of students enrolled in social/behavioral science programs (including anthropology) across institutional sectors take some classes online, with just under 20% of these students enrolled in programs that are entirely online (this is an increase from 3% in 2003-04). In short, trends in enrollment data provide evidence that online courses and programs are a growing facet of post-secondary (and by extension anthropology) education, and that they serve as a mechanism of educational equity for students who are otherwise excluded or underserved in higher education.

Faculty Resistance

Though research indicates, and the COVID crisis underscored, that online learning is key to higher education especially for underserved students, faculty are resistant to online teaching (Lloyd et al. 2012; Straumsheim 2014). A 2014 survey of 2,799 faculty member's attitudes toward technology, published in *Inside Higher Ed*, found that a majority of faculty believe that online courses are inferior to in-person instruction, a sentiment foregrounded as faculty had to rapidly retool for online instruction during the COVID-19 campus closures. Only 26% of faculty respondents said that online courses can produce student learning outcomes that are equivalent to in-person courses (Straumsheim 2014). Faculty are especially critical of what they perceived as a lack of student engagement and meaningful student-teacher interaction (De Gagne & Walters 2010; Straumsheim 2014). Research also points to faculty concern with online instruction increasing their workload (Meyer 2010) and requiring new skills (Almerich et al. 2016). Tenured faculty members were the most critical of online courses (Straumsheim 2014). Alternately, Straumsheim (2014) reports that faculty who had experience teaching online courses were the most positive in regards to the potential of distributed learning to provide high-quality education.

As more students and faculty are exposed to online courses, either by choice or thrust there by circumstances such as COVID-19, there may be an acceleration in pedagogical innovation. In my experience, developing effective online courses presents curricular, pedagogical, and intellectual challenges, but also affords opportunities for teaching and authentic learning that can be difficult to match in a classroom. To expand educational access for diverse students, I began teaching online in 2011 and since then have consistently designed and taught hybrid and online courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Through practice I have realized that creating a dynamic learning environment online is not about reproducing the live classroom experience in a virtual setting, but instead utilizing the immense resources of the internet to expose students to a much wider set of intellectual resources and to facilitate

their connection to course content, to each other, and to the world. As an anthropologist, the fact that my online students are effectively “in the field,” provides abundant and variable opportunities for them to engage in ethnographic inquiry, applied research, and place-based learning. Anthropology online relaxes the distinction between field and classroom and subsequently the dichotomy between theoretical and experiential education.

To provide an example of curriculum that leverages the resources and unique opportunities for learning that are available online, I will briefly share a course I designed in 2019 titled, “Power & Resistance: South African Counter-stories,” which explored political and social relations in South Africa with a focus on understanding patterns of oppression in relationship with forms of resistance. I employed a counter-story approach that emphasized student engagement with lived experiences through online primary source materials. Among the resources that students accessed online were archived folktales passed down through centuries, diaries and statements by colonial figures like Cecil Rhodes, the political scholarship of Sol Plaatje and John Langalibalele Dube, Black Consciousness writings by Stephen Biko, the songs of mine workers, and transcribed testimony from the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Using digital repositories in a variety of online spaces - art, songs, and fiction were presented in conversation with iconic documents such as “The Freedom Charter” adopted in 1955 by the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela's “Statement from the Dock” in 1964. Students built a collaborative digital media archive where they catalogued news and other media expressions generated by contemporary South Africans and they participated in book clubs – reading, discussing, and presenting literature by South African authors. The culminating course experience was a digital storytelling project that entailed students designing websites and utilizing text, visual, and audio-video content to construct complex narratives that centered South African voices. Some of the topics that students investigated were resistance to contemporary language policy in higher education, structural inequality and social vectors of HIV/AIDS infection, Zulu nationalism expressed through the concept of the “100% Zulu boy,” and resistance to Eurocentric hair aesthetics as manifested in elementary school grooming policy. This course is just one example of the possibilities for innovative and decolonizing curriculum that can be realized online.

As a faculty member who has embraced online teaching as a tool of educational equity, has undertaken training in online course design and pedagogy, and who works tirelessly to support student success – “success” in online teaching has often felt unattainable by institutional standards. Some of the challenge can be attributed to methods of institutional assessment, as evidenced by teaching evaluations in which students indicated that they could not tell whether I arrived in class prepared, demonstrated mastery of the subject, created a safe classroom environment, etc… These questions did not translate well in an online environment where instructor

presence and presentation of content are less direct than in a physical classroom. Traditional course evaluations (deeply flawed as performance measures even in face-to-face courses) are ill-equipped to elicit meaningful feedback in online courses. A second challenge to achieving success according to institutional metrics, i.e., course pass rates, is that many of the students that enroll in my online courses at a comprehensive public university have complex lives that impel them to take courses online but can also impede their ability to complete coursework. It follows that course pass rates may be more of an indicator of structural barriers to success faced by students than a measure of the educational value provided to students by an online course. Unfortunately, these obstacles to normative measures of success seem to reinforce for other faculty and some administrators that online classes are the problem, or to indicate substandard instruction - making it feel at times like a professional risk to teach online. I offer instead that there is a lack of nuanced assessment of online teaching as well as general institutional unfamiliarity regarding the complexity of student engagement in online courses.

Student Engagement

In assessing online education, it is clear that students face unique challenges and barriers to success. Perceptions of these barriers tend to reflect a deficit mindset and attribute failure in online courses to innate limitations of the online modality (previously mentioned) or to individual student characteristics - for example, lack of time management, self-direction, or college-readiness (Dixson 2015).

In 2018, I undertook qualitative research with the aim of understanding barriers to student engagement and success in online courses. Data collection included one-on-one interviews with students, faculty, administrators, and online course designers. Interviewees were recruited from two community colleges and two bachelors-granting public universities, with a total of 11 interviews conducted. The interview questions/prompts centered the student experience and focused on identifying the specific facets of online courses that students struggle with. In addition, interviewees were asked to explore which aspects of the online learning experience were either within or outside of their control, and therefore might be improved by expanded awareness of their own agency and an increase in self-efficacy. Several relevant findings emerged through this research. Belying the assumption that students are technological autodidacts, most students felt unprepared to navigate the online classroom, whereas they were accustomed to the anatomy of the physical classroom, the online space was unfamiliar to them and felt like something they had to scramble to learn while also being required to master course content.

Students shared that, “The ‘start up’ was difficult” and “I really needed a tutorial on how to maneuver….” They reported that each online course they took was set up

differently and they found it challenging to navigate courses where assignments and resources were not located on a central landing page. In addition, students' engagement often weakened when they were faced with technologically complex assignments, such as a narrated video assignment that requires students to work across digital platforms. In this case, students created content offline, then uploaded to overlay narration and edit their video online. Finally, they submitted their work through a separate online course management system. Students' weakening of engagement was mitigated by proactive support from faculty, which took the form of instructional videos, scaffolding assignments, virtual workshops, and regular e-mail check-ins. Unsurprisingly, a major factor of students' level of engagement, and one that students felt was entirely out of their control, was tied to faculty "presence" in the classroom, for example participation in discussions, as well as faculty use of their own "voice" in instructions, announcements, and lessons. While most students felt that faculty interaction and responsiveness were important components in their success, only one faculty interviewee mentioned their interaction, outreach, or responsiveness as an aspect of student engagement. As one interviewee, a course designer at a bachelors granting institution, stated, "A poorly skilled or absent professor hinders even the most motivated individuals."

The role of faculty in an online course differs to some degree from a face-to-face course, where effective classroom instruction relies in part on the ability to command the room and lead a group of students collectively through a choreographed series of activities. In an online course, effective instruction varies depending upon the modality (synchronous, asynchronous) and includes faculty mastery of a variety of technologies and platforms, presentation and/or curation of engaging content, providing prompt individual feedback and guidance, as well fostering a sense of community and personal engagement. In short, the role of the faculty is no less crucial for ensuring a high-quality learning experience in an online course, however, it is more complex and diffused.

Online Education and Persistent Equity Gaps in Higher Education

It appears from institutional trends and imperatives, as well as a COVID-19 inflected shift, that the future of anthropology and the academy will be defined in some way by online teaching and learning. This future is likely to include expanding online programs, however, if the development of online post-secondary education parallels that of the community college, there may be an increase in the stratification of higher education, thus reinforcing existing equity gaps (Yu and Hu 2016). Today, community colleges are the first point of college access for nearly 40% of the approximately 19 million undergraduate students in higher education (Shapiro et al. 2017). While more than 80% of students who enroll in community colleges intend to complete a bachelor's degree, the six-year bachelor's completion rate for students first enrolled in community college in 2011 was under 15%, compared to 60% for students who began their degree at

a bachelor's granting institution (Shapiro et al. 2017; Wang and Wickersham 2014). Similar to graduation rates amongst students who first enroll in community college, the six-year graduation rate for students enrolled in online programs at public institutions was 20% and at for-profit institutions it was under 10% (NCES 2019). Like online degree programs, community colleges enroll a higher percentage of students who identify as minority, female, low income, first generation, and/or disabled (Cohen et al. 2003). These statistics signify persistent inequities for underrepresented groups in higher education. To address equity gaps in online education, institutions must develop robust online programs as well as work to understand and address the structural barriers to success faced by students who enroll in them.

Conclusion

Online education affords opportunities for new ways of learning and intellectual engagement, opening up possibilities to transform higher education. In terms of anthropology, distributed learning softens the divide between classroom and fieldsite, representing an opportunity to rethink the discipline's relationship to the academy of bricks and mortar and potential for the discipline to become truly field-based. Moreover, developing online university courses and programs can serve as a tool of educational access and equity, as online degree programs enroll a higher percentage of students who identify with groups that continue to be marginalized in higher education. Whether online higher education generally and anthropology specifically, realizes its potential, depends in no small measure on institutional and faculty buy-in and willingness to invest resources and intellectual energy into developing rich online curriculum and pedagogy that is responsive to the needs and lived realities of diverse students.

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