

Journal of Archaeology and Education

Volume 5
Issue 1 *Perspectives on Teaching, Learning, and
Doing Archaeology and Anthropology Online*

Article 1

May 2021

Meeting Students (and Subjects) Where They Are: Perspectives in Teaching, Learning, and Doing Archaeology and Anthropology Online

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Recommended Citation

Pacifico, David and Robertson, Rebecca
2021 Meeting Students (and Subjects) Where They Are: Perspectives in Teaching, Learning, and Doing Archaeology and Anthropology Online. *Journal of Archaeology and Education* 5
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/jae/vol5/iss1/1>

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Abstract

This article introduces a special issue of Archaeology and Education that explores teaching and learning anthropology online. We argue that effective online teaching requires course design that supports participant interactivity, instructor presence, and student-centered opportunities for 'doing, not viewing.' Online modes of teaching, learning, and doing anthropology and archaeology address issues of educational equity and access in addition to providing opportunities for authentic learning that are not available through face-to-face instruction.

The Challenges and Opportunities of Online Teaching and Learning

The essays collected here emerged out of a lively exchange at the 2018 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, in a roundtable session titled, *Teaching and Learning Anthropology Online*. They are intended to expand understanding and spark deeper discussion within the discipline on the opportunities and challenges that online teaching and learning represents. While there is much research on online education (Panigrahi et al. 2018; Tallent-Runnels 2006), there has been relatively little engagement with the topic among faculty generally and even less within the discipline of anthropology. A recurring theme in the extant literature is the varying levels of faculty resistance to online and distance education (Lloyd et al. 2012) associated with the perception that student-faculty interaction is lost (De Gagne and Walters 2010). Additionally, research highlights faculty concerns with the impact of online teaching to their workload (Meyer 2010) and the need to acquire new technical skills (Almerich et al. 2016). Further, the literature indicates that faculty resistance is undergirded in part by the conception that online distance education cannot deliver a high-quality learning experience (Bolliger and Wasilik 2009; Kim et al. 2013). Contrary to this belief, empirical studies evince online learning outcomes comparable to, or exceeding, face-to-face outcomes (Allen et al. 2004; Al-Shorbaji et al. 2015).

In higher education, online connectivity is now an integral component of the teaching and learning experience. E-mail, digital assignments, PDF required readings, and course management systems are essential parts of our instructional repertoires. Hybrid and fully online courses are standard elements of departmental and disciplinary curricula. During the Covid-19 global pandemic (which is still ongoing at time of writing) the world saw a rapid and massive turn to online learning from junior kindergarten through graduate-level education. This development highlighted in public discourse the broad ambivalence to online teaching and learning. On the one hand, online

technologies salvaged many semesters and kept curricula going so that students did not fall behind in their progress toward graduation. On the other hand, students, parents, and educators alike expressed intense frustration with online interfaces, anxiety about the value of online modalities, and doubts about the possibility of reproducing the positive elements of traditional educational formats in online venues.

In the wake of the pandemic, one thing is certain: we can expect online teaching and learning to be a growing facet of education in the future, both during emergency and “normal” times. Our responsibility as educators is to use online teaching and learning platforms to serve our students and ideally to serve our disciplines simultaneously. Considering that many of us will probably find ourselves moving more frequently than ever between online and in-person formats, we should also think about how to transfer the best of each format to the other.

The following essays present intellectual and pedagogical insights, as well as tools for capitalizing on the possibilities that online education represents. They provide case material for modelling online approaches for readers, and they help us think about the core values and activities that go on in our teaching, regardless of the medium. These insights are particularly urgent at the time of publication (spring 2021), when most of the world is grappling with social distancing in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overwhelmingly, the papers argue that online curricular design sharpens our focus on the core qualities of our teaching. If there is some good to come from the massive shift online during the pandemic, hopefully it will be a broader acceptance of the most important themes in these papers - which show extreme creativity in teaching methods while also confirming and expanding a growing body of literature on best online practices reaching back more than 20 years (Garrison 2016; Garrison et al. 1999; see also Berry 2019 and Vesely et al. 2007). For example, Plattet and Shoaps (this issue) show that recorded media in an online “virtual field school” provides more students the opportunity for learning experiences that would be ephemeral and less accessible in real time. Another advantage is that students can work together regardless of schedule or location, as seen in Pacifico’s contribution (this issue). Online courses and Internet tools are well-suited to archaeology and anthropology because of the central role of fieldwork in those disciplines. After all, specialists in various niches are distributed around the globe and rarely consolidated in one department. The contributors here emphasize media as central to online teaching and learning. Wesch’s contribution (this issue) shows how students doing assignments in the field close to home results in diverse, shared, and often moving learning opportunities. Media production need not be sophisticated, argues Baxter (this issue), in the age of the smartphone. In fact, the familiar aesthetics of cellphone video and social media platforms can be personalizing precisely because they mirror the communication media we use outside the ‘classroom’ with friends and family. This personalization,

Baxter argues, is essential to creating community in a course, online or in person. While classroom settings are widely favored, they can also hide who our students “really are” because students are often anxious about performing on the spot in front of peers. Moreover, simple media production and consumption solve other intellectual, disciplinary, and pedagogical challenges. For example, transparency and community engagement beyond the course roster can be facilitated by media created by teachers and students and hosted in public online venues. The learning opportunities captured in these media are enriched, extended, and made replayable in an online environment, whereas such opportunities are often fleeting offline. For this reason, Bernard (this issue) explains that methods are best learned online and that methods instruction provides students with portable skills that make them valuable candidates in post-graduation job markets outside the academy. Online courses meet students where they are, and so can be surprisingly personal and humanizing. As Klataske (this issue) suggests, the affective growth cultivated by his online courses is intended to drive positive change in offline living.

Addressing the broader implications of online teaching and learning, Robertson (this issue) argues that online education should be evaluated through a social justice frame. Online courses and programs not only provide unique pedagogical opportunities, they also serve as instruments of educational equity. The flexibility of online learning, especially in an asynchronous format, lowers the opportunity costs and increases the accessibility of higher education (a point) also addressed by Scalf in this issue. However, among academics, there is legitimate concern that online instruction is a corporate strategy to increase revenue and decrease costs. While we should always be on guard against the commodification of the educational experience, Scalf explains how online courses extend from a long tradition of external outreach that stretches back decades into the pen-and-ink era of snail mail correspondence courses between expert archaeologists and auditors.

There are two resounding concerns among the following contributions. First, that online environments prevent the sense of community that is essential for anthropological learning. Second, pressure to teach online will lead to the substitution of abundant reading in place of abundant creativity in course design. Following our authors’ examples, we can be largely relieved of these anxieties. The problem of community is solved by course architectures that encourage diverse interactions between students and teachers. In place of piles of reading, our authors mobilize multiple media forms, ranging from professional popular media, to academic productions, to student-made cellphone images. Surprisingly, student dishonesty seems of limited concern among the authors here. Perhaps it is the robust connectivity inherent in teaching and learning online that makes impersonation difficult.

In the aggregate, these essays illuminate an applied online pedagogy that has three overarching principles, 1) effective online learning centers on interactivity, 2)

faculty presence is key, and 3) students should be doing, not viewing. To contrast with the aforementioned—and often maligned—correspondence course model, quality student-student as well as student-professor interaction is a necessary component of effective online pedagogy (Palloff and Pratt 2007). This interaction can take many forms. In the face-to-face classroom talking and listening comprise the core of interaction. In an online course reading and writing are added to this repertoire. Interaction can be built into any course through asynchronous discussion, collaborative assignments, as well as peer review and faculty assessment. Faculty presence is closely tied to interactivity and includes both instructional and social presence (Whiteside et al. 2017). Professors can inject their instructional presence into their courses by facilitating discussion – synthesizing themes, identifying areas of agreement/disagreement, and acknowledging students' contributions. In addition, providing students with formative and summative presentations, either written or audio-recorded, is a way to responsively “show up” and guide student learning in an online course. Social presence can be somewhat challenging, as it entails injecting your “self” into a course. This can be accomplished through use of informal language, audio-video presentations that are relatively unscripted, and building space into an online course for social engagement. The third principle of online pedagogy that can be drawn from the collective experience reflected in these essays, is that active and engaged learning is fundamental to successful online courses (Meyer 2014). Years of research has highlighted that experiential learning leads to better retention of content and greater gains in critical and higher-order thinking when compared with passive forms of learning, such as viewing lecture presentations. In essence, the more time students are engaged in quality doing, the more they will get out of a course. A few examples of online assignments that center student responsibility are student-led discussions, Internet scavenger hunts, case study analysis, and field-based activities such as mapping, interviewing, artifact collection/analysis, and participant observation.

This collection demonstrates that an undeniable advantage of online pedagogy is that it meets student needs in an authentic way. These needs range from flexibility in schedule and location to the ability to view and review instructional media multiple times over. The human needs of the students meet the pedagogical priorities and research interests of the discipline in ways that face-to-face courses often cannot. Specifically, with the ability to capture, view, and respond to media, online tools can provide advantages of durability and repetition that are not possible in the ephemeral arena of face-to-face learning. Accordingly, we are pushed to think about the role of online collaboration in our offline lives as teachers, researchers, and students.

Case Studies and Experiential Insights

The following papers are organized into thematic clusters, though many of the themes are woven through and across these clusters. The first two papers (Baxter and Klataske) provide insights and suggestions on the praxis of teaching well and doing it online. They serve as go-to guides for immediate insight. The next two papers (Scalf and Wesch) go into more specific detail on creating and managing course-level and program-level curricula online. The next two papers (Pacifico, then Plattet and Shoaps) explore the possibilities of doing fieldwork-style research learning in online environments. Finally, Robertson and Bernard highlight some of the broader tensions and opportunities that have emerged in teaching and learning online.

In the first paper, Jane Baxter explains that online learning is viewed negatively by many professors because it does not provide an obvious space for the cherished experiences from professors' past. Yet as a matter of our current reality, she suggests embracing the strengths of the platform and accepting that the platform will not offer some of the things that face-to-face courses offer. She also warns that we should not give up the ideal of creating authentic community online. Indeed, she argues that authentic community building can happen by providing an architecture within course design - and facilitated by the course's online interface - for student-student collaboration. Student-student interaction is a goal in all courses. Online, Baxter suggests focusing on media and student-driven activities to humanize the space. In this light, Baxter prompts us to reflect on how we structure our courses and facilitate community in *any* medium.

Klataske recognizes the widespread skepticism to online teaching, but also observes a similarly wide desire to improve among those teaching online out of choice or necessity. Klataske reminds us to think of our students – and remind them to think of themselves – as offline beings who apply skills gained online to offline situations. In a conservative heartland environment, Klataske reports that his students demonstrate that online learning improves offline living precisely because online connectivity allows students to meet one another where they are, and therefore in a very humanizing way. Reflecting on his students and teaching experience, Klataske provides straightforward tips and examples of meeting student and curricular needs for a synergistic experience.

Scalf traces a long history of reaching out from the specialized research environment of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago (OI) to engage with non-traditional student audiences. He recounts a natural evolution in the OI's public curricula from brick-and-mortar, non-credit courses to correspondence courses to email courses to online courses. This stepwise logical progression suggests that online teaching and learning might be less alien than it may seem. Scalf continues on the Internet's ability to facilitate learning through multimedia content delivery and interaction, in his case, so as to expand access to object-based learning. His example shows that

online course structures at the OI are rooted in longstanding traditions of public, not-for-credit programming reaching back before the existence of an Internet. Scalf's case also highlights how a sincere effort to reach the public has become a net revenue generator with momentum to reduce entry barriers. The case of the Oriental Institute reinforces that online teaching and learning is most successful when rooted in pedagogical ideals, like object-based learning. These ideals lived online have led to in-person forms of positive engagement for Scalf. He provides two important warnings, as well. First, that teachers must be mindful of the learning curve required of students to use online courses. He also finds that community can be authentically cultivated online, but also cliquey.

Wesch emphasizes the theme of anthropology as necessarily happening outside of the classroom. He presents an innovative and wildly successful way of meeting students where they are - on mobile phones, specifically - as a way of achieving the highest ideals of anthropological learning, which he identifies as human connection. His innovative experiment (supported by Klataske) is summarized here but deserves much attention in its open-access life online. Wesch provides rare examples of student feedback where students self-report the tremendous value of his Anthro101.com curriculum and methods. Like Scalf, Wesch's experiment began as a sincere effort to meet students where they are but has turned out to be both a pedagogical and financial success that engages with wide-ranging and popular Internet tools, including Twitter.

Pacifico details his work with students using online Geographic Information Systems (GIS) platforms for mapping archaeological sites in Peru's Casma Valley. In his case study, student needs are met by allowing them to work remotely from anywhere they have Internet access at any time that is convenient for them. This approach addresses the complicated lives of college students today, students who are increasingly challenging the integrity of a "traditional/non-traditional dichotomy." Pacifico argues that his case study is an example of "authentic" learning (Bada 2015:67), in that student activities have open-ended outcomes that replicate the activities of professionals. Research needs are met in that rapidly disappearing archaeological sites in the Casma Valley can be mapped and interpreted using Pacifico's pre-existing architectural typology, and therefore digitally preserved. Pacifico hypothesizes that such mapping can also allow for rapid future fieldwork, even after the surface architecture is erased.

Plattet and Shoaps contribute another example of authentic research being conducted by students in an asynchronous, online environment. Plattet and Shoaps push the envelope of online connectivity "beyond the learning management system" by crafting an innovative online "virtual field school" examining dogsled mushers. The success of Plattet and Shoaps' method shows how the rich use of multimedia files, which is uniquely facilitated by online connectivity, creates a community of practice that joins students, faculty-researchers, and subjects in a discursive relationship

that positively addresses longstanding anxieties about researcher/subject power imbalances. They argue that collaboration online in a virtual field school is superior to that of a traditional field school because the media technologies allow for more equitable, more frequent, and richer experiences of data that would be ephemeral in person, but, online, endure for repeated learning and analysis opportunities.

Robertson explores tensions that currently define online teaching and learning – for example, institutional imperatives to go online (accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis) versus faculty resistance. This essay draws our attention to vital issues of educational access and equity as it contemplates the future of anthropology and the academy online. Drawing on personal experience, empirical inquiry, as well as existing literature, Robertson raises important points regarding the challenges and opportunities of online education for disrupting pedagogical traditions, facilitating student engagement, and addressing enduring equity gaps in higher education. These issues are of pressing importance as the COVID-19 crisis precipitates deep institutional budget cuts and extended campus closures, thus widening existing inequalities in higher education.

In the final contribution, Bernard makes the case that teaching research methods online is superior to face-to-face instruction, as online methods instruction facilitates the necessary opportunities for repetition that are not available in ephemeral, real-time, in-person courses. He further asserts that millennial students are conditioned to seeking information from Internet resources, thus online methods courses meet students where they are. Bernard's final point attends to the need for anthropology to incorporate robust methodological training in order to remain a viable discipline in the twenty-first century, and for students to be competitive candidates in the modern job market.

Conclusion

This collection of short essays provides valuable insights and practical tools that can inform the development of rich online curricula and pedagogy. These papers represent a range of experiences, methods, and perspectives - illuminating the possibilities of online education as a means of reimagining the teaching and learning of anthropology and adjacent disciplines. The aim of the collection is to encourage innovation as well as to catalyze thoughtful and productive discussion regarding online pedagogy within the discipline of anthropology and beyond.

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