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Online Learning for Offline Living

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Abstract

Teaching anthropology online presents a unique opportunity to invite students to explore the world along with us, from wherever they might be. This journey can introduce students to the range of human potential and possibility, while also allowing them to better understand themselves, where they come from, their everyday lives, and the world around them. This article argues that online learning can transform offline living, especially when it engages everyone in their efforts to bring about change in their lives. It presents online teaching as a powerful act of engaged anthropology and an urgently needed experiment to develop online learning experiences that are relevant, useful, accessible, flexible, accommodating, and engaging for a wide range of students. Drawing on years of teaching anthropology online, this article offers tips and advice, along with specific examples and stories of lessons learned along the way. These tips encourage and help guide instructors to aim for “anthropology for everyone,” become a curator, think creatively about online possibilities rather than recreating on-campus courses, make anthropology relevant, and encourage real-world practice. By focusing on online learning for offline living, we not only teach students about the world, but actively engage with them to change and improve theirs.

Introduction: Teaching Anthropology Online

“The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” I often heard these words of T.S. Eliot as an undergraduate from a great professor, Harald Prins. Now, as a teacher myself, they reflect my approach to teaching anthropology online, a discipline that introduces students to the vast range of human potential and possibility, but also allows them to better understand themselves, where they come from, the complex dynamics of everyday life, and their connections to the world around them. By teaching anthropology online, we have a unique opportunity to invite a diversity of students to explore along with us, from wherever they might be. Online learning can transform offline living, especially when it engages everyone in their efforts to bring about change in their lives.

Teaching online, therefore, can be a powerful act of engaged anthropology. Stuart Kirsch (2018:1, 230) describes engaged anthropology as an experiment in “making anthropology relevant and useful” and an opportunity to “mobilize the discipline to work toward achieving a more ethical world.” As our students strive to bring about change in their lives and communities, how can we design and teach online courses that support and engage in their efforts? One way, I believe, is to challenge ourselves

to develop online learning experiences that are relevant, useful, accessible, flexible, accommodating, and *engaging* for a wide range of students.

Colleagues often ask me about my tips and advice for designing and teaching online courses. Many recognize the demand for online education and, although some people might still see online courses as “less-than” their on-campus counterparts, colleagues express a desire to learn to teach online well. This article outlines a few of these tips and advice based on six years of teaching Introduction to Cultural Anthropology online at Kansas State University. In 2014, I developed and taught K-State’s first online course in Cultural Anthropology. I also collaborated with Michael Wesch in the initial development of ANTH101.com, a free online “connected course” and resource for instructors, which provides the “textbook” and foundation for weekly modules and offline “challenges.” This class has resulted in high student evaluations and positive feedback. Based on this experience, here are five tips and some recently emerging thoughts.

Tip 1: Aim for “Anthropology for Everyone”

As Harald Prins has pointed out (Prins 2017), K-State is situated in a town heavily influenced by its proximity to Fort Riley—home of the US Army’s 1st Infantry Division—contributing to an online class that is consistently made up of a wide variety of people from different walks of life, from veterans and stay-at-home parents, to busy working professionals and people returning to school after many years. While this class also includes “traditional” 18-22-year-old students, my challenge is to make it relevant, useful, and accommodating to *anyone*, and to think about the needs of everyone. Therefore, from the beginning, I began focusing on the development of content and assignments that are engaging to people with diverse backgrounds, often at very different positions in their lives.

This involves content and assignments that not only introduce them to the enormous range of human variation and diversity, but also relate to their everyday lives and ordinary experiences with families, jobs, health, technology, and the world and people around them. Students reflect on deep questions and engage with anthropological concepts through widely relevant content including, for example, a documentary on social media, a podcast episode on the power of words, readings, short videos, and journaling exercises on the people behind the food we eat, marriage and kissing, storytelling, heart health, happiness, and “the good life.” A series of real-world, offline challenges further encourage students to step outside their comfort zones and become more curious, critical, and empathetic, with a greater appreciation for on-going learning. Additionally, the class includes opportunities to see how anthropology can contribute to their career development, not only to add to new skills to their toolkit, but

also to avoid the experience of a “bullshit job” (Graeber 2013)—a phenomenon with which many online students of different backgrounds can relate.

One of the first students who inspired this mindset was Donnell, a father of four and former Army medic returning to school after an injury ended his military career. For Donnell, an exercise in making the familiar strange provided an opportunity to see the social fabric of his life with new meaning and texture. In this exercise, in which students document and describe an aspect of American culture from an outsider’s perspective, Donnell crafted a heartwarming video of his motorcycle club, profiling his leather-clad compatriots and their seemingly strange behavior. By the end, our class gained new insight into the important role of this and other motorcycle clubs in creating a sense of community, kinship, and belonging for veterans and military families.

In my experience, many veterans and other non-traditional students are not new to some of the introductory anthropological concepts and skills including talking to strangers, observing cultural diversity and difference, or experiencing uncomfortable situations. They often share first-hand accounts of cross-cultural (mis)communication or culture shock. For other students, the experience of moving from a small town or rural parts of the state to K-State’s location in Manhattan is culture shock in itself. Designing an online course that is engaging to everyone requires introducing the vast range of human potential and possibility to some students, while offering new lenses and perspectives to others. By becoming aware of their diverse backgrounds and skills, we have an opportunity to make anthropology relevant to both “traditional” and non-traditional students like Donnell, and to highlight its value in new contexts of everyday life.

Aiming for “anthropology for everyone” has also meant developing a course that is engaging, useful, and accommodating for other non-traditional students like Tracey, a 44-year-old mother of three, returning to school after many years. Tracey is recovering from drug and alcohol addiction and lives in a small town, where she cares for her aging mother and relies on online courses to advance her education, career, and community service goals. For Tracey, flexibility was key, allowing her the time and space to engage deeply with the material, ideas, and assignments, while also dealing with the daily demands of full-time caregiving. Like many online students, she completed much of her coursework in the evening or late in the night. By making the course asynchronous and self-paced, with weekly modules and a single due date at the end of each week, Tracey could participate whenever she had the time, energy, and desire. A highly streamlined structure makes the modules straightforward, user-friendly, efficient, and predictable, while optional synchronous video group “meet ups” and flexible one-on-one meetings add voluntary learning opportunities.

Despite our physical distance, my teaching assistant and I developed authentic relationships with Tracey by meeting on video, producing a podcast episode to share with the class, interacting on Instagram, and providing personalized feedback on her

work. Not all online students want or need this type of relationship, but cultivating one online benefits from flexibility beyond set, rigid “office hours” when many non-traditional students are at work or caring for family. Many other students also appreciate and benefit from a flexible, self-paced course structure, but some prefer assignments that allow for greater autonomy and individual reflection. Transforming points-driven discussion boards that require a certain number of posts, for example, into individual journaling exercises shared within small groups with voluntary discussion has helped to make this possible. By not recreating an on-campus course and instead experimenting with a more flexible and accommodating online learning experience, classes can become more voluntary and less forced with fewer assignments designed to simply “keep them in line.” This approach shares similarities with the “andragogical principles” of self-directed learning identified by Knowles (1990) and discussed by Caulfield (2011). It also produces more authentic discussions and interactions, deeper reflection, and more intrinsically motivated engagement. In other words, I try to give students the autonomy and respect I would want for myself.

For these reasons, I encourage other instructors to apply the idea of “anthropology for everyone” to their field and focus on the development of online courses that aim to interest, improve, and fit within the lives of a wide range of different people, of various ages, professions, and walks of life.

Tip 2: Become a Curator

Consider yourself a curator, rather than simply the sole expert or “star of the show.” By curation, I am referring to the practice of selecting, organizing, and presenting a wide variety of materials and diverse media, moving beyond the idea of you and your textbook as the locus of learning toward more opportunities for open-ended conclusions, questions, and curiosity. There is an incredible array of high-quality digital content available online. Some of it is produced by anthropologists, but much of it is not. As a curator, you can focus on surveying and selecting the content to assign, and how to introduce, explain, and connect it to each other, to core concepts in our discipline, and to the everyday lives of students. You can then create short videos, provocative discussions, writing prompts, and other exercises.

For example, in a two-part lesson on making a living, our tools, and technology, I weave together Wesch’s chapters on infrastructure with a classic anthropological text on foraging by Richard Lee, a video and photo essay on the Anthropocene, a Hidden Brain podcast featuring David Graeber and the rise of bullshit jobs, along with a Black Mirror episode on social media, a New York Times’ podcast on surveillance technology, and a short video on the fascinating emergence of Lil Nas X and his hit song, “Old Town Road.” Part of the joy (and challenge) of approaching an online course as a curator is

that it reminds us to keep exploring, learning, and thinking anthropologically, and to stay alert for new content and unique, thought-provoking connections.

For me, a curation mindset was a necessity when I started developing an online course but has proven to be an effective approach to “anthropology for everyone,” without requiring me to produce traditional or narrowly defined lectures, PowerPoints, assignments, or time constraints. Students consistently express their enjoyment and appreciation for the diversity of content, reporting (and demonstrating) that it helps them stay engaged and relate anthropology to their lives. This combination of curated content, as one student wrote in his final reflection, “not only made the class more enjoyable, but also helped me understand things on a deeper, more conscious level.” By conceptualizing myself as a curator, this approach allows me to explore and learn along with students as we traverse new (and old) media, debates, current events, and issues. We are guiding our students on an exploration, which means we participate too, and considering oneself a curator is one way to accomplish it.

One potential outcome of this approach to online teaching is that it can dramatically reshape students’ experience with online learning. In the words of one student who has spent most of his life on a ranch in eastern Kansas, “My favorite part about this class was that it wasn’t really a class as much as it was just a weekly adventure that I got to go on.”

Tip 3: Don’t Recreate an On-Campus Course

I am reminded of the famous phrase that, “the map is not the territory.” In the same way, an online course is not an on-campus course. They are inherently different and, I would argue, an on-campus course is never translated exactly into an identical digital experience. I suggest creating and conceptualizing an online course as an online course from the start, as a curator, allowing yourself to think and assemble material creatively as you experience teaching online.

In my online class, this meant not only thinking about how I could curate and connect content in new ways but opened the door for experimenting with a variety of different tools and techniques for online teaching. I use YouTube playlists, for example, to feature a collection of short videos on a specific theme, and easily craft digital photo essays with images from around the world, together with links for further exploration. I have created my own short videos without the constraint of classroom walls and involved students and teaching assistants in the creation of longer, deeper podcast episodes on topics including gender stereotypes in sports and arranged marriages in India. Students have used Duolingo to practice learning Navajo and Instagram to post photos and videos from this and other “challenges.” Without the need to gather in one location, my teaching assistants have ventured out around the globe, providing dispatches and insights on our lessons from Spain, Morocco, Greece, and elsewhere.

Online courses also open up possibilities for rethinking the schedule, timing, and duration of required or suggested coursework. Many online students have busy, stressful, and complicated lives and require a class that is flexible, accommodating, and designed with their needs in mind. They cannot attend classes during a set time frame each week. Instead, I curate materials and activities that allow students to read, watch, listen, or engage with the class and its content on their time, at their pace, and to pause or resume participation when they leave work, in between jobs, or when they put the kids to bed.

As Tracey told me, without this flexibility, her same level of participation would have been impossible, limiting her opportunity to engage with new ideas in way that, as she said, “changed my life perspective forever.” For Emma, a self-described stay-at-home mom whose husband worked two jobs, completing coursework at night was the only option, and she often needed additional flexibility during times he travelled. Danelle, on the other hand, took part in class at 4:00am—before she began her first of two jobs from 5:00am to 7:00pm each weekday. Another student studied in a hospital waiting room and bed while receiving regular infusion therapy. There are many, many other students with similar stories. Whether their lives involve parenting or caregiving, long hours of wage labor, military orders, health challenges, or take place in a different time zone, the possibilities for flexibility in online courses help make learning possible.

In addition to self-paced, streamlined weekly modules with a single due date each week, students appreciate the opportunity to turn in work anytime throughout the semester without severe consequences, and to resubmit their work when they learn from it or want to improve it. As one student remarked on the course flexibility, “Personally, I really liked that I could choose when to learn, because there really are optimal learning times for every individual, and I got to work within mine! Not having a narrow time commitment, allowed for me to learn at my own pace and therefore produce my best possible work.” By not recreating on-campus courses, we have a unique opportunity to think creatively about almost every aspect of an online course, from its structure, the way it works, when and how students work, and the ways in which everyone involved engages with ideas and each other. Doing so can be a meaningful intervention in the lives of our students.

Tip 4: Make It Relevant

All students encounter strangers with whom they to some degree share concerns about life’s big questions and issues facing humanity. Anthropology tackles these shared themes, including making a living or interacting with others and our environment, and it accepts encounters with strangers as a given. Making it relevant means to me that we should aim to help others see why anthropology—or an anthropological perspective and skill set—is valuable and useful, in whatever career or position in life they might be. In

my experience, students find anthropology relevant, for example, when it helps them talk to and interact with strangers and people different than them, when it provides a new way to question and critique our own culture and society, when it inspires them to be more empathetic and curious about others, or when it empowers them to reshape their habits or bring about change in their lives. It is also relevant when it assists students in better understanding and evaluating widely shared concerns related to making a living, politics, diversity and conflict, global change and the challenges facing humanity, as well as our impact on the environment and human wellbeing. By making anthropology relevant, it becomes a valuable addition to students' toolkit. Teaching it online helps to keep the lessons of anthropology relevant with new, curated digital content.

In my class, for example, the simplified structure of modules makes it easy to integrate new and/or timely content or questions on current issues and debates, from the death of a missionary in the Andaman Islands, the impacts of wildfires on indigenous people in the Amazon, the controversy around trophy hunting in Africa, or the emergence of the global pandemic. Readings or videos on some far-flung group of people or distant part of the world are not simply exhibits of cultural difference, but tools that allow students to see themselves and the often taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life in new ways. Anthropology becomes relevant, for example, when a lesson on globalization leads someone to change the way they think about their morning coffee and the people behind it, or the many things they take for granted that “just show up on shelves at Walmart, Target, or other big stores.” It becomes relevant when students describe the world around them coming alive—whether it's the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the strangers they meet, or even their own bodies, habits, and abilities. It is also relevant when students describe the value of their skills and perspectives as a nurse, manager, special educator, community leader, or parent.

Tip 5: Encourage Real-world Practice

My final tip is to encourage online students to practice the skills and real-life applications of anthropology in their offline lives and communities. Of course, there are numerous avenues for creative experimentation online, but offline practice tends to complement online activities and the time students spend in front of their devices. It also accommodates students of varying technical abilities. In my class, for example, this takes place through a series of challenges that enhance student abilities to build connections and engage in deep and meaningful interactions with others across cultural divides, to more carefully observe and question the world around them, to tell stories, and to think critically through the complex issues we face. These weekly or multi-week challenges involve practicing the skills of anthropology and exercises based on anthropological insights.

One perennial favorite, which relates to the role and power of habit in our lives and the human proclivity to try new things, involves building or breaking a habit for 28 days. Students have given up tobacco, learned instruments, taken up journaling, and incorporated a variety of other healthy and rewarding habits into their lives. They report that their newfound habits make them feel healthier and happier. Our first challenge, involving talking to strangers, is often one of the most difficult for many students, but also one of the most rewarding as they learn to see, think about, and interact with people around them in new ways. Other challenges involve tough conversations with people who are very different than them, and giving up some of the “things” we use and take for granted in our daily lives like cars, chairs, mirrors, and electricity.

Wesch and I have aimed to create challenges that are inherently fun, thought-provoking, and relevant to a wide range of students—I also get requests from students for more assignments just like them. These challenges are followed by opportunities for deep reflection, and we often hear how students integrate the lessons learned into their everyday lives, becoming more curious, empathetic, and confident. As Tracey explained, “I seek to understand others on an entirely different level. I seek to really hear what they are saying and to, if asked, be part of the solution.” Whether we want our students to learn about participant observation and thick description, to cultivate empathy and critical thinking, or to explore big things like the complex relationships and impacts of technologies or the hidden hands involved in all the stuff we consume, we should encourage them to learn through real-life practice in both online and offline spaces. This experience can open their eyes to their global connections while also connecting them to their local community, wherever they might live.

Conclusion: Thinking About Online Teaching as Engaged Anthropology

When developing and teaching online courses that aim to interest and apply to the efforts of all students to bring about change in their lives, is it worthwhile to think about teaching as a form of engaged anthropology? While Kirsch focuses primarily on *political* engagement, I believe that this approach provides a valuable perspective as we engage with students as they learn and struggle to make a living, care for their families, make a difference in their communities, and live a meaningful and rewarding life. Teaching anthropology online presents a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to make a constructive intervention in our students’ lives and efforts to bring about change.

Conceptualizing this intervention as engaged anthropology, however, also requires us to prioritize reflexivity, as Kirsch suggests. We must, therefore, critically consider how our online courses address student needs, the kinds of transformations we intend to produce, and the impacts we make on the lives of those we work with—our students. These students often choose online courses because, for various reasons, they lack access or opportunities to take part in on-campus courses. I think of the

cab driver in Cincinnati, the night shift nurse in New York City, or the many veterans who have yearned for new knowledge, skills, and opportunities. When we focus on online learning for offline living, we see that we are not simply helping students better understand the world, we are actively engaging with them to change and improve theirs.

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