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## ARTICLE

# “Hearing What They Don’t Say”: Cultivating New Perspectives through Teaching and Learning at a College of Art and Design

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### Abstract

*In the current educational environment, students need transferable skills not only to graduate but also to be well-prepared for their futures. Starting in 2017, the Cleveland Institute of Art required all incoming first-year students to take a 3-credit “Engaged Practice” course intended to facilitate collaborative work between students and artists and designers outside of the institution with a variety of industry and community partners. As part of this initiative, I created a course entitled Applying Anthropology to teach art students the foundations of cultural anthropological field research methods and to show how those methods can be useful to artists and designers when working in a collaborative environment. Students worked with partners at several local organizations to collect life histories and stories and to then design and implement collaborative art projects with those partners. After three semester-long iterations of this class, I show how the outcomes of teaching anthropological field methods and skills to non-major students can greatly enhance undergraduate student success and have a meaningful impact on students and their community partners.*

**Keywords:** *Community-based anthropology; Teaching; Socially engaged art; Undergraduate pedagogy*

### Introduction

On the second day of my Applying Anthropology class, I had my students do the “10 Things I Believe to be True” peer interviewing exercise (Jenks 2016). For this activity, students first write down “ten truths they believe in” and then—working in pairs—they interview each other about those truths, ultimately selecting three from their partners to share out loud in class. This activity allows students to listen to their classmates and make decisions about how to best represent their partners’ answers, mirroring how anthropologists listen to people and identify important themes and meanings from those statements. On this particular day, one student shared this statement from their partner: “I believe that it is a waste of students’ time to be forced to take Liberal Arts electives [at an

art college].” By “Liberal Arts electives” the student was obliquely referencing the very class in which they were participating.

I made a pact with that student that by the end of the semester they would both see the value of this class in the wider Liberal Arts curriculum and specifically understand how this class would benefit them as a student and artist. At the end of the semester, their reflection on the course demonstrated they did indeed see the value of this class, and perhaps realized that rather than wasting time, they learned important skills applicable in other classes and even in the wider world upon graduation. In their final self-reflection paper for the class, this student profoundly wrote, “It was interesting to not only speak to people but to try to read between the lines and hear what they aren’t saying.” This ending assessment of the class was not unique; students who engaged with cultural anthropology methods and techniques leave the class with a new set of skills and a deep appreciation of these methods that extend far beyond the classroom.

Anthropological and ethnographic field methods are typically taught as upper-level undergraduate courses for majors due to their field-specific content and the idea that they build from other required major-specific classes. There is growing literature demonstrating the importance and relevance of teaching anthropological topics, methods, and techniques to undergraduates, especially those who are not majors in the field (for example see Brunson et al. 2021; Haldane et al. 2022; Jenks 2022; Kvittek et al. 2023; Nortman et al. 2023; Stein et al. 2016). These courses teach critical thinking skills, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration to students with diverse academic backgrounds. In a college of art and design, faculty often assume students gain these valuable skills through their studio courses and in art history and visual culture classes. I argue that through my design and implementation of a course on applying anthropological methods at an art college, students not only learn about those methods, they also gain valuable transferable skills that they can use in a variety of settings as they engage with the public both in class and in their post-graduate careers.

My work with art students demonstrates the pedagogical relevance and effectiveness of teaching ethnographic methods and techniques to non-anthropology undergraduate majors and supports the growing body of literature both in anthropology and in art education about the importance and practicality of engaged, hands-on learning outside the traditional classroom. Teaching art and design students anthropological techniques of interviewing, listening, and drawing meaning from those conversations imparts important skills that benefit art students in their practice both in college and beyond. Engaging students from the social sciences transforms students into more well-rounded artists and designers, stronger critical thinkers, and better communicators, making the teaching of anthropological skills important to their overall student success. This approach provides positive results for both students and community partners, supporting the growing body of literature on the benefits and successes of engaged learning in anthropology, and more widely in places like a college of art and design.

## Contextualizing Teaching Anthropology at a College of Art and Design

Since 2010 I have been working at the Cleveland Institute of Art (CIA) as the only anthropologist in the Liberal Arts department comprised predominantly of art history, literature, and creative writing faculty. I work to support my students in their artistic practice by delivering a wide variety of course content in the form of upper-level electives that connect anthropological themes, topics, and ideas to their artistic endeavors. This is both a unique opportunity and sometimes a challenge; there is no anthropology major, minor, or department at my college. Many students take multiple classes from me, but others take only one. Therefore, I must create classes that work together as an integrated whole or can be taken as standalone courses. I create coursework uniquely tailored to the needs of our students, but my students and I rarely engage in in-depth research or fieldwork as faculty in anthropology departments might. One way I attempted to do both was through the development of a methods-based class that would allow students to use art and anthropology together to see tangible outcomes of that collaboration.

Working at a small college of art and design also means there is no formal IRB process. While we do have someone at the college who coordinates work with outside partners, it is not the same as having IRB policies and procedures. When my students work with community members, we share an informed consent document with partners and work to uphold principles of anonymity and to do no harm. My work here is covered under the CIA policy for use of student work since I am not using my students as research subjects, but rather using their work to punctuate my class structure and process. Identities of our community collaborators, as well as quotes from student work here, have been anonymized, and identifying information removed.

In 2016, the Cleveland Institute of Art launched a new and innovative initiative called Engaged Practice (EP), described in the CIA college course catalog<sup>1</sup> as

[A] 3-credit requirement of the BFA degree program through which students have an opportunity to learn through experience by working on projects with external partners or clients, or in the public sphere. These experiences provide a distinctive element to the baccalaureate education at CIA, developing skills and personal attributes such as collaboration, communication, and professionalism well in advance of graduation.

Along with this description, there are several general course requirements for these specifically designated classes at the college, including a structured learning environment, a project with an external partner or client, or in the public sphere, and a project that is informed by the curriculum of the college, i.e., art, design, humanities, or the social sciences.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://issuu.com/ciamarketing/docs/22-23\\_cia\\_college\\_catalog\\_jul5](https://issuu.com/ciamarketing/docs/22-23_cia_college_catalog_jul5)

A few examples of Engaged Practice classes taught by studio faculty include a first-year Foundation class that painted a mural on the wall of a local community center dining room and created a temporary art installation on a chain link fence around the building. Both projects were undertaken at the request of and in collaboration with the center staff and community members. An Industrial Design class worked with Cleveland Metroparks to design and fabricate a series of artificial buoys implemented along the shores of the Cuyahoga River to reduce erosion. Finally, another faculty member teaching first-year Foundation classes worked with the Cleveland Clinic to have students sit and draw/paint portraits of patients receiving dialysis treatment. Upon conclusion of the course, students hung their work in an exhibition space at the CIA, then gave the portraits to the patients they had drawn. Within this context and precedence, I designed an Engaged Practice experiential anthropology class.

## **Teaching Engaged Anthropology Methods**

The skills and goals of applied, community-based anthropology work are similar to work done in the area of socially engaged art (SEA) and overlap in terms of methods, techniques, and outcomes (Helguera 2011, xiv-xv). When employed as classroom pedagogy, art students see how their practice can be impactful and meaningful outside their studio walls. SEA engages students to explore their experiences and assumptions in a guided and scaffolded way. Faculty who employ SEA as part of their class curriculum report that students benefit from sustained meaningful engagement with others (Bernasconi 2020; Deines 2020; Whelan 2018, 33), as it also allows students to explore themselves in relation to the world around them and think critically about their place in it (Bass 2018).

SEA fosters a greater sense of student empathy for both the community partners they work with and for each other and can serve as a catalyst for creativity and the exchange of ideas (Bass 2018; Kester 2012). From my own experience at an art college, I can attest that undergraduate students seek out these opportunities, can readily see their value in the curriculum, and rise to the challenges of the class. Sholette (2018, 281) argues that SEA is a radical act of pedagogical engagement with a deep history of activism pushing for social transformations (The Pedagogy Group 2018, 75). Artists make art to engage with an audience, often in an active way that seeks to bring about some form of social change or to address community-identified needs. Combining aspects of anthropology methods and techniques with a curriculum of SEA enhances students' learning and shows directly the relevance and connections of anthropology in their wider artistic practice.

This overlap helps make it easier to match applied community-based anthropology curricula to the needs of art students by building on an artistic practice many students have been exposed to in their studio classes. It seems fitting to teach artists and designers the basics of anthropological skills to complement their artistic and professional practice. Every time they interact with someone—a client, an organization, or even an employer—they can

model asking descriptive questions, listening to responses, finding meaning from those responses, and using their grounding in anthropology to facilitate understanding and respect for diversity. A growing body of literature documents the positive effects of anthropologically driven community-based classes and projects for both students and community partners (see also Helguera 2011, xiv-xv, 37). In fact, anthropologists have been successfully engaging their undergraduate students in community-based collaborative projects for over 20 years (Willis et al. 2003).

Students work towards collaboratively addressing locally and community-identified needs and problems, often making contributions towards social justice while doing so (McCale et al. 2009, 80; Mitchell and McDonald 2012; Polanyi and Cockburn 2003, 16; Strand et al. 2003; Sosnowski et al. 2022). In faculty-guided settings with community members and organizations, students gain confidence in their abilities to address problems, share their talents and skills, and realize they can make a substantive difference in the world around them (Strand et al. 2003, 11). Many anthropology faculty working with students in class-related community research projects report that their students gained valuable, transferable skills, and often find their students positively respond to these experiences (Barone and Ritter 2010; Keene and Colligan 2004, 6; Schalge et al. 2018).

Community-based classroom experiences are also beneficial to students by being "hands-on" in their classroom, linking practicalities of fieldwork that go beyond simply reading about field methods to giving students opportunities practicing and learning anthropological methods. Helping students to make their own connections with class topics leads to better, more meaningful, and even surprising outcomes that show students internalize the ideas and can work to creatively solve them (Lang 2021, 98-99, 101). Active hands-on engaged learning, like the kind involved with community-based class experiences, is one way to invite students to "devise their own connections ... [that] will necessarily be more meaningful to them" (Lang 2021, 99). There has been substantial research demonstrating the effectiveness of experiential active learning in the classroom. Kolb (1984, 38) provided a framework for including engaged learning in classroom settings, defined as the "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." Young (2002, 44) further suggests that hands-on activities in the classroom can lead to "minds-on" in terms of reflective observation and abstract conceptualization of classroom experiences. For undergraduate students, these transformational experiences link course material to real-world practices, in the process shifting the ways in which they see themselves as collaborators, activists, artists, and community members (Brunson et al. 2021, 59; Copeland and Francois Dengah II 2016; Rosenberger 2000). Actively participating in anthropological field methods while working with community partners in real-world settings is a valuable experience for students that enhances their learning experience.

Although widely touted as a positive experience for students, there are some critiques of community-based class projects. One major criticism of class-based projects is the short

period of time in which these projects are undertaken, often without the ability to engage with multi-year commitments. Some classes are “one and done,” without any follow-up or plan in place for external community partners once the semester project is wrapped up (Fine 2016, 109; Schank and Halberstadt 2023, 16). Others critique the imbalance of power between students/classes and external community partners and question how much benefit those community partners receive from the experience (Irwin and Foste 2021, 72; Mitchell et al. 2012, 613). While there is merit to these critiques, if instructors take time to set up their classes with the intent of long-term engagement and support with clear input from community partners, then community-engaged research—even done over a single semester—can be meaningful and impactful for all those involved (Barone and Ritter 2010, 24; Copeland et al. 2016; Reeves Sanday and Jannowitz 2004).

Another frequent criticism of the kind of engaged student learning with community partners discussed here is the potential to uphold power structures and white supremacy (Mitchell et al. 2012, 613; Whitaker and Hines 2018; Wightman 2019). This is particularly true when mostly white students and faculty work with or in communities that have been traditionally underserved (Irwin and Foste 2021). Classroom projects that engage with community partners (either through service learning or other engaged activities) run the risk of affirming whiteness in a number of ways including upholding unequal positions of power and privilege and having the class or even just the instructor decide what problems and solutions to work on in a top-down way (Copeland et al. 2016; Wightman 2019). Further, if students aren’t engaging in critical self-reflexive examinations of their own relationships to race and identity within the school and other socio-economic identities their experiences run the risk of furthering white supremacy (Irwin and Foste 2021; Keene and Colligan 2004; Mitchell et al. 2012; Rosenberger 2000; Wightman 2019). These critical assessments of service-learning style class projects are valid, but there are ways to ensure classes engaged with community partners can have important, transformative experiences that don’t uphold institutionalized whiteness. These methods include pedagogies of humility, reflexivity, and critical service learning.

Humility is the ability of students to stay “present and emotionally engaged” (Aanerud 2015, 104), to be accountable for their actions, and to understand their place within wider constructions of power and privilege and historical structural oppression (Aanerud 2015, 105; Irwin and Foste 2021, 71-72). Related to pedagogies of humility are classroom practices rooted in reflexivity. Reflexivity encourages students to continually assess their own learning and have agency for their behavior both in class and with our community partners (Keene and Colligan 2004, 8). This works in tandem with humility, as students identify what works and doesn’t in their engagement with community partners and “embrace the discomfort of not knowing” all the answers (Irwin and Foste 2021, 73).

Critical approaches to student engagement with community partners aim to “dismantle structures of injustice ... and deconstruct systems of power” (Mitchell 2008, 50). Many proponents of community-engaged classroom experiences advocate that these practices

can and should have a social justice component actively working to respond to injustice and inequality within the communities they work (Jacobs 2014; Mitchell 2008, 51; Rosenberger 2000). This critical approach also works in tandem with reflective practices to help students understand privilege and power structures as they relate to community partners (Mitchell 2008); their situational awareness of these various structures is vital and itself helps them work towards social justice. Mitchell (2008, 53) suggests that a critical approach starts with a classroom component that combines student discussions on the structural imbalances of power with the goal of creating social change (without seeing that need through a deficit lens) as students and faculty work to redistribute power through the recognition of that imbalance and through forming and cultivating authentic relationships with community partners.

## Engaged Practice and Anthropology at the CIA

As an Engaged Practice (EP) class at the CIA, I worked to create Applying Anthropology as a course that accomplished two goals: 1) teaching students the basics of anthropological/ethnographic fieldwork skills, including talking and listening to people outside of the college; and 2) working collaboratively with community partner organizations to co-create art projects that fit the needs of our partners. I designed my class to connect studio and liberal arts topics through the lens of anthropology, having art students work with local community organizations to conduct interviews and design collaborative art projects. This course also aligns with educational outcomes in both EP and Liberal Arts department guidelines, allowing it to tie together curricular goals across departments and practices. In addition to fulfilling the general EP requirements, this class also fulfilled department-specific outcomes. For liberal arts classes in humanities and social/natural sciences, those include articulating a critical awareness of current social and political discourse, including diverse cultural and global perspectives, applying course concepts to aid creative problem-solving in students' work as artists and designers, and ultimately expressing nuanced connections to practices in other disciplines, media, and cultural contexts.

Due to the curricular design for liberal arts electives at the CIA, this upper-level class has no prerequisites. Some students had taken other classes with me, and for others, this course was their first (and perhaps only) experience with the field and subject matter. We could only accomplish so much in one semester, so I adopted the model that McCurdy et al. (2005, viii) propose in their book *The Cultural Experience*: to use a "discovery process rather than a theory-driven process." McCurdy et al. argue that a discovery process lets "undergraduates come away from the research process with a much deeper understanding of what culture means" (2005, ix), along with the basic skills to ask good, in-depth questions of others and to listen to and interpret the responses to find cultural meaning.

To date, my classes have worked with three community partners: a community center in an adjacent city, a non-profit organization that works with senior citizens, and a senior



lifestyle apartment community with an art therapy program. With all our partners, we aimed for students to work with informants to take life histories and uncover stories of their lived experiences through small-group interviews and conversations. From those interview interactions, the class then worked to develop two to three collaboratively-based art projects grounded in ideas generated by both art students and our community partners.

## Course Materials and Practice

Prior to any work with community partners, we spent the first half of the semester reading about and practicing good anthropological methods. Applying Anthropology met one day a week for 3 hours, giving us time to read, digest, and reflect on the methods and topics. To help give students the basics of anthropological fieldwork skills, I rely heavily on two textbooks that ground students in the fundamentals of ethnographic field methods: *The Cultural Experience* by McCurdy et al. (2005) and *Field Notes: A Guided Journal for Doing Anthropology* by Vivanco (2017). We spent the first half of the semester reading *The Cultural Experience*, one chapter per week; we spent time in class talking about the readings and putting them into practice through short assignments and activities based on the chapter content. The McCurdy et al. book teaches students to structure well-designed open-ended descriptive questions to ask informants and then to organize and find meaning in the answers they receive. We used this book to create what the authors term “descriptive questions.” Some examples from the spring 2019 class include: describe a typical day in the community; take me on a (verbal) tour of the building; tell me about activities you enjoy, artsy or otherwise; tell me about a great day you had here; tell me where you like to go when you can leave the immediate neighborhood.

To give a few specific examples of how I pair the McCurdy et al. book with short activities to reinforce content, I will highlight two chapters specifically. Chapter 2 in the book covers microcultures, defined as “a smaller group that exists inside a culture” (McCurdy et al. 2005, 14). Because our class work was done with local partners, the idea of a *microculture* was one that resonated with my students as each community partner could be seen as a microculture. To reinforce this idea, I compared microcultures to the various studio disciplines at the college and had students conduct a short interview with a student from a different studio with the specific instructions to spend about 20 minutes learning about that studio microculture. Chapter 4 of the book covers “folk terms,” defined as “cultural categories [that] are part of an informant’s knowledge, but their existence can’t be physically sensed” (McCurdy et al. 2005, 36). To understand these cultural categories the researcher must observe behavior and ask descriptive questions meant to “encourage informants to talk about their cultural worlds” (McCurdy et al. 2005, 37-38). Following the microcultures assignment, I had students follow up to see if they could identify folk terms and cultural categories from their student informants from different studio practices. The goal of all of this was to practice identifying themes and topics of importance to the people they were interviewing so that they would be able to conduct interviews with our eventual community partners.

Vivanco's *Guided Journal* is a workbook that guides students through several small-scale anthropological exercises aimed at building cultural anthropology skill sets including making social observations in public places, mapping a space, taking a "soundscape listening tour," walking students through ethical considerations, identifying privilege, and "unpacking your invisible knapsack." This book pairs well with the McCurdy et al. textbook and reinforces themes and topics in that book. For example, when covering Chapter 4 in the McCurdy et al. book on interviewing, students also read Chapter 7 in the Vivanco book on "Asking Good Questions." In that workbook, there are directed prompts for students to reflect and write on, such as "Guiding an Informal Interview" and "Structured vs. Informal Interviews," that reiterate course material (Vivanco 2017, 80-81). Since I worked with art and design students, I also relied heavily on the "Mapping" and "Approaching the Visual" chapters in the workbook, having students create "participatory maps" (Vivanco 2017, 90) first among themselves and ultimately with our community partners. I assign the exercises in the Vivanco workbook in conjunction with the methods presented in McCurdy et al. to prepare the students to work with informants in community settings and guide them through the fieldwork process. Students record and take notes on the conversations and then employ the McCurdy et al. methodology outlined in Chapters 5 and 6 to look for patterns and meaning in the informants' responses. McCurdy et al. refer to this process as finding a "taxonomic structure" that helps identify explicit cultural themes and meanings (2005).

By the middle of the semester, after completing this extensive background work, we were ready to meet with our external community partners. Before we met with each of our partners, as a class we would talk about our objective for the day, what kinds of activities we would be doing, and how to structure the descriptive questions we would be asking our partners. At the end of the class time with our partners, I led students through a wrap-up session where we would talk about what we learned, discuss effective follow-up questions for next time, and process anything else that came from these sessions.

As mentioned above, in a class like this it is important to engage in the dialogue about power structures between students and community partners and how we might work to dismantle them. I had to thread this needle carefully, since nearly a third of my students identified as non-white, and I didn't want to burden them with the responsibility of teaching their white peers about structural inequality. We spent time through our readings thinking about our own positionalities and identities with regard to our community partners. We read and talked about the urban history of the neighborhoods around our college, including the effects of red-lining, urban renewal, and gentrification that have taken place here and the shift in demographics that occurred in neighborhoods around us. When we engaged in projects with our community partners, it was always driven by the wants and needs of our partners, with students acting as the facilitators to turn ideas into art-based projects. We used the assignment in Chapter 2 of *Field Notes* (Vivanco 2017, 22-23) that has students engage in a version of unpacking the "Invisible Knapsack" and asks them to examine their own problems and biases as they approach fieldwork. Finally, at several

points in the semester culminating in the final paper, I ask students to be reflexive about their experiences. Chapter 4 in *Field Notes* includes a section about reflections on note-taking, prompting students to “[t]hink about the process of taking notes. Which [topic] felt the easiest to take notes on, and which was more difficult? Is there anything you would do differently the next time you take notes?” (Vivanco 2017, 48). Reflecting on how they are perceived by our community partners and how they feel about the experience itself is part of the critical approach that helps students identify their positionality, potential biases, and helps to create a better collaborative environment with our community partners.

## Description of Class Projects

Over three semesters, nearly 30 students took the Applying Anthropology class, engaging with three community organizations applying the methods described above. Here I describe in detail the community partners we worked with and the projects we carried out with them. In each case, all work was student- and/or community-driven.

### *The First Semester (Spring 2017)*

The first iteration of the class partnered with a community center at the suggestion of the City of East Cleveland’s Mayor’s office. The Mayor had reached out to the college to see if we could partner with city organizations to create community-centered art projects. My class worked specifically with two different groups that met regularly at the local community center: first a group of teens that met weekly for an after-school program, and then a group of senior citizens who met daily through an externally organized outreach program.

We met with the teens six times, working in small groups of two CIA students and two or three high school students. My students brought art supplies and, using art as a catalyst, asked the teens questions about place and community. East Cleveland has one of the highest abandoned house rates in the county (Exner 2016); the Mayor’s office wanted ideas of what to do with vacant lots after abandoned houses were torn down. While we were not able to physically do anything with abandoned lots through the scope of our class, we used the abandoned lots as a starting place to ask high school students what they would want to do if they could do anything with an abandoned building lot in the city. My students listened to what their informants were saying and then worked with them to paint or draw what the informants said. The high school students talked about making butterfly parks, dog parks, gazebos, and even a “unicorn park.” My students interpreted these ideas metaphorically. We recognized that we weren’t going to have a fantasy “unicorn park” within the city. Instead, my students understood that these teens were saying that they wanted a safe, beautiful place to escape from the abandoned houses and dilapidated buildings that surround them daily.

That same semester my students also engaged with senior citizens who came to the center during the day as part of a senior group sponsored by a local non-profit providing resources and programming for older adults. Through casual conversation over games of cards and dominoes, students learned about topics of importance to the seniors, including how they created community with one another at the center. Through interviews my students learned that fiber and textile arts were important to many of the older women who came to the center; women always worked sitting together knitting, crocheting, or doing needlecraft. My students ultimately organized a temporary show of the women's work in the CIA campus gallery space and invited the women and their families to a formal show opening. This exhibit was important to the women whose work was shown; they were so excited to see their work formally recognized and displayed in our gallery (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Textile and the creator at the exhibit organized and curated by students.  
Photo by the author.

As part of this gallery show entitled “Bridged: Making Partnership and Place,” students crafted an exhibition statement to accompany the show. From their collective reflections on the class, they wrote:

Arriving at [the community center], many of us were skeptical about going in and talking [to] or “interviewing” complete strangers. Many of the seniors were skeptical at first as well. Getting past that initial awkward stage we really got into talking to the seniors about all sorts of things, some of which include their stories, where they came from and stories about East Cleveland. The expressions on their faces while they told these stories really showed how passionate they were about the city where they came from.

While talking to the seniors we noticed that many of them came to [the center] to crochet and do many types of crafts together. Having a single place where they all could come together and share ideas and techniques made [the center] the place to be. Along with this, the seniors were able to sit, relax and talk while creating what they wanted to. The company of their friends, neighbors, and community members made it a place to call theirs. It was a home away from home.

Their collective statement demonstrates that they were able to master the ideas of ethnographic inquiry we cultivated throughout the semester and found deep meaning in the responses from teens and senior citizens of the community.

### *The Second Semester (Spring 2018)*

In the second iteration of the class, we partnered solely with the community center’s senior center program. Once again, my students participated in everyday activities at the program including card games and knitting. Working in pairs, my students interviewed seniors, asking them descriptive questions about their life histories, their jobs when they worked, their travels, and their families. Some of the cultural themes that emerged from these interviews were the importance of family, place, and community.

Using these interviews, students developed an art project to do with the seniors involving small sentimental personal items that they could bring to the center. Using light-sensitive cyanotype paper, the seniors made images of small items, mostly the jewelry they wore and small knickknacks they brought from home. They placed the items on the paper, and with the help of my students, they put them under a UV light. We left the images with the center so that they could use them to decorate their meeting space (Figure 2). Additionally, that semester a senior photography student used some of that work in their thesis/capstone BFA project.



Figure 2. Cyanotype image created by students and seniors. Photo by the author.

*The Third Semester (Spring 2019)*

For the third iteration of the class, we worked with residents of a HUD housing property that serves low-income residents over the age of 52, some with mobility or other health issues. This apartment building is near the college campus, and some residents come to the CIA to attend public events like gallery show openings and film screenings. A full-time art therapist works at the complex, facilitating art therapy and activities for residents. After initial introductions students worked together in groups of two or three, interviewing residents and asking descriptive questions about how they thought about place and their community in the University Circle area of Cleveland. In order to learn how community members engaged with the wider neighborhood, my students decided to do a community mapping project in which they asked the residents to draw or illustrate and then annotate their favorite places on blank area maps. They spent several hours on Friday mornings interviewing the residents and working to create two art projects that could be done with the residents. Cultural themes that emerged from these interviews include the importance of community with other residents, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and the importance of the annual Parade the Circle event, where residents create themed costumes and walk in the event.

Many of the residents have limited mobility and couldn't be outside as much as they wanted, and many of them wished that they had access to gardens. Students decided to make an art project of painting terracotta flower pots with the residents and then planting seeds of either thyme or pansies (or both) in the pots so that residents could have window-sill plants in their apartments. We also invited the residents for a private tour of an exhibit in our gallery space on campus and then screen-printed t-shirts together with a logo that two of my students collaboratively created with inspiration from their interviews (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Students and residents painting flower pots together. Photo by author.

## Results and Discussion

For three semesters I worked with nearly 30 undergraduate students and three different community partners in and around our campus community. Students learned the basics of anthropological field methods, including how to ask effective descriptive questions, actively listen to the responses, and find meaning in those responses. Our partner organizations, especially the seniors and apartment residents, enjoyed the opportunity to talk with young people and to engage in fun and meaningful art projects. Several of my students continued in their relationships with the people they met and collaborated with and even invited their newfound friends to their BFA thesis defenses and work exhibitions.

At the end of each semester, I asked my students to write a reflection paper based on the work they did throughout the semester. In this paper, they are asked to synthesize what they learned from the people they interviewed and spent time with and to reflect on their experience in terms of what they learned and what they took away from the course and experience. In reviewing these essays there are a number of themes that emerge. First, students enjoyed the opportunity to connect with others, especially people with whom they would not normally have the opportunity to interact. They frequently wrote about how much they learned from talking to people outside their somewhat insular bubble at the college. One student remarked, "fostering positive relationships with those outside of an art field are beneficial for both parties, simply because we are all so different." Another wrote, "To be able to converse with individuals that have experienced written history is inspiring and really brings a reality to what we learn through our [class]." Additionally, students also wrote about how they learned to see the world through the eyes of others. One student reflected that they were not sure how they would work "specifically with non-creatives," i.e., people who were not artists/art students like themselves. Perhaps this

student had some bias or preconceived notions about how to work and connect with people outside of their specific major or discipline. However, this experience helped them address their own biases and learn to work with others.

Another important theme that emerged from these reflections was the importance of understanding how other people see and encounter the world around them. Some students were struck by the similarities of lived experiences. One student wrote, "I never considered that they would feel cooped up and lonely like I do, in my apartment," making sense of a shared experience and feeling of isolation that students and community members sometimes feel. Students also reflected on how they learned to listen to other people without judgment and without centering themselves in the conversations. In the margin of a student's field notes from their time working with senior citizens, one student mused, "it is hard to observe something without being the influence of it." Another reflected that "the act of listening is just as important as speaking or telling a story."

The student who was initially so adamant that this class would be a waste of their time wrote in their reflection essay, "[i]t was interesting to not only speak to people but to try to read between the lines and hear what they aren't saying." This student had made a connection with the subject matter and the class as a whole, and I would argue that they no longer thought of this experience or class negatively. The class experience clearly had an effect as they made personal connections with the community member they worked with. The student wrote of their informant, "we're cut from the same cloth, both being quiet, thoughtful, and cynical to a certain degree. I admit I wasn't expecting to bond with anyone over these past few weeks, but fortunately, I was wrong." In every semester iteration students rose to the occasion to challenge themselves to do something different that they had never experienced in the classroom setting before. They might even have felt uncomfortable at times but in the end took with them important skills that they can apply in a wide variety of settings in their post-collegiate lives.

This class not only teaches good anthropological techniques, it also fosters skills like empathy, engagement, organization, and community building and helps students better understand themselves and their positionality in different situations and cultural environments. These skills are essential for art and design students as they begin to explore their own professional practices. Anthropology is full of transferable tools including critical thinking and listening, better cross-cultural understanding of others, open-mindedness, interdisciplinary thinking, and important collaboration skills (Fukuzawa et al. 2017; Haldane et al. 2022, 21; Jenks 2022, 61; Kitchin 2021; Miller 2021), and helps students see and understand the lived experiences of others. Students also learn that working with community partners is not always easy and often requires flexibility in scheduling and logistics, especially with the unexpected situations that may arise. Most importantly, students themselves see the value in this work with others as is evident in their own words and reflections in a paper they write at the end of the semester.



All of the above samples of student reflections demonstrate a deep understanding of themselves and their relation to others. Students took the anthropological methods and techniques learned in the classroom and were able to successfully employ them to ask good questions, listen to responses, and find meaning behind those responses in creative, sophisticated ways. After three iterations of this class, evidence from student feedback shows that the class had a positive impact on both students and our community partners. The experiences of my art and design students reflect similar programs demonstrating the value of learning and applying anthropology for undergraduates. Students gain valuable critical thinking skills and recognize the relevance and importance of anthropological skills that transfer to other aspects of their education paths (see Ricke 2018, 65). My students also learn the importance of community engagement “as integral in the process of both learning and practicing anthropology” (Copeland et al. 2016, 241), and they see how their newly acquired skills are applicable in many settings outside of their studio practice (Funkhouser et al. 2016, 247). They also acquired an expanded perspective of diversity in their communities, a perspective that they can carry with them and apply in their post-collegiate careers.

Their own words make it clear that these art students succeeded with the challenge of doing something new to them, sometimes uncomfortable or at least unfamiliar, and all grew personally and academically from the process. Art students directly saw how anthropological topics, methods, and best practices relate to their studio work and curricular and professional trajectories. Their new skills, including listening, finding meaning, and ultimately having compassion and empathy for people around them, will allow them to better interact with people and groups that they encounter after graduation. These students learned anthropological methods and learned to listen and hear what people were and were not saying. The effectiveness of this class can be used as a model for how other anthropologists teaching in non-traditional settings can incorporate aspects of community partnership and applied anthropology methods and techniques for their students in a variety of classroom settings.

## **Reflection and Conclusion**

While there were great successes in the class, there are also places for the class to grow and change before its next iteration. I faced several challenges in the creation and implementation of this class, some of which are unique to me in my position at the college and others that are more common with faculty practicing engaged anthropology projects with dedicated undergraduate majors. As noted above, one of the greatest challenges is the lack of infrastructure and support that might be found in a typical anthropology department. Working with students who do not share a common anthropological background limits what we can cover in a single semester. Additionally, due to the scheduling needs of other departments, the class can only be offered once an academic year, so gaps appear in our community engagement that threaten to compromise momentum (see also Hathaway and Kuzin 2007). There is also a significant amount of

complicated planning and scheduling that goes into my class. My students frequently have large blocks of studio class time which makes it challenging to find convenient times for our community partners to meet with us (see also Copeland et al. 2016, 242). Many of our liberal arts classes meet in the late afternoon or evening time slots outside of the normal working hours and availability of potential community partners. Time is also a challenge in terms of establishing connections with our community partners, completing the projects we design, processing our collective experiences, and the ability to be flexible when the timing doesn't work out the way we thought it would, all within a 15-week semester (see Copeland et al. 2016, 242; Miller 2021, 17-18; Willis et al. 2003, 39). Even with the limitations and challenges we faced, including weather closures of the college, availability of our community partners, student availability, and scheduling, we managed to have successful experiences.

Finally, the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic has fundamentally changed higher education and the communities with which we interact and serve. Beyond college-mandated COVID-19 restrictions and ongoing precautions, we must be sensitive to wider community health and safety concerns. Part of the "do no harm" ethical mantra of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) includes not exposing or passing on COVID-19 to students and community members, particularly those who are vulnerable, and not adding additional emotional labor to those who are hit hardest by the ongoing pandemic. For the last few years, anthropologists have been grappling with the question of how best to do fieldwork and connect with people safely in the face of ever-changing virus strains and changing levels of community transmission (see Babcock 2020; Howard 2020; Santos 2021; Wenner-Gren 2020). Since 2020 I have not been able to offer this class, and I am uncertain when I might be able to offer it again in its current modality and organization. It is my hope to eventually return to community-based work either as the entire focus of the class as described in this article or in smaller activities or projects as part of a larger class that gives students the experience of fieldwork—a vital tool to connect with people and organizations outside of our institution in a meaningful and collaborative way. Eggeling (2023, 1348) argues that in a post-pandemic world anthropological fieldwork can and should adapt to new needs of both anthropologists and the field itself through the use of new research directions, flexible methods, and even making awareness of the effects of the pandemic "part of their emerging arguments." Should I be able to offer community-based projects and classes in the future, flexibility and reflexivity will be key.

My research and work with this class demonstrates the importance and validity of teaching anthropological content and methods to undergraduate, non-major students. Despite challenges and COVID-19-related setbacks, this class was a success for students and our community partners and can act as a model for anthropologists seeking to engage in similar classes or projects with a wide variety of students from across majors and academic backgrounds and disciplines. Teaching non-anthropology major undergraduate students to listen to the lived experience of others by reading between the narrative lines

and to experience compassion and understanding will help them in whatever academic or professional pursuit they may encounter in the future.

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