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COMMENTARY

Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures: Remote Futures for Teaching and Learning Anthropology

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced myriad challenges for teaching anthropology and has altered the academic landscape for years to come. However, it has also brought new opportunities for improving coursework with creative digital methods and online resources. Can an entire anthropology course be taught using only freely available web-based materials? If so, what could it look like? I embarked on this digital learning experiment hoping to create open educational resources (OERs) that could be shared and adapted by anthropology instructors. Aimed at introducing students to the fundamentals of cultural anthropology, Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures *is an engaging 13-week syllabus supported by carefully curated readings, videos, and activities. I reflect on designing these resources as adaptable tools for online or hybrid learning during the pandemic and share feedback from instructors and students who have used them. Finally, I suggest that flexible approaches to education implemented out of necessity to buffer the uncertainty and disruption of a global public health crisis will continue to have long-term effects on teaching and learning anthropology.*

Keywords: anthropology; teaching; learning; culture; OER; ethnography

Introduction

When college and university campuses closed in March 2020, a shift to online learning happened quickly (Sherpa 2020). Transitioning to remote learning posed obstacles for both students and educators. Instructors have recounted tales of frantic planning in the midst of profound disruptions to both academic and personal lives for themselves and their students. What followed was a prolonged feeling of being "stuck" in uncertainty (Henig and Wiegink 2020). This was likened by some educators and administrators as akin to academic triage: an endlessly confusing attempt to adjust, prepare, and meet the needs of students, with more time spent "assessing the situation than actually being able to do anything about it" (Trivedi 2021, 131).

When reflecting on the pivot from in-person classes to online or hybrid formats due to the pandemic, one should avoid equating "emergency remote teaching" in a crisis-response mode with online learning as an established teaching methodology (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020; Hodges et al. 2020). Web-based education in its varied formats – including wholly online classes; hybrid or blended courses mixing virtual and offline components; or distance education – is not new (Tallent-Runnels et al. 2006). Long before 2020, experienced instructors had extolled the many benefits of online education. For instance, research has shown that online learning has led to increased flexibility and participation among students, higher rates of student class satisfaction, and greater inclusivity and accessibility (Clark-Ibáñez and Scott 2008, 34–35).

The experiences of educators working in online methods since the early 2000s offer many lessons that would bolster the foundation of a toolkit for remote emergency instruction. Unfortunately, with sometimes only hours or days to prepare a pandemic teaching response in such uncertain conditions, there was little time to train instructors for the new reality. Long-term practitioners of online learning point to how "the crisis-response migration methods adopted by universities [were] limited to delivery media without taking cognizance of effective online education theories and models" (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020, 8).

I proposed at the time that pivoting to online teaching in the Spring 2020 term would be a stopgap towards what I called remote futures in education (Barone 2020c). "Remote futures" is somewhat of a play on words. On the one hand, it suggests that remote learning will be part of education for the foreseeable future and therefore changes some very basic facts about classroom learning. On the other hand, the term speaks to the uncertainty we have all felt since March 2020. As a return to "normal" remains a moving goal post, it feels distant and difficult to anticipate even the near future.

Remote Futures

Digital technologies are the hinge upon which remote futures are likely to balance. This raises issues that must be addressed, such as instructors and learners with disparate access to digital learning tools, devices, or bandwidth; lack of familiarity with the multimedia tools needed to create engaging and web-friendly coursework or to complete online assignments; and other barriers to the integration of technologies that have been exacerbated by prolonged disconnection from physical spaces of campus learning. Technical issues are cited as one of the main reasons why online and hybrid learning remained challenging even in 2021 and 2022, especially due to pandemic conditions and closed campuses. It cannot be assumed that access to learning technology is assured, or even when it is, that proficiency in some digital activities like social media or online gaming means that students will also hold the very different skillsets required to successfully navigate higher education at a distance (Clark-Ibáñez and Scott 2008, 36).

Short-term fixes like hastily uploading syllabi to an online learning platform or deciding between synchronous and asynchronous methods were the first steps towards longer-term adjustments in how we teach and learn, and, indeed, how we conceptualize teaching and learning. Whether we took heed of the lessons learned by experts in online education or figured it out one day at a time, the cumbersome and unprecedented "pivot-to-online" required creative solutions to overcome myriad challenges (Barone 2020b). As we edge towards 2023, remote and hybrid classrooms are still with us and remain a continual work in progress.

Back in April 2020, I suggested that absent a physical campus as a base, successful remote classes would depend on a combination of forethought, planning, and flexible technologies in order to foster a virtual environment that feels like a co-present classroom in a time of physical isolation. Rather than seeing virtual methods as a poor facsimile or "simulation" of "real" classes, digital anthropology teaches us that online spaces can also be inhabited places, in most ways as real as their physical counterparts (Barone 2010). The test for instructors and students alike would be to realize a digital place where education can continue to thrive despite these unprecedented changes to our lives (Barone 2020c).

A constant preoccupation with a hypothetical "return to normal" (Trivedi 2021, 133) since 2020 leads us to consider what this future normal could possibly look like for education in the wake of a global pandemic, the end of which still remains out of sight as we move into 2023. Just as we have all waited for our personal lives to go "back to normal," the online pivot was meant to be a temporary substitute, a stopgap, and something we could not wait to be rid of. However, what if it also presented an opportunity to invite meaningful change in higher education and to build a more student-centered experience that is unencumbered by a need to replicate what we have always done before?

Meeting the Challenge of Hybrid Learning with Digital Tools and OER

Open Educational Resources (OERs) respond to inequity in education by remedying the lack of available, low-cost resources for teaching and learning. Whether in print or digital formats, OERs have open licenses or are in the public domain and are therefore free to use, share, and repurpose for teaching, learning, and research. These resources can include full syllabi, course materials, lectures, notes, articles, wikis, videos, podcasts, test banks, and software. They are extensible, modifiable, and available in a variety of formats. Because they can be adapted or remixed, the OER designation allows for more creative inclusivity than traditional commercial materials (Van Allen and Katz 2020, 212).

When print volumes and other campus-based library resources were rendered inaccessible during pandemic library closures, it became cumbersome for instructors of existing courses to convert their curricula directly to digital formats. In this context, OERs offer a flexible toolkit for meeting the needs of dynamic classrooms even – or perhaps especially – at a distance. As such, OERs can be cost-effective replacements for expensive proprietary course materials, or they can supplement existing materials to give more

depth, variety, and exposure to different points of view. The ability to modify and remix OERs to align with and enrich existing course aims is an important advancement which will be the focus of the remainder of this discussion.

Multivocality is one of the greatest assets of OERs, as they allow for more engaging, timely, relevant, and comprehensive coverage. I show below that creative use of OERs can help to enable a worthwhile shift to more student-centered learning by offering students greater flexibility. The reduced barriers to access encourage self-guided and exploratory learning. Research has likewise shown that including OERs is an effective way to "contextualize the content for students within current world events, issues, and interests" and greatly improves student learning experiences (Van Allen and Katz 2020, 211).

In addition to co-founding one of the broadest grassroots projects in open-access online anthropology to date (Barone and Hart 2015), I have always had a keen interest in following innovative teaching and open publishing projects in anthropology, especially those that are free to use, remix, extend, and share. With regard to free web-based teaching resources, there are dozens of online journals, open access publications, textbooks, professional blogs, micro-lectures, videos, photos, illustrations, and ethnographic repositories on nearly every anthropological subject (Barone 2020c). Many have been around for years, while new projects are being developed all the time. Since the pandemic, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms have become an abundant source of valuable information, camaraderie, and support amongst teaching faculty across disciplines.

Teaching and Learning Anthropology's use of the hashtag #COVIDSyllabus is a prime example of leveraging social media to build a crowd-sourced toolkit to support anthropology instructors and students. It allowed for the rapid exchange of up-to-date information during the pandemic, as well as opening access to disciplinary knowledge and advice (Jenks 2021). Anthropology teaching resources such as syllabi and micro-lectures were generously collected and shared on the web as open resources (Barone 2020c). The American Anthropological Association also compiled a collection of COVID-19 materials[1].

With a growing number of born-digital resources, anthropology instructors have a profusion of choice. The present challenge is how to leverage the promises of OER for building effective pandemic-ready syllabi while remote, hybrid, and/or in-person classrooms remain in flux.

Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures

The changing landscape of pandemic learning prompted me to experiment with building an open course that would stand up in quality, depth, and breadth alongside the expectations of any "traditional" undergraduate anthropology curriculum. The result of my

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[1] See https://www.americananthro.org/covid-19

experiment, *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures*, presents a richly curated and comprehensive introduction to cultural anthropology (Barone 2021). The course draws from digital resources to create an experience that is as visually inviting as it is academically challenging. I followed up *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures* with an additional student project called *Nascent Worlds*, a culture creation project that can be assigned independently or alongside the full course. Discussion of this project is unfortunately outside the full scope of this article (Barone 2021a).

Three lessons from Clark-Ibáñez and Scott's (2008, 36–40) reflections on online education resonate with my experience building *Ethnographic Insights.* First, "technology can enhance a course but it should not dictate the shape of the course." Second, "good online classes cannot be built by simply converting existing face-to-face courses." Third, "multimedia can add a little zing to an online class." In designing *Ethnographic Insights*, I sought to produce an introduction to anthropology that would work just as well in an offline class as in a physical lecture hall or any of the hybrid or online environments that fall in between.
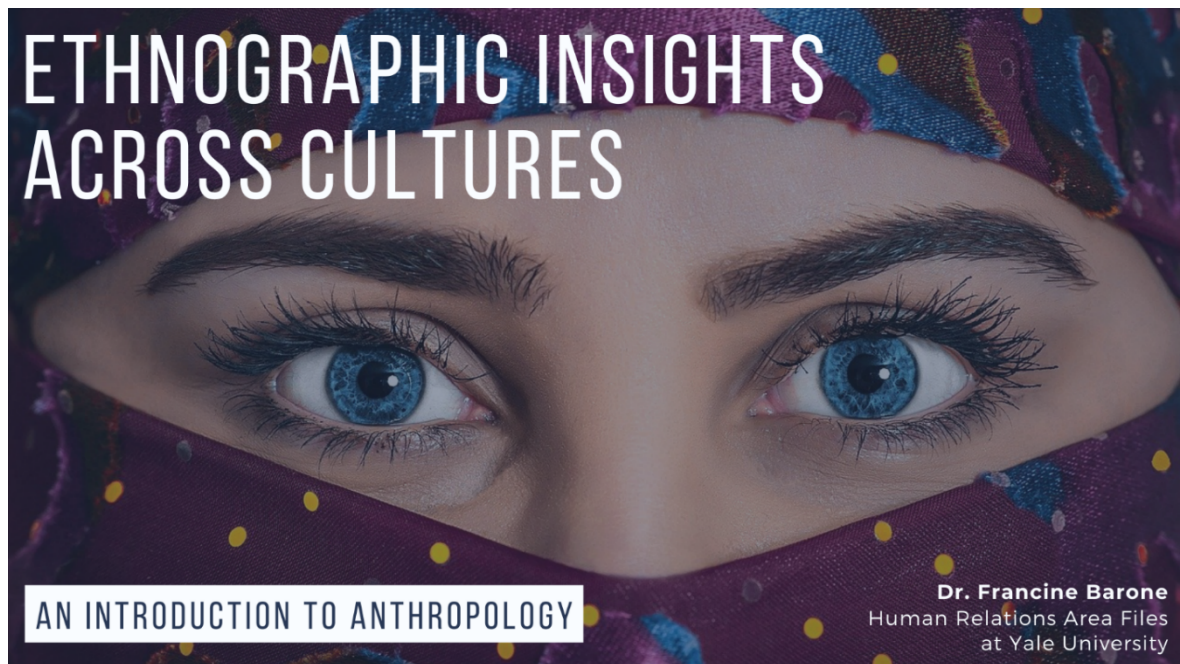
Course Overview

Figure 1. Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures Title Slide

Ethnographic Insights is available to view online in an easy-to-share interactive slideshow format, or it can be downloaded in HTML or PDF formats. It includes 13 weeks of curated content and two optional assignments. See Appendix A for a course description, learning objectives, table of contents, and a link to access the file downloads and

suggested grading schema. Both the text-based and slideshow versions of the syllabus include hyperlinks to web content for one-click access to all assigned readings, activities, and videos. The weekly selections have been carefully curated to cut through "information overload" while presenting a variety of viewpoints for class discussion.

A criticism levied at online learning is that attending classes virtually results in a lower level of student dedication, since "anything done online suffers from attention span" and distractions (Govindarajan and Srivastava 2020). I selected the videos, articles, and interactive environments (such as the "Atlas of Emotions" in Week 3) to encourage participation, exploration, and even a little healthy distraction. *Ethnographic Insights* embraces anthropology as a unique "discovery engine" of a discipline, letting students choose which resources they wish to pursue. Thus, "students are more active and responsible for their own learning" (Copeland and Wightman 2021, 69).

Figure 2. *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures*: Week 5 Overview

As a guideline, each week provides for approximately two to three course hours across a combination of a lecture and discussion, tutorial, seminar, or asynchronous equivalent. However, the syllabus is designed to be adaptable. It can be supplemented with more advanced ethnographic or theoretical material at the instructor's discretion to scale up beyond an introductory level, or focus can be kept on the videos and key readings alone for a brief introduction for new learners.

Each week begins with a paragraph introducing the anthropological area of interest (such as Exchange & Reciprocity, pictured in the top slide of Week 5 in Figure 2). These summaries outline the suggested talking points for a corresponding lecture and align with the contents of the videos and readings that follow. The idea of "human universals" carries throughout. For instance, how universal are different aspects of eating, keeping pets, gift-giving, the home, our identities, or how we view our bodies? What can anthropology teach us about how and why culture can be similar or different across societies?

Next, featured videos on aspects of the weekly theme are embedded in the slides or available as links from the HTML version of the course (see Figure 3). Most of the videos, documentaries, talks, or micro-lectures are about 5-10 minutes long. Some of the videos include ethnographic footage or explain anthropological concepts – such as rites of passage or belief in magic – in engaging ways; others summarize an aspect of culture from around the world, such as gift economies or understandings of time. Some "TED Talks" present a speaker's opinions on social issues, such as gender identity or emotional experiences, designed to inspire further discussion and debate.

Figure 3. *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures*: Week 13

The Key Readings for each week match the main theme and feature comparative cultural insights supported by ethnographic examples. The ethnographic snippets showcased in the key readings cover a wide range of subjects perfect for initiating class discussion, such as the anthropology of the home; ritual and belief; gender; beauty standards; luck and chance; gift exchange; and comfort eating (Barone 2019; 2020; 2015; 2018; 2020a; 2017; 2020d).

Background reading from trusted anthropological sources – including selected chapters from free and open-access anthropology textbooks (Brown et al. 2017; Dastrup 2015; Wesch 2018), open-access cultural summaries (e.g., Ember 2016), and encyclopedias (Stein et al. 2018) – are provided in the "Textbook" section. The optional "Advanced" section for each week connects the curated key readings and videos to classic monographs or relevant anthropological theories and debates. Following Sherpa (2020), one objective of offering vetted expert content is "to train students to sort through excess of online sources to identify credible ones – a valuable skill for anyone in today's world." Due to the modular framework that is consistent throughout each week, instructors can choose how much or how little to focus on, as well as any additional materials that they would like to add.

Student Assignments

Guidelines for two assignments are included: a group interview project and an essay. The group project requires participants to interview each other to learn how their cultural backgrounds and experiences might be similar or different to those of their classmates. This assignment was modified to consider pandemic conditions that preclude the safe practice of popular undergraduate activities such as conducting mini in-person ethnographies in local communities.

The essay assignment – Do cultural universals exist? – requires students to research an anthropological subject of their choice across several societies. Then, based on the evidence uncovered, the student will assess whether or not (or to what extent) the chosen subject could be considered a "human universal" common to all societies (Murdock 1945). Students have the option to write a traditional paper or to include their own photos, videos, or other creative media in their "essays."

Designed with student-centered learning in mind, the group project suits a flipped classroom model (Copeland and Wightman 2021; Herreid and Schiller 2013) and the writing assignment is in line with the concept of an UnEssay (Sullivan 2015). Students can be encouraged to experiment with various media and platforms to complete both tasks. Emphasizing the existence of cultural differences and similarities connects both assignments with the weekly themes.

Student and Instructor Feedback: Reflections on Teaching and Learning with *Ethnographic Insights*

> "As a College student, getting to learn from Dr. Barone's work has been an exceptional experience. I always leave my virtual classroom feeling well informed, academically challenged, and culturally cultivated."

> Jazmin Cantu
> Student, Pima Community College

In the 2020-2021 academic year, Dr. Diana Repp, an Instructional Faculty member in Anthropology at Pima Community College, incorporated *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures* into her undergraduate class of 23 students. In terms of demographics, in Spring 2020, Pima's total enrollment was 39,356 across all programs. Students are 70% part-time, 56% female, 46% Hispanic/Latino, and 56% aged 18-24. There is a 16:1 student-to-faculty ratio.[2]

Pima Community College supports and encourages the use of OER to reduce the cost of educational materials. According to Dr. Repp, this is one reason she chose to adopt *Ethnographic Insights*. In addition, she adopted it "because it was fresh and relevant and could engage students online during the pandemic." She explains[3] why *Ethnographic Insights* was successful in her classes:

> One of the stars of *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures* is the collection of essays curated for each section as part of the Key Readings. They are topical and timely and draw students into the joy of discovery. The succinct, focused research on specific topics, illustrated with ethnographic examples culled from the eHRAF [eHRAF World Cultures database produced by the Human Relations Area Files], offers students examples of how to use the database to explore an area more deeply. They are a great gateway into research for undergraduates, modeling how to mine and combine eHRAF with other sources for their own research projects.

Throughout the pandemic, online learning has posed challenges at Pima, as it has for institutions and instructors around the world. One of the obstacles one must consider when adopting online coursework is limited access to digital technologies, which disproportionately affects low-income students. According to Repp, "the pandemic exposed and exacerbated inequities seen in our country, and in my region."

In selecting and modifying her materials and assignments for online learning, Repp acknowledges that she needed to reconfigure her teaching methods. It was important to create low-tech assignments that were inclusive (allowing for those with lower levels of

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[2] Source: https://www.pima.edu/about-pima/quick-facts/index

[3] Dr. Repp graciously agreed to be interviewed about her use of *Ethnographic Insights* in her course, and both she and her student Jazmin Cantu consented to sharing their feedback in this publication.

access), yet still engaging and challenging. *Ethnographic Insights* has low-bandwidth-friendly display options. It does not require a special platform as the videos are embedded in the slides, and the entire syllabus is also available in standard text or HTML formats without images.

Another feature of *Ethnographic Insights* that appealed to Repp is its modular structure, which allows sections of the course to be adapted to a wide variety of anthropology and related curricula: "I may use portions of *Ethnographic Insights* in the future, in other classes. I have already recommended it to another instructor for ancillary materials to supplement another course." Leveraging the flexibility and adaptability of OER has been a key goal in the production of *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures*. As a result, it can be freely adopted as an entire standalone course, or selected weeks or links to resources can be modified to populate other syllabi as and when needed.

Conclusion

There are both pedagogical and pragmatic issues to consider when adapting to changing landscapes of education. Embracing the potential of digital media to enrich course materials allows instructors to move beyond simply mimicking past practices with less-than-ideal technological solutions. Inventive digital formats and platforms along with high-quality OER can inspire learning while facilitating equitable access.

Lessons learned from crisis-driven emergency remote teaching have led instructors, students, parents, and administrators to ask important questions about the pre-COVID status quo of education. Some of the most heretofore immovable aspects of campus-based education were forced open to negotiation in the wake of the pandemic shutdown. For example, is a residential college experience necessary? What aspects of higher education can be substituted, supplemented, or complemented by digital technologies moving forward (Govindarajan and Srivastava 2020)? Might hybrid learning actually produce a greater value and more accessible landscape for learning?

Some instructors have recounted accidental successes during their pivot that inspired changes which may ultimately affect how they teach well into the future. For example, Copeland and Wightman's experiences "suggest that, as faculty scrambled to turn in-person courses into online ones, many of our adaptations became useful tools and methods for both in-person and online teaching in the future" (2021, 71). It was being amenable to new methods and solutions – namely, moving towards student-centered approaches – that allowed those authors to respond effectively to changing demands in a time of uncertainty. Moreover, their successes both "reflect and reinforce the value of these pedagogies" and "suggest ways to learn from the pivot that continue to benefit students" (Copeland and Wightman 2021, 68). Similarly, Trivedi (2021, 134) points to the need "to retain hybrid and remote access opportunities, even in the eager rush to return to face-to-face instruction," and to learn from this experience to be prepared for future demands for greater adaptability.

In the short-term, the online pivot was a necessary emergency measure and an immensely stressful undertaking for all involved. While students and faculty everywhere await an elusive return to "normal," the idea of prolonged "remote futures" is not a pessimistic one. Nor is it at odds with a safe return to campus-based learning. Despite unprecedented disruptions, ongoing experiments testing the adaptability of OERs combined with digital learning tools have proven immeasurably useful and insightful. By sharing the development and scope of *Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures*, I hope to contribute an example of how it is possible for anthropologists to harness the promises of open materials – both print and digital – through creative and thoughtful curation, however and wherever the future of anthropology teaching takes place.

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Appendix A

Ethnographic Insights Across Cultures can be accessed at https://hraf.yale.edu/teach-ehraf/ethnographic-insights-across-cultures/.

Course Description

Through the comparative study of different cultures, anthropology explores the most fundamental questions about what it means to be human. This introductory course encourages students to explore cultural similarities and differences to better understand how culture shapes who we are: our societies, our shared meanings, and our everyday lives. Beginning with unpacking the concept of culture in anthropology, each week covers a different anthropological theme, including love, ritual performance, gender, language, food, and kinship. Evaluating cultural universals will allow students to contemplate the rich diversity of the human experience. With remote learning in mind, wholly online sources on timely topics are interwoven with classic ethnographic accounts to inspire lively class discussions. The cross-cultural and database research skills developed throughout the course provide a solid framework for understanding and analyzing anthropological concerns both within and beyond the social sciences.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

- Develop an understanding of the concept of culture within anthropology
- Distinguish between ethnography and anthropology
- Read and interpret ethnographic data
- Compare and contrast diverse cultural insights and belief systems
- View one's personal habits and beliefs within global social and historical context
- Draw meaningful cross-cultural conclusions about human universals
- Conduct independent research

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Week 5. Gestures of kindness and reciprocity, or when no good deed goes unpunished

Week 6. Place, space, and the dynamics of house and home

Week 7. Cultures and calendars: making and keeping time

Week 8. Defining selfhood: Gender, sexuality, identity and power

Week 9. "You're, like, really pretty": On bodies and beauty standards

Week 10. Let the good times roll: Rituals, rites of passage and liminality

Week 11. Witchcraft and sorcery: Dealing with misfortune, magic, and a zero-sum universe

Week 12. Puppy love: Animals and their humans

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