

Saving Anthropology from COVID-19

HIGHER EDUCATION IS AT A CROSSROADS. CAN WE ADAPT TO THE ONGOING CHALLENGES AND CREATE TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATIONAL COURSES FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE?

By Michael Wesch

As colleges and universities started shutting down classrooms and moving courses online, it became apparent to edtech professionals that this might be a “moment” for online learning, and given the rush with which things were thrown together, it might not be a shining one. A flurry of tweets and blog posts in the edtech world eventually swarmed around a key distinction between “emergency remote teaching” and “online education.” The distinction was immediately embraced and welcomed, not only by the edtech crowd, but also by beleaguered faculty who felt relieved of impractical expectations to suddenly design an exquisite online learning experience. But while this distinction holds for now, what about this fall? Students, parents, and the general public will expect us to be prepared. And with nearly everything about the fall semester still uncertain, we are left with a difficult instructional design challenge: How can we create courses that are ready for the many possible disruptions of a global pandemic?

Rising to this challenge is of extraordinary importance to the future of our institutions and to the discipline of anthropology. Shrinking endowments, unforeseen costs, an eroding tax base, lower projected enrollments, and uncer-

tainty about the trajectory of the pandemic paint a gloomy picture. Budget cuts are inevitable. Program closures are likely. Even university mergers and closings are not impossible. George Siemens tweeted that the most likely scenario is “carnage”

with 30+ percent budget shortfalls for the academic year ahead (@gsiemens, April 8, 2020). “Higher Ed will need a bailout or it’s going to collapse,” the author John Warner declared matter-of-factly in the title of an article for *Inside Higher Ed* (March 19, 2020). But public sentiment, especially on the Right, is not in our favor. College is perceived as far too expensive and ideologically slanted, its institutions better replaced with automated systems or free online materials. “Colleges are going to pay a heavy price for the contempt they have shown in recent years towards American values,” wrote the economist and commentator Richard Vedder (March 24, 2020). And Fox News’s Tucker Carlson gleefully announced that “there is not enough federal bailout money in the Treasury to save every pointless university in a bad recession ... one of the few bright spots in an otherwise dark moment” (Garcia, March 19, 2020).

We are unlikely to convert the Tucker Carlsons of the world into a sudden appreciation of anthropology or the virtues of a liberal arts education, but we will need significant public support to survive this moment, and one way to do that—maybe even the best way—is to provide transformative educational opportunities to as many people as possible regardless of the circumstances.

So to successfully address the design challenge, our courses will have to meet the following four conditions: (1) easily transition to and from online formats as outbreaks occur and recede, (2) provide maximum flexibility for individual students to participate in person or online, synchronously or asynchronously, as they deal with their own uncertain circumstances, (3) maximize equity, accessibility, and

inclusion, and (4) continue to provide a unique, deep, and valuable educational experience that cannot be easily replicated outside of a carefully constructed course that is organized, managed, and mentored by an expert in the discipline. Faculty of every discipline must face this challenge. As teacher and digital education advisor Enrique Dans (April 13, 2020) announced unapologetically in *Forbes*, "This will not be an option."

But the challenges of creating such a course in anthropology are great. It is easy enough to imagine putting a content-centered course into a hybrid environment in which students can either attend lectures or watch the recordings later, and then take simple and automated exams to measure their ability to memorize keywords or apply simple formulaic procedures. These content-centered courses are also the easiest to automate and scale, the kind of thing Silicon Valley edtech startups like to pillory in the press while gobbling up their content. It is also the vision of "online teaching" that gives faculty pause and leads to widespread concerns about the value of online teaching vs. face-to-face classrooms. But as the pedagogical innovator Robin DeRosa has noted, the real distinction to be made is not between face-to-face and online courses, but between content-centered and human-centered courses (@actualham, August 6, 2019). That's the rub of the fourth condition of this challenge. To succeed, we need to build flexible *human-centered* courses that can move online and offline as needed.

This is not to diminish the importance of great content, but we teach people not content, and teaching people online can be especially challenging in fields like anthropology that aim not only to teach new information, or help students learn specific skills, but might also

inspire a complete rethinking of previously taken-for-granted assumptions, reveal hitherto unknown possibilities for humankind, inspire new worldview-shaking insights into why the world is the way it is, ignite the imagination to what could be, and nurture a sense of personal and social responsibility for creating the cultural realities that we collectively realize into existence. These often turbulent learning journeys require a delicate balance of personal space, community, and mentorship.

It was transformative learning outcomes like these that Ryan Klataske and I had in mind when we set out to create ANTH101.com as a free and open "connected course" that could bring together faculty from all over the world teaching Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. Although the course was not explicitly designed as a blended hybrid course and not put together under the pressures of a global pandemic, it is designed to serve both online and in-person students, and much of what we have learned along the way may be useful as we step up to this new design challenge.

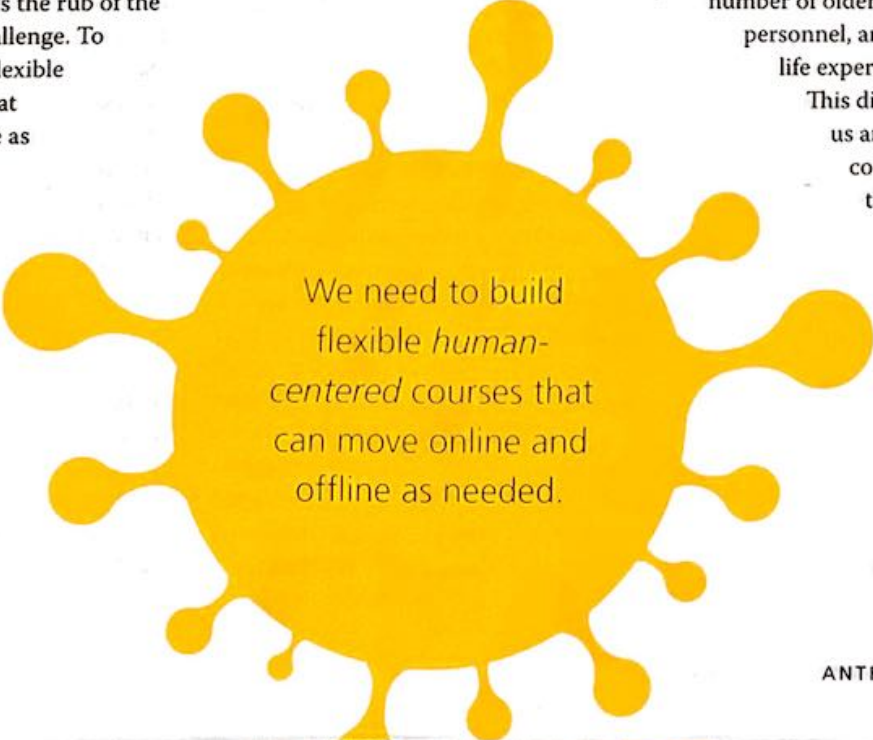
First, we set out by shifting our thinking of the course away from the idea that it is "online," to the idea that it is "out in the world." We created weekly challenges (instead of more coercive "assignments")

that get students out into the world talking to strangers, doing micro-ethnography projects, and reflecting on their everyday lives in new ways. Student favorites include "The 28 Day Challenge" to create or break a habit to explore our evolutionary heritage; "The UnThing Experiment" of trying to live without smartphones, shoes, chairs, or other taken-for-granted technologies; and "The Other Encounter" in which students have hard conversations with people who are very different from them. In designing these challenges we have continuously eschewed anything that creates a sense of compulsion. We want to create inherently fun, mind-changing, world-expanding challenges that allow students to shift their entire mode of being toward the anthropological perspective.

We create space for reflection on these challenges through deep and quiet offline activities such as journaling. We encourage students to find space away from the screen, with the phone turned off, to process ideas and experiences and to think deeply. These reflections build in the final weeks with guided explorations of their assumptions, perceptions, and values, and culminate with a "manifesto" in which they reflect on what they have learned about themselves, the world, and how they see themselves serving the world in the future.

Our students include "traditional" students ages 18–22, but also a significant number of older working adults, military personnel, and others with complex life experiences and circumstances.

This diversity raises the bar for us and inspires us to develop content and assignments that are relevant to real-life situations and engaging enough for students from widely different backgrounds. We often use popular movies, TV shows, documentaries, podcasts, and articles that raise deep questions, illustrate core concepts through rich stories, and



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create engaging entry points into the core concepts and ideas of our discipline. We also make these easily accessible in a variety of formats to accommodate different learning styles and complicated schedules. For example, in my class I provide a single audio file each week with all of the week's content so that busy students can download and listen wherever and whenever they have time.

During any given week, a student can easily spend up to 80 percent of their time engaging with this "online" class without being online. The time we do spend online is reserved primarily for discussion. But we are wary of forced and fabricated inauthentic discussions resulting from points-driven discussion boards. Klataske's favorite internet meme depicts an all too familiar phenomenon:

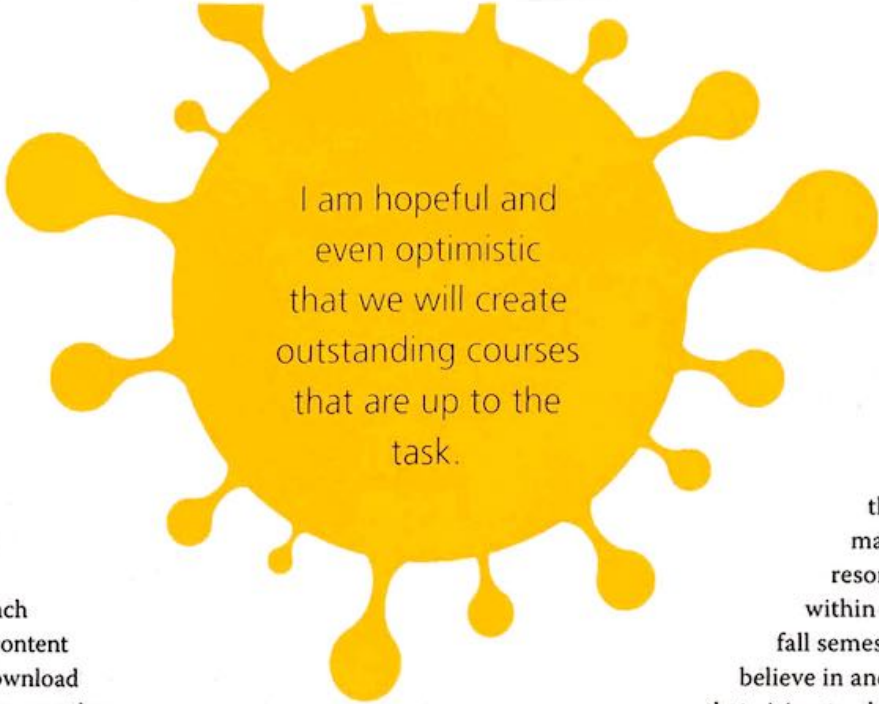
Student 1: I love bread.

Student 2: I agree. I love bread too. I like the part when you said you love bread.

Great point!

So we use unique Instagram hashtags and private discussion boards where students share pictures, videos, and written reflections of their adventures as they complete the challenge assignments. These posts and pictures humanize the class. And instead of requiring a certain number of posts and replies each week, we simply try to inspire great discussions through our own authentic participation. We do the challenges. We reveal and explore real questions that have no definitive answers. We celebrate great posts. In short, we let students know that we are participating, listening, and that their ideas move us, make us think, and sometimes change our minds.

All of this is framed within a super simple structure and schedule for weekly activities. This might seem simplistic and technical, rather than deeply pedagogical,



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cal, but a simple structure with a single weekly due date reduces confusion and is essential for creating the cognitive space for transformative learning in a hybrid environment. A simplified structure does not mean it is a simple class. It just gets confusion out of the way so students can focus on deeper questions and more complex problems and projects.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this particular design challenge, we have a community of faculty all over the world who are borrowing, adapting, changing and contributing back to these core ideas, creating a wealth of alternatives for a wide range of situations and different course conditions. In the flurry of activity that occurred as COVID-19 shut down campuses, we met on a Google Doc and shared dozens of ideas for how to transform our challenge assignments to fit the moment. And our collaboration was not the only one or the most impressive in the anthropology world. Others put together a massive list of ideas for continuing fieldwork throughout the crisis, an extremely impressive COVID-19 Super Syllabus was created, and hundreds of tips for transitioning to online were shared across multiple platforms. Such idea-storms and collaborations will be essential for navigating the ongoing challenges ahead.

We have never faced a more difficult instructional design challenge with such high stakes. So any recommendations or proposals, including the ideas I have laid

out here, should be carefully and critically evaluated before being adopted for a course design. It is important that each one of us take full ownership of the design decisions we make and ensure that they resonate with our core teacher within so that we can enter the fall semester with a vision we can believe in and the capacity to adapt that vision to changing circumstances as necessary.

Despite the challenge that is set before us, I am hopeful and even optimistic that we will create outstanding courses that are up to the task, and that they will have a lasting value for our students long after the pandemic has passed. As I have started my online teaching journey I have not only been won over by the potential of online learning, but more importantly I have been awakened to the vast need for high-quality transformational education experiences that reach beyond our campus to those students who simply cannot be present due to work, parenting, illness, or many other "life happens" situations. When I think of the true value of engaging with this design challenge, I have in mind the needs of specific students that I have had the pleasure of working with over the past few years. I see their faces. I feel their struggles. And I know that they will be immensely grateful for any progress we can make toward improving their educational futures. As champions of equity, access, and inclusivity in the classroom, now is our opportunity to expand our efforts beyond our classroom walls. 🍌

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