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Zooming in on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Community College Classrooms: Experiments with a Pedagogy of Place in Anthropology Courses

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Abstract

Reflecting on our recent experience of online teaching with mainly historically marginalized students at the U.S.-Mexico border, we emphasize the importance of engaging a critical pedagogy of place by creating communities of trust. We describe how the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced among us and our students, focusing on how it impacted practical aspects and the context of our teaching. We discuss four teaching strategies we implemented during the pandemic that highlight the importance of communication and flexibility in allowing students to self-pace their learning. These strategies proved useful as we began to reach a level of trust among students and gained knowledge of their needs. We conclude by describing the pandemic as a period of opportunities in which anthropology students can apply concepts from assigned readings to confront and analyze a historical moment that neither we, nor our students, had previously experienced.

***Keywords:** critical pedagogy of place; community of trust; critical digital pedagogy; U.S.-Mexico border*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed many U.S. educators, administrators, and students. The 2020 spring “break” challenged us to rethink daily life, family ties, school responsibilities, and the concept of where and how to work. It was no break. Everyone sorted through pandemic news and how to respond to it. People like us, instructors in a community college system located in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, had an extended two-week Spring Break to contact students, assess how they were doing, and convert our courses to an online format. The pandemic exacerbated existing contextual problems that the three of us, as anthropologists, knew we must address in our courses: job losses for students supporting families, unequal access to technology and the internet, and

healthcare challenges for at-risk family members. In addition, some instructors dealt with the realities of being uninsured and the risk of insurmountable financial consequences through COVID-19. Teaching occurred in a moment when both we, as instructors, and our students, were experiencing the first phases of isolation and loneliness that would continue for months.

Apart from personal issues, teachers and students in the borderlands live in a zone where climate change is taking its toll on energy and water supply. These processes happen under a political administration that is interested in policies that will improve well-being of the upper one to ten percent (Fremstad 2018). Left out are adults seeking to create avenues of social mobility for themselves and their households through the main path promoted in liberal democracies with the promise of improving people's lives: securing higher education. At the U.S.-Mexico border, both students and instructors can be minorities¹: trans-frontier immigrants, Native Americans, people "with an accent," and people of color overcoming the impacts of U.S. policies that limit their potential to become successful citizens while retaining traditional cultures. Our students include those from ethnic groups fearing the Border Patrol and jurisdictional police, low-income parents trying to improve the prospects of their children and simultaneously care for older generations, and non-binary students trying to survive an uncertain future. The multi-level COVID-19 crisis exposes systemic inequalities that should not be surprising to anyone. The state of Arizona has a history of promoting legislation that endangers education and contributes to a negative narrative about the value of borderlands students. James Greenberg and Luminița-Anda Mandache (2017) identify progressive implementation of neoliberal policies in Arizona since the 1980s. Their analysis of state budgets between 1979 and 2013 illustrates how Republican discourse that mobilizes fears and prejudices "has pushed policies that simultaneously criminalized undocumented immigrants and has used their high numbers to justify investments in private prisons, further reinforcing these fears and prejudices" (222). Increases in security expenditures led to budgetary cuts in areas considered less "productive" from a neoliberal perspective. For example, cuts in education expenditures per student in Arizona were 50.4% more than in any other U.S. state (Oliff et al. 2013). Education budget cuts and increased expenditures on security measures threaten to deepen existing inequalities. The COVID-19 economic-health-environmental crisis intensifies this trend.

Educators need to examine their pedagogies in order to implement an educational praxis that effectively addresses current threats to education. Students and instructors are aware of narratives promoted by the media and U.S. Homeland Security portraying immigrants as criminals. As educators, we want to empower students to create a more just and equitable future where immigrants and minorities can feel secure (Rendón 2009 and 1994). As a start, we want to create courses that enact "communities of trust" in our

¹ Each of the authors has lived and worked in the borderlands for at least ten years. Our work as anthropologists involved relationships with oppressed minorities outside our teaching responsibilities, who often included individuals trying to equip themselves with more skills for better jobs.

classrooms, where students can learn from and support each other. We draw from the definition of community offered by Chavis and Lee (2015):

Community is not a place, a building, or an organization; nor is it an exchange of information over the Internet. Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs. ... Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other. They have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of that community, influence their environments and each other. ... [Thus] neighborhoods, companies, schools, and places of faith are context and environments for these communities, but they are not communities themselves.

As we altered our classes during the pandemic, we explored online teaching modalities that would successfully engage students in their own education, such as flipped classrooms (McCrea 2016); participatory learning through student smartphones, webcams, and/or tablets that assist students in visualizing interactive concepts as the teacher and/or classmates explain key concepts (Montrieux, Raes, and Schellens 2017; Zou and Lambert 2017); project-based learning (Beck 2008; Sulisworo and Santyasa 2018); and cognitive scaffolding (Doo, Bonk, and Heo 2020), among others.

The current moment is a new era that some call the Virocene, which “colonizes, overpowers and catastrophically affects humans and ecosystems” at the same time that “opportunities for change” become available (Fernando 2020, 640). COVID-19 poses challenges to teaching that parallel the confluence of other events, such as Black Lives Matter protests (and its spinoff, Black Minds Matter) and daily reminders of the impacts of climate change. At a time of socio-political polarization, news interpretations are suspect. In this context, anthropology can support critical thinking skills that ultimately allow students to interpret reality and distinguish different political voices. As anthropology instructors, we recognize that the continuing errors that confound racism require a holistic perspective to understand the political context (Martinez 2020, 10), which can then bring about change.

Our proposal to reshape anthropology education through a critical pedagogy enables students to participate in molding their own education through virtual learning environments. Despite the lack of physical presence, students remain grounded in local realities of their daily lives by incorporating life experiences into their learning. First, we describe the students at the U.S.-Mexico border and the kinds of challenges the Virocene is presenting to their learning. Second, we explain how the new critical pedagogy requires a teaching methodology for creating and maintaining classrooms as communities of trust. Finally, drawing on our teaching experience in the Spring 2020 semester, we offer our experiences adapting to the Virocene through virtual teaching and conclude with a call to action to answer the question: “What now?” Rather than a totalizing solution of how to teach, we suggest a change in perspective that emphasizes increased student participation within a critical pedagogy of place that is amenable to numerous regional variations. We

identify the COVID-19 pandemic as a moment of new learning opportunities for students and teachers alike.

Identities of *Transfronterizx* Students

The concept of borderlands applies not only to a geographic location, but also names an area where political contradictions and changes occur daily. For us, *transfronterizx* (“borderland”) refers to a non-homogenous group (nationality, race-ethnicity, gender) of students situated in the borderlands. Many of these students engage in frequent border crossing for different reasons (Falcón-Orta and Orta-Falcón 2018), including work and study (Convertino 2018). College students in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands are diverse: Black, Native American, Hispanic/Latinx, low-to-moderate income whites, and those raised on one or both sides of the border. This group of students includes documented and undocumented students, and those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, who have spent most of their lives in the U.S., which makes them eligible for in-state tuition. Adding to this diversity, Pima Community College has refugee and immigrant students from African, Middle Eastern, and Asian/Pacific Island countries. One semester before COVID-19 (Fall 2019), the student body was comprised of 47.13% Hispanic/Latinx, 37.11% White, 2.24% American Indian Alaska Native, 4.76% Black/Afro-American students, as well as students from other origins (Pima Community College 2020).

The Hope Center’s Spring 2019 survey summarizes three issues faced by students from 39 two-year colleges and 15 four-year colleges, namely, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2020). Students in ten racial-ethnic categories who were surveyed reported greater difficulty with housing insecurity than the other two issues. Minority students reported more problems with these three issues; those reporting the most problems were Indigenous, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, Pacific Islander/Hawaiian, and Hispanic/Latinx students. Ranking among the lowest three, white students (83,295) outnumbered all of the other race-ethnicities combined (74,798).

The real-life stories of some of our students are more poignant than numbers in terms of their capacity to describe existing inequalities. Hispanic/Latinx and Indigenous peoples are confronted with walls and fences as a “tactical infrastructure” (Sundberg 2015, 209) aimed at “disrupting [potential] terrorist travel and bolstering our border security” (U.S. House of Congress 2005, 454). Indigenous communities such as the Apache, Cocopah, Kickapoo, Kumeyaay, O’odham, Pai, and Yaqui tribes, split by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and 1853 Gadsden Purchase, consider the border wall to be an “‘imaginary line,’ an invisible boundary created by colonial powers that claim sovereign indigenous territories as their own” (Leza 2019). Officially, federal laws and treaties affirm the right of federally recognized tribes to cross between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, yet passes are often required by U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency agents, who may delay and/or refuse entry at official checkpoints (Leza 2019). Hispanic/Latinx individuals face similar obstacles to attend classes when they return from visiting family in Mexico.

It is not uncommon for us, as anthropology instructors, to have students narrate border encounters in assignments or class discussions, sometimes in a way so natural that one might view such experiences as a normalized part of students' daily lives. Jeremy Slack et al. (2015) describe how border and immigration enforcement programs like the Consequence Delivery System (CDS) are progressively moving from deterrent to active punishment, incarceration, and criminalization of family members. Slack et al. consider that this practice of criminalization puts young people "in harm's way," even if they are students who were born in or have lived their lives in the U.S. (109). As one can imagine, the pandemic obliged some students to cross the U.S.-Mexico border more frequently to visit ill family members. These experiences increased students' fears of denial of re-entry.

Some transfronterix students born in the U.S. hold dual citizenship and have family on both sides of the border. Others are Mexican students with F-1 or M-1 student visas or are green card holders (Permanent Residents). Some can enter the U.S. legally but lack documents that allow them to lawfully attend school in the U.S.; for example, they may have a Border Crossing Card or B-1/B-2 visa granted to temporary visitors². Being a student and working in the U.S. often go together. Engaging in cross-border work increases by 7.9% the likelihood of being a cross-border student. In addition, some fronterix students come from high-income households with strong ties to the U.S. (Orraca-Romero et al. 2017). A 1982 Supreme Court ruling protects students from illegal immigration reprisals, yet Arizona, California, and Texas require that a student must reside within a school district to pay in-state tuition unless they have DACA status (Orraca-Romero et al. 2017). Furthermore, students are sometimes lumped together in public discourse with other immigrants, whatever their legal status, so they may feel anxious about potential anti-immigration sentiments of classmates.

Media narratives contribute greatly to the portrayal of immigrants as potential criminals. Tuttle and Harris (2019) analyzed the content of over 3,800 newspaper articles from 2008 to 2012, geo-locating and pairing them with macro-level data. They concluded:

- (a) one-third of local stories describe immigration as crime-increasing;
- (b) articles that link immigration to rising rates of crime are more likely to appear on the front page of newspapers, as are stories describing immigration's impact on the justice system or the rights of immigrants within it; and
- (c) articles published in places with lower rates of crime, higher median household incomes, and smaller foreign-born populations are likely to appear on the front page (215).

Such media narratives increase the likelihood that transfronterix students will be associated with "unlawful" and/or "criminal" activities. Negative narratives about transfronterix students as members of drug cartels, "alien" competitors with North

² The B visa is appropriate for brief recreational study, M visa is for study at vocational or other recognized nonacademic institutions, and F visa is for university or college, high school, and private elementary school enrollment. A green card is for permanent U.S. residency (U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs, n.d.).

American workers, terrorist infiltrators, or Mexican rapists have been prominent in the media (Bierman et al. 2018; Kleyn 2017; Vila 2000). Political affiliation plays a role in how comfortable Mexicans studying in the U.S. feel about their presence north of the U.S.-Mexico border. A Pew Research Center national survey in 2016 found that respondents “held generally positive attitudes toward undocumented immigrants regardless of political affiliation, although Republicans favor stronger [9% to 41%] border security and law enforcement than Democrats” (Parrott et al. 2019, 679). Fortunately, local newspapers such as the *Arizona Daily Star* report on DACA students’ involvement as health professionals fighting COVID-19 (Meyers 2020). Concerns existing before COVID-19 were incorporated into the Trump administration’s policy to increase the border wall as a way to limit back-and-forth immigration across the border. Additionally, socio-economic inequalities among students, existent prior to COVID-19, continue to be exacerbated and made more visible by the pandemic.

Critical Pedagogy of Place and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2010, the Tucson, Arizona, Unified School District (TUSD) voted to ban its Mexican American Studies (MAS) program, arguing that the curriculum promoted racism and classism towards Anglos and suggested overthrow of the government (Robbins 2013). Paulo Freire’s book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005 [1970]), was among the books affiliated with this program. Seven years later in 2017, U.S. District Judge A. Wallace Tashima ruled the 2010 action to be unconstitutional, arguing that “both enactment and enforcement were motivated by racial animus” (Galvan 2017).

The closing of the MAS program and the banning of Paulo Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by the TUSD in Pima County suggests that the book posed a threat to deeply entrenched unequal power relations in the borderlands, 50 years after its publication in Brazil. This ban speaks to critical pedagogy’s potential to disrupt ways of knowing by potentially enacting change through consciousness-raising. The critical pedagogy model inspired by Brazilian educator-sociologist Freire proposes an understanding of education as a political act of uncovering and denouncing oppressor-oppressed power relations, followed by adjustment praxis (Freire 2005 [1970]). According to Freire, schooling privileges socialization and conformity to the status quo, whereas education is a struggle for meaning and improved power relations (McKenna 2013). Seen this way, students are not mere objects but subjects of history, as education is the medium through which they are transformed into active social actors instead of passive workers and consumers. In the past 50 years, critical pedagogy has expanded its scope to include worldwide scholars concerned with the relationship between education and power in society. These scholars are committed to reducing social inequalities and exclusion in classrooms and society at large (Darder, Mayo, and Paraskeva 2016). All three authors of this paper embrace this pedagogical approach to teaching.

Based on our teaching experiences as anthropologists at a borderlands community college, we propose ways that teaching anthropology can accomplish critical pedagogy's mission of raising awareness about social injustices in this geographic region. We aim to inspire students to become subjects of history by co-constructing and co-interpreting both the immediate and larger world through their experiences and knowledge. We propose the practice of critical pedagogy that privileges place, considering the distinct power dynamics that shape the U.S.-Mexico border. Merging ideas about critical pedagogy and place-based education, David Gruenewald (2003) proposes a critical pedagogy that emphasizes the spatial aspects of social experience: "a critical pedagogy of place aims to contribute to the production of educational discourses and practices that explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture and education" (10). In the context of the borderlands region, a critical pedagogy of place, as a vibrant educational pedagogy, examines both the visible, material and less tangible implications of living at the U.S.-Mexico border. One concern we emphasized, which is unexamined by Gruenewald but implicit in his argument, is the ongoing effort to create communities of trust in our classrooms. Along with other scholars of higher education pedagogy (e.g., Curzon-Hobson 2002; Herrington and Herrington 2006; Israeli 2020; O'Siochru and Norton 2014), we believe that trust between teacher and students – and among students – is essential for a critical, dialogical learning environment. By "communities of trust" we mean classrooms where all students feel supported and encouraged to express opinions and learn from individually different experiences (Rendón 2009 and 1994). Such communities rely on trust that is developed over the semester between and among students and their teachers, who design courses that explicitly encourage students to reflect on their life experience(s) within a larger socio-economic-political context. In the next section, we describe how we built communities of trust to implement a critical pedagogy of place in an introductory cultural anthropology course.

Implementing a Critical Pedagogy of Place

The three authors of this article were each teaching a section of the same ANT12 course, *Exploring Non-Western Cultures*, each with a maximum capacity of 25 students. The pandemic brought us together to exchange best teaching practices and suggestions on how to better serve our students. This paper is the result of our conversations on this topic and our teaching experience during the Spring 2020 semester. When teaching the cultural anthropology course, *Exploring Non-Western Cultures*, Pima Community College requires instructors to use the free digital textbook, *Perspectives: An Open Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (edited by Nina Brown, Thomas McIlwraith, and Laura Tubelle de González 2020), published by the American Anthropological Association. We used each of two editions in succession, posting the book in the course management system (Pacansky-Brock 2017) "Desire To Learn" (D2L). The textbook discusses classic anthropological topics addressed not only in terms of their ethnographic significance, but their relevance today. Because our expertise and research interests vary in the field of anthropology, each of us

supplemented the textbook with additional readings, documentary films related to specific chapter content, podcasts, and brief instructor-crafted videos that often included a focus on the borderland region. When assigning the chapter on “Political Anthropology,” for example, we discuss the concept of borderlands and policing of the U.S.-Mexico border. When assigning the chapter on “Sustainability and Environmental Anthropology,” we discuss topics such as the drought-producing Dry Corridor of Central America and its impact on “climate refugees” who flee into neighboring countries as they head northward toward the borderlands.

Browning approaches teaching like the director of a play: the class is a unique stage where students and instructor are both actors and audience (participatory observers). The story or drama addresses the theme, “How can cultural anthropology help us as individuals and as global citizens better understand and address the cultural changes and challenges we are facing in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (local context)?” As a teacher inspired by Paulo Freire’s work and whose area of expertise includes urban poverty and social movements in Brazil, Mandache focuses the course on understanding the visible and hidden aspects of inequality by discussing things such as the perverse side of American meritocracy that economists like Richard Reeves (2017) analyze, or the ways in which cultural politics shape political subjects, characterized by contradictions and discontinuities according to work by Richard Rodriguez (1983) on public persona. Bletzer uses border-crossing to suggest that fieldwork can encompass anything with cultural relevance that requires social justice. He asks students to think how often local news media mention deaths in the desert for migrants seeking to enter the U.S. outside checkpoints (O’Leary 2009) and consider cultural heritage objects that they discard (Soto 2018). He reviews fieldwork by Jorge Bustamante, who crossed the Río Grande River into Texas in the late 1960s (Samora 1971, 107-127), and Seth Holmes (2013, 1-29), who crossed into Arizona in the first decade of this century.

During pre-COVID and pandemic-concurrent classes, topics and issues such as these generated productive conversations that rely on the diversity of student experiences and implicitly on students’ participation. Additionally, discussions often lead to moments when students learn from each other and they help students see anthropological concepts “at work.” What our approaches have in common is an interest in not only teaching culturally and locally relevant content to which students can relate, but also creating possibilities for moments when students can connect readings and concepts to their immediate reality. In so doing, we replace the banking model of education – in which student minds are containers (see Freire 2005 [1970], chapter 2) – with a model of education that blends course content with students’ pre-existing knowledge and life experiences. Our experience shows that applying Freire’s approach to course design increases participation as students can more easily understand readings that speak to their immediate reality. Thus, they feel comfortable and safe contributing to discussions with their observations, personal stories, and anecdotes that blur distinctions between teaching and learning. Such moments foster

trust among students and empathy towards each other, further contributing to developing a community of trust.

The pandemic uncovered systemic dysfunctionalities existent in U.S. higher education. Mays Imad, Coordinator of the Pima Community College Teaching and Learning Center, points out that “even before the pandemic, educational research highlighted the importance of relationship building, fostering a sense of belonging in online education critical to student success” (personal communication, 2020). More than ever, building connections is important: “Beyond the electronic connection, we need to connect emotionally – especially in times of anxiety and uncertainty” (Imad 2020). Michael Wesch (2020) identifies a context of inevitable budget cuts for higher education and unfavorable public sentiment on the political right about education. He suggests that college courses will still have to meet four conditions: (a) easily transform to an online format; (b) provide maximum flexibility for students; (c) ensure equity, accessibility, and inclusion; and (d) “provide unique, deep, and valuable educational experiences that cannot be easily replicated outside of carefully constructed courses” (25). Building on his last requirement for future anthropology courses, we emphasize the need to create online communities of trust in ways that standardized courses are not able to offer.

Reflecting on ideas proposed by Wesch on human-centered anthropology courses, we draw attention to the emotional and invisible labor embedded in producing such pedagogies, especially for adjunct instructors, who in some institutions comprise a majority in their respective departments. The challenge is creating courses that follow the principles of critical pedagogy of place, so relevant for the context of our teaching that replicate design requirements suggested by Wesch, but also account for limited time and financial resources of adjunct faculty. Seen this way, collaborations among faculty and exchanges of best practices are a viable solution. Pooling class resources (e.g., articles, assignment instructions, syllabi) not only allows for a cross-generational exchange of ideas on pedagogies, it helps create new solidarities and mutual aid when the position of untenured instructors is increasingly more vulnerable.

To illustrate these practices, we discuss four experimental practices and lessons that we implemented during the Spring 2020 semester, fully aware that other teachers might have experimented with similar or even more creative teaching practices:

(1) Before the course officially opened after the Spring Break, we implemented a survey to assess students’ technological needs and capacity for classes online. This assessment survey was important in signaling basic concerns, mostly related to technology access as well as concerns for mental and physical health that students bring to the course. This survey gave us time to address these concerns. For example, Mandache decided to meet virtually (synchronously) once a week and have students independently work from home during the second course meeting. The decision to have synchronous meetings was based on students’ expressed interest in staying in touch with their colleagues and also in carving out a time and place for learning that was separate from the unstructured time of the

pandemic. She brought students' concerns to the department head, who discussed them in meetings with college administrators. Such concerns included precarious access to the internet and computer technology, and in some cases, food insecurity. Understanding student needs and concerns, we were able to periodically keep the students updated with news about resources the college or city of Tucson made available for them (technology, internet, food) and ways to access them. Students often shared resources with colleagues, including information about technology, internet hot-spots, and/or Tucson-based food assistance programs. Sharing common resources and mutual vulnerabilities within a multi-level historic crisis further fostered social connection and deepened trust among our students.

(2) We started each class with informal conversations that create a collective space for sharing personal experiences. For example, Browning started classes before the scheduled time by recognizing each student with some informal chatter, including questions. Then she announced the day's objectives and usually administered another short pre-assessment to see what students already knew or didn't know. Mandache started class with a short discussion of general student concerns. Many students directly expressed excitement about these meetings, and some insisted it was something they were looking forward to. Course time was a moment that allowed students to interact with people other than family. During these meetings, students learned about each other's challenges. Each course session gave students the chance to ask about updates. Because most students struggled in multiple ways with limitations imposed by the pandemic, they felt encouraged to share vulnerabilities with the rest of the class and in this way connect more intimately through their struggles. Some students dropped the course when personal events other than education had to be prioritized. For example, some lost jobs and were able to get new ones with different work schedules. Others had to take care of younger siblings and prioritize household duties. Stronger ties were created among students who remained engaged. During class meetings, they shared stories about family and friends. Sometimes a dog would bark in the background or a cat would walk elegantly in front of the camera. When Mandache's partner crossed the room during one class, students interrupted, asking to meet him. Students would also introduce partners, children, or siblings to the class. Ironically, the impersonal camera and laptop allowed us to create an environment of trust and cohesion that probably would not have been possible during in-person circumstances. Despite its apparent neutrality and coldness, the camera and isolation imposed by COVID-19 allowed students and instructors to have this experience together and share personal vulnerabilities differently from what might occur in "normal" times (Israeli 2020). These conversations lead to new solidarities and an acknowledgement of others' challenges. While such moments are not unique to online courses, we illustrate them here to emphasize that despite limitations with remote learning, how we taught created moments of intimacy that eventually contributed to our developing communities of trust for teaching.

(3) During synchronous and asynchronous class time, we prioritized visual and audio resources when possible. For example, Browning used PowerPoint presentations with lots

of photos and embedded questions. Virtual class usually included short videos, such as TED-Talks, ethnographic films, and interviews, or a class debate. She sometimes included a group activity based on a discussion thread in the course management system, a role-playing exercise, or preparation of a group project through Google Docs. Similarly, Mandache prepared a short lecture and exercises around media articles and videos that students analyzed collectively. As a class, students discussed COVID-19 distribution in Tucson in relation to the city's existing patterns of economic inequality and their correlation with race and ethnicity indicators. Class time was split between a short interactive teaching moment and two class exercises where students worked in groups to analyze multimedia material in relation to the current week's concepts. Lacking technology skills to hold synchronous meetings (a situation that was corrected the next semester with virtual classes in Bongo), Bletzer prepared textbook lessons in dark blue Times New Roman that he augmented with slanted comments in another font style/color that signals "teacher talking" (TT). Expanded space requirements meant that slides formerly posted in D2L on two-to-five pages became 20-to-30 pages (still with two slides per page) for each chapter lesson. Bletzer used participation in the weekly D2L discussion as an attendance marker to replace a sign-in sheet and gave a grade for each week's participation (based on three sentences for each thread and two responses to classmates). Students began Week One after the extended Spring Break by suggesting how to participate collectively and professionally, which reflects this article's central idea of a dialogical learning environment. Each week thereafter, Bletzer offered a new prompt from the digital textbook. Two prompts, for example, focused on post-COVID-19 life: (a) apply the American Anthropological Association's "Statement on Humanity and Climate Change" (Palmer 2017, 324) to Pima County, and (b) consider how "presentation of self" and "personal front" (Griffith and Marion 2017, 349-350) will help a community college graduate to prepare for and participate successfully in a job interview.

(4) Throughout each course, we prioritized ongoing assessments and allowed flexibility for assignment due dates. These assessments included a midterm exam, research project, and informal written or verbal comments from class members. We distributed low-stakes assessments throughout the semester rather than overwhelming students with fewer high-stakes assignments. This provided time to share examples of student work in class to reinforce the learning process. Wanting to adhere to deadlines, Browning quickly learned that students were more likely to do work if she gave them some flexibility. Most of her students were balancing class responsibilities with child or grandparent care, sharing one computer among household members for different functions (work and/or home schooling), and even traveling to Mexico for the same tasks. Illness was a potential worry through exposure at work, public travel, and/or inadvertent proximity to someone with the virus. Mandache realized that extending deadlines for class assignments led to better completion. Recognizing from the assessment survey that students struggled to focus on class work, as attention was distracted by fear the virus might affect families directly and/or indirectly, she shifted attention away from COVID-related themes by offering students the

opportunity to revise all previous assignments to improve their grades (to B but not higher than that) or to complete quizzes they missed. This practice allowed many students to improve their grades and focus on the learning process. Bletzer learned how to enter corrective comments on low-stakes assignments into D2L, rather than stapling printed correctives to paper assignments and marking grammatical irregularities in green. He still completed timely replies before the next class and, additionally, he allowed students the flexibility to submit late assignments.

Experimenting with teaching practices at the beginning of the pandemic, we learned two critical lessons. First, successful adaptation to a virtual classroom means constant communication between instructor and individual students and among students. This was the most important strategy to keep the class together, not only for attendance, but for communicating to students how they were doing with course content. Much of our initial communication with students was about computer access and/or Wi-Fi and their knowledge of D2L technology. Some students used phones instead of laptops for assignments, which often became a struggle. In this case, we helped them borrow college laptops and informed them about college Wi-Fi hotspots. For most students, virtual education required more planning than normally expected. Since personal schedules varied considerably, we established a back-up system for classes that students could not attend. This meant recording the actual class as well as providing a PowerPoint for each class, which was permanently posted in D2L. Some students lost jobs and had to find new ones, which meant their schedules changed from the beginning of the semester. As expected, communication with students was not limited to learning. While Browning encouraged students to email concerns as well as homework, she often had to call or email a third of her students when they were absent. Initially, students had self-management questions: how to get unemployment insurance, where to find free food when budgets were cut, where to find additional scholarship funding. She had to make certain that she knew who they needed to contact. Similarly, when one student wrote that they and their family contracted COVID-19 as the Spring semester was concluding, Bletzer responded with suggestions for in-place college services, after verifying information with college staff. Since then, he has two or three students each semester willing to reveal to him and/or classmates that they had COVID-19. A third of these COVID-infected students were able to complete the course. The others continued attending but withdrew on time with no penalties.

Second, equally important to the online transition and in step with our critical pedagogy-inspired teaching practices, was addressing pandemic stress. Course information included how disease travels in a globalized world, how vaccine development is a genetic challenge, why access to COVID-19 health care and/or any health care is easier for some people and not others. The media identified disproportionate effects on access for Hispanic/Latinx and African American patients. We discussed health disparities in relation to ethnicity and/or socio-economic status, examining current COVID-19 data from our county and/or other places in the world. After multiple protests associated with the

Black Lives Matter movement took place, students became interested in knowing why they were occurring and what should be done to re-establish stability. Protests for institutional change require knowledge of how structural power or “hegemony” is established. This is a topic of great interest to anthropologists. In our classrooms, we looked to Paul Farmer’s experiences in Haiti to see how this happens (Farmer 2004), and we discussed *How to Be An Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi (2019), who self-reflexively contrasts his life experiences with those of a white majority. Pima Community College required all instructors to participate in a three-part workshop based on Kendi’s book. Creating a sense of supportive community includes addressing *elephants in the room* that requires working for a better future. Farmer, Kendi, and Martinez all emphasize the importance of creating a just world through recognition of alternative perspectives and interpretations of ongoing injustices and inequities.

Plagues have occurred multiple times in human history. One outcome of the present pandemic has been a new intellectual-political stimulus for a paradigm shift that can generate social transformations (O’Siochru and Norton 2014; Smith 2020). Overall, the effort to create communities of trust in our classrooms was grounded in teaching practices that encourage mutual self-care exchange (such as checking up on each other), implicit sharing of existing vulnerabilities, and discussing course content that speaks directly to pre-existing and ongoing socio-political situations in the borderlands.

At the end of the remote course, when reflecting on the impact of virtual teaching practices on student learning, Mandache noticed that many of the students’ end-of-semester essays were exceptionally good, exceeding the average quality of similar work submitted previous semesters. Fewer students generally complete her courses than the average PCC course, but more did this semester than expected. Bletzer calculated that the proportion of students receiving “A” or “B” grades and completing two end-of-semester essays in all three Spring 2020 classes parallels those in two previous high classes within a margin of 1.11%. These two examples suggest that students dialogically viewed interactive cultural anthropology as a “sanctuary” during the multiple uncertainties (Imad 2020) created by COVID-19. The extraordinary dimension of this event has a potential to bring change within the world (Chotiner 2020; see also Turner 2008 [1969]). The current historic moment can generate new forms of solidarity and communal trust through a shared vulnerability among students and instructors.

Conclusion

Exploring the experience of teaching cultural anthropology through the COVID-19 pandemic at the U.S.-Mexico border, we emphasize the importance of engaging historically marginalized students through a critical pedagogy of place that can create communities of trust within an online environment. Our approach to critical pedagogy is inspired by our life histories, research experiences, and location on the U.S.-Mexico border. We insist on the importance of integrating into learning experience examples from

everyday life in a borderlands region. Such experiences create spaces for reflection by students who experience structural inequities that resonate with the global examples that are revealed through cultural anthropology course materials. Inspired by Paulo Freire's approach to teaching and his ideas on blurring boundaries between learners and educators, we reveal ways the U.S.-Mexico border, coupled with anthropology readings and assignments, encouraged students to bring their lived experiences of the borderlands into the center of the learning process.

Analyzing how the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced among us and our students, we describe ways in which it impacted the more practical aspects of teaching as well as the content of teaching. For anthropology instructors, like most people during the pandemic, this was a moment of reflection. What really matters to students now and in the future? How can we challenge anxieties about an insecure present and an unknown future? How can we bring insecurities and anxieties to the center of the learning process, collectively analyze them, and find room for hope, rather than allow them to become paralyzing? We discuss four teaching strategies we implemented during the pandemic and emphasize the importance of genuine communication and flexibility in allowing students to self-pace their learning. These strategies proved to be useful, as each semester we reached a level of community trust and knowledge about our students that enabled us to meet individualized needs.

Overall, through the pandemic, anthropology students were able to apply concepts learned in assigned readings to analyze a unique historical moment experienced collectively, which facilitated the identification of answers to pressing questions. Sharing our mutual vulnerabilities simultaneously created room for pedagogical reflections that we translated into innovative learning practices for the *new normal* that students will be creating. At the same time, we gained insights into effective concurrent teaching practices that will be applicable in future courses.

Some questions remain on how to adapt the teaching of anthropology to what appears to be an approaching closure to the COVID-19 crisis. Overall, we learned that students can be successful when they overcome their vulnerability and become self-motivated and self-disciplined, and when we allow them agency and ownership over their learning. How to achieve this is an open-ended project that educators at all levels should be willing to activate by exchanging best practices, including improving technology that will allow more frequent inter-personal interactions.

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