

COMMENTARY

Building a #COVIDSyllabus: Lessons for the Future of Collaborative Pedagogy

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Abstract

In early March 2020, Teaching and Learning Anthropology (TLA) initiated a crowdsourced document entitled "Teaching COVID-19: An Anthropology Syllabus Project." This essay reflects on TLA's #COVIDSyllabus in the context of a broader shift toward the use of crowdsourced hashtag syllabi – or #syllabi – in social justice movements. I argue that the #COVIDSyllabus holds important lessons for anthropological teaching and learning. As a collaborative, open-access pedagogical project, the syllabus points to new possibilities for 1) expanding public anthropological engagement with contemporary social issues; 2) democratizing knowledge practices and centering the contributions of often marginalized scholars and activists; and 3) building shared communities of praxis within the discipline and among scholar-activists. The full syllabus can be downloaded from this essay's supplemental materials; the live document is available at <https://bit.ly/TeachCOVID19>.

Keywords: COVID-19; hashtag syllabus; social media; collaborative pedagogy

Introduction

In early March 2020, Teaching and Learning Anthropology (TLA) initiated a crowdsourced document entitled "Teaching COVID-19: An Anthropology Syllabus Project." The idea for the syllabus emerged during our monthly editorial meeting. Like many conversations in those weeks, the meeting was dominated by discussion of the pandemic. Members of the editorial team gave updates from our various locations across the United States and Canada and described the steps we were taking in our own courses to respond to the pandemic. As we shared materials and resources, we recognized that a broader exchange was needed. We created a collaborative Google Doc that afternoon and invited contributions through our Facebook and Twitter

networks. More than a year later, the document has grown to include over 250 resources for teaching about and during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

The final syllabus holds important lessons for anthropological teaching and learning. Over the last year, the impacts of COVID-19, along with ongoing racial and state violence and intensifying environmental catastrophe, have underscored the urgency of calls to rethink anthropology's commitments and practices (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019; Jobson 2020). This essay considers the role that pedagogical projects might play in efforts to "reimagine anthropology to meet the demands of the present moment" (Williams 2021). I reflect on TLA's #COVIDSyllabus in the context of a broader shift toward the use of crowdsourced hashtag syllabi – or #syllabi – in social justice movements (Clark 2020; Graziano, Mars, and Medak 2019). I argue that the #COVIDSyllabus illustrates possibilities for a more publicly engaged, inclusive, and collaborative pedagogy that can help shape the future of the discipline.

Tracing the Hashtag Syllabus

TLA's #COVIDSyllabus was one of at least a dozen crowdsourced syllabi curated by academic communities across the humanities and social sciences in response to the pandemic.² As academics posting on social media scrambled to reformat their courses for remote learning, Anne Fausto-Sterling called on instructors to scrap their existing syllabi and #teachthevirus (Fausto-Sterling 2020). But while the pandemic was clearly recognized as a "teachable moment" across disciplines, the curation of crowdsourced syllabi as a specific response is linked to recent interventions in anti-racist pedagogy. In her analysis of the emergence and significance of hashtag syllabi, Clark (2020) traces their development through responses to three incidents of racial violence in the United States: the killing of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 (#FergusonSyllabus), the massacre of nine congregants at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015 (#CharlestonSyllabus), and the attack on anti-fascist protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 (#CharlottesvilleSyllabus). It is through these projects, Clark explains, that the "idea of a digital, crowdsourced, rapid-response syllabus ... achieved salience as an artifact created by educators on Twitter for the purpose of fostering critically engaged public pedagogy" (Clark 2020, 231).

In anthropology, attention to hashtag syllabi as "a new form of activist action" (McGranahan 2016) grew following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President.

¹ See the supplemental materials for a downloadable copy of the syllabus as of July 2021. The live document is available at <https://bit.ly/TeachCOVID19>.

² These include an interdisciplinary #coronavirussyllabus initiated by Alondra Nelson; Teaching Coronavirus-- Sociological Syllabus Project, edited by Siri Colom; COVID-19 Reader Project, edited by historian Yeonsil Kang; Humanities Coronavirus Syllabus, edited by Sari Altschuler and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon; the #COVID19DecarcerateSyllabus, curated by the California Coalition for Women Prisoners; and #coronavirussyllabusK12. Links to these and other projects can be found in TLA's #COVIDSyllabus in the supplemental materials attached to this commentary.

Anthropologists circulated resources to #teachthedisaster (Wool 2016), including a round-up of crowdsourced syllabi such as the Trump 2.0 Syllabus, #StandingRockSyllabus, #PrisonAbolitionSyllabus, Anthropoliteia #BlackLivesMatter Syllabus, and #PulseOrlandoSyllabus, among others (McGranahan 2016).

The use of the term “syllabus” in these projects is significant. The term resonates with educators, who “recognize it as a collection of texts guiding learning development” (Clark 2020, 230). At the same time, it “names the problem of contemporary political culture as pedagogical in nature” (Graziano, Mars, and Medak 2019, 118). In this way, contemporary hashtag syllabi are part of a long-standing focus on education in social justice movements. This lineage includes Black women’s literary societies and self-education clubs during the Jim Crow era (Monroe 2016), Freedom Schools created by civil rights organizations in the 1960s (Graziano, Mars, and Medak 2019), and university teach-ins from the anti-Vietnam War movement through the present day (Sizek and Russell 2017).

But the rise of the crowdsourced hashtag syllabus is an important development in both critical and digital pedagogies. As a form of “digital resistance praxis,” Clark argues, these syllabi offer new opportunities to “dismantle hegemonic pedagogical structures within the academy” (Clark 2020, 223). In the remainder of this essay, I draw on Clark’s (2020) analysis to highlight three lessons TLA’s #COVIDSyllabus holds for anthropology. I suggest that the syllabus, as a collaborative, open-access pedagogical project, points to new possibilities for 1) expanding public anthropological engagement with contemporary social issues; 2) democratizing knowledge practices and centering the contributions of often marginalized scholars and activists; and 3) building shared communities of praxis within the discipline and among scholar-activists.

Rapid Response Pedagogy

The hashtag syllabus phenomenon reflects the need for an immediate response to contemporary events, whether “state violence, racialized violence, and expressions of white nationalism” (Clark 2020) or a once-in-a-century pandemic. In an interview about her work building a #coronavirussyllabus, Alondra Nelson explains that it’s easy to think nothing like COVID-19 has happened before. But “there have been other moments when people said the same thing about their society and lives. ... The work of scholars and scholarship has been to help us understand – take a fast moving thing and help us orient it in our minds and in our lives” (Waxman 2020).

TLA’s #COVIDSyllabus offered a toolkit to support anthropology instructors and students, as well as broader publics, in making sense of our experiences. It stands as a valuable record of anthropological engagement with the pandemic through its first months. Many of the first postings in the #COVIDSyllabus were links to news articles, dashboards, or public health resources that provided up-to-date information that could be used in classroom conversations right away. The syllabus also curated and

disseminated reflections and analyses from anthropologists, who began writing about the pandemic in online forums almost immediately. Many of these forums are intended not only for anthropologists, but for non-academic audiences as well; these include *Anthropology Now* (Higgins, Martin, and Vesperio 2020) and *Sapiens* (Lasco 2020; Mason 2020), in addition to news sources like the *New York Times* (Lynteris 2020), *Ms. Magazine* (Yates-Doerr 2020a), *Al Jazeera* (Laterza and Romer 2020), and the *New Humanitarian* (Benton 2020).

As the #COVIDSyllabus grew, many of the recommended books and articles provided social and historical context for the pandemic, examining how the novel coronavirus and responses to it are embedded in broader social systems. These resources included ethnographic examinations of infectious disease and public health, particularly analyses of other epidemics like HIV, Ebola, and SARS (Abramowitz 2017; Gomez-Temesio 2018; Sangaramoorthy 2014; Zhan 2005). Many of the resources explore ways the virus intersects with historical and contemporary racial oppression (Burgos Martinez 2020; Carter and Sanford 2020) and with inequities in health care, education, housing, transportation, immigration, and labor policies (Gravlee 2020b; Mendenhall 2020).

As with other hashtag syllabi, TLA's #COVIDSyllabus also focused on encouraging action (Monroe 2016; see also Darling 2020). Readings included critical perspectives on the roles anthropologists play in health emergencies (Sams et al. 2017; Sangaramoorthy and Benton 2015). Many of the shared assignments, which were being created by instructors in the moment, encouraged students to engage directly with the issues they were both studying and living. These included journaling projects (Willen and Mason, n.d.), ethnographic portfolio assignments (de la Torre III et al. 2020), and advocacy letters (Yates-Doerr 2020b).

TLA's #COVIDSyllabus was initially intended to support anthropology instructors in addressing the pandemic in their individual courses. But hashtag syllabi are also a form of public intellectualism (Lyons 2019) that contribute to the goals of public anthropology (Benton and Bonilla 2017). The #COVIDSyllabus illustrates how open-access pedagogical materials, along with communication through social media and other digital platforms, can expand access to anthropological scholarship and amplify the contributions of anthropologists to socially significant conversations.

Knowledge and Power

In addition to expanding the reach of academic scholarship, hashtag syllabi challenge tacit claims about the value of knowledge and the ways it is produced (Clark 2020). Racial justice hashtag syllabi in particular curate resources for teaching non-normative perspectives, especially those of scholars and activists of color who have been systematically excluded from school curricula (Lyons 2019; Monroe 2016). In anthropology, just as dominant citational practices have long excluded the contributions

of anthropologists of color and especially Black women (Bolles 2013; Smith et al. 2021), so too have our teaching practices. Of the most-assigned texts in over 41,000 anthropology syllabi surveyed by the Open Syllabus Project, few are authored by women or by Black, Indigenous, and other scholars of color (see Ralph and Beliso-De Jesús 2019). Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre (2019) identify such “exclusionist pedagogy” as “crucial to how anthropology maintains white supremacy” (70). Collaborative, open-access pedagogical projects can play an important role in decolonizing (Harrison 1991) anthropological knowledge production, reframing the traditional “canon,” and foregrounding the contributions of marginalized anthropologists (see, for example, Buell et al. 2019 and Zunner-Keating 2021).

By decentering the expertise of a single instructor, hashtag syllabi also facilitate the exchange of knowledge outside of traditional academic hierarchies (Clark 2020; Jobson 2020). TLA’s #COVIDSyllabus was largely built on expertise and theoretical engagement generated through #AnthroTwitter, and it demonstrates the network’s role in democratizing anthropology’s knowledge practices (Jobson, Clarke, and Cantero 2020). Contributions to the #COVIDSyllabus were made by anthropologists from community colleges and research universities; by tenured professors, contingent faculty, and graduate students; and by scholars in both the Global North and South. Additional contributions came from individuals who are not professional scholars working in academic institutions.

The #COVIDSyllabus points to the importance of reconsidering our assumptions about knowledge and the power centers from which it is produced. Hashtag syllabi and similar pedagogical projects support the diversification and decolonization of anthropology and contribute to ongoing efforts to center the scholarship and intellectual contributions of those who have been excluded.

Care and Community

A syllabus is always more than a collection of texts; it is a genre of writing that reflects and structures relationships among instructors and students within a given course (Jenks 2016). Built through collaborative information platforms like Twitter or editable Google Docs, crowdsourced syllabi expand these relationships and use hashtags to “signal connectivity and belonging among educators who are otherwise isolated and disconnected in the confines of their institutional homes” (Clark 2020, 237).

This connectivity took on a new salience with pandemic isolation. The resources in TLA’s #COVIDSyllabus focused on supporting instructors who were not only teaching about a rapidly-changing topic, but who were also teaching in new modalities in the midst of a global crisis. Many anthropologists found themselves teaching online for the first time, often switching formats mid-semester. Remote teaching required many instructors to learn new technologies and pedagogical techniques while also managing

unreliable computer or internet access, improvised workspaces, and care for children, family, friends, and communities (see Santos 2021 and Jayaram et al. 2021, this issue).

In addition to sharing advice from instructors with previous online teaching experience (Gravlee 2020a; Jenks, Wesch, and Koneczny 2020), TLA's #COVIDSyllabus also gathered links to course content that could be accessed remotely. This content included games and podcasts, online biological anthropology labs (SACC, n.d.), crowdsourced lists of online archaeology resources (Borck, n.d.), and a collection of mini-lectures hosted on the Open Education Resource Commons (West and Wool 2020).

West and Wool (2020) point to the "spirit of relationality" underlying these projects. This spirit was also evident in sick faculty guest lecture exchange lists (Kaiser, n.d.), where anthropologists volunteered to step in for colleagues at other institutions, and in materials that prioritized accessibility and support for students (Hamraie 2020). Although teaching is often an isolated practice, the #COVIDSyllabus reflected an ethic of care and generosity emerging from collaboration.

Conclusion

While the hashtag syllabus movement opens new pedagogical possibilities, we must recognize these possibilities exist within neoliberal educational systems and in the context of growing faculty precarity (Platzer and Allison 2018). As West and Wool (2020) point out, there are "many companies, state legislators, and administrators who have been pushing for pedagogy without faculty for decades now." Crowdsourcing complicates debates over intellectual property and who is the rightful owner of syllabi and other pedagogical materials (Graziano, Mars, and Medak 2019). In the midst of these concerns, however, there is much to learn from the use of crowdsourced hashtag syllabi in racial justice movements. As TLA's #COVIDSyllabus makes clear, such projects encourage us to imagine a more broadly accessible, democratic, and collaborative approach to anthropology pedagogy.

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