

## EDITORIAL

### Special Issue: *Teaching and Learning Anthropology in the Time of COVID-19*

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#### *Abstract*

*This special issue results from email conversations begun in the summer of 2020 concerning COVID-19's effects on the teaching and learning of anthropology in higher education. The Society for Applied Anthropology's Higher Education Thematic Interest Group listserv functioned as a networking tool, bringing together questions, authors, editors, and the journal. The resulting commentaries, project showcases, and research articles published here offer analyses of teaching and learning within the virtual walls of the academy during the pandemic. They reveal much about student and professor experiences with online tools and digital anthropology as well as the preexisting inequalities in higher education uncovered by the pandemic. Collectively, the essays in this issue offer insights and perspectives that can help guide anthropological teaching and learning in the future.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; pedagogy; digital anthropology; inequality

Since March 2020, U.S. higher education has wrestled with the effects of a pandemic, institutional responses to that pandemic, and preexisting structures that determine how those responses affect our communities. Adding to that turmoil, the nation continues to experience a punctuated period of political division, racialized violence, and intentional misinformation. Within this context, higher education locked down, switched predominantly to online learning, then reopened within virtual walls, all in the space of less than a month.

After the mad scramble of Spring 2020, many anthropologists reflected analytically: What is happening? What is the best way to cope? What will happen to our students, our institutions, and ourselves? Few of us knew what our institutions would do in the 2020-2021 academic year. The U.S. presidential election loomed close. Vaccines remained a long way off. Administrators made decisions quickly, as needs arose. Uncertainty and anxiety came to characterize the experience of higher education. Now, as Fall 2021 approaches, many institutions continue to function in "crisis" mode.

The essays in this special issue represent initial forays into making sense of it all. Popular news informed us that much research on COVID-19 had begun, largely focused around biomedical and broad political economic concerns. What about higher education? In the summer of 2020, I contacted the Higher Education Thematic Interest Group (TIG) of the Society for Applied Anthropology to ask if any journals were dedicating issues to higher education? I was surprised to find no voices responding “yes,” though several felt someone should.

*Teaching and Learning Anthropology* filled this void. Together, the editors and I assembled the essays in this volume, penned by both students and instructors; they include research papers, commentaries, and showcases of work completed from March 2020 to Summer 2021. They fall into three types. Some provide explorations of the benefits of online tools such as digital ethnography (Cheuk), virtual tours (Ricke), and the confluence of hashtag activism with pedagogy (Jenks). Others describe student projects conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring topics like suicide prevention (Kim et al.), the connection between COVID-19 and racialized structural violence (Pfister and Encinosa), and the effects of the pandemic on both professors and students in a university music department (Phelps).

Finally, a few authors provide in-depth analysis of teaching and learning within the virtual walls of academia during the pandemic. Flexibility in both content and assessment became a critical pedagogical tool (Copeland and Wightman). Different students, different instructors, and different contexts require unique instruction. COVID-19 illustrates how structural inequalities interact with an individual’s social positionality during such a natural disaster (Jayaram et al.), the complexities of which are layered by the multiple roles we carry and lenses we use within our institutions (Johnson). Drawing on my own research, I (Santos) argue that, in fact, there is no “COVID crisis” in higher education, but rather a preexisting system of all too familiar inequalities that simply reached a predictable confluence. These difficulties, brought to the forefront during the pandemic, now become class material through critical pedagogies of history and place (Mandache et al.). Above all, we must remember these difficulties will persist, even as we “return to normal” (Trivedi).

While each piece tells its own story, the issue supports some central narratives and leaves plenty for us to continue to explore. The pandemic pushed anthropologists to test their technological tool kit. Take away physical access to research sites, face-to-face communication, and proximity of bodies, and our discipline continues to invent and innovate. The human condition remains explorable, teachable, and learnable under conditions of social isolation and deadly disease. Cheuk, Ricke, Jenks, Copeland and Wightman, Kim et al., Pfister and Encinosa, and Phelps (all this volume) provide concrete proof of that.

Yet even such innovation returns us to another painful and sustained anthropological narrative around inequality. Jayaram et al., Johnson, Mandache et al., Santos, and Trivedi (all this volume) greatly emphasize how the vulnerability of some students, instructors, and

administrators plays out during the pandemic. Racial differences, class differences, location within the academy, and more clearly illustrate that many of our administrative priorities, coping strategies, and technological advancements shut many people out. How can virtual tools serve a student who doesn't have internet service? Must instructors who mastered in-person teaching now retrain online or face obsolescence? How do we deal with the fact that for some within higher education, the pandemic has been a simple inconvenience, while others have lost jobs, homes, loved ones, and lives? How do our anthropological teaching tools and innovations rely on privileged assumptions of technological access and competence? This special issue fosters exploration of such issues.

Cheuk begins with questions inspired by Miller (2018). Can online research be considered ethnographic? To what extent can digital research methods become a primary research tool, not simply a complement to face-to-face fieldwork? Student projects, now necessarily digital, provide some insights here. As the pandemic interrupted his *Ethnographic Research In/Of Houston Asia* course, Cheuk's digital methods involved Zoroastrian, Sikh, and Chinese Buddhist communities whose leadership cooperated with virtual fieldtrips and a web symposium to allow class research to continue. Ironically, the pandemic meant local communities, having already scrambled into the online world to better accommodate their members, could more easily interact with virtual ethnographers.

Ricke points us towards developments in teaching using virtual technology to transcend place (Vadala 2017; Turner 2020). Instructors can now offer not just images, but virtual tours of an archaeological site or refugee camp. Through an inventive use of backwards design (Bowen 2017), Ricke challenges us to ask, What do we want students to take away from what we can offer them online? In a time of such technological growth and innovation, the question gains critical pertinence. Further, simple instructions on finding publicly available 360° videos, along with examples, provide us with tools that will long outlive the pandemic.

Jenks explores the confluence of crowdsourced data and hashtag activism through syllabi. She notes a history of crowdsourced syllabus creation and new research examining its efficacy (Clark 2020; Graziano, Mars, and Medak 2019). This journal, *Teaching and Learning Anthropology*, through Jenks, created a #COVIDSyllabus, further contributing to this synthesis of critical pedagogy and digital tools. Something as simple as an online Google Doc presents opportunities to confront challenges, create community, and promote learning.

Phelps demonstrates student projects can serve multiple roles – assessment, research, and community building. Her project (a product of the fluidity described in Copeland and Wightman's article) examined effects of COVID-19 on music students and professors at the University of Alabama. How do artists such as these, already in a precarious field, cope when a viral pandemic robs them of the ability to connect and perform publicly, much less learn in close quarters? Phelps's vlogging project reminds us of both the amazing

capacities of our students and the usefulness of anthropology in facilitating expression of a community's issues.

Kim et al. describe student work with the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide (SPTS) in Freehold, NJ, emphasizing the intersection of the pandemic with mental health. They demonstrate how anthropological concepts such as structural violence, the mindful body, and the nocebo effect teach us how the pandemic fits into existing structures that aggravate mental health.

Pfister and Encinosa describe a ground-breaking faculty/student project surrounding illness, health, and structural violence. They took cues from Primiano, Krishnan, and Sangaramoorthy (2020), who propose that pandemics provide unique insight into structural inequalities. Pfister and Encinosa sought to find empirical proof and biological corroboration of these inequalities. Their project revolves around use of epigenetic markers to map the embodied effects of social environments on individuals and their descendants.

Copeland and Wightman prioritized student-centered learning (Wright 2011; Weimar 2002) in their "pandemic pivot." Comparing two different university environments, they expose how preserving engagement and experiential learning requires flexibility, principally in topics explored and forms of assessment. Assigned research papers can now become presentations, videos, and more. Oral histories can now become research papers and discussions. During the pandemic, even course goals could be revised for student excellence and development of real-world skills, such as use of presentation software, digital recording and transcription, and self-direction. Copeland and Wightman also illustrate how inequalities between students, such as access to technology and housing, become the focal point of instructor flexibility.

Jayaram et al. use insights from disaster studies (Klein 2010; Jackson 2011; Schuller 2015) to explore experiences of non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF) during the pandemic. Beginning with the tenet that a "person's positionality affects experiences and interpretation of disaster," they explore how health issues, family obligations, physical space, and time set the limits for instructor responses to the need for continuity in instruction, digital presence, and emotional labor. Importantly, they note how experience with online work made a tremendous difference in how the disaster affected professors and students.

Santos also explores instructor experiences. This article follows Roitman's (2013) challenge to view "crises" such as the 2007 economic crash – or the COVID-19 "crisis in higher education" – as the result of the "business as usual" model of the powerful rather than unique and unpredictable circumstances. Over and over again, professors point not to new issues created by COVID-19, but to the same old ones: students and instructors who can afford less, have less social and cultural capital, or are marginalized by identity pay the highest price in the crisis.

Johnson shares her experience through the multiple lenses her roles provide: applied anthropologist, educator, and faculty administrator. She describes how institutional decision-making places her in the position of having to communicate information and policy while being highly cognizant of difficulties they might create and how they might be perceived. How should those in the middle of power structures cope with mediating roles? Ultimately, she reveals that clearly-defined priorities simplify what otherwise seem like irresolvable conflicts of interest. Johnson put caring first, confronting intersecting issues of race, gender, class, and public health that all too many of us have witnessed paralyze other administrators. Instead, she follows the path of caring and compassion in higher education (Meyers 2009; Whitaker 2020).

Mandache et al. synthesized the experience of COVID-19 and the anthropology of place while teaching near the U.S.-Mexico border. These instructors transformed the pandemic into an opportunity for critical pedagogy informed by students' experiences. Students made sense of the pandemic by examining differential effects set up by the borderland's historical inequalities. Inspired by writers like Paolo Freire (2005 [1970]) and Chavis and Lee (2015), the authors helped connect student experiences of oppression to global power structures.

As more people consider the pandemic over and begin a return to "normal," further challenges await. Trivedi draws on her own research (Trivedi 2021) to poignantly call into question what normal is and ask whether it is good for everyone. Varied needs and crises pre-dated, accompanied, and now will survive the pandemic. Normality marginalizes several groups within the academy. Furthermore, Trivedi notes how not all communities have had or will have the same needs. Instead, she calls on our abilities as anthropologists to observe, investigate, and determine what each people, time, and place require.

Certainly, questions remain about the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and higher education, even as many say it is time to return to business as usual. What will the long-term effects of the pandemic be on students, instructors, and administrative policy? Should we make the innovations instructors and students developed during COVID-19 mainstream? Does student work now serve both as testimony about the pandemic as well as a model for new forms of assessment and research? How do we make sense of the confluence of the pandemic with the murders of Black Americans, attacks against Asian Americans, protests against racial violence, and the political situation that provoked the Capitol insurrection of January 6th? What kinds of trauma have students and instructors endured from 2020 to 2021, and how should higher education respond? Plenty of reflection and research remains to be done. The current volume offers a first step towards making sense of it all. We hope it also serves as a calling to continue the discussion.

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