Anthropology in Cyberland: exploring virtual teaching formats
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Abstract
This paper explores the use of multimedia technologies in the creation of effective learning environments for Anthropology. With particular reference to the ‘Anthropology of Africa’, a new module designed and first taught in the spring of 2012, I critically reflect on the possibilities and challenges of implementing a web-based forum. Of particular concern is how to enthuse students for the subject material by encouraging a sense of responsibility for learning, while also cultivating an appreciation of anthropology’s core methodologies. To conclude I consider how engaging with the pedagogic development of this course supports my professional development in anthropology, my role in the educational context of Exeter and in UK Higher Education more broadly.

Keywords: e-learning; multimedia; anthropology

Introduction
In a recent essay entitled, the ‘The End of Anthropology, Again: On the Future of an In/Discipline’, John Comaroff, a prominent Africanist, suggests that Anthropology’s epistemological unease ensures its continued existence. Rather than the discipline’s demise, the cyclic rejection and revision of empirical foundations, theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches is a source of ‘animation and emancipation. To the degree that ours is a critical practice, then...it will always be imbricated in crisis. Perhaps intermittent iterations of the End of Anthropology do not portend oblivion so much as prevent it’ (2010: 525).

Having survived the onslaught of postcolonialism, Marxism, deconstruction, feminism, queer theory, post-structuralism and post-humanism, anthropology exemplifies the resilience of grounded theory; it is a discipline, Comaroff argues, not circumscribed by particular topics or methodological operations, but propelled by the dialectical relationship between its critical concepts and the concrete world. The undisciplined nature of the discipline – its fundamental
heterodoxy – allows it to reflexively interrogate its own ideological foundations, absorbing all manner of political, ethical and epistemic critique.

Anthropology’s crise du jour is of a slightly different order: its origins lie with the emergence and rapid evolution of cyberinfrastructure – the coordinated assemblage of ICT hardware, software, services, networks, personnel, organizations and regulations that support and extend the acquisition, storage, management, integration and exploitation of data (e.g. Duderstast 2000). These infrastructures evolve at a dizzying pace; doubling in capacity almost every year and a thousand fold in a decade (Castells 2011). The ever expanding links between centres of research and knowledge have the potential to trigger what Arden Bement, Director of the U.S. National Science Foundation foresees as ‘a second revolution in information technology…one that will dwarf, in sheer transformational scope and power, anything we have yet experienced in the current information’ (Bement 2001).

Unlike the political and philosophical movements listed above, the challenges this technological revolution poses to the anthropology are neither strictly conceptual nor methodological. The sheer volume of data captured by these networks and the modes of collaboration they enable, throws into question the individualist conventions of participant-observation (Boyd and Crawford 2012). The concern is not that e-forms of social life remain out of ethnographic reach: on the contrary, anthropologists have produced a number of thick descriptions worlds ranging from the affective dimensions of online-dating (Johnson-Hank 2007); the symbolism of Nigerian 419 email scams (Smith 2008), to the transactions of Second Life (Boellstorff 2008.) Rather, what is at stake is how we think about anthropological knowledge creation in the context of a ‘technology driven collaboratory’ (Marcus 2008). If we agree with Comaroff, that anthropological work is guided by the reflexive interrogation of its principles, the future of the discipline hinges on how we develop these technologies to materialize new modes of research and teaching.

In the present article, I suggest that fostering an online presence for ANT 3006 will productively develop my students’ involvement in the topic of African Anthropology. In line with Exeter University’s commitment ‘to deepen students’ involvement in all aspects of their learning’, I argue that enhancing my ELE platform could ‘enable activate and collaborative ways of learning’ (Exeter’s Education Strategy 2010-201). Here, I outline those planned changes in depth, drawing from advice from colleagues, students, IT experts and trends in UK HE Policy. Of particular interest is the degree to which these pedagogic changes resonate with or challenge anthropology’s disciplinary conventions. I conclude with some reflections on how using e-tools for teaching purposes might inform my future research practice and professional development.

ANT 3006 and ELE

‘You’ve really only used a fraction of ELE’s capacities’, Mike Jefferies-Harris, the E-Learning and Communications Coordinator for the College of Social Sciences and International Studies, kindly
said as I concluded my short scroll through the weekly log of my course. *Kindly*, because after only a few minutes of our tutorial it was clear that I had not managed to ‘use’ ELE at all, at least in the way it was intended. ELE is a virtual learning environment that can offer a range of tools including quizzes, discussion forums, wikis, blogs, glossaries, mark sheets and realtime feedback. The ELE page for ANT 3006 was in essence a bulletin board: a static space to post lecture files, reading lists, and the occasional weblink, which from conversations with students it was clear, no one could find to access.

Mike began simply, going step by step through the moodle-basics – how best to layout the page, start a topic thread and embed a YouTube link. These techniques may seem basic, but I soon realized that the aesthetics of e-learning was a critical dimension of its pedagogic capacity:

‘because learners often encounter the stimulus materials when they are sitting alone at a computer, away from easy coaching or support from an instructor...the interface, the page and screen design, the interaction and navigation, the learning activities, the assessments—all of these features must be designed and developed in some fashion ahead of time’ (Wilson 2004: 79).

In designing an e-learning environment, one needs to consider not only course content, but how it comes across to users; how resources ‘look’ in relation to other aspects of the page. Mike’s suggestions on how to format my page – manage what was visible and invisible, create folders, setting off video clips from lecture notes, starting and ending topics, increasing the font of the questions I posed for the week, promised to better capture and sustain student interest in those resources.

But design was only the first step. To encourage students to engage in this interface, to make it their own, required establishing a more interactive format, such as an online forum. Mike demonstrated the different ways of instigating and managing the forum to promote participation and, critically, the interaction between students. Over the term students emailed me with links to new articles and videoclips that they believed would be relevant for the other students in the class. However, because I had not enabled a collaborative site, I was responsible for putting up all these links, and in the end, was probably the only person (other than the student who sent it to me) who read them. In the forum, learning is a matter of co-production; students can put up their own links, comment and analyse their content.

In its recent guide to e-learning, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JSIC) argues that one of the most key things enabled by digital platforms and e-learning is ‘the ability to extend communicative and collaborative activity beyond the classroom’ (2009: 5). Indeed, Linda Harasim’s extensive historical work on online learning explores the shift from teachers as ‘sage on the stage’ and ‘guides on the side’, to a role as mediator between students and knowledge communities, facilitating their introduction into a field of practice (Harasim 2011). That introduction involves developing a fluency in the social and substantive discourses of the given academic field: ‘to be competent is to understand the enterprise well enough to be able to
contribute to it’ (Wenger 2000: 229). Setting up a forum promises a dynamic space where students can ‘talk the talk’ of anthropology, mutually exploring the shared resources that define that disciplinary community.

More radically, Mike suggested that this forum could serve as a more effective context for responding to the readings. For instance, rather than ask students to submit a précis each week, I might require students to post and respond to each other’s reactions. This would not only develop a sense of accountability – it would be clear to all who had done the assignment – but also, he argued, ‘lighten the mood.’ From his experience, students find it much easier to blog quick and honest responses than present a hardcopy of work to the teacher. Indeed, one of my students told me that all of her coursework for one module was conducted through a wikipage. Initially, she said, she found the prospect of contributing to a website to be ‘a bit flaky’. But after only a few weeks into the course, she realized that it was a great way to exchange ideas with other students: ‘it was cool – I was on the site all the time and really got to know the other students in the class. I probably remember a lot more from that module than I will from others.’ Learning from this student’s experience, asking students to post their responses online would help deepen understandings of what constitutes a critical response through the process of self-critique. Further, extending the précis into a blog or wiki-format would help develop a wider range of skills, such as constructive analysis and collaborative thinking, which can form the basis of richer and tailored feedback (JISC 2010).

Empowering students in this way is not to abdicate responsibility for their learning experience. On the contrary, creating more opportunities for flexible and informal interactions enriches and extends the possibilities for what I do in class. I spent a great deal of time this past spring summarizing readings – points which could have been arrived at in a more compelling way through an online dialogue. Furthermore, giving my students opportunity to present and discuss online content will provide considerable insight into their preconceptions about the course topic. Research jointly commissioned by JISC and the British Library warns that despite, or perhaps because of, ‘their familiarity with computers, learners lack the critical and evaluative skills required to interpret information found online’ (JISC 2009:7). This observation is of particular relevance for ANT 3006, which seeks to decentre and destabilise contemporary representations of ‘Africa’ as a singular place and an economic and public health problem. There were a number of issues – genocide, female circumcision, AIDS, slums – that excited and disturbed students. In the final essay for the course, students asked if they could draw from online media sources, to which I consented as long as they critically interrogated these resources. Again, here is where an online forum would have proved an invaluable tool; rather than rehearse the meaning of critique, I could have asked students to post these sources and collectively analyse their ideological content and socio-cultural import.

Shirley Booth defines learning as ‘a change in the way the learner experiences the world; which means that the relevance of the task has to be seen to transcend the task in itself and have some personal meaning for the learner’ (1997:137). Extending the classroom to the intimate and personal space of an online forum creates more opportunities for students to internalize
and integrate lessons with their own experiences. But further, it enriches the pedagogic possibilities of the classroom; delegating more of the ‘surface work’ – the summaries of texts and even (as my colleague, Samantha Hurn explained) through Adobe recording technology, my lectures – to ELE, I could free up class time for more in-depth discussions, activities and group learning, transforming the dynamic of the course from teacher to student-led learning. Marton and Booth (1997) persuasively argue that effective teaching depends on refining the extent to which the instructor can empathize with the students, understanding not only what they already know, but how they come to know what they know:

‘The teacher focuses on the learner’s experience of the object of learning.
Here we have (what we call) ‘thought contact’, (with) the teacher moulding an object of study (for the students)’ (ibid. 179).

In short, through transforming the points of contact and the conditions of awareness, ELE can bring the object of knowledge and personal understanding into closer alignment. Thinking through how I might transform ELE from blackboard to bantaba (a traditional West African meeting-place)\(^2\), I feel invigorated for next year. But beyond how they might improve ANT 3006, working with these collaborative technologies has inspired some rethinking of my research and how I might teach anthropological method.

**Being-There, Online**

According to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2007), Anthropology pursues ‘the integrated study of both diversity and commonality among people throughout the world’ (ibid. 1). That dual commitment to particularism and holism is actualized through extensive and intensive empirical engagements; thus, one of the key areas of knowledge and understanding students are expected to develop is:

‘an appreciation of the importance of empirical fieldwork as the primary method of gathering data and as a basis for the generation of anthropological theory’ (ibid. 6).

But what is the benchmark of empirical fieldwork? Like other disciplines, anthropology has fragmented into a number of sub-fields in response to the globalization and marketization of academia (Beacher and Trowler 2001). However, because it is a discipline at the intersection of the humanities, arts, social and natural sciences, establishing coherent principles of scholarly and pedagogic practice is particularly fraught. Just as ‘the diversity and capacity for transformation...is the hallmark of human culture’ (Quality Assurance Agency 2007: 1), a dynamic heterodoxy defines its methodological approach. Again, returning to Comaroff: ‘ours

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\(^2\) The Bantaba, which derives from the Mandika words for ‘banta’ meaning ‘tree’ and ‘aba’ meaning ‘where to meet’, is a traditional meeting place for men in The Gambia.
really is an indiscipline whose conceptual foundations and techniques of knowledge production have almost infinite potential to open up new horizons’ (2010: 532). What anchors that disciplinary peripeteia is its disciplined oscillations: the concrete and the conceptual, the ethnographic and the theoretical, the empirical and ephemeral, the descriptive and the abstract, the visible and the invisible, the strange and familiar, home and away. For most anthropologists, that dialectic hinges upon some form of presence, on quite literally, *being there*.

Take, for example, Clifford Geertz’s (1973) foundational account of anthropological analysis. Drawing from Gilbert Ryle, Geertz explores the difference between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ descriptions by analysing two boys blinking. The first ‘winks’ because he suffers from a twitch, the other blinks at his companion in order to communicate. Both acts involve the contraction of the eyelid, but while the former is involuntary, the latter is semantic and carries a precise meaning of what has occurred. That difference could only be captured by elaborating the scenario through a careful analysis of the broader social context, the affective tenor of the relationship between the two boys.

This example goes to the heart of anthropology’s research aesthetic: to capture the imponderabilia of everyday life, the fleeting gestures that go without saying, ethnography must be conducted, quite literally, face-to-face. Those methodological prescriptions also betray an ethical commitment:

‘it is amidst this sociality that the face-to-face relationship with another person reveals the mutuality of existing in an immediate, visceral form. The face makes the other’s vulnerability apparent and makes the self responsible, someone with the potential to do violence’ (Benson and O’Neill 2007: 33).

Because anthropology tends to focus on the socially-marginalized and disenfranchised, witnessing is both a political and personal act. To encounter those effaced by society face-to-face renders their struggles visible, immediate and intelligible.

Thus, the pedagogic value for IT technologies to teach anthropology is not entirely straightforward. There is a burgeoning literature in anthropology that shows the inherent ‘thinness’ of online communication, concluding that cyberspace is devoid of meaningful sociality. And while recent work in education theory has demonstrated the innovative potential of multi-media technologies in formulating personal narratives and self-reflexive identity-work (Figa 2007), one does gets a creeping sense from the policy literature that the value of certain IT technologies (i.e. Second Life; virtual tutorials) inheres in the approximation of ‘real’ presence – ‘as though you have been with other people’ (JISC 2009: 32).

If physical proximity rests at Anthropology’s methodological core, do we not betray those commitments in shifting our learning to faceless interactions online? In what ways do these tools help or hinder our student’s engagement with disciplinary norms? Should our pedagogic and research methods be treated as distinct domains of practice? Is there a way that students can link their experiences of learning anthropological analysis on the web forum to future work
in the field? What purchase does ethnography have on the Internet and, if so, what kind of knowledge is it expected to produce? What kind of cultural texts are blogs and wikis and what is their appropriateness for the fundamentals of anthropological analysis?

The task of familiarizing myself with web-based technologies has provided the occasion to begin to think through (though certainly not answer) these questions. Its commitment to being-there notwithstanding, anthropologists have sought to reimagine the socio-temporal dimensions of the field, developing multi-sited strategies for doing ethnography to uncover ‘more complex and surprising objects of study’ (Marcus 1999: 13-14). To a considerable extent, the shift away from classic models of individual fieldwork is implied by my module’s topic. The course departs from the assumption that ‘Africa’ should be grappled with as a social reality whether or not it scans ethnographically. Much of the intellectual work of the course consists of bringing diverse representations of African lives and landscapes under an ethnographic reign, but other than linking together a diverse set of texts, the course did very little to demonstrate how that might be done in practice. Vered Amit eloquently describes the contingent nature of the field-site I have in mind:

‘[I]n a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualisation to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred’ (Amit 2000: 6).

In short, I think ELE provides an opportunity not only to engage students in the anthropology of Africa, but also in how Africa is constructed ethnographically. While there is not a great deal of room in the budget or time in the curriculum to take my students to Benin or Senegal, ELE offers a hybrid space to construct a field of encounter with African communities and modes of social practice. Looking ahead to other courses I will teach in the upcoming years, I believe an e-learning environment can provide a critical space for students to explore the shifting alignments between fieldwork and thick description (and between winks and blinks). I will accompany them on this exploration, drawing inspiration from these online encounters into the evolving norms and forms of ethnographic research.

From Pedagogy to Professional Development

Recently admitted into the Russell Group, Exeter presents itself as a research-intensive university, excelling in innovation and investigative excellence across a number of disciplines. Thus in addition to encouraging ‘students to take responsibility for their learning’, faculty are expected to inculcate an appreciation of and aptitude for empirical work through ‘research inspired teaching and assessment’ (Exeter Education Strategy, 3). In the section above, I began to explore how cyberinfrastructures can help link those commitments, by reflexively engaging students with how an Anthropologist of Africa might construct its object of analysis. Here, I
want to push the argument a bit further and suggest how elaborating an e-anthropology can provide a frontier for my own methodological innovation and theoretical development.

The development and extension of the so-called cyberinfrastructure has been a strategic focus of UK research since 2001. In a recent review of the UK’s e-Science programme, a RCUK Steering Committee explored the impact of investment in sprawling ICT platforms, networking centres and Grid architecture and concluded that

‘the largest and most important academic impact [of e-science] is in the interdisciplinary efforts that have gone into most of the projects and that have fostered new social academic networks and spawned new collaborations’ (RCUK 2009: 1).

The creation of structures that coordinate across the Research Councils has inspired new ways to frame research problems and conceptualize innovative approaches to those problems. One of the key recommendations for growth focused on the role of the social sciences contributing both to the analysis of these large datasets and to the ways in which they are designed and managed. Despite a number of methodological oppositions to the assumptions of e-science – i.e. that ‘bigger’ datasets somehow produce a more rigorous knowledge or that social networks like Twitter can be made to ‘stand in’ for society – there are clear ethnographic opportunities here.

Upon joining the department, I was asked to participate on a bid to the Leverhulme Trust to study the practices of data sharing within scientific research. Focusing on malaria research in Africa, the project aims to contribute towards a better understanding of how, why, and to what end scientists in developing countries share data, and whether these data sharing practices differ from the priorities, practices, and policies associated with research in developed countries. The project poses a number of key methodological questions, least of which is how to thickly describe what, ontologically speaking, data is. ‘Raw data’, Geoffrey Bowker writes, ‘is both an oxymoron and a bad idea; to the contrary, data should be cooked with care’ (Bowker 2005: 183-184). By exploring what motivates and mediates sharing in the creation and curation of databases, we hope to advance discussions on what constitutes care and stewardship in the context of ‘big science’, furthering the development of e-Science policies, across what is often referred to as the ‘digital divide.’

Second, engaging with e-Science offers an opportunity to rethink the role of collaborative work in anthropology. We have long claimed that our ethnographies are the products of dialogue, emerging from long-term engagements with our informants. The effectiveness and value of this collaborative mode remains under-theorized, particularly in light of the fact that what anthropologists tend to produce are single-authored monographs, which rarely, if ever, are read by the people we work with.

The increasing demand for collaboration – whether from UK Research Councils or from home institutions – has been met with mixed response by practitioners. The commitment to solitary
fieldwork and transcendent ethnographic experience is difficult for anthropologists to abandon tout court. Marilyn Strathern defined the nature of ethnography in its production of empirical remainders: ‘the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection’ (2004: 5-6). Anthropologists, in other words, build up their analytical models and theories after their journeys to the field; there must be a space left for data to surprise. The strategic nature of collaborations poses a threat to the indeterminacy, naivety and, critically, the pace of ethnographic work.

However, it is clear that increasingly the spatiotemporal complexity of our objects of study – globalization, biosecurity, transnational clinical trials, identity work among the diaspora – is something that the pith-helmeted anthropologist arriving in a canoe on a desert shore cannot capture. Moreover, the cat to some extent is out of the bag: many of our subjects are doing something-like-ethnography, whether they are financial traders, development policy makers, clinicians, indigenous rights lawyers, journalists – often our work performs a second order of analysis on those who spend a considerable time being-there. What is missing from our pedagogy is an articulation of how these objects and conditions of research transform our methods – or how they should – and here is where some degree of engagement with cyberinfrastructures can help. While there is little consensus across UK institutions as to whether fieldwork should be included in an undergraduate degree (Anthropology Benchmark Statement 2007), many, including the University of Exeter, offer the opportunity to do small-scale supervised research projects as part of a dissertation. These projects can be sites of methodological experimentation and collaborative partnership; ICT technologies can help define and formulate the boundaries of the ethnographic field. The discussion forum for ANT 3006 is a modest start, but one that I believe can lead my students and me into a deeper discussion of the norms and forms of disciplinary knowledge, contributing to the development of anthropological research and pedagogy (AA5). Guided by a clear educational mission, e-learning tools can promote the kind of reflective innovation which Comaroff believes underlies anthropology’s spirit.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an analytical rationale for some of the changes I plan to implement in my module on the Anthropology of Africa in the upcoming year. It has also reflexively considered the relationship between the tools to implement that change and the larger methodological questions troubling ethnographic research today. I realize much of what I have written here is aspirational; how and to what extent an anthropological engagement with digital infrastructures can retool classic approaches to research is uncertain. What I do know is that in the upcoming years, I will make e-learning tools a central component of my pedagogic practice as a means of thickening the mutual awareness that characterizes the learning experience.
References


