

Undergraduate Student Led Research: An Applied Anthropology Course as a Community-Based Research Firm

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Abstract

Increasingly, undergraduate students desire hands-on learning experiences to prepare them for life after graduation. Research experience at the undergraduate level unlocks a key skill set students need and desire in terms of its anthropological value and also the value of transferable, critical thinking skills. This article explores the creation and continued development of my *Applied Anthropology* course which relies heavily on community-engaged research and community-engaged pedagogy. The course is structured as if participants are an independent, community-based research “firm” that has been contracted by a local community agency to undertake research on their behalf. Students manage every aspect of the project including developing data collection tools, seeking Institutional Review Board ethics approval, collecting and analyzing data, and ultimately preparing a technical report, policy recommendations, and presentation for the client. In addition, I will discuss the benefits to both students and community partners (including practical research experience and, in some cases, already implemented policy suggestions) as well as some of the challenges to this approach including time, capacity, and commitment. I conclude by reflecting on my role as mentor during this process and provide suggestions for those who would like to create a similar research experience for their own students.

Keywords: Teaching; Community-engaged Pedagogy; Community-based Research; Applied Anthropology; Undergraduate.

Introduction

Undergraduate students (and their families) increasingly consider the applicability of their major and the skills they learn to their future lives as primary considerations in selecting a major or deciding to go to college causing higher education administrators and faculty into reactionary positions justifying their services and the costs involved (Berrett 2016, Galloway 2017, Blumenstyk 2019, and Supiano 2018). Anthropology, of course, is not immune to this pressure-- a fact which was highlighted in 2011 when then Florida Governor Rick Scott declared that Florida did not “need any more anthropologists” (Gonzalez 2011 and Harper 2011). At the time Scott made that claim, I was a doctoral student in the Applied Anthropology program at the University of South Florida. My fellow students and I immediately mobilized and created the *This is Anthropology* project (Miller et al 2013), which has since been incorporated into the American Anthropological Association’s public education programs. For us, it seemed clear that anthropology offered a specific toolkit of skills that had wide ranging applicability, but there was an evident disconnect in the way the public perceived those skills. While national rhetoric questioning the “value” of anthropology has cooled in recent years (Kowarski 2019), students (and their parents) are rightly concerned with future career goals and their acquisition of transferrable skills. As anthropologists we must help our students understand the value of the skills students gain in our courses and how an anthropological toolkit can be applied in a variety of contexts across a student’s future life.

Since 2012, I have been a faculty member first at a regional private institution and now at a regional municipal (public) university in the United States. Both institutions hired me, at least partially, because of my applied anthropological training and my ability to: 1) teach classes that exposed students to anthropological career pathways; 2) mentor student research incorporating community-based and applied elements, and 3) to teach an applied anthropology course—a course I’ve now taught numerous times over the past 8 years and the focus of this article. Many of my courses incorporate *community-engaged pedagogy*, an umbrella term for a variety of pedagogical approaches that connect classroom learning to community (Rubin 2012) and my Applied Anthropology course is no exception. In this article, I will begin by introducing my course and briefly discussing

some of the research projects students have completed over the years to give an idea of the breadth of topics students research. Next, I speak to the benefits and challenges of this pedagogical approach particularly as a faculty member in small anthropology programs where I may be the only applied or only cultural anthropologist. Finally, I conclude by recommending some best practices for those interested in creating their own version of this course.

The Course

Each time I teach Applied Anthropology, planning begins almost a year in advance with identifying potential community-based organizations (CBO) or nonprofits that might have a possible research project for my students. Luckily, both institutions I have taught at have strong, well developed centers for community engagement. These centers have multiple roles on campus, but both assist faculty with developing community-engaged courses. I work closely with the center's staff and my own connections in the community to identify partners. I also now rely on word of mouth or repeat partners who have previously partnered with me in this or another course I've taught.

The potential CBO partner(s) and I will then meet several times to discuss the possibility of partnering. Eventually, we develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that clearly lays out expectations for the project. In some terms, the MOU is very informal and conversational. Other partners and projects may necessitate the creation of a specific, formal document depending on my relationship with the partner and the nature of the project(s). These conversations include identifying general research questions the students will explore and a general sense of study design, providing the students with background information, negotiating expectations (both for academics but also for CBO partners), and talking about realistic expectations in terms of what the CBO partner can expect; being realistic about what an undergraduate student can accomplish during the term¹. In some terms, the class partners with just one community partner while in others there may be multiple partners. This is largely dependent on the number of students in the course and the nature of the projects.

Once the term begins, I spend a good portion of the first class meeting framing the experience for the students by describing community-based research and the nature of the course, providing students with background on the project, and encouraging them to come to the subsequent class meeting ready to meet with the "client" and ask questions. The CBO partner(s) then join us in the classroom for the entire second class meeting to present additional background about the project, answering student's questions, and dialoguing with students about the research topic. This gives students an opportunity to meet directly with the partner(s) and begin to form social relationships. The students, community partners, and I spend quite a bit of time at the beginning of the project outlining responsibilities and dividing the tasks to complete the project. Even in the comparatively long semester, we have to be very strategic in how we work. I assume the role of "director" of the research firm, the students are the "researchers" and the CBO partners are in the role of "client." I explicitly frame our roles this way for students and talk about the importance of the CBO partner. This is a subtle, albeit very important, signal to the students that the CBO partner is someone on equal power footing with me as the faculty member and will serve as a kind of co-teacher during the course. The CBO briefs the students providing context and educating the team about appropriate language and cultural sensitivities we need to be familiar with as we potentially enter into a new community for the first time.

After that, the majority of the class runs as if we are an independent research firm. The students work to break the larger project into "chunks", and themselves into smaller teams, each of which takes a piece of the project. When the class is quite large, then there may be more than one research project and partner, thus there are several teams working for different clients. All of the teams begin by conducting literature reviews and Institutional Review Board (IRB)-mandated ethics training. Then, in their teams, they create research proposals and data collection protocols which we then meet to discuss and polish. We then send the projects through the IRB. I do this because it is good experience for the students, but also because occasionally the students want to present or write about their projects in public ways. Once approved, we all participate in the various aspects of conducting the research and the students and I analyze collected data.

Over the past seven years, the class has partnered with seven different CBOs. Four cycles of the class partnered with just one CBO at a time and one cycle partnered with three different CBOs (one of which was a repeating partner). The CBOs were quite varied including a cooperative grocery store, a local arts education center, a school-based clothing closet, and even our own university's center for community engagement. Each project required a different approach, but almost all of the projects involved program evaluation or needs assessments. This was because of stated community needs, but also worked well for us since evaluation-style projects typically are well bounded in scope and often receive expedited or exempt status from institutional review boards. For example, in 2013, we partnered with a disability rights advocacy organization. The organization wanted to better understand how adults with developmental disabilities experienced barriers to access to oral health care. Students broke into two teams, one conducted focus groups with patients and the other conducted interviews with dentists. In 2019, we partnered with a local emergency food pantry which wanted to evaluate its services and gain more clients. Students in this cycle broke into three teams, one evaluating the pantry's services, one evaluating the marketing, and the third group conducting a community needs assessment.

After students collect and analyze their data, they synthesize their findings in the form of a technical report and presentation for their client and invited guests. The technical report mirrors other forms of anthropological writing and contains sections for an introduction, literature review, methods, analysis, findings and policy implications, and conclusion as well as all of the raw data and data collection protocols in appendices. The quality of these reports, and the findings, naturally varies based on the nature of the project, the skills of the students, etc. but I (and the clients) are often pleasantly surprised at the level of nuance and insight the students often produce.

The entire community-based research project is worth 45 percent of the students' course grade. At each stage of the project, I scaffold the research and writing experience so that students turn in smaller pieces of their work or sections of the final technical report for feedback and then assemble the final report and presentation (hopefully) incorporating feedback. These are often connected to low-stakes, group-based grades (worth 20 percent of the student's overall course grade). These formative evaluations allow me to check in with the students and the groups. For example, early in the term, students submit a "mind map" of their research project outlining major elements like study design, research questions, ethical considerations, data collection techniques, etc. This is worth a small percentage of points in terms of their overall grade and I grade most of these on a pass/fail basis—if the group turns it in on time and it is clear the group made a good-faith effort toward completing the map, they get receive full points... along with a page of comments back from me and a 10-minute check in the next class meeting to discuss what their submission. Students have the option of turning in a full draft of their final technical report for similar feedback, although most do not avail themselves of this opportunity, likely given that the timing is tight at the end of the term. The final technical report and presentation are worth 20 percent of the student's grade with an additional 5 percent of their grade is connected to a peer evaluation of their teammates.

In addition to the community-engaged research project, the more traditional business of the anthropology classroom continues: students read articles concerning the history and theory of applied anthropology and I offer short "on-demand" lectures on relevant topics such as ethics, history, and methods—which have now mostly moved online in video format. I also invite applied and practicing anthropologists to come and speak to the class. They talk about their own career trajectory, create an ePortfolio with examples of their work, and reflect on how they use anthropology in their current jobs outside of academia.

Benefits

There are several benefits to this approach:

First, students' knowledge of anthropological methodology and self-efficacy in utilizing those skills is increased through participation in field-based projects. Toward the end of the course, I debrief the experience with my students as a kind of informal focus group. I encourage them to engage in metacognition (Chick et al 2009 and Commander and Valeri-Gold 2001) as we talk about what worked well, what did not work as well, and what we might do differently next time. In addition, I also survey them anonymously for their feedback and students complete the university's course evaluation. A majority of students across all cycles self-reported a better understanding of the research process and the skills anthropologists use in their work. Students also self-reported higher levels of self-efficacy regarding undertaking community-based research after completing the project. Students experience the same kinds of challenges professional researchers face. For example, no dentists responded to the students in the previous example even though over 50 dentists were contacted using a three-

point-of-contact recruitment scheme. In contrast, the patient group had a greater response rate than they were able to accommodate in the time allotted. In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic completely halted the student's research with a local elementary school's clothing closet as the school and its closet closed. These real-life outcomes become important teaching discussion moments in the course and opportunities for students to reflect on their own professional formation as anthropologists. One of the most gratifying aspects of the course has been students who have decided to continue on conducting other research or volunteering with a community partner after the end of the course. In one particularly powerful example, a student was so taken with her project and became so passionate about the work of the partner and the community they served that she designed, conducted, and analyzed several additional focus groups for the partner on an unrelated project over the following year. Another student became so engaged with her work that she created a short film for the partner after she graduated. Finally, students gain *artifacts* they are able to include on their résumés, curriculum vitae, and ePortfolios for future employers in the form of the technical report, presentation, and data collection protocols. While many students seem to approach the creation of the ePortfolio with skepticism, a surprisingly large number of students have reported that their ePortfolios (containing many examples of work from this course) have helped them apply to graduate school or find a job.

Second, I follow up with each community partner either in person, by phone, or by email. These informal conversations about what worked well, what the partner would change, and ideas for how the products students produced will be used are incredibly helpful in updating the course each cycle. The partner receives both the raw data and the students' technical reports with their analysis and policy recommendations. In one term, the partner confided she had "very low expectations" and was blown away with what the students were able to accomplish proclaiming it one of "the best community-based learning projects [she] had ever been a part of!" The CBOs use these data and analyses in their continuing efforts to influence policy and implement programs to varying degrees based on the sophistication of the findings. For example, the Adults with Developmental Disabilities patient experience group found local evidence to support two themes the student's uncovered in the scholarly literature – namely that the built environment of clinics and denial of care due to cost or disinterest were strong barriers amongst those attending the focus groups. Moreover, students were also able to identify two additional areas they did not find widely reported in the scholarly literature: first, that adult patients with developmental disabilities experienced a high degree of shaming by dental office staff and second, that patients reported their inability to read and understand forms (due to low levels of literacy) created a barrier to care and appointment scheduling. From their analysis, the students ultimately developed three policy recommendations they were able to share with the CBO. The client was then able to immediately begin to use these findings in their advocacy work at the state level with the state's dental association. On a smaller scale, students' interviews with local urban farmers for a food cooperative CBO helped create new retail channels and expand food access in the neighborhood.

Finally, I also benefit from this pedagogical approach. While a large amount of work goes into creating and sustaining the projects, it is a kind of work that is personally exciting and rewarding to me as an applied anthropologist. By scaffolding and grading assignments by student groups, my grading workload is reduced without sacrificing the attention I give each student. Instead, I find that I now have more time to talk in small groups and individually with students and build relationships. This is not only beneficial to my teaching but also helps ensure I receive high marks from my students on course evaluations particularly in areas of interest, engagement, and relevance. Beyond that, I am able to nurture relationships with community organizations across the city and in domains that I may or may not previously have a connection with. Some of those new relationships blossom into additional teaching or research opportunities—particularly when the organization shares similar interests. Other times I am able to leverage existing partnerships. For example, I was a board member of the community food coop (which was disclosed to students in advance) and so the positive work my students did also benefited me as a local community member.

Challenges (and Opportunities)

While this pedagogical model provides clear benefits to students and community partners and many opportunities for creative pedagogy and scholarship, it is not without challenges.

First, community-based work is incredibly time consuming. It takes a considerable amount of time to get the projects off the ground and then to keep them going. Having only 10 or 15 weeks to complete an entire project from scratch is possible— and certainly teaches students about the conditions in which practicing anthropologists find themselves, but it also means that the project must be created in a very strategic way. Even the 16-week

semester is a tight timeline. This sort of hands-on teaching takes a huge amount of my own personal energy to get started and sustain. Sometimes it seems as though we are only able to make it to the end because of my own sheer determination to have the projects succeed. I am often told by senior faculty and members of the administration that community-engaged pedagogy is “valued” by my institution. However, in terms of the way faculty are compensated (salary, tenure, promotion, etc.) most institutions do not reward faculty who engage in community-engaged pedagogy in any significant way over those who do not.

For students, active and community-based learning classrooms require students to be present in a way traditional lecture or discussion-based seminars may not. For example, one of the more “hidden” skills students must develop as applied anthropologists is that they are somewhat beholden to community members and other informants’ timelines. Students may lack time flexibility in terms of scheduling interviews or hosting focus groups due to personal considerations such as other classes, work, or family. This can occasionally have a significant impact on the research project. For example, one team of students identified participant observation and interviewing as the most appropriate research methods for their research question regarding an emergency food pantry but found that none of them could be on-site during the time the pantry was open to the public. Ultimately, this group was unable to conduct a single interview with the partner’s clients. This, coupled with the lack of participant observation, meant their project lacked significant ethnographic context. The students reflected on the challenges their schedules created in causing their project to ultimately fail and were able to learn a valuable lesson. However, the partner was given a final project that was incomplete (although they were equipped with the interview protocol which they could use in the future to collect the data themselves). This is, unfortunately, another reason to spend time creating the MOU with the partners in advance; in this instance, the partner knew that the students may be unable to complete the project and had planned accordingly for that possibility. I discuss the time-intensive nature of the course with students on the first day of class although I have never had a student drop the course at this point.

Community partners may also face significant time challenges. In our debrief conversations some partners reported surprise at how much time it took to work with the students; getting them up to speed, helping to arrange focus groups, helping to analyze data, etc. I try to proactively address this challenge as part of my early discussions with each partner. For example, I discuss what level of involvement the partner desires and the level of involvement required by a proposed project. Some partners want to be very involved and attend many classes and meetings with the student team becoming a full partner in the process. Other partners may have very little interaction with the students beyond attending the first day and viewing the presentations on the last day of class. That is OK too, depending on the scope and parameters of the project. Occasionally a partner may overcommit themselves or their organization. Partners are, of course, free to withdraw their collaboration for whatever reason although this has never happened in my experience. Occasionally a partner may disappear with no communication at all. This did happen to one team of students which led to an important conversation about the realities of engaging in community-based research and research ethics.

Another challenge I continually face in the course is low enrollment. Early on, there was no prerequisite for the course. This meant the class was a mixture of lower- and upper-level students. On average, only about half of the students have usually already taken our required methods course before this class. The depth and quality of work students can produce may be impacted by their previous experience. Moreover, it is challenging for a faculty person to meet students where they are while still creating a coherent course that meets all student’s needs. Even after adding our introductory cultural anthropology course as a prerequisite, the course still attracted a diverse mix of students from several majors and backgrounds. I feared adding further prerequisites (such as our methods course or requiring junior or senior standing) because they might further diminish enrollment. Our relatively small size as an anthropology program means the class is chronically under enrolled and is always in danger of being cancelled as little as a week before it is offered. Moreover, this means I have potentially made an MOU with a community partner and now have to tell them the class may be cancelled at the last minute; an untenable position. At my former institution, I went as far as to rename (and reframe) the class as “Community-Based Research” (a term that proved to be incredibly popular with students). I did this partially as an attempt to better market the course and to solve our low-enrollment issues. My former institution also decided to make the (community-based research) course a required class for their cultural anthropology major. Now that I am in a new institution and department, I find myself having the same conversations I previously had with my former colleagues as we debate renaming and reframing the course.

Finally, it can be challenging to communicate to community partners exactly what can be accomplished by a group of well-meaning undergraduate students at a variety of skill levels. Some partners anticipate they will

receive a professional quality report and, sometimes, we can deliver on that— especially when the students in the course are seniors who have already completed their methods courses. Other times, the classroom is composed of students who may only be beginning their training and are not yet able to provide a highly developed technical report. It is critical to find a community partner who is understanding of the limitations of an undergraduate class-based research project. Working with undergraduate students means starting from the students existing skill base and not all students are capable of producing professional results at this level. I always discuss this and the eccentricities of the academic calendar with my community partners in advance and am very clear about managing expectations as part of the process of creating the MOU. In this regard, it can be really helpful if I know who most of the students in the class are before the term begins. Sometimes this works out since we are a small anthropology program and I have a good idea of what each student is capable of from having previously taught them in other classes. But sometimes I walk into a room of students who are entirely new to me (as I did when I began my current position and taught *Applied Anthropology* in my first semester). In that situation, I discussed my class roster with my more senior colleagues and made assessment of student skill level as we went under promising at the beginning. This means I need to be cautious when setting up the project with the partner and conservative about any promises I make.

Conclusion

I close with some considerations for those who are interested in creating their own version of this course. As is best practice with any community-engaged learning experience, I try to weave the research project (and provide opportunities for reflection) into every aspect of the course. For example, if we talk about interviewing in the first half of a class meeting, we spend the second half of class working in teams developing questions for interview protocols. Students keep weekly reflection journals using guided prompts and we also reflect in in-class discussions drawing from those journals as well as extemporaneously. These reflections help the students in several ways. First, they help create a sense of community in the room by allowing students to see that their struggles and experiences are, perhaps, not unique but shared by others. Second, they allow for cross-team problem solving and collaboration. Some of the best insights have come from students on other teams giving feedback to their classmates! Finally, focused reflection helps students to more concretely see that the skills they are developing as anthropology majors are transferable and applicable to their future careers regardless if they intent to *be* anthropologists.

Many students have an immediately negative reaction to *group work*. I devote time early in the term to discussing effective team strategies and we engage in team building activities. These are not tagged-on but are embedded in a larger conversation about applied anthropological skills. We discuss examples of how applied anthropologists work as part of teams and I ask students to discuss their previous experiences of teamwork—what helped and hindered a team to work effectively. I also encourage students to leverage technology to work effectively as teams. While many faculty may have a perception that students are ‘tech savvy,’ I find this to not always be the case. For example, I encourage students to use collaborative writing platforms like Google Docs or Microsoft Word 365 Online and find that students are unaware of how to use their collaborative functions, see and resolve comments, or provide constructive criticism of a peer’s writing which, although not specifically an aspect of technology, is an important skill. While there are also collaboration tools built into various learning management systems, such as D2L, Canvas, Blackboard, etc., Students often report they are hard to use and do not intuitively fit into their workflow. By the end of the term, it is common to see students and myself with all of our laptops and tablets working on their technical reports together before the big presentation day.

Finally, to help mitigate some of the time and invisible labor involved in this work, I have begun searching for a “regular” community partner to collaborate on long-term projects that would cut across academic years. That way, the prep-work is lessened because much of the work of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with the partner, setting expectations, creating an IRB template, learning a new body of scholarly literature, etc. has already been completed. This is, perhaps, less participatory for the student in that they will have less control over shaping the tools and research agenda, but my hope is that the end results will largely be the same. While I had found such a partner at my previous institution, my recent move to Topeka, Kansas has meant I must start again to cultivate a new set of research partnerships.

Incorporating student led research into my applied anthropology course has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my teaching career. Community-engaged pedagogy has allowed me to practice community-based research with my students and to see them get excited about being anthropologists and becoming more embedded in their own communities-- particularly those students who get so enamored with community-based

research that they continue to volunteer with their agencies or become more civically engaged. Teaching this course has allowed me to deepen my own methodological approaches to applied anthropology and explore research topics I otherwise may have never considered but, none-the-less, are of importance to my community. Finally, teaching *Applied Anthropology* helped me to create lasting relationships with both my students and my community partners which continue to manifest in many wonderful ways. I encourage others to explore how they might adapt some aspect of this work to fit their own teaching.

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Notes

1: As mentioned previously, I first taught *Applied Anthropology* in 2013 when I was an Instructor at a regional private university on the "quarter system" that used a 10-week term. Now, I am an Assistant Professor at a university that uses a 16-week semester. That context is important because the course is much easier to teach when participants have 16 weeks to complete the research project versus 10 weeks.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.