# Virtual Reality as a Proxy for Participant Observation in Introduction to Socio-Cultural Anthropology

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This article details the piloting of a virtual reality activity in an introductory anthropology class at Utah Valley University. Anthropologists have only recently started exploring how VR technology can facilitate classroom learning. For example, Steinmetz and Bishop (2020) used the 360 VR film *My People, Our Stories,* to teach students that hearing multiple stories can shatter stereotypes. The producers of this film gave 360-cameras to four people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles, which allowed the film's subjects to introduce viewers to their world and tell their stories directly. Professor Lavanya Proctor at Lawrence University also used a 360-film called *I am Rohingya*, which centers on the lives of a woman and her family living in a refugee camp in Bangladesh, to teach her class.  The experience, Elzen (2018) writes, allows "students to immerse themselves much more than passively watching a video." It is this immersive quality of the medium that makes it particularly useful for anthropological pedagogy.

VR-levels of immersion have potential beyond just novelty and student engagement. Cauterick and Ingraham (2021) argue that "the immersive power of VR storytelling can enact ethnographic encounters premised less on the impulse to extract meaning from other people and their ways of life than on the sensory and affective force of being with others in an unfolding experience of both similitude and difference" (2021, 11). In describing the film *Traveling while Black*, a 360 film about Black experiences in the United States, they claim VR films have the potential to "foster nonappropriative relations" because they place the viewer's body in close spatial relation with the bodies of others – a production choice that avoids either erasing others through over-identification or objectifying them through distanced abstraction.  In this, they argue, VR has the potential to do the work of good ethnography: striking a balance between proximity and distance.

My experience also suggests that VR is useful for teaching students about the process and purpose of participant observation because VR films approximate the experience of being present in diverse human contexts. Conveying the process of ethnographic methodology to novice anthropology students is challenging because classroom instructors' options often fail to convey the balance of proximity and distance characteristic of fieldwork.  Instructors either teach through text and traditional film (too much distance) or encourage short-term, ready-to-hand, 'local' ethnographic projects (too much proximity) (see Howell 2018, 4).  My VR pilot activity draws on the medium's capacity to overcome these limitations to achieve two major objectives. First, to help students understand the process and merits of ethnographic fieldwork, including the analytic relationship between immediate experience, data gathering, and anthropological literature. Second, to create an experience of affective and sensory proximity to peoples often discussed in introductory anthropology texts, whose lives are likely to be distant from students' ordinary social experience.

Utah Valley University is an open-enrollment, public University in north-central Utah that serves students at different levels of academic ability. An open-enrollment university has a non-competitive admission system, requiring only a high school diploma or equivalent qualification for admission.  In the U.S. system, undergraduate students spend their first two years completing general education (GE) courses. Many students at UVU take Introduction to Social-Cultural anthropology to fulfill their Social and Behavioral Science GE requirement. Some students enter the course with only a vague idea about the discipline and have little interest in pursuing further study.  In my course, I teach students with a wide range of major concentrations that may include Nursing, Computer Science, Biology, Math, Graphic Design, Psychology, Dance, and Social Work.

The Anthropology program at UVU recently purchased 15 Oculus Quest Two VR headsets to use in anthropology courses. These were added to the six Oculus Go headsets that were purchased the previous year. The Oculus Go headsets were the now-discontinued budget option of VR headsets, which on the lower-end ran

$200 apiece. These were much cheaper than the Oculus Quest, which ran $500, and the Oculus Rift which required an expensive gaming PC to run. Oculus's most recent headset, the Quest Two, is lighter, with more advanced features than the Go and Quest One. The Quest Two are stand along and allow one to interact more extensively with virtual worlds. These are priced at $299, making them an affordable option for college departments.

I led the first pilot activity in my Introduction to Social-Cultural Anthropology class at the end of the semester of Spring 2021. In preparation for the class, I worked with University IT offices to download the Felix and Paul Studio app on all the headsets. The Montreal-based Felix and Paul Studios creates films aimed at "creating immersive entertainment" with a focus on "highly engaged and inspiring virtual reality" experiences.[1] This app contains a variety of 360 films, including the *Traveling while Black* film mention earlier, an encounter with a Dinosaur, a tour of the White House by Barack Obama, and the *Nomads* series (Lajeunesse and Raphael 2016). *Nomads* features three films on non-sedentary pastoralist and/or foraging communities: the Maasai, the Bajau "Sea Gypsies", and Mongolian herders. Of course, these communities are more diverse than the films suggest, and most individuals in these communities are no longer nomadic. This became an important topic of class discussion as we unpacked the experience on day three.

Given the diversity of Felix and Paul Studios productions, their focus is clearly on immersive VR experiences, not ethnographic filmmaking. Though anthropologist Pegi Vail served as a cultural consultant and co-writer on the project, the creators are not anthropologists. Yet, it is no surprise that some noted that *Nomads* might be useful for anthropology instruction (Hines 2020). Maasai ethnography alone is a staple ethnographic reference in anthropology textbooks. In addition to the relevant subject matter, the approach of filmmakers makes films particularly useful as an experiential proxy for participant observation. Except for a few written words that pop on the screen at the beginning or end of each film, there are no subtitles or narration throughout. Viewers are placed in the middle of Shamanic rituals, fishing boats, and family conversations. As the *Nomads* filmmaker Felix Lajeunesse put it, "We are trying as much as possible to remove ourselves as filmmakers and to create conditions for an encounter between the viewer and the subject" (Hines 2020). To this end, directors told the films' subjects to pretend like the 360-camera was a guest. Of course, the editorial and filming choices serve to create a particular kind of "experience" for the viewer, an experience of alterity that the filmmakers envisioned when they embarked on the project. However, the relative invisibility of filmmakers as intermediaries allows the *Nomads* film to function, for novice anthropology students, as an approximation of what it might feel like to be an anthropologist just entering the field. In a phased pedagogical approach, the films can serve as both a proxy for a participant observation experience and an object for critical reflection about the politics of representation.

## The Pilot VR Activity

Two classrooms were reserved to allow for required distancing and students were provided with disinfecting wipes with which to wipe down equipment before and after use. The class format was "modified in-person" to give students the option to come to class during the pandemic. This means class sizes were reduced, and seats were arranged to ensure students sat six feet apart. All were required to wear masks. Classes were recorded via installed video cameras, so students had the option to participate from home. Oculus allows VR experiences to be broadcast, so students were able to complete the VR assignment remotely if they chose to.

Before the students began their experience, I gave a short lecture explaining key aspects of the fieldwork process. I noted that anthropologists are often disoriented when they first enter the field. They take notes over time and piece their observations together like a puzzle. I also go over the concept of "headnotes" (Emerson et al 2011 [1995], xvi). Anthropologists can't always scribble in their notepads during participant observation. They must form a habit of taking mental notes of their surroundings that they later commit to paper. I suggested they imagine they are anthropologists entering the field for the first time and that they take "headnotes" throughout the experience. When the film ended, they were to write down everything they remembered as fieldnotes. Students were intentionally given minimal information about the three communities featured in the film.

After some brief technical instruction, they put on their headsets and experienced each film together as a class. As the film played, students stood up and looked around with their headsets on, appearing immersed in the experience. When each film ended, they removed their headsets and recorded their "head notes" while they were fresh. After five minutes of writing, they discussed their fieldnotes with their neighbors. Next, they were given 1-2 minutes to write down questions they had about the peoples in the film. Once this time had passed, I instructed the students to discuss their questions with their classmates for five minutes.

These phases of the activity culminated in a full class discussion with the professor about student questions. The student questions reflected an understanding of what they learned throughout the semester. Students asked about gendered divisions of labor, histories of colonialism, and the kinds of trade relations people transacted with their neighbors. The latter question was striking because the films present a picture of relatively isolated people, but they knew from instruction that semester that foragers and pastoralists have exchange relationships with people practicing other modes of subsistence. It allowed us to talk about the difference between simplistic mass media representations of people deemed "exotic" and the more complex realities revealed in contemporary ethnography. We repeated this exercise with each short film, which spanned two class periods. After completing these activities, I assigned students selected ethnographic readings on the three communities in preparation for the next class period. I encouraged them to seek answers to their questions in these ethnographic texts.

In the final third phase of the VR project, we discussed what they learned from reading about each group. Students first discussed their findings in small student groups, then we discussed them as a class. After each discussion, I gave a small, prepared lecture on the featured communities, answering some student questions that came up in the previous class periods. The film focused on parts of the Bajau, Maasai, and Mongolian communities that fit the filmmakers' image of "nomads." However, the ethnographies we read show the diversity of each community, including their participation in sedentary agriculture, industrialized labor, and tourist economies. During class discussions, I noticed palpable curiosity about the peoples represented in the films, as the VR experience students left students with a sense of personal familiarity with them. Students felt as if they had briefly met members of these communities and this encounter made them want to learn more.

Student evaluations of the course suggest the VR activity was well received. Students felt they had a firmer grasp of how anthropologists do their work.

> Student 1: I especially enjoyed the VR assignment at the end because it was a culminating experience that helped us practice what we had learned the entire semester.

> Student 2: I really enjoyed the VR Experience…a brand-new method of learning … [it] really helped me get the true anthropological feel for the material.

> Student 3: We were the pilot class for VR fieldwork at the end of the semester, and I loved it! It gave me a real-world glance into what anthropology looks like in action (All from anonymized student feedback forms).

One student stated that they wished they would have had the 360-VR activity earlier in the semester because it gave them insight that would have provided an experiential foundation for engaging with course content from books and lectures.

## VR and Pedagogy in Anthropology

VR films provide a variety of classroom applications in anthropology because they allow students to experience a subject up-close. Greater closeness and immediacy would be helpful for most topics taught in cultural anthropology classes, which may include lessons on ritual, discrimination and exploitation, migration, illness, and kinship. In my Fall 2021 Introduction to Anthropology class,
I utilized *Traveling while Black*, the 360-experience mentioned earlier that educates the viewer about racism in the United States. In the class discussion that followed the experience, one student expressed her appreciation for the film because, having grown up in a predominately white county in Utah, she had limited opportunities to hear directly from BIPOC about their experiences of racism. At one point the film sits the audience down in a café with Samaria Rice, where she tells of her pain following the death of her son Tamir at the hands of a police shooting in 2014.

Immersive film experiences are not the only potential application of VR in the classroom. In my ethnographic methodology class in Spring of 2022, I plan to experiment with VR chatrooms in class as a way for students to practice participant observation research in a virtual environment. VR chatrooms are virtual worlds where users can move around and engage in joint activities with other users, communicating via microphone. Students could engage in these worlds while their experience is projected onto a screen. It would create an opportunity for them to practice building rapport with strangers, conducting informal interviews, and balancing observation and participation in front of the class, allowing the professor and students to offer immediate feedback.

My use of the *Nomads* films and my future use of VR chatrooms aims to give students a taste of ethnographic methodology in the classroom. Student-led "scientific experiments" in introductory chemistry and biology classes represent an attempt to replicate professional scientific work in miniature. For obvious reasons, it is more difficult to provide similarly miniaturized experiences for cultural anthropology students. VR overcomes this limitation somewhat by making immersive experiences with diverse communities portable. It offers a new, compelling way for instructors to demonstrate how anthropologists link abstract analytics with close-up experiences in their study of human lives. Granted, at present anthropologists have a narrow selection of 360-VR ethnographic films, which limits the usefulness of VR in anthropological pedagogy. VR will become increasingly impactful as a teaching medium when anthropologists produce more 360-films that represent up-to-date perspectives of our discipline, perhaps creating less exoticized, more multidimensional versions of the *Nomads* style of filmmaking. Given the growing use of VR technology, we can expect filmmakers to produce a steady stream of useful content. Currently, there is a wide range VR media that allow instructors to supplement their lessons with "the sensory and affective force of being with others" (Cauterick and Ingraham 2021, 11).

## Notes

[1] This is quoted from the Felix and Paul Studios website, https://www.felixandpaul.com/?info retrieved on November 13th, 2021

## Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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