Teaching Anthropology

2025, Vol.14, No.1, pp.89-94

Doing Right by Our Undergraduates: Nurturing Possibilities through Collaborative Approaches

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Abstract
Undergraduates are coming of age in increasingly perilous times. Anthropology's hallmark use of ethnography offers much for teaching in this moment, through its capacity to navigate uncertainty, foster understanding across differences, centre empathy and real-world engagement, and, above all, promote collaboration. Acknowledging the particular positioning of my institutional context, I detail how collaborative approaches to advising, group work, peer assessment, and community-engaged experiential learning can nurture a fuller sense that we need not – and do not – navigate crisis and uncertainty alone.

Keywords
Undergraduate pedagogy, collaborative practice, ethnography, advising, group work, community

Introduction

As an anthropologist at a US liberal arts institution genuinely committed to student formation, I consider undergraduate teaching among the most important avenues for practice available to me. My work positions me to maintain ongoing conversations with students that often go beyond the immediacy of the classroom. Particularly among those entering their later undergraduate years and recent graduates, I've noted a growing urgency in their reaching out. They seek collaborative reflection on their hopes, dreams, and aspirations alongside the fears, concerns, and confusion that come as the "real world" starts to feel real. A complex set of challenges, outlined by Schlosser and Harris in the introduction to this special issue, looms in the background as we navigate questions about next steps - employment, post-graduate service, graduate school or a professional program. These challenges are compounded by forces that threaten to erode higher education broadly and anthropology programs in particular. For now, my students and I may be at least partially buffered by the values enshrined in the mission of our private, Catholic Jesuit university. As I detail below, this observation carries a certain irony. Still, these values, considered alongside recent reckonings in our discipline, can align with broader efforts to rise to the moment.

The undergraduate years are inherently future-oriented. But when the terrain includes climate catastrophe, war, rising authoritarianism, and extreme inequity, the journey ahead is daunting indeed. Yet as a close mentor, anthropologist Barbara Dilly observed more than once, if we ask our students to engage with the world's thorny realities but then leave them without hope, purpose, and community, we have oppressed them. As global crises intensify, so does my resolve to do right by my students – that is, to accommodate, support, and enfranchise these young global citizens who may not yet fully realize their own collective power. Have the pedagogical stakes ever been higher in our lifetimes? I'm not sure that they have. And lately, it seems we must equip students not for one specific challenge, but for navigating uncertainty itself – and, crucially, for doing so in collaboration with others.

What, then, does it mean to "do" anthropology in contemporary times of crisis? Wrestling with this question depends on how we are situated in a complicated landscape where the ground shifts beneath us. In this article, I critically examine this landscape, describing the complicated positioning of institutional contexts like mine within it, and articulate what anthropology can offer to students coming of age in this moment. I advocate for undergraduate teaching that is grounded in ethnography – a hallmark method used for its capacity to navigate

uncertainty, to nurture understanding from differences, to centre a commitment to empathy and real-world engagement, and, above all, promote collaboration. In practical terms, I will detail how the tools of collaborative approaches to advising, group work, peer assessment, and community-engaged experiential learning can be integrated into undergraduate teaching. In doing so, I suggest we can nurture a sense of solidarity with our students, that we need not– and do not – navigate crisis and uncertainty alone.

Grappling and Grounding in Times of Upheaval

Threads of upheaval within our discipline are interwoven with external pressures, including critiques of anthropology (O'Connor, 2011) and of higher education more broadly (Schrecker, 2022). These pressures are compounded by institutional mandates to meet enrolment targets amid the looming "Demographic Cliff" (Bauman 2024). In the context of a "marketization of higher education" (Jobson 2020: 266), many of us have long found ourselves justifying our discipline's very existence as vital to a university's academic portfolio. The intensified targeting of university systems across the U.S. only exacerbates these challenges.

My own hope for continued freedom to teach anthropology through contemporary crises is undergirded by values codified in my university's mission and identity as Catholic and Jesuit. Like others of its kind, the institution's raison d'etre is grounded in the 130-year tradition of Catholic social teaching, which centres on principles such as a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, stewardship of creation, global solidarity, dignity of work and the rights of workers, participation in society, and – importantly – community and the common good (Office for Social Justice Catholic Charities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, n.d.). These principles support a collective, mission-driven appreciation of diversity and a commitment to the promotion of justice, and they cannot easily be dismissed. Importantly, they not only serve as an institutional lodestar but also as a meaningful bulwark against efforts to restrict the topics and perspectives that can be engaged in the classroom (see, e.g., Moody and Weissman, 2025). Still, this insight is not entirely reassuring. As anthropological perspectives have long shown, nothing exists in a vacuum. The erosion of public secular education in favour of private, Christian-aligned education has long been a policy priory of far-right factions in the U.S. (Wendling, 2024). Thus, while my institution's Catholic and Jesuit identity may offer some protection, it does not provide a universal answer to the crises we face.

However, it does create space for meaningful engagement with recent disciplinary reckonings that call for a radical re-imagining of anthropology. We can – and should – bring these lessons into our teaching. Jobson, for example, calls for abandoning anthropology's "academic 'star system'" that "hinge[s] on a possessive investment in authorship that values dissention above agreement, individualism above collaboration, and the sequestration of knowledge above its open circulation" (2020: 267). Indeed, we can refine our pedagogies to resist neoliberal logics of productivity, prestige, and possession – forces that often obscure the unquantifiable promise of undergraduate training in anthropology. We must not forget what we offer.

So, What Do We Offer? Anthropological Perspectives, Anthropological Possibilities

Undergraduate teaching in anthropology demands a sustained mindfulness of multiple perspectives. In a time when the word "unprecedented" is frequently used to describe recent events, we can help students cultivate a commitment to holistic and comparative thinking. From the earliest stages of our training, anthropologists are taught to turn the world on its head: to hold both an "insider's" and an "outsider's" perspective, to question what is taken for granted, to remain open to the unexpected, and to recognize how our assumptions shape both our observations and interpretations of those observations. This training provides essential grounding for a nuanced understanding of our times – one that resists simplistic, hegemonic narratives which can limit possibility.

Nonetheless, even as anthropology offers these tools, our students arrive at our doorstep steeped in neoliberal, hyper-capitalist logics. For many, especially those burdened by student debt, post-graduate employability is a pressing concern. Anthropology, already facing strong headwinds in the ecosystem of academic majors, must respond with support. Over the years, I've developed my 'advising toolkit' through conversations, shared experience, and the collaborative learning engendered through relationships with my own mentors. This includes using coaching techniques for undergraduates who are keen to study anthropology, and need advice on how to answer *the* question their well-meaning relatives ask them: "But what can you *do* with that major?" I've occasionally had success with role-playing, in which I act the part of that well-meaning relative, channelling

memories of my own parents asking the same question. In these scenarios, my modest goal is to collaborate with students to articulate a better response than the "I don't know?" of my youthful self.

In our senior capstone course, my colleagues and I also have incorporated Briller and Goldmacher's "Introduction Exercise" (2021: 86-90), which helps students practice explaining the relevance of their anthropological training in just a minute or two. We also benefit greatly from the Anthropology Career Readiness Network (https://anthrocareerready.net/), which offers a growing repository of resources for students, instructors, departments, and job-seekers alike. These resources include not only job titles – helpful for conversations with family – but also practical guidance on building careers across diverse fields and industries.

I make it a point to acknowledge that few job postings explicitly seek candidates with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology. But rather than viewing this as a weakness, I frame it as a strength. In a world where artificial intelligence is rapidly re-shaping the job market, the adaptability provided by anthropological training feels like a form of insurance. What once was uncertainty – "I don't know?" – now can be confidence: "I trust that my anthropological training will remain relevant, no matter how the world changes."

A "How-To" for Approaching Uncertainty Together

In many ways, our undergraduates are positioned at the epicentre of our changing and challenging world. They are transitioning to adulthood at a time when previously well-trodden pathways feel both precarious and obscured, even impenetrable. Our discipline is perhaps most uniquely equipped to help students navigate this uncertainty, particularly through ethnography as collaborative practice. As LeCompte and Schensul (2010: 2) emphasize, "the tools of ethnography are designed for discovery prior to 'testing'." In other words, ethnography is ideally suited for contexts where we don't yet know what we need to learn – or where our existing assumptions may no longer apply. This inductive, iterative approach can be especially challenging for undergraduates whose prior research is limited to quantitative, deductive experimental design. But even the most reluctant students have "ah-ha" moments as they discover how different life experiences shape the questions people ask, and, in the case of researchers, position them to notice different patterns in data. These insights emerge powerfully during a semester-long qualitative ethnographic interviewing and analysis project that I assign. In it, students must not only develop and articulate their own research questions but also explore their motivations and underlying assumptions that inform their interests. At the heart of this multi-part project is *collaboration*.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, anthropologist Ellen Rubinstein and I began a close collaboration by co-designing this assignment to be carried out in groups. Our goal was to demystify qualitative research, emphasize its value, and make clear the strengths of collaborative work. Despite longstanding critiques, the image of the "lone ethnographer" still endures. But it often doesn't hold up to practical realities, and carries less currency in applied anthropology. We wanted to equip our students with concrete tools alongside the knowledge and dispositions they gain through training in our discipline. Thus, we worked into the assignment as much scaffolding as possible, focusing on skill-building in team-based collaboration for conducting interviews, analysing data, sharing findings, and discussing implications.

Over time, I've observed changes in students' proclivities regarding this genre of assignments, otherwise known as "group work." Earlier in my career, announcing a group project often elicited strong reactions, ranging from exasperation to dread to outright fear – usually due to concerns about unequal labour distribution. To address these apprehensions, I introduced peer assessment into the process. While all group members initially receive the same grade, students evaluate each other's contributions at midterm and semester's end. These assessments can adjust individual grades and, more importantly, foster accountability and communication. Crucially, I also require students to have conversations throughout the semester, offering feedback to one another directly, and collaboratively addressing any group dynamics or patterns that may hinder progress. Initially, peer assessment served primarily to reassure students worried about fairness. But more recently, students have described the group project as one of the most rewarding parts of the course, attesting to feeling personal growth through the process. Perhaps most tellingly, students' peer evaluations increasingly reflect empathy and awareness of their classmates' circumstances, accounting for the challenges their fellows may have faced during the semester. Rather than simply noting a lack of contribution, students now often acknowledge with sensitivity if an "underperforming" peer has been ill, struggled in other ways, or faced a family crisis.

I've observed shifts even in courses without formal group projects. More students now describe opportunities to collaborate with peers as a top priority in their course reflections. These changes may signal a broader readiness among undergraduates to abandon some of the very same neoliberal logics once serving as the mortar of foundations now rocking beneath us. If nothing else, I am heartened by these embers which suggest that anthropology's collaborative ethos is not only relevant, but essential in this moment. Our discipline offers students the tools—and the mind-set—to face uncertainty together.

Empathy and Engagement in the "Real World"

In addition to its knack to apprehend even the most elusive, contested, and seemingly contradictory realities, crucially, our discipline's hallmark method – ethnography – centres on empathy. Ethnographic approaches remind us that knowledge is not a uniform thing to be delineated and hemmed in, but a shared understanding to be nurtured. It evolves through co-creative relationships across difference. As a mode of scholarship, ethnography draws students into real-world stories of everyday life and allows them to see why context matters. In doing so, it practically compels a re-examination of assumptions. By immersing our undergraduates in ethnography as a means of developing anthropological perspective, we show the value of earnest listening without "othering," of recognizing diverse forms of expertise, and of grounding interventions in a deep, nuanced appreciation of complexity.

These tenets come to life in one of my courses through a semester-long community engagement project. Students partner with local community organizations around intersecting themes of food, culture, gender, and health. This "real world" collaborative action outside of the classroom, aligns with pedagogical approaches situated at the confluence of undergraduate education in anthropology and the anthropology of education (Rodríguez-Mejía, 2021). It also draws from a tradition in medical anthropology that integrates critical applied work with the "observe, judge, act" methodology of Liberation Theology, exemplified in Paul Farmer's work with Partners in Health (Farmer, 2005). This tradition, which shares kinship with Catholic Social Teaching, offers a meaningful way to live out many of the Jesuit values central to our institution's mission. Indeed, this course is included in our university-wide undergraduate core curriculum. Through direct community engagement and reflection, paired with academic content, students learn about a problem from those most directly affected ("observe"), assess whether the status quo constitutes an injustice ("judge"), and, if so, consider impactful action guided by tenets of Catholic Social Teaching that include pragmatic solidarity and a preferential option for vulnerable communities (Farmer, 2005).

Students in this course often demonstrate close attention to – and concern about – the multiplying crises of our time. Throughout the semester, they work with a wide range of partners, including community gardeners, senior groups, refugee community-serving organizations, school meal program staff, and small family farmers practicing regenerative agriculture, to name just a few. Students are required to draw from their experiential learning to identify core issues at the heart of the work of their partner organizations. They must also articulate and defend possible solutions to the problems they have engaged through collaboration with community members, for whom finals week does *not* mark an end to the work. Perhaps because of this sustained engagement with collaboration, students in this course often seem best equipped to face our troubled times productively. They learn a powerful lesson from their community partners: that in the face of crisis, hopelessness and inaction are not viable options.

Conclusion: Carrying On in Collaboration

The private, Catholic Jesuit institution where I teach is committed to a mission that calls its members to work toward justice. Its mission is grounded in Ignatian values and over a century of Catholic Social Teaching that centres *collaborative* efforts to address social problems through global solidarity, care for our shared world, and dignity for all. Within this context, I enjoy continued freedom to bring anthropological perspectives and tools into the classroom - and I think my students benefit from the space to meaningfully apply them. Moody and Weissman (2025) note that religious freedom may help protect this freedom. Yet the fact that such protections do not extend to colleagues at public secular universities underscores that religious affiliation is not a panacea. While it happens that my particular institutional context continues to support a space for teaching anthropology, I argue for the broader potential of collaboration as a central pillar of undergraduate teaching across institutional contexts. Whether advising students whose loved ones are questioning their decision to pursue studies in our field, or teaching our research methods through team-based approaches, or pushing our students to partner and

problem-solve with communities beyond the classroom, we can enliven, replicate, and share powerful means for action.

Among the books I recommend to colleagues navigating these turbulent times is Susan D. Blum's '*I Love Learning, I Hate School: An Anthropology of Learning*'. She writes: "While I await a more human world, I carry on in my classes […even] while acknowledging that my efforts often fall far short of my ideals" (2016: 274). This sentiment resonates deeply as we plan for future semesters and are reminded of the real stakes involved. It won't be enough merely to ensure that students read the work of traditionally under-represented scholars in our field, though that remains essential. We must also help students realize their collective power to challenge received wisdoms that no longer work (and maybe never really have) and collaboratively generate new ways of understanding and doing that carry their learning out into "the wild" (borrowing from Blum, 2016).

As we accompany undergraduate students in a world that is, quite literally and metaphorically on fire (Jobson, 2020), we find ourselves at a knotty crossroads. With little luxury to be impractical about the relevance of our field, the realities of our times provoke a call to pedagogical action. Teaching, then, becomes a form of anthropological practice that is best carried out with the hopeful, collaborative tools of our discipline, so that we can engage in these times of crisis together.

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to Shana Harris and Allison Schlosser for organizing and facilitating such a timely Roundtable session at the 2023 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, where a rich and impassioned discussion helped me organize my thoughts for this piece; for feedback on an earlier draft; and for shepherding this special issue into existence. I am grateful, too, to the anonymous peer reviewers, whose comments pushed me to clarify, concretize, and sharpen my ideas, and to the copyeditor who improved this piece further. Thanks to my parents, who eventually embraced my pursuing Anthropology. Thanks to Pamela Runestad for our many conversations over the years about undergraduate teaching practice. And my deepest thanks to Barbara Dilly, Ellen Rubinstein, Alexander Roedlach, and a list of students too long to possibly fit in one paragraph. The best of what I've learned about the significance of collaboration in Anthropology, I have learned from them.

Disclosure statement

The author has no potential conflicts of interest to report.

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