

Teaching Anthropology Through Contemporary Crises

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Introduction

Teaching is critical to the anthropological discipline, as our theories and methods equip students with the perspectives, critical thinking skills, and research approaches necessary to confront the many global issues we now face. International, national, and local transitions in politics, economics, climate, and mobility have prompted multiple crises in recent decades. Democratic institutions and public education face increased pressure to implement austere neoliberal reforms, dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming, and censure discussions of histories of marginalization that challenge academic freedom. Political agendas threaten the rights and recognition of racialized, marginalized, and vulnerable groups, including people of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants and migrants, and the unhoused. Climate change and multinational economic schemes challenge environmental sustainability and the survival of communities endangered by sea-level rise, environmental pollutants, and other perils. Misinformation, funding cutbacks, and stigma impede efforts to effectively address critical public health issues, such as the opioid crisis, abortion access, and COVID-19. Moreover, anthropologists must increasingly teach in educational environments shaped by policies and politics that question or denounce central values of the discipline, such as holism, cultural diversity, and privileging the voices of marginalized communities.

This Special Section explores these challenges and their effects on faculty, students, local communities, and the discipline of anthropology. It builds on the roundtable, “Teaching Anthropology Through Contemporary Crises,” held at the American Anthropological Association’s 2023 annual meeting in Toronto, Canada. The session brought together scholars from a range of higher education institutions across the United States to discuss their experiences of teaching anthropology through contemporary crises. Panellists drew on their experiences across an array of teaching areas: navigating state educational policies hostile to understanding diversity, race, and racism; discussing climate change and the need to decolonize science; presenting controversial health interventions aimed at addressing drug overdose and the spread of COVID-19; teaching LGBTQ+ and trans rights and health from a social justice lens; and leading community-based courses on immigration, policing, and economic inequalities across university-community borders. A lively discussion between the panellists as well as the panellists and audience ensued. The conversation left many of us eager for continued discussion of our often-difficult experiences of teaching in the current political climate and our varied responses to these challenges. A sense of shared frustration, but also camaraderie, emerged from the conversation, which included the voices of seasoned teachers and aspiring anthropologists, as well as U.S.-based scholars and those teaching in other countries, providing a wide range of experiences and responses. As the roundtable drew to a close, several participants expressed their appreciation for the session, noting that these discussions rarely occur at professional meetings, rendering our challenges as teachers of pressing current issues hidden even as they become increasingly urgent in our daily work as educators.

This Special Section is an effort to continue this critical conversation. It is comprised of five *Developing Teaching Reports* written by select roundtable panellists. These pieces extend the discussion started at the roundtable, sharing not only lived experiences of teaching anthropology through current crises, but also the ways we have responded in the spirit of anthropological inquiry and practice. Together, we aim to approach the problems and opportunities presented by contemporary challenges with a sense of creativity, experimentation, and care for our colleagues, students, and the communities in which we teach. Our overarching goal is to explore the challenges

of teaching in and through contemporary crises and to consider how we may come together to address these concerns as educators and anthropologists. To this end, the authors discuss how they have responded to these challenges in the classroom and at their institutions.

Collectively, these essays highlight related challenges and opportunities that have emerged as we considered how we have navigated the fraught landscapes of higher education to teach anthropology in ways that stay true to central principles and practices of our discipline: holism, cultural diversity, centring marginalized voices, and reflexivity. Essays explore how these principles may be transformed in the classroom in the context of broader crises in ways that trouble teaching and learning. For example, essays illuminate how anthropology's value of cultural diversity presents challenges to faculty and students in the context of attacks against teaching about the broad range of topics now often labelled "woke" (e.g., structural inequalities, LGBTQ+ health). Relatedly, faculty face difficulties as they integrate reflexivity into their teaching, as students increasingly receive messages that diminish the value of discussions of diversity and positionality in the broader socio-political environment. The consequences of a teacher's positionality, shaped by their racialization, class backgrounds, gender and sexual identities, locations within their institutions, and the type of institution in which they teach, is a common theme running through the essays (c.f. Chaudhuri-Brill, 2021; Choi & Lim, 2021; Okley, 2012). Several essays highlight the problems presented when a teacher integrates reflexivity of one's positionality into their teaching and mentoring. These essays show how faculty and student positionalities interact to shape experiences teaching and learning anthropology through crises.

Several contributors describe how their minoritized positionalities shape their teaching, particularly when teaching the anthropology of issues that are now often deemed "controversial" such as public health interventions and environmental justice. Importantly, these positionalities may offer opportunities for faculty to connect with students who come from similarly minoritized backgrounds, such as underrepresented, racialized, and minoritized (URM) students at predominantly White institutions who may feel alienated in this context, cultivating a much-needed space for belonging that sets the stage for the difficult work of applying critical social sciences theories and methods to urgent health and social issues. Yet these faculty positionalities may also render them vulnerable to attack from students, especially those from more privileged backgrounds who may be sceptical or dismiss critical social science approaches and may even see these approaches as attacks against White individuals. In the current political climate in the U.S., these students have become emboldened to resist critical perspectives by national and local politics and policies that undermine their validity. These socio-political dynamics, then, make teaching about cultural diversity, marginalized voices, and reflexivity at once evermore important and increasingly dangerous.

Indeed, the essays in this Special Section underscore how our locations as faculty in states with varying politics and policies related to higher education also matter deeply, making some more vulnerable to censure in our teaching than others. Florida is the most visible U.S. state in which broad political attacks and policies have threatened the ability to teach anthropology by undermining instruction on cultural diversity and structural oppression, among other topics and lenses central to our discipline. These attacks on academic freedom in higher education have profoundly impacted faculty by cultivating a climate of pervasive surveillance, instability, and uncertainty. Yet the essays also provide a window into the challenges of teaching anthropology in states that have received relatively little attention regarding their educational policies. In Nebraska, a largely conservative state, policymakers are proposing higher education legislation similar to initiatives in Florida, yet these efforts are little-known outside of the state. In Rhode Island, a more politically progressive state, entrenched White liberalism presents its own challenges to teaching anthropology by contributing to the erasure of liberal complicity in ongoing structural disparity.

The essays also highlight the significance of the positionalities of faculty in relation to their institutional location. A teacher's positionality within a private versus public university may influence their ability to teach anthropology through crises by offering a buffer against policies affecting teaching at public institutions. Yet this buffer is limited by broader neoliberal transformations that have profoundly influenced all forms of higher education, shaping it toward the goals of efficiency and profitability. An instructor's location within a particular college or university also shapes their experience of teaching anthropology. Being a teacher with minoritized identities in colleges, departments, and programs that value objectivity and abstraction (e.g., in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)) may intensify the challenges of teaching anthropology through crises, as the critical lenses that our discipline brings to bear on health and social issues may be poorly understood, diminished, or even disregarded by colleagues with little to no exposure to these approaches.

Relatedly, the essays illustrate how anthropology specifically can be marginalized both politically and in the academy (Santos, 2025). The neoliberal transformation of higher education across the United States has led policymakers and college and university administrators to favour market-based values over higher education's democratic mission (Giroux, 2002; Mintz, 2021). This means that disciplines whose course enrolments or graduate programs are not large enough or "competitive" with other fields are vulnerable to financial or personnel cuts. Several contributions to this Special Section address how the pursuit of neoliberal aims poses such threats to anthropology departments or programs across the country, especially when our discipline is cast as not providing lucrative post-graduation career opportunities. Additionally, the devaluing of anthropological concepts, methods, and theories occurs when they are misinterpreted or deemed too "radical" for other disciplines, such as STEM fields. In such contexts, faculty who teach and students who seek out such content are subject to additional barriers to their pedagogical and educational goals.

Another theme across the essays in this Special Section is the various ways that attacks on academic freedom and neoliberal transformation affecting colleges and universities contribute to the invisibilization of marginalized lived experiences and urgent contemporary topics in higher education. This occurs when the topics we commonly teach, such as racial discrimination, environmental justice, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and drug use, and the methodologies we use to teach them, such as community-engaged and anticolonial approaches, are de-emphasized or eliminated from curricula by administrators because they challenge dominant political ideologies, or by faculty as they self-censor to protect themselves from attack. In this context of erasure, URM students, many of whom take our courses with a deep interest in learning about histories of oppression and ways of responding equitably, may struggle the most, as their experiences and communities are obscured or erased from their education. This threatens to further alienate students who have the most to gain from higher education.

The essays point to the necessity of modifying how we teach in response to contemporary crises. Laws can drive such pedagogical change when the censorship by state legislation requires faculty to rethink how they can teach key anthropological concepts and theories. The pressure of such manoeuvring leads some faculty to self-censor or drop "controversial" topics (even whole courses) from the curriculum, while others search for alternative ways to provide foundational instruction without violating the law. When legal restrictions are not a factor, changes to teaching can stem from a sense of responsibility to provide instruction in certain ways. Essays describe classroom experiments with critical pedagogical approaches that challenge the status quo and facilitate nuanced discussions of difficult histories, cross-cultural issues, and socio-political-economic shifts shaping students' daily lives. This often involves the employment of pedagogies that centre antiracist and anticolonial concepts from feminist, queer, and Indigenous scholars, scholars of colour, and scholars from the global south (c.f. Bourke, 2021; Diallo & Friborg, 2021; Karampampas, 2023; Sundal, 2025; Torres, 2022).

Changing how we teach demands being attentive to student needs as they face long-standing problems and new pressures in and outside of the academy. As the essays illustrate, faculty have redoubled their efforts to use educational approaches that foster safe spaces for students to understand and actively engage with contemporary societal challenges. These approaches prioritize collaborative learning in classrooms that privilege students' abilities to communicate about their lived experiences that are often hidden due to stigma and fear in the current political climate. This includes valuing and encouraging student self-reflection on their own experiences, research, career goals, and disciplines (anthropology or otherwise) and accompanying students in witnessing current crises and working toward solutions. Faculty are providing supportive spaces for students to express their concerns and emotions when discussing weighty subjects or systemic inequalities. These spaces require mutual respect between faculty and students as well as among students (hooks, 1994). This approach positions faculty alongside students as learners and builds trust and community in classrooms, making them crucibles for experimenting with new ideas and alternative futures obscured by current attacks on higher education.

Importantly, the ability of faculty to teach successfully—both during and in response to crises—is affected by the support (or lack thereof) they receive. These essays show how support can come in many forms and from many sources. Home institutions can trust their faculty to teach fundamental anthropological concepts, issues, or theories and champion innovative pedagogical approaches that challenge students to address the crises of our time. Home institutions also can support faculty, especially those with minoritized identities, who are discriminated against or targeted by students whose beliefs or identities do not align with those of their professors. They can also recognize the emotional and professional impact of such experiences on faculty and offer protections against student retribution in evaluating teaching effectiveness. When faculty do not have access to institutional support, they often rely heavily on their peers to provide the pedagogical tools, emotional

room, and camaraderie they need to weather the challenges posed by laws, political climate, disciplinary legacy, and institutional history. Professional organizations such as the American Anthropological Association, European Association of Social Anthropologists, and Society for Applied Anthropology can provide further support by creating resources for faculty struggling to teach in light of the multiple socio-political-economic crises they and their students face and offering venues for discussing how we can respond to these challenging circumstances. While professional organizations have taken steps to provide these supports, as evidenced by the inclusion of our roundtable at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting and the efforts of the association's Higher Education Thematic Interest Group to coordinate responses to these challenges (Santos, 2025), more support will surely be needed as attacks to higher education continue.

Overview of the Essays

The essays in this Special Section add depth and nuance to the themes described above from the vantage point of the authors' particular positions within their communities, higher education institutions, and political contexts. Highlighting the challenges to teaching anthropology in a conservative-led state with multiple "anti-woke" laws that severely impact higher education instruction, Shana Harris examines current political and pedagogical difficulties faced by faculty at public universities and colleges in Florida. As a faculty member at one such institution, she outlines how specific laws impede how "controversial" topics, such as race, gender, and systemic inequalities, can be taught and restrict DEI initiatives on public campuses. These limitations are especially challenging for a field like anthropology because of its scholarly attention to cultural diversity, socio-economic and historical context, and centring the experiences of marginalized communities. Additionally, she demonstrates the detrimental effects of Florida's political climate on free speech, academic freedom, and faculty well-being by showing how these laws and educational policies have contributed to a sense of routine crisis among faculty. Such crisis is marked by disorientation, distrust, and disillusionment that directly affect faculty morale and the ability to teach effectively. She shows how this situation unfortunately is not confined to Florida, as faculty from other U.S. states and political landscapes with mounting mistrust of higher education are experiencing and attempting to manage their own crises as educators.

Continuing to focus on teaching anthropology in a conservative political environment, Nolan Kline considers how polarizing political climates can result in some students feeling emboldened to challenge course content and faculty with politicized identities that do not match their own. Drawing on his experiences as a gay faculty member at a private college in Florida, he discusses how faculty, such as those from sexual and gender minorities, can become targets of what he calls "weaponized grievance," the strategic leveraging of feeling "wronged" for personal benefit and to maintain moral superiority. He explains how students can use such grievance, which is based on emotional manipulation and denial of wrongdoing, to confront individual faculty members who teach topics that run counter to their worldviews or to claim bias. This strategy has personal and professional consequences for minoritized faculty members, especially if their teaching performance is based solely on student evaluations. To address this issue, he offers useful suggestions for institutions to support faculty whose identities or course content put them in students' aggrieved crosshairs.

Shifting to a state with a liberal political leaning, Melva Treviño Peña and Amelia Moore describe their experiences as women of colour teaching anticolonial and antiracist theory and ethnographic methods at a predominately White public university in Rhode Island. Within this context, they face challenges to teaching anthropology within environmental science and geography graduate programs in a STEM college where critical social theory and qualitative methods are often poorly understood or questioned as legitimate science. As faculty with minoritized identities in an educational context in which such scholars are rare—"minorities within the minority," as they write—they offer students, especially those from URM backgrounds, a sense of belonging and guidance on applying critical lenses to pressing research on environmental issues that are deeply connected to discrimination and inequalities. They share how they apply anthropological pedagogies to foster educational spaces marked by empathy, ethical transgression, and social transformation, but also explore the challenges they face in doing so, from subtle resistance from colleagues to mentoring students whose research challenges the status quo shaped by entrenched White liberalism.

Building on the discussion of critical pedagogies, but shifting again to a politically conservative local context, Allison Schlosser highlights the challenges and opportunities of teaching the anthropology of stigmatized topics—specifically drug use and "addiction"—in Nebraska, where these issues are often seen as things that "don't happen here." She explores her experiences with teaching these pressing, but often silenced, health and social issues at a public university that has faced ongoing state budget cuts, threats to the ability to teach

diversity, and broader neoliberal imperatives that threaten academic departments and programs that are not seen as economically productive. These social, political, and economic contexts have challenged the ability of teachers and students to engage in open classroom conversations about social problems, undermining public education's democratic mission. URM students, who often seek out courses on issues like drug use that directly impact their communities, struggle to access nuanced education on these topics. In response, Schlosser draws on critical pedagogies of hope to accompany students through witnessing difficult histories and contemporary challenges related to drug use and collaborate with them to imagine alternative possibilities, with the goal of fostering engaged citizenship among students.

Finally, Laura Heinemann provides a window into teaching anthropology through contemporary crises at a private university. She discusses how teaching anthropology at her home institution in Nebraska offers some buffer from the political and economic restrictions placed on faculty at public universities and colleges. Heinemann explains that teaching at a Catholic Jesuit university, whose foundational tenets include the promotion of justice, dignity, and ethnic and cultural diversity, may afford her greater academic freedom to teach controversial topics compared to public institutions subject to increasingly restrictive legislation in politically conservative states. However, she suggests that this institutional positioning does not protect her, her students, or her institution from other pernicious forces, such as neoliberal logics and the influence of politically motivated funding. In this context, she provides some anthropological tools that faculty can use to help students better understand the contextualized nuances of contemporary social problems and to collaboratively engage students in addressing the challenges and crises that we face using anthropology as a guide.

By sharing the essays in this Special Section, we aim to cultivate reflection on the challenges and opportunities of teaching anthropology through the fraught political, economic, and social contexts of our contemporary world. Yet we also aim to encourage connection as we recognize our shared struggles to teach anthropology—a discipline that is critical to responding to contemporary crises—in a way that draws on both critique and hope for a better future. We face daunting challenges to teaching anthropology that call for action from government, higher education, and professional institutions, and we must work together to demand the support we need. Yet the essays collected here remind us of the importance of what we do in our classrooms every day as we apply critical pedagogical strategies and cultivate strong relationships with students and colleagues in the spirit of anthropological praxis. These approaches to teaching anthropology are essential interventions in responding to the mounting intellectual and emotional demands of the time. As such, the essays in this Special Section demonstrate a shared conviction that learning can be liberatory (Freire, 2000), in and despite contemporary crises.

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