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ABSTRACT

An undergraduate "Anthropology Through Science Fiction" honors course is described. Participation in the course was by invitation only and included both anthropology and non-anthropology majors. By using science fiction, non-anthropology students quickly became familiar with weekly topics and anthropology majors found the readings a new way to approach familiar topics. Frank Herbert's "Dune" formed the core of the course; additional works included Vonnegut's "Player Piano" and LeGuin's "The Left Hand of Darkness." Students read both science fiction and theory weekly, wrote one-paragraph abstracts of everything they read, kept weekly journals, and wrote an original anthropological science fiction short story. A key function was for the class to take responsibility for the course, with the instructor selecting readings, evaluating student work, insuring that everyone was permitted to speak, and seeing that all pertinent points were made. Students formed a committee which met outside of class to read and react to each other's journals. The course answered the need to present a quality, non-traditional, undergraduate course in an era when anthropology enrollments are falling. (KC)

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TEACHING A NON-TRADITIONAL, HONORS ANTHROPOLOGY COURSE

a paper by

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TEACHING A NON-TRADITIONAL, HONORS ANTHROPOLOGY COURSE

For those of us who teach anthropology courses at undergraduate universities, the possibility of teaching senior-level, seminar-style specialty courses is quite limited. I suppose the prospects are even worse at community colleges where one might be the lone anthropologist on campus. My own university, Northern Kentucky, does have five full-time anthropologists, an occasional part-timer, about twenty-five or so anthropology majors and minors, an active and enthusiastic Anthropology Club, and a small museum and laboratory facilities. Located in Cincinnati, Ohio's Kentucky suburbs, we also have community resources like the Cincinnati Zoo's primate facilities at our disposal.

Despite all these advantages at my particular university, however, undergraduate anthropology teaching (anywhere) is largely done to an audience of non-majors fulfilling requirements for graduation or looking for an interesting elective. With the anthropology majors themselves at different points in their undergraduate careers and with varying degrees of commitment, it is difficult to justify teaching a senior-level, seminar-style specialty course without the warm bodies to fill it. Our "Culture Theory" and "Archaeological Methods and Theory" courses regularly get less than the ten students needed to keep the courses from being cancelled. It is possible, of course, to justify teaching certain courses without having obtained the ten minimum bodies, but such justifications are often not acceptable to the administration.

What I decided to do last spring semester (1982) was to teach a senior-level, seminar-style course covering selected topics I had an abiding interest in, get fifteen top students to take the course, and not compromise my principles. I believe I was successful, and I would like to share some strategies for doing the same kind of thing at other undergraduate universities.

With pressures on faculty to carry larger student enrollments, specialty courses are often not taught in favor of introductory classes or legitimate but flashy fare, such as courses on sexuality, which I also teach. Faculty frequently find themselves in the position of not being allowed to teach courses in their areas of specialization if those specializations are not judged flashy enough to bring in a large "body count."

My strategy therefore began with obtaining assurances that fifteen bodies was an appropriately "large" enrollment for a senior-level, seminar-style course. Just to be safe though, we gave the course an honors designation. My own university is just now putting together an Honors Program. So an honors course had the look of innovation. Since the university as a whole had not decided what a university honors course was, we made it a departmental honors course and in lieu of something on their transcripts promised letters on file for students who passed the course with an "A" or a "B." The subject matter and teaching methods I proposed also qualified the course for an Experimental Programs designation which meant the course had a little more status and would not be cancelled unless it got less than six students. It also gave me access to the Experimental Programs more lucrative budget for xeroxing purposes, since I was creating my own readings for the class.

My next problem was to attract fifteen fantastic students to the course. Since it was impossible to find fifteen anthropology majors ready to take such a course, I never even attempted to pack the course with anthropology students. Instead, I looked for and found fifteen great students, from a number of fields. Some were anthropology majors, but I also had students from sociology, philosophy, history, creative writing, computer sciences, and pre-med biology. Of the students who completed the course roughly half were anthropology majors. About one-fourth were not anthropology majors but had had two or three anthropology courses. For the remaining fourth this was their first anthropology course.

Most of the students I chose for the class I knew personally. The majors had all been in several of my classes. I also, however, searched my introductory and survey courses for particularly bright people. A few students I knew from other contexts, such as a student publication for which I was faculty sponsor. Since we are largely a commuter university, students congregate in departmental lounges, and I had had an opportunity to meet and talk with students in other disciplines in my department. A couple of students were put in contact with me through other faculty outside my department.

Admission to the course was by invitation only. In addition, I scheduled the course to meet for two and one-half hours Friday afternoons, figuring that time slot would keep out anyone merely shopping around for an elective. The odd time period was also intended to emphasize that the course was for only the truly serious students. That, plus the fact that a letter of invitation was required for admission, lent the course a certain esprit de corps, in fact, far more than I had intended. Just

before the semester began, several anthropology majors who had not been invited into the course dropped by to plead for admission. A sort of unintentional reverse psychology operated, and I began the semester with twenty-three officially on the roll. We were down to an optimum number of fifteen by midterm. It was odd, however, that the more I told the students of the demanding work load the more they wanted in.

When the class was finally assembled, we were of diverse backgrounds and had widely varying experience with anthropology. Such a diverse class could not have been taught using only traditional approaches. I happen to enjoy trying new and experimental teaching techniques, and I believe that kind of approach is necessary if the only criteria for students to be in a course is that they be especially bright. I also knew I wanted to do some traditional things, have students read original theory, for example, and not have me summarize and regurgitate White, Barth, Goffman, or Gluckman for them. Perhaps it is a lot to expect even undergraduate anthropology majors to dissect Gluckman, much less expect that of undergraduates with no anthropology background whatsoever. So I looked for a way to ease the class into theory and found an approach in something that interests me.

Each week's readings had a theme. The second week's readings, for example, had a traditional theme: "What Makes Humans Unique: Culture." Two of the reading assignments were Leslie A. White's "The Concept of Culture" and William W. Howells' "How to Be Human." The class also, however, had to read Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey," a brillant piece of anthropological science fiction which focuses on what sets human beings apart from other animals. I took something I was interested in, namely, science fiction, and used it to ease the class into

more advanced readings, bypassing any lectures by me.

I think something like the science fiction pieces were absolutely necessary for quickly familiarizing non-antnropology students with each week's topic. The only other approach I would have trusted would have been for me to lecture. That approach would have had the affect, I believe, of boring the anthropology majors who in previous courses had sat through lectures on most of the topics we covered. For the anthropology majors the science fiction readings were an exciting new way of approaching old topics. Because we used science fiction as a gateway to more difficult readings, I titled the course, "Anthropology Through Science Fiction.". I now feel that title was too limited in describing the purposes of the course, but the title was accurate in communicating that the course was going to do some innovative, non-traditional things.

When I first thought of using science fiction in the course, I wanted to use some piece of classic science fiction, not only as a background reading but as something we could refer to again and again throughout the course for inspiration and to tie ideas together. I found what I believe to be the perfect book in Frank Herbert's Dune. The book seemed to work magic in inspiring the class, and I tried to ignore the fact that Watergate defendant G. Gordon Liddy had recently listed the book as the piece of fiction which had most motivated him in his personal life. Inspiration, I suppose, can take a number of paths.

Dune is the first of a series of four books by Frank Herbert. It has won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards, and science fiction readers generally rate it one of the best science fiction novels ever written. Some students who were in the course still refer to it as the "Dune

course." The class was required to have read the book in its entirity before the first day of class. Each week's reading assignments included quotations from Dune which applied to the week's topic. (You can see this in copies of the course syllabus which I have on hand for anyone interested.) Although only the first of the four Dune books was required, more than half the class went on to read the other three during the semester.

The advantages of using Dune as the core reading were two-fold. First, Dune covers numerous topics of interest to anthropologists. I found Dune most valuable in exploring topics from ecological anthropology, political anthropology, and anthropology of religion, three areas I have an interest in but never get to do much teaching on. Second, Dune presents certain values the class emulates if they identify with the book's central characters, the Atreides. These values which the class takes to heart are the very values they need to succeed in a senior-level, seminar-style course with a heavy work load: primarily hard work and persistence.

For anyone considering using science fiction as a teaching technique, I think you will be pleasantly surprised at how much of science fiction has an anthropological bent and has even been written by authors with a background in anthropology. For example, some of the authors I used with backgrounds in anthropology included, to name only three: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who studied at the University of Chicago and whose book on technology, Player Piano, which I used, has an anthropologist as a central character; Ursula Kroeber LeGuin, the daughter of A. L. Kroeber, whose book on sex and temperament, The Left Hand of Darkness, is an award winner; and Chad Oliver, a U.C.L.A. graduate and chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas, whose stories often deal with

fieldwork and have anthropologists as central characters.

Although students were reading science fiction and theory every week, I also occasionally added a timely piece from a news magazine to give the topic a feel of immediacy. For example, for one of our week's readings on ecological anthropology had the class complement Louise E. Sweet's data on desert adaptations among camel herders with articles from Newsweek on "The Browning of America" and "Vanishing Forests," as well as a National Geographic article on the world's expanding deserts. I believe such additions made the anthropological theory on the same topic seem more relevant to non-anthropology students.

I have explained how I had the class do different types of readings. I also had them do three different types of writing. As a recent graduate of an NKU workshop on introducing more writing assignments to classes, I decided to have students do not only report (transactional) writing more typical of anthropology courses but also journal (expressive) and fiction (poetic) writing. Students had to do a paragraph-long abstract on everything they read, type them up, and turn them in before class. In addition, they had to keep weekly journals, writing at least two pages a week before class, reacting to the previous class. Finally, they had to write an original anthropological science fiction short story in at least two drafts.

Since a minor rebellion against abstract writing had recently occurred in another professor's theory class, I knew I had to do a good selling job in order to get the class to take their writing assignments seriously. I used several techniques. One approach was the same as had caused the rebellion in the other class, namely, admitting that one reason for the assignment was to find out if everyone had really done the readings on

time, a reason which students interpreted as insulting to their honesty and commitment. What I also did though was to give other reasons for weekly abstracts and journals. Mostly, I emphasized that writing about something is a learning experience in itself which clarifies concepts not fully understood from reading alone. I emphasized also that writing is a learning technique for generating ideas, solving problems, becoming more personally involved with the material, recording one's growth, and letting off steam. Less all these additional reasons appear as little more than a smoke screen for finding out who did and who did not do the reading assignments, I had an impartial authority figure from the writing program in the English Department come in the first day of class and sell a multitude of purposes for writing assignments. She even did a mini-workshop on writing for the class using material they wrote in class to prove her points. I do not know if the technique of bringing in an impartial outside authority figure will always work, but it did with this particular class. Not only did no one whine about the writing assignments, but when students were late with assignments, they still turned them in, done in excellent form, with the understanding they were not receiving credit for these assignments.

Having the class do different kinds of writing also helped factionalize the class along lines other than anthropology and non-anthropology students. Some of the anthropology students, for example, had never done creative writing while others had. The same was true of the non-anthropology students.

Beyond reading and writing assignments, a key function of the course for me was to make the class take responsibility for the course. It may be easy to get graduate students to do this, but undergraduates look to

the professor to take charge. Although I had emphasized that the method for teaching the course was "active learning" and that we were all simultaneously instructors and students, it was a week or two before there were any signs of the students' running the class. Early on I defined my role as selecting the semester's readings; evaluating and grading students' work; insuring, if need be, that everyone got to speak; and seeing that all pertinent points were made in any discussion. In other words, I defined myself as a sort of "first among equals." There were times I intentionally let the class drift off onto tangents to see if anyone but me would bring us back to center. At first, I just got complaints from some students in their journals about why had I let so-and-so dominate the discussion or get off the subject. My response was always that they also had the power to redirect the discussion if only they would use that power.

Before midterm I was rewarded with an event that exceeded my wildest hopes. Three students began the process and won over the rest of the class. What the three students suggested was that they wanted a more active role in evaluating (not grading) each others work. They suggested that journal entries no longer be merely reflections over last week's class but also incorporate a student's expectations about the upcoming class. The journals would then form the basis for class discussion. Furthermore, they suggested the formation of student groups, called "the committee," to meet outside of class, read each other's journal entires, and react to those journals in class. The members of the class then negotiated what form participation in the committee would take. I said participation would not help or hurt a student's grade. Nevertheless, everyone in the class took at least one turn at being on the committee,

and everyone submitted some written work, sometimes anonymously, to the committee for group evaluation and reaction. I was also encouraged to submit written work for evaluation. From that point on, all written work went into one of three piles: instructor only, committee only (because some students did write about ideas for the committee which they did not turn in to me for a grade), or both instructor and committee.

In conclusion, teaching a non-traditional honors anthropology course is very much like writing a symphony and then conducting the orchestra. If the orchestra will not cooperate when given the proper cues, it matters not how good the symphony looks on paper. Therefore, the major piece of advice I would give to anyone yearning to teach an undergraduate seminar-style class reminescent of those experienced in graduate school is this: pack it with the best students, whether or not they are anthropology majors. In graduate school it is possible to find enough anthropology students who are truly brillant. At the undergraduate level during an era when anthropology enrollments are falling, it is not. I found my non-traditional, honors course much more rewarding than my attempts at teaching traditional culture, theory, social organization, or culture change to anthropology majors alone.

My second piece of advice is this: innovate. Whether you use science fiction or not, you need some technique for introducing basic anthropological ideas to non-anthropology students without boring your majors. In addition, make the course diverse enough in its requirements (like having the class write fiction as well as reports) so that the anthropology majors do not have a clear advantage over non-anthropology students when it comes to being graded. Emphasize the value of everyone's diverse background, that everyone therefore has a different role to fill, and that a philosophy

student, for example, is expected to make a very different contribution to class discussion than an anthropology student.

My third piece of advice is this: inspire. Sounds hokey, doesn't it? But if you do not, an undergraduate seminar-style course will not work. Graduate seminars work well in part because the students are so motivated. They have opted for careers as anthropologists and are working toward graduate degrees. Undergraduates are not in that category. So, whether it's choosing a book like Dune to inspire, bringing in an outside authority to back up the professor, or whatever, do something to fire the class up with commitment.

Finally, probably the greatest rewards of teaching such a course come after the semester ends. From that point on, until they graduate, one essentially has junior colleagues, and certainly friends, who are pretty well versed in all the topics one is interested in in anthropology. I recommend such a course to anyone feeling isolated at a small university with no colleagues with similar interests. Simply, create your own colleagues.