
Fundamentals of Anthropology as Effective Experiential Learning Strategy to Promote Social Justice

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Introduction

This practice-based experiential learning approach utilizes the discipline of anthropology to foster a more nuanced understanding of social and racial inequalities with the objective of promoting advocacy work among student learners in an undergraduate introduction to cultural anthropology course. The core of this experiential learning practice exists at the interface of interrogating self and others at the community level. This is accomplished primarily by coupling foundational anthropological concepts and ethnographic fieldwork techniques on a local and global scale. Through immersive interaction with a cultural, racial, or linguistic “other” and subsequent reflection on “self,” students are encouraged to connect lived experiences and observed realities to power structures and social constructs that generate inequality and difference within societies. The purpose of this strategy is for students to move beyond the familiar and confront experiences of difference with a critical lens to arrive at an informed and empowered position to carry out important social and racial advocacy work. At the center of these experiences are discussions and reflection assignments on issues of positionality, privilege, power, and representation. Outlined below is a discipline-centric pedagogical approach and details of two experiential learning experiences: a semester-long visual community interviewing project and an immersive cultural field experience to Costa Rica.

Background

The work takes place at Widener University in the city of Chester, Pennsylvania roughly 20 miles south of Philadelphia along the I-95 corridor. The city’s famous slogan, “What Chester Makes, Makes Chester” harkens back to a booming industrial era known for the wartime production of steel ships at Sun Shipbuilding as well as consumer goods such as paper products by Scott Paper Company. Despite previous

economic and social prosperity, the city of Chester experienced rapid deindustrialization during the second half of the 20th century, which fueled white flight to affluent Philadelphia suburbs. This left behind a predominantly African American population and an economically depressed urban center struggling with poverty, pollution, corruption, and violence. The city’s business sector is now comprised of a large casino, a state prison, a major league soccer franchise, the Crozer-Chester Medical Center, and Widener University; institutions that operate disjointedly and often in disharmony with the local city government.

Although the university is working toward change, Widener is considered a predominantly white institution due to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among faculty and the student body. The divide is further pronounced vis-à-vis the local demographics of the city of Chester, which is roughly 70% African American. Further, the campus is physically separated from the community on one side by Interstate 95. In other areas, roads and walkways leading from campus to the city have been barricaded off with concrete dividers or closed off with wrought iron gates. Institutional-level tensions with the city regarding possession of the Alfred O. Deshong public art collection and lawsuits over parking ordinances complicate the long-term sustainability and feasibility of community-university partnerships. While certain departments, initiatives, and individuals are doing fantastic work to bridge the Chester–Widener divide, overall, there is very little integration of students in the day-to-day ebb and flow of city life in Chester.

Problem Statement / Line of Inquiry

The disconnect between Widener and Chester is compounded by the fact that the average Widener student arrives to campus with very little exposure to diverse cultural or ethnic traditions. Many students

come from working-class backgrounds in the tristate area whose families cannot afford opportunities such as international travel or summers abroad. For example, in conversation with a group of students, I discovered that hopping on the train to frequent a dim sum restaurant and explore the rich cultural heritage of Philadelphia's Chinatown seemed out of reach, if not outright intimidating. That year I took the student group for a dim sum Thanksgiving and stroll through the China Gate on 10th Street in the city. However, it was exactly these types of hesitations, and even fear on behalf of the students, that led me to recognize some of the barriers that exist in undergraduates' lives when it comes to learning about and critically engaging with cultural difference.

This resistance was especially the case for first-year students who were simultaneously adapting to college life in a new setting with an increasing number of interactions on-screen or via social media. Not only are new students unaware of the local history and surroundings in Chester and the diverse cultural traditions in nearby Philadelphia, but they are also increasingly disengaged with human interaction "in real life," be it in classroom group work or in extracurricular activities. Recognizing the importance of exposure to cultural otherness and the need for critical skills to dialog through difference in pursuit of equality, I found the practices highlighted below to be effective in addressing these issues.

Experiential learning, as it relates to the social sciences, often involves going out into a community to conduct field studies or work with different groups who provide students new approaches and collaborative perspectives to learning. A large component of this type of experiential learning practice requires students to step outside of their comfort zone and communicate with distinct populations, oftentimes with the expectation of bridging cultural, linguistic, racial, generational, or geographical divides. To maximize learning within these encounters and support student involvement in advocacy opportunities for social and racial justice, I argue that educators must focus on developing a critical lens to frame student understandings of systemic inequalities and differences that students observe. This lens should be applied in experiences that require students to employ basic communication skills including talking and listening to people whose stories and daily lives are different from their own.

As we emerge from pandemic-induced social isolation into an increasingly siloed and divided political world, I argue that educators must dedicate a renewed amount of time and pedagogical space within our

learning environments to teach students how to confront and reckon with difference in myriad forms. Creating the space for generative dialogue and skill sets to promote social activism rooted in empathy for other human beings, as basic as it sounds, is a competency of utmost importance for today's college students.

The line of inquiry this work follows then is twofold. First, I will discuss how an anthropological approach to understanding difference can lead to empathy-building, a critical cultural lens, and self-awareness, all of which are crucial justice-related learning outcomes. Second, I will identify and describe two community-level experiential learning practices (one local and one global) that put these skills to use, namely the People of Chester Project and an optional nine-day cultural immersion trip to Costa Rica.

The primary question this work seeks to answer is: What particular strategies or practices in higher education foster justice-related learning outcomes? More pointedly, what types of experiences can experiential learning educators employ that empower students to step outside of their comfort zone, listen and relate to others' lived experiences, and ultimately understand the systems that created these realities as well as the options available to generate societal change and promote equality?

Description of the Practice: Anthropology as Approach and Method to Activism

Community engagement and cultural immersion as stand-alone "learning from life experience" (Kolb 2015, p. xviii) do not promote a holistic theoretical understanding of experiential learning. Truth, according to Kolb (2015), "is not manifest in experience" (p. xxi). Rather, emphasis should be placed on the conversion of an experience into "learning and reliable knowledge" (Kolb, 2015, p. xxi). Experiential learning as process, as opposed to technique or outcome, thus involves not only direct experience, but critical reflection, the extraction of learnings, and future application of that knowledge (Kolb, 2015).

The experiential learning described in this work employs an anthropological approach. Students critically engage with social and cultural difference and then reflect and utilize this knowledge in a semester-long, community interviewing fieldwork project followed by an optional immersive international field experience the following semester. While other experiential learning practitioners have explored intersections of international fieldwork, anthropology, and social justice (McClellan & Hyle, 2021; Smith, 2010; Bossaller et al., 2015), current works fail to

highlight the basics and broadly applicable fundamentals of the discipline that serve as low-hanging fruit in justice pedagogies. Thus, the focus of this anthropological approach to experiential learning lies in participant observation, which involves the semiotics of self and other, and the concept of ethnocentrism.

Why Anthropology?

With certitude, every anthropologist has been asked some rendition of the question: “What is anthropology?” To clarify, anthropology is the study of humans and the human experience.¹ A critical first step to empowering students to advocate for justice is cultural understanding and human empathy. I argue that it is impossible to be an ally² without being able to relate to someone else’s circumstance or picture yourself in their shoes. Socio-cultural or cultural anthropology involves the study of peoples’ everyday lives, cultural practices, behaviors, institutions, belief systems and practices in locales all over the globe. Situated at the core of this intellectual exercise is the practice of long-term ethnographic fieldwork in which researchers conduct participant observation, the primary research methodology of the discipline. This method requires the researcher to be present and involved in the daily routines of the community for long periods of time, while taking detailed field notes of their observations and experiences (Schensul & LaCompte, 2013).

Fieldwork is an endeavor where “self” and “other” encounter one another and through which new forms of knowledge are constituted. Early practitioners focused their gaze on primitive human subjects in far off colonies ostensibly too barbaric to be civilized by European settlers. Still struggling to reckon with this dark history, generations of anthropologists have since critically engaged with the poetics of self/other both in the field and afterward as we “write culture” or critique power relations in advocacy work. Today, a healthy debate ensues concerning subjectivity, objective truths, power structures, representation and how or if one even can, in fact, speak for, with or about others.

Ethnographic fieldwork trains students of anthropology to become participant-observers of others’ lived realities. Students learn to embrace cultural relativism and reject ethnocentrism; the belief that one’s own culture or way of life is normal, natural, and thus superior to other cultures. Anthropology opposes using one’s own culture to evaluate and judge the practices and ideals of others. Cultural differences are understood to be relative to the contexts, worldviews, and systems of meaning from which they stem.

Developing a non-ethnocentric lens is similar to Hallett and Majka’s (2020) discussion of cultural humility, a cognitive skill that entails both recognizing “the limitations of one’s own point of view and being willing to listen to others’ perspectives” (p. 150). When paired with exposure to difference through participant observation and a critical assessment of a culture’s social constructs such as race, institutions, laws, practices, and beliefs students begin to develop the holistic foundation necessary to carry out informed social advocacy and justice work.

The People of Chester Project: Application through Local Field Experience

The People of Chester Project is a visual ethnographic interviewing initiative developed in response to a lack of student exposure to diverse groups of people and an institutional–community divide that hinders student engagement with the local community. It was implemented in multiple sections of an introductory-level anthropology undergraduate course at Widener University over a three-year period. A driving factor in the creation of the project was to demonstrate to students that even in times of polarizing extremes when topics of politics, race, migration, gender, or sexuality feel unapproachable, a basic but powerful strategy exists within reach of every student to bridge divides often perceived too wide to cross; namely to be human, to talk and listen. By moving into new social spaces and embracing unfamiliarity, fleeting discomfort or the awkwardness of silence, students learn to navigate the intricacies of self/other encounters which can ultimately facilitate social understanding, connectedness, or common ground, enhancing student confidence to confront difference. The discovery of possessing the ability to empathize or relate to a stranger with whom you never envisioned speaking is a powerful realization for students who are too often silenced by difference. As such, the main objective was to increase student interaction with a broader range of people and identities that stretch beyond their customary social circles utilizing a critical anthropological lens. As a secondary objective, students were to gain first-hand experience carrying out community-based fieldwork involving ethnographic data collection and analysis techniques.

At the beginning of the semester students were presented with an overview of the project tasks: to identify a place or person of interest within the city limits of Chester, conduct an audio-recorded off-campus interview with someone they normally wouldn’t interact with, and take a photograph of this person that showcases their relationship to Chester.

Leading with this assignment on the first day of class typically evokes varying levels of discomfort or anxiety expressed with heavy sighs and remarks such as, “You want us to go where?” or “I can’t do that.” Ultimately, all the students do participate, albeit some with more ease than others. However, what repeatedly surprises me year after year is the initial apprehension and how some students believe they simply cannot do this type of work. Students could choose to interview anyone they liked so long as they lived or worked in Chester (and had no affiliation with Widener). Some students sought out local professionals in their field of study, others scheduled times to meet with local government officials, while others interviewed individuals they encountered at the bus stop or at a corner business. The critical component was that students move outside their comfort zone and into new cultural spaces to observe people who speak, think, or act differently than they do.

To kick off the project, students wrote an in-class reflection on what they know or believe to know about the city of Chester and the people who live there. They were then asked to analyze the foundations of this knowledge questioning narratives their understandings may or may not perpetuate. They completed a community mapping assignment and readings about Chester to lend historical and demographic context to the project. The next class session was spent in the lobby of the university auditorium, a space on campus that hosts “Connections: A Timeline of Our History,” a life-size historical timeline exhibit depicting events in the city of Chester alongside university milestones. The historical photographs and documents served not only as a starting point for identifying a person to interview but also as a conversational common ground students could reference when conducting interviews with individuals from Chester.

Students of anthropology study cultural, ethnic, racial, or linguistic “others” but in turn also learn about self as this knowledge is applied through reflection. At the center of this experiential learning experience are discussions and reflection assignments on issues of positionality, privilege, power, and representation. During class students explored and assessed forms of representation in ethnographic works and examples of visual storytelling projects such as Brandon Stanton’s *Humans of New York* (2013) and A&E’s Look Closer campaign. Students grappled with questions such as, how much of what we see is influenced simply by our presence as an observer?

How much of what we think we know about “others” is informed by our own implicit biases that we bring to the field? How do we recognize and engage with these biases as we interact with others in social justice work? How do we follow the ethical principle of do no harm? These questions are intrinsically tied to the anthropological practice of ethnographic fieldwork and are imperative questions to discuss when directing students into the field whether at home or abroad.

Upon completing their interviews students returned to campus to transcribe their interview data, and qualitatively code for overarching themes in their work. With partners they identified several quotes or excerpts that they found to be impactful or elicit an emotional response. Near the end of the semester students presented their work displaying the photograph of their interviewee and reading their selected quotes to the class. Peer feedback was provided on each students’ work to assist in selecting a final excerpt to include in the collective work.

Next, students organized the profiles into a cohesive storyline on the walls of the classroom based on varying themes present in the interview data such as loss, triumph, gun violence, life dreams, or the mundane. They later shared selected interviewee profiles and stories on university social media in conjunction with students in the communications program to provide an ethnographic depiction of the interesting people and stories that make up the social fabric of Chester. Impressive examples included a female fire-fighter breaking gender barriers at the local ladder, a friendly neighborhood bartender, a Chinese immigrant restaurant worker, an alumnus of the Pennsylvania Military College, local school children on their bikes, artists, a factory worker, a single mother, and many others. As students collectively built the storyline they grappled with questions of representation, stereotypes and positionality.

A Global Field Experience In Costa Rica To Bring It All Home

A cultural immersion spring break trip created an additional experiential learning experience for undergraduate students in Costa Rica, a country where the author has conducted research for over 10 years. This was an ambitious 9-day trip executed in conjunction with the Office of Global and Civic Engagement of Widener University. Rooted in the same context and project objectives, a global field-work experience was developed to capstone learning

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from the introductory course. The international field experience was intended to underscore the interconnectedness of human lived realities and the value of applying this lens to different cultural contexts.

By the time the small group of students arrived in Costa Rica they had already crafted a critical lens to interpret differences they observed in course material and in the community of Chester. This experiential learning opportunity entailed exposure to a foreign culture, language, and peoples through direct contact with community members and local leaders/organizations. Purposeful planning challenged students' worldviews through exposure to "difficult differences" related to race, power, inequalities, and human rights. Students traveled to different regions of the country where the author facilitated their welcome into local community settings such as private homes, schools, farms, production facilities, and rural development organizations. Students sampled home-cooked Costa Rican food and learned how families live off the land. They explored sustainability, grappled with exploitative labor practices, and saw first-hand the environmental degradation of invasive pineapple farming through the eyes of local organic agricultural producers. They attended a rodeo, volunteered in a community kitchen, and shared games and active play with school children at recess. Their reflective video-recorded testimonials during and after the trip express integrative student cultural competency and knowledge through in-depth recognition of similarities/differences between different cultural practices and worldviews. The footage was compiled into a film highlighting students' experiences and debuted at Widener University as part of a student presentation.

Outcomes

My experiential learning approach was driven by the intent of exposing students to difference to facilitate the growth of a justice-oriented student toolkit. By pairing the experience of cultural, racial, and linguistic "others" with an anthropological lens that critically engages with systemic roots of inequalities, students connect social issues in their backyard to ones around the world, whether that be environmental degradation, racism, poverty, or access to clean water. The real-world examples that exist at home and abroad serve as connecting nodes in a more nuanced cultural competency, self-awareness, and critical cosmopolitanism (Birk, 2014). In this sense, the described experiential learning approach and practices featured in this work are examples of building a bridge to new cultural and social spheres located in neighborhood surroundings and in other parts of the world.

Without the impetus of the project, most students would not have ventured off campus to explore the city of Chester. Based on pre- and post-reflections of both experiential learning experiences, students expressed satisfaction in learning about new places and spaces. The most prominent theme in student reflections was a newfound connection to local communities and an appreciation for the commonality of lived human experiences and social phenomenon in diverse settings. One student wrote, "I was struck by the fact that even though we as students often come from other cities and states, we share a lot in common with Chester residents." Another student on the Costa Rican trip expressed: "Being on this trip really just drove home the experience of being immersed in a different culture, learning about the different people that live here and really learning that we aren't so different no matter where you live."

In some cases, the project interviews led to deeper ties to the community. For example, a priest at a nearby church came to campus to meet with an interfaith group, a NGO leader hired a student as an intern, and a local business owner of a donut shop was quite pleased to see Widener students show up for baked goods. The People of Chester Project also led to several undergraduate research opportunities in which student assistants digitized, indexed, and coded the data. The People of Chester research data was presented at a High Impact Practice Fair at the university during which community member photographs and interview quotes were shared in a public format.

Conclusions for Teaching and Learning

Conducting these experiential learning opportunities, in particular the People of Chester Project, at an introductory level with non-anthropology majors, was a productive learning endeavor but it was not without its challenges. The project requires a lot of pedagogical scaffolding so students don't get overwhelmed with the ethnographic component. Questions and anxieties abounded, especially when students were identifying and locating interviewees and crafting interview questions. Entire class sessions were devoted to interview strategies and developing interview topics.

Similarly, at the start of each class, several minutes were reserved to touch base, provide updates or identify any roadblocks that students were encountering. Obstacles would be presented and then opened to the floor for discussion of possible solutions. As this project is a microcosm of in-depth, and long-term ethnographic research, when students shared their inevitable challenges it served as a group learning opportunity to highlight the realities of doing ethnographic research.

For example, it was common to hear students assert that they couldn't contact their desired interviewee. Upon further examination, it was often revealed that they only tried outreach via email. Asking the class how this would be addressed in a long-term ethnographic project, classmates suggested going there to speak with the person at different times of the day. Working through these pain points together allowed me to realize that students were learning other important skills in this experiential learning project as well. For example, it teaches persistence and boundaries around research expectations, how to frame and present the intent of one's work, recruit a prospective research participant and how to relate to participants in their role as university students.

Developing this project to scale is another challenge. After several semesters of sending students out into the community, many would return to the same people and places asking for interviews. One example of this was the city police station where officers were understaffed and overly taxed with patrolling and administrative duties. On more than one occasion the chief of police invited students into his office for the interview component of the project. When this came to light, I paused the project and have since created a database and stricter guidelines for students to use when selecting a potential interviewee.

Action Plan / Next Steps

Conducting in-person ethnographic research came to a grinding halt during the Covid-19 pandemic. As we begin to return to normal, I will assess the feasibility of continuing the People of Chester project utilizing the new database to avoid overburdening the Chester community.

When in-person research is possible again, my next step is to seek community partners who may be interested in collaborating on special topics or partaking in co-authored ethnographic visual productions. I also plan to develop this project into a service-learning course with new components directed at giving more back to community participants and potential partners. A further goal is to ultimately identify a permanent platform or location on campus to exhibit the People of Chester images and stories. A visual display of this ethnographic project would underscore the boundary-crossing objective of this project by moving faces and stories beyond the Chester-Widener divide, reminding students that a start to bridging racial and social frontiers is to move beyond the familiar and confront experiences of difference with a critical lens. ■

Notes

1. Known as the four-field approach, the subfields of anthropology are: (1) Archaeology, (2) Biological/Physical anthropology, (3) Linguistic anthropology, and (4) socio-cultural anthropology (Guest, 2020).

2. The term "ally" here is used not only because I identify as an educated, white, cis-gendered woman and thus embodying the privileges of such a position, but also because following Crenshaw (1989), I understand all identities to be multidimensional and of varying-privileges intersecting along lines of race, nationality, economic status, language, physical ability, religion, sexuality, gender, etc.

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