Course Number/Title ANTH 011 Cultural Anthropology

GE Area D1

Results reported for AY 2014-2015  
# of sections: 7  
# of instructors: 5

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Department Chair: Chuck Darrah  
College: Social Sciences

Instructions: Each year, the department will prepare a brief (two page maximum) report that documents the assessment of the course during the year. This report will be electronically submitted, by the department chair, to the Office of Undergraduate Studies, with an electronic copy to the home college by September 1 of the following academic year.

Part 1

To be completed by the course coordinator:

(1) What SLO(s) were assessed for the course during the AY?

Student Learning Objective #2: Students shall be able to identify and analyze the social dimension of society as a context for human life, the processes of social change and social continuity, the role of human agency in those social processes, and the forces that engender social cohesion and fragmentation. Students will be able to place contemporary developments in cultural, historical, environmental, and spatial contexts.

(2) What were the results of the assessment of this course? What were the lessons learned from the assessment?

The instructors adopted an Ethnography of Ritual assignment to help students develop ethnographic skills in identifying the contexts in which focal phenomena occur. The exercise teaches students skills in the conceptualization, organization, collection, and analysis of qualitative research material. Specifically, it asks students to: 1) conceptualize a research question about a specific ritual activity; 2) develop and articulate research methods by which they can answer that research question; 3) collect qualitative research data through anthropological field research; and 4) analyze those data. Students draw on a variety of ritual exercises that they choose on their own or in consultation with faculty: from formalized rituals like weddings or other rites of passage; to ordinary, banal, and often unconscious everyday behaviors and patterns like watching TV or scrolling through Instagram like a modern-day rosary. Through their research, students learn to locate and unpack key symbols articulated either explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, in the behaviors they observed. And/or students learn to watch the unspoken and habitual elements of ordinary life. As such, they learn the anthropological habit of “making the strange familiar and the strange familiar,” as well as develop a working understanding of the ways that cultural commonsense and social institutions organize everyday life.

While some students focused simply on the breach between what people say and what people do, others focused on rites of passage that confer new identities on social subjects; some focus on the gap between the intended effects of an institution and its actual benefit to its target population, and what might be done to improve outcomes; while still others focus on the forms of power, discrimination, and social difference – processes of inclusion and exclusion — coded in ritual behavior. Thus, this exercise was oriented particularly towards giving students tools for understand how identities (e.g., religious, gender, ethnic, racial, class, sexual orientation, disability, and/or age) are shaped by cultural and societal influences within contexts of equality and inequality.

Qualitative research skills – and particularly ethnographic research skills – are increasingly highly regarded across a range of fields: scholarly, business, health, government, etc. However, qualitative research is a term that hides the wide range of creative intellectual, methodological, and visionary processes that come into alignment in a well-crafted study. Based on our experience with students in ANTH 011 it became clear to us that students still require extended exposure to cross-cultural and historical examples of cultural difference in order to perform the necessary steps of intellectual distancing from habitual practices and ingrained cultural ideologies. In
other words, the traditional, cosmopolitan intention of anthropology — learning to see one's own perspective as one among many — is not a luxury or an anachronistic, scholarly extravagance. Rather, the broad-minded and multi-perspectival aspect of cross-cultural knowledge is a key engine of innovative qualitative analysis. The hurdles that our students encountered in this regard relate more closely to a lack of experience with challenging texts, lack of practice writing, and an educational culture too closely regimented, that thereby refuses students the intellectual space necessary for creative problem solving.

(3) What modifications to the course, or its assessment activities or schedule, are planned for the upcoming year? (If no modifications are planned, the course coordinator should indicate this.)

There are no plans to change assignments or assessment of this SLO, only to support it with further attention to the cross-cultural data that helps students relativize their experiences and to “step back” from the contexts of familiar activities.

Part 2

To be completed by the department chair (with input from course coordinator as appropriate):

(4) Are all sections of the course still aligned with the area Goals, Student Learning Objectives (SLOs), Content, Support, and Assessment? If they are not, what actions are planned?

This assignment is quite standard in introductory cultural anthropology courses and variants of it have long been used in this course. The assignments and assessment are clearly linked to the SLO and to the larger goals of social analysis. The instructors meet to discuss assignments, study guides, discussion prompts, etc. and I am confident that the classes are taught comparably and that the SLO is being assessed in a way that supports continuous adaptation to a changing student population.

(5) If this course is in a GE Area with a stated enrollment limit (Areas A1, A2, A3, C2, D1, R, S, V, & Z), please indicate how oral presentations will be evaluated with larger sections (Area A1), or how practice and revisions in writing will be addressed with larger sections, particularly how students are receiving thorough feedback on the writing which accounts for the minimum word count in this GE category (Areas A2, A3, C2, D1, R, S, V, & Z) and, for the writing intensive courses (A2, A3, and Z), documentation that the students are meeting the GE GELOs for writing.

The anthropology department is addressing practice and revisions in writing with larger sections of ANTH 011 in the following ways: (1) by employing a mutually supportive teaching team that includes a stable group of experienced instructors; (2) by coordinating construction of assignments that facilitate efficient assessment of student work, including assessment of student writing; and (3) by developing increasingly streamlined procedures for providing feedback to students in a timely fashion. If provided with adequate resources (which do not currently exist), the anthropology department would welcome the opportunity to hire graduate assistants to help support assessment of student writing.