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COMMENTARY

Teaching Ethnographic Research Methods in the Time of COVID-19: Virtual Field Trips, a Web Symposium, and Public Engagement with Asian American Communities in Houston, Texas

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Abstract

This article presents a detailed description of how I adapted an undergraduate ethnographic research methods course to a fully online format during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on my recent experience designing and teaching a new course titled Ethnographic Research in/of Houston Asia in Fall 2020 at Rice University, I illustrate the virtual learning environment I maintained in this course through ongoing collaboration with members of the Zoroastrian, Sikh, and Chinese Buddhist communities in Houston, Texas. Specifically, this article describes how I incorporated virtual field trips and a web symposium – two activities that I organized with the support of Rice University’s Course Development Grant – into my teaching of ethnography on Zoom. Such online activities, which are by necessity intensively interactive and community-oriented, enabled the course to cultivate a deep level of public engagement that arguably would not have been possible in the pre-COVID-19 period.

Keywords: *Ethnographic field methods; online teaching; COVID-19; Houston; Asian Studies*

Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to anthropology, which is strongly based on ethnographic fieldwork for its disciplinary identity. As the president of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Danilyn Rutherford (2020), has noted, “The kinds of field methods for which we’re famous [as anthropologists] have become largely impossible,” mostly due to the travel restrictions and social distancing rules that have been enforced to mitigate the global spread of the virus. As most anthropologists no longer travel around the world and must indefinitely suspend in-person forms of field research, COVID-19 has, indeed, created an epistemological crisis in anthropology revolving around one key question: Can online research be considered ethnographic? More and more literature – mostly short essays and blog articles – has been

debating this question, exploring the possibilities and limitations of virtual ethnographic methods such as online interviews and digital storytelling (e.g., Hine 2020; Hooker 2020; Winter 2021). This debate has also reinvigorated ongoing discussions on what Daniel Miller calls “digital anthropology,” exploring the extent to which digital research methods could become a major research tool, not simply a tool that complements traditional forms of ethnographic fieldwork (Miller 2018). These two bodies of literature have made a significant contribution as researchers experiment, revisit, and critique a range of digital approaches and skills that anthropologists have acquired, developed, and used before and during the time of COVID-19 (e.g., Lupton 2020). Nonetheless, this strong focus on moving research online is less useful in informing how the everyday teaching of ethnographic field methods – especially at the undergraduate level and for non-anthropology majors – can be moved fully online as well (cf. Wesch 2020).

This article aims to fill this knowledge gap by offering a model for teaching undergraduate-level ethnographic field methods on an online platform. Drawing on my recent experience designing and teaching a new undergraduate course titled *Ethnographic Research in/of Houston Asia* at Rice University, this article presents the details of how I adapted this ethnographic methods course to a fully online format during the COVID-19 pandemic. I describe the virtual learning environment that I created and maintained for this course through ongoing collaboration with several members of the Zoroastrian,¹ Sikh, and Chinese Buddhist communities in Houston, Texas. Specifically, this article shows how virtual fieldtrips and a web symposium – two types of activities that I organized with the support of a Rice University Course Development Grant – were incorporated into my teaching on Zoom. Such online activities, which are by necessity interactive and community-oriented, enabled the course to cultivate a deep level of public engagement that arguably would not have been possible in the pre-COVID-19 period.

Course Plan Development

I finalized the original plan for *Ethnographic Research in/of Houston Asia*, which was intended to be taught in person, in February 2020, right before the global spread of COVID-19. Trained as a sociocultural anthropologist of Hong Kong, China, and India, I designed this ethnographic research methods class for the interdisciplinary B.A. in Asian Studies program. The course was designed to offer a semester-long training on ethnographic research and was open to all of Rice University’s undergraduate students, particularly those who had no previous training in anthropology or in qualitative research methods in the social sciences and humanities. As I wrote in the course proposal,

¹ Zoroastrians are also known as “Zarathushtis” and – for those with South Asian heritages – as “Parsee” (Hinnells 2005). In the course, I conceptualized Zoroastrians in Houston as part of the West Asian diaspora, drawing on the encompassing notion of “West Asia” to capture their ancestral origin in today’s Iran, their long-standing connections with various parts of Asia, and their ongoing global dispersal (Marsden and Mostowlansky 2019).

Ethnographic Research in/of Houston Asia aims to provide students with an interdisciplinary and methodological training in ethnographic research in/of Asia across a wide range of settings. It is designed for Rice students (1) majoring in Asian Studies; (2) considering declaring Asian Studies as their major; and (3) non-Asian Studies students interested in learning more about ethnographic research, qualitative research methods, sociocultural anthropology, and Asian Studies who might be able to take it as a Distribution 2 (credits for general education in Social Sciences). No prerequisite knowledge is required for this course. Students do not need any background in Asian Studies, sociocultural anthropology, or ethnographic research to do well in this course.

Like other courses in my department, the enrollment in my course was capped at 15. In addition to ensuring that students would receive a good quality of attention in the course, this number allowed me to give at least four sessions of one-to-one supervision to each student as they developed their ethnographic project on an Asian American community.

To accommodate the interdisciplinary interests of the students, I set the pedagogical goals of the course rather generally and broadly, as follows: (1) to learn ethnographic field methods that can be applied in a wide range of contexts, especially for students' own study interests; and (2) to promote local research engagement with various Asian American communities in Houston through several course activities outside the classroom. I anticipated that students would take full advantage of studying and living in the city of Houston, which has one of the largest, fastest-growing, and most diverse Asian populations in the U.S. (Binkovitz 2016). As such, Houston offered an ideal field site for acquiring hands-on ethnographic skills and knowledge.

Specifically, I proposed convening three outreach activities that would enable the students to meet the Asian American communities in Houston, including (1) three weekend field trips to a Zoroastrian temple, a Sikh temple, and a Chinese Buddhist temple where students would have the chance to interact with members of different Asian American communities in Houston; (2) a half-day campus tour organized by the students and myself that would bring members of Asian American communities to visit Rice University; and (3) a small-scale student forum in which students would present their research projects to an invited panel of community leaders and long-time members of local Asian American communities. The Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL) – a Rice University initiative that seeks to promote innovative teaching practices addressing the sociocultural, historical, and political dimensions of peoples' lives in Houston – awarded me a Course Development Grant in April 2020. This grant was to fund all the proposed activities, particularly the transportation costs that would be incurred between the campus and the field sites.

The course proposal was approved by my university, but I still had concerns about actually teaching the course. One of my foremost concerns was what students could

critically learn from the field trips, which would be largely constrained by the ephemeral and sporadic nature of intercultural encounters. Drawing on his experience of bringing U.S. liberal arts college students to Southeast Asia for short-term study-abroad programs, anthropologist Barkin (2018) provides a critical stance on this question. The outcome-obsessed management in neoliberalized higher education, as Barkin warns, often makes short-term visiting programs susceptible to reproducing colonial ideologies and the Orientalist gaze on Asian “Others” in and beyond the classroom. These trips do not necessarily help students cultivate a critical awareness of the largely hidden structure of power inequalities, which have been deeply shaped by such encounters. In another article, Barkin (2014) proposes that one of the best ways to mitigate such pitfalls is to adopt what he calls “the extended semester” approach – that is, to provide students with a semester-long training in the classroom before sending them out for the study-abroad program the next semester. While I agree with Barkin’s two-semester approach of dovetailing field study with pre-field classroom teaching, I doubted whether I could do the same. Several factors made it extremely challenging, if not entirely impossible, to replicate Barkin’s model in my course, namely, (1) the diverse study interests of my students, most of whom were new to ethnographic approaches; (2) the very complex and different backgrounds of the three Asian American communities that we were going to study; and most importantly, (3) the requirement that the course be run on a very tight one-semester schedule with no possibility of being extended. So, the weekend field trips that I was to organize in Houston could only be a pedagogical compromise, which was far from what I would consider the most effective teaching strategy in de-essentializing students’ imaginations of “Asia” and “Asian American communities” in Houston.

Moving the Course Fully Online

The world changed significantly after the course proposal was approved in March 2020. My home department moved every class fully online, and in July 2020 it became clear to me that it would be impossible to teach my fall semester class on campus, not to mention organize any field site visits, campus tours, or student research forum on and off campus. As it turned out, the suspension of any type of in-person activities, particularly the field trips, did not reduce the course enrollment. In fact, nine students registered for the course, which is considered a strong enrollment at my university. Based on the online survey I conducted in week 1, I found that my students were diverse in terms of year of study (the course had seniors, sophomores, and first-year students), major (Asian Studies, Biochemistry, Visual and Dramatic Arts, and Computer Science, to name a few), and research interests (gender, religious practices, arts, social movements, and organization studies, among others). I also found that very few of the students had previous training in ethnographic field methods and only one had fieldwork experience in Houston. This was very close to my expectations when I designed the course.

In addition to preparing to transition the weekly class meetings to a remote teaching format, I also had to communicate closely with my research contacts in the Zoroastrian,

Sikh, and Chinese Buddhist communities in Houston. Specifically, I had to see whether we could work together to move the field trips and symposium fully online.

Several members of the three communities, with great enthusiasm, agreed to co-organize the virtual field trips with me. All of them had already become familiar with interacting with people on Zoom, so they did not expect to have any technical issues joining our Zoom class meetings. Having lived in Houston for a few decades and having been active members in their communities' affairs and events, they offered to give guest lectures and take part in discussions during the virtual field trips, helping students to understand the historical and contemporary formation of their communities in Houston. They also promised to help connect my students with other members of their communities, especially those who could be interviewed by my students for their own ethnographic projects, after the field trips.



Figure 1. Virtual field trip to the Zoroastrian Temple in Houston with Kaemerz Dotiwala from the Zoroastrian Association of Houston, one of the guest speakers (September 2020)

The basic format of each virtual fieldwork session was as follows: (1) the guest speaker gave a 20-minute talk on the general profile of their community and also presented pictures and short videos that were recently taken at their religious sites in Houston (see Figure 1); and (2) students asked questions related to their projects, thereby engaging in discussions with the guest speakers on a range of topics. This format allowed us to spend much time exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on the speakers' lives and their views on the recent rise of anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic. The field trips also enabled the guest speakers to become more familiar with the ethnographic projects of each of my

students, thereby helping every student to find at least two people to interview for their ethnographic projects.

Cross-Community Interactions through the Online Symposium

It should be highlighted that the community members joining our class as guest speakers had been the key figures responsible for adapting meditation classes, Sunday school for children, and other major activities in their communities to a fully online format (see Lorea 2020 for a similar observation in Asia). In other words, these speakers had been at the forefront of helping Houston's Asian American communities cope with the everyday challenges brought by COVID-19. In this sense, what they had been doing in this regard can be discovered by ethnographic methods. So, rather accidentally, setting up virtual field trips in this fashion gave the class a coherent and timely ethnographic theme. This helped my students, who also had a strong interest in the social and political consequences of COVID-19, to appreciate the ongoing importance of intercommunity understanding in Houston during the pandemic. In fact, most of my students chose to develop their project papers on topics related to COVID-19.

In order to fully realize the potential of this unintended convergence, I decided to actively expand the public engagement of the course. In so doing, I organized two activities as follows: (1) I co-ran an Instagram page with my students on which we posted regular updates about our lives during the lockdown, the field trips, and other activities (see <https://www.instagram.com/riceu.houston.asia.2020/>); and (2) I convened a web symposium in which my students presented their ethnographic projects to the general public (see Figure 2).

These virtual activities combined two on-campus events that could no longer be convened, namely, the campus tour and the small-scale, in-class student forum. But, precisely because of the new virtual format, I was able to facilitate a significantly higher rate of participation from the Asian American communities in the area than I had anticipated.

The Instagram page made the course updates accessible to everyone, but it was the web symposium that successfully created a deep level of public engagement. As it turned out, 62 people registered to join the web symposium and about 40 people were present in the Zoom room at the symposium's peak time. Twenty-nine people – most of them members of the three Asian American communities, as well as university researchers and students – stayed for three hours in the web symposium, actively asking questions and sharing information. If this had been an on-campus activity, I believe it would have been extremely difficult to have a similarly high number of participants since most people would have needed to drive to the university from different parts of Houston.

RICE Chao Center for Asian Studies

ASIA 305 RICE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ONLINE RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

Ethnographic Research in/of Houston Asia

- 9 student ethnographic project presentations, based on fieldwork in/of Houston
- 3 Asian-American communities covered - Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and Chinese/Buddhists
- 3 panel discussions + 3 discussants + 1 keynote address by Rev. Gregory Han

Rev. Gregory Han
Director of Interfaith Relations & Education
Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston

November 23 (Monday) 2020
6:00pm-8:00pm CST
Fully Online by ZOOM; RSVP @ChaoCenter webpage

The symposium is convened by Dr. Ka-Kin Cheuk (ka-kin.cheuk@rice.edu) and is generously sponsored by the CERCL Course Development Grant

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Figure 2. The web symposium flyer (created by the author)

The symposium began with nine presentations given by my students; these presentations featured their ethnographic projects based on literature reviews, field trips, and interviews under my supervision. Chi-mei Lin, the CEO of the Chinese Community Center in Houston, Kaemerz Dotiwala, a representative from the Zoroastrian Association of Houston, and Sahil Warsi, an independent anthropologist who has worked with Afghan Sikh migrants in India, were invited as discussants for the presentations. This arrangement helped the students receive extensive comments on their presentations from the leaders of local Asian American communities and from an expert in migration studies. Students found these comments useful in revising their papers after the symposium. The symposium ended with a keynote address given by Reverend Gregory Han. Reverend Han has worked with the three Asian American communities studied in the class in his interfaith projects for many years. As such, the web symposium enabled many Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Chinese Buddhists, and other Asian Americans – who could rarely all meet at one event – to have cross-community interactions that benefited greatly from the keynote address and students’ project presentations on a coherent theme.

I received encouraging feedback from my students in the course evaluations. Students acknowledged that the field trips, symposium, and project supervision – despite the course’s makeshift online format – were instrumental in helping them to learn about ethnographic research methods. One student wrote in their evaluation, “Despite the limitations of online teaching, the course being newer, and the core of the course’s design being around ethnography, Professor Cheuk was able to educate students and provide an enthralling experience.” One student “loved the virtual ‘field trips’ and [getting] to interact with actual members of the Houston religious community.” Another student added that the online class “was very fun and rewarding” because they “had the opportunity to interact with and interview people from the Houston community on our own chosen topics.”

Conclusion

A course taught in such a format is certainly not without problems. For instance, it remains extremely difficult for such a course to overcome the so-called “digital divide” in knowledge production since we do not have the means to approach people who are not using virtual communications. Nonetheless, cultivating a deep level of public engagement in an ethnographic methods course, as this article illustrates, is possible and can be very productive, particularly so in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. A virtual learning environment such as Zoom provides an inclusive space that enables course instructors, students, and a large number of members of the general public to learn from each other, in this case with a shared concern about COVID-19 and its disruptions to each of our normal lives. There has been no sign that COVID-19 will disappear anytime soon in most parts of the world, even by the time of this writing (June 2021). As it would remain a challenge to organize in-person field activities due to the ongoing pandemic, we should continue to explore other options. This article illustrates that innovative virtual events such as the virtual field trips and the web symposium can be organized to help students learn about ethnographic field methods, enabling them to explore the unique strength of ethnography in cultivating public engagement in the time of COVID-19.

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