

Anthropology Curriculum Revision & Course Development

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“What is decolonization? [...] At base, decolonization involves taking seriously the critiques and theories of anthropology's peripheral allies, such as feminist activists and policy makers. It also incorporates the idea that global racial apartheid is the foundation of social, economic, and gender inequality, which is now known as structural oppression or structural racism. Decolonization entails looking beyond the colonizers' perspectives and using the frames of reference of those being studied. It also raises questions about how researchers deal with the “Other,” that is, those who differ from the researcher, and their role in shaping anthropological knowledge. [...] Overall, decolonization is about bringing to light subtle aspects of the process that can be easily missed. To decolonize anthropology means to recognize and confront the discipline's colonial legacies, which have led to the marginalization and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge.” (Bolles 2023: 519)

The abridged quote above captures various strands that encompass recent calls in anthropology to “decolonize” the field at the levels of epistemology, pedagogy, and methodology. While appeals to confront anthropology’s literal and figurative colonial pasts are now decades old (Harrison 1991), the current moment has been appreciably different. Various impulses of anti-racism (particularly after the murder of George Floyd), labor issues in the academy, and the changing demographics and learning needs of students, among other catalysts, have all lent a certain urgency to the moment. What sets this more recent call to action apart is, arguably, a more systematic approach – addressing how decolonization can impact areas of epistemology (including canon formation), pedagogy, and methodology (how we conduct research and instruct students in anthropological research methods) (See Savage Minds 2016). Many anthropology departments globally have met this challenge by adding specific courses on decolonization and curricular revisions, as well the adoption of public-facing mission and value statements.

Over the spring term 2024, the Anthropology Department received a PIG to explore ways to “decolonize” our department and program. We combined this general effort with some very specific curricular goals. As stated in our PIG proposal, we sought “to revise our required courses for the major: ANTH-101, -201, and -301, to better align the sequencing of these courses, and to structure required courses to provide students with a conceptual and methodological toolkit that prepares them for senior assessment.” This latter goal was prompted by our recent reconfiguration of the major (principally the reinstatement of our theory course, Anthro 301 (formally 318, “History and Theory of Anthropology”), and a recent decision to NOT require students electing our ES-Anthropology major to take 201 (our fundamentals of cultural anthropology class). We also decided upon this goal based on the findings of our recent departmental

external review conducted in fall 2024. In particular, we wished to address one of the main concerns of the report, that “[t]he curriculum needs an overhaul to better reflect (a) the current faculty, (b) recent developments in cultural anthropology, as well as (c) to do a better job of preparing students for their senior thesis or capstone project [...]. Specifically, the review team pointed out a problem of “content overlap between 101 and 201,” an issue we had already identified as a department yet had not systematically worked to ameliorate.

It is maybe unnecessary to say that this was an ambitious pedagogical inquiry project. Working on a decolonization plan OR revising our core classes would have been suitable stand-alone semester length endeavors. Thus, we feel like our work this semester was only a start to meeting our goals. That said, we met various times over the course of the semester for short (1-2 hour) meetings, along with a final longer session to assess our work and plan for the future. We read a number of recent articles and statements about current decolonization efforts in anthropology, with an eye toward assessing the possibilities and pitfalls of different approaches. (See PIG proposal for a sample of those readings.) We also collectively read Amitav Ghosh’s imaginative travel memoir/ethnography *In an Antique Land* as a way to historicize and think critically about the current decolonization project in anthropology. We ultimately felt combining these tasks – the curricular overhaul with decolonization efforts – afforded a productive synergy to our work.

Below we list a number of our main tasks, any outcomes that came out of the PIG, and future action items, where appropriate.

1. We considered the merits of having a departmental mission statement/statement of goals that would, in part, reflect a decolonization report. We also considered where this statement would be placed (e.g., website, syllabi). We determined that instead of a mission statement, we would take the decolonization values and incorporate them into a revised set of learning goals. Next steps: revamp learning goals as a department AND in conjunction with student input. Come up with new learning goals in conversation with students during a departmental event in Fall 2024, asking students what they think the mission or purpose of Anthropology should be.
2. We looked at various versions of our 101 (Becoming Human) gateway course syllabi, as offered by different faculty. Each professor teaching this course has free rein to teach the course as they choose even though we all cover a series of shared themes. While we agree that there should be faculty autonomy in how to teach this course, we agreed that we should strive to have 1 or 2 shared texts each year. (So far this has happened organically in the case of 1 text.) Next steps: Read and generate a list of common texts that can be used in this class.
3. Revamping 201 (Fundamentals of Cultural Anthropology). As 201 reverts back to a more basic introduction to cultural anthropology as we move its previous emphasis on anthropological theory to 301, we probed ways to make this class more skills-based, particularly focused on ethnographic methods. While the course will inevitably introduce theoretical concepts, this emphasis will be tertiary. Instead, 201 will focus on the anthropological concept of “culture” – its historical development and ongoing critiques of its relevance and utility and on ethnography as

both the main genre form of the discipline and as method. We spent considerable time on the latter focus, where we devised a number of small assignments that could lead to larger semester-long ethnographic projects (including basic methods, such as interviews, participant observation, field observations, material analysis, etc.). Our goal would be to make these assignments consistent across every iteration of this course. We also talked about (but did not devise) ways this class could also introduce students to public anthropology. Students would be required to transform some portion of their ethnographic projects using different kinds of genres of representation for public audiences, such as podcasts or artistic productions. Next steps: Concretize the ethnographic assignments and public anthropology component. Correspondingly, Professors Pribilsky and Blavascunas will develop a similar skills curriculum for ES-Anthropology students who do not have to take 201.

4. Re-assessing our theory course. This class has only been taught once in its current form (Anthropology 301). Theory classes tend to be taught from a historical, genealogical perspective (aka “the march of theorists”). This approach of how one theoretical development may morph into or supplant another theory is a legible way to explain to students the importance of theory in anthropology. However, it is not amenable to decolonization approaches. It often reflects an official (i.e., white male) record of theoretical developments. Moreover, approaches to just add marginalized voices to the historical march ends up feeling tokenizing, and in some cases is impossible for a 15-week course. In general, it’s not advised to try to teach the whole expanse of the history of anthropological theory. In its place, we explored a new model that would be ethnography-based whereby students would read a curated selection of new texts that are particularly theory-forward – cutting edge in theoretical applications, but also historically linked to past theoretical concerns of the discipline. With students, these texts would be explored in terms of their own theoretical merits and how they are building on past trends. Next steps: Professors Yuan and Pribilsky will meet with Professor Serin who is teaching this course in the fall to discuss ways portions of this approach might be implemented along with her own pedagogical style and goals.

5. Organization and Historical Memory. As we seek to make our core courses both “rhyme” from instructor to instructor and be coherently scaffolded, we see the need to have a better archive of what each of us is doing in these courses. To that end, we have set up a Canvas page to store syllabi and developed a Google Doc to keep a running list of proven classroom-worthy ethnographies arranged topically (with keywords).

As is clear from this report, there is still considerable work to be done to meet the twin goals outlined above. In addition to the next steps outlined above, we also did not have time to thoughtfully consider how well our 101-201-301 sequence is preparing students for their capstone projects. (We’ll likely take up that task during our departmental meetings over the course of the year.)

References

Bolles, A. Lynn. "Decolonizing anthropology: An ongoing process." *American Ethnologist* 50, no. 3 (2023): 519-522.

Harrison, Faye (1991) *Decolonizing Anthropology*. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.

"Decolonizing Anthropology" (Series) Accessed at:
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