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Introducing Contemporary Anthropology: A Team-Taught Course for Large Classes

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Introducing Contemporary Anthropology: A Team-Taught Course for Large Classes

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The author describes a method of teaching large sections of introductory anthropology by members of the anthropology faculty giving their best lectures. Initiating, operating, and evaluating the course is discussed. INTRODUCTORY ANTHROPOLOGY; LARGE CLASSES; TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY; TEAM-TEACHING.

By 1975, anthropology's decline in popularity among undergraduate students was certain. Through special reports in the *American Anthropologist* and the *Anthropology Newsletter*, we at the University of Pittsburgh learned that our experience was shared widely within the discipline. But not until our university administration adopted a policy of cost-effectiveness, measured by classroom body counts, did the anthropology faculty's concern turn from mild to acute. The administration's sanctions for low class enrollments and few majors were perceived as threatening both the department's viability and the comfortable working conditions to which individuals had become accustomed. This galvanized and united the faculty like nothing previously. We knew we had to attract more students to our courses and that this could be done only by drawing from class enrollments in other departments. But how?

The solution came in late 1976 when we learned of a highly successful, team-taught course developed by Sherwood Lingenfelter at SUNY, Brockport. Its appeal to large numbers of students appeared to lie in a format that juxtaposed lectures with formal debates and informal discussions as well as in the timely relevance of its topics; e.g., race and intelligence, ecological crises, American interventions overseas. The Brockport course also was attractive because it seemed to meet our objectives to (1) introduce students to examining contemporary issues from an anthropological perspective; (2) challenge students to view contemporary events with a cross-cultural perspective in order to enhance and broaden their understanding of local and international affairs; (3) acquaint students with the anthropology faculty; and, not least, (4) attract large numbers of undergraduates to sample the anthropology curriculum. We adapted the Brockport model for our faculty and students. I present the results here to encourage others to do the same, but to avoid the problems of our initial trial-and-error efforts.

Initiating the Course

No course on this scale had been attempted previously on our campus. So, while most faculty favored attempting the experiment, this was tempered with ambivalence. Some argued that the logistics of organization were exceedingly great and that the course required special funds that were not available in the departmental budget. These objections were met when I agreed to assume the organizational and administrative responsibilities of the course as part of my normal teaching load, and when I had received informal reassurance from our dean that needed funds would be supplied.

A few faculty objected that their presentation time would not be compensated with money or a reduction of course load because of the few hours involved. These faculty were swayed, or their objections muted, when it was argued that the experience could be self-serving. Since each instructor would offer one or two lectures on topics he or she chose as personal favorites, these lectures could be presented with flair and enthusiasm that should evoke favorable responses from students, who then would be stimulated to enroll in that instructor's classes. If the course went well, the individual benefit also would benefit the department through increased enrollments in upper division courses.

Faculty support—or at least approval—having been achieved, I began to organize the course. A memo to members of the department requested information on how each participant would contribute. I requested financial support to cover the cost of graduate student teaching assistants, secretarial assistance, duplicating reading materials, and miscellaneous supplies.

We justified the use of these funds as follows. The course was feasible only on a grand scale. It required 300-400 students who would have to be attracted to it by directed publicity, as it had not been offered

previously. There were to be two one-hour lecture periods each week. Discussion sections of approximately twenty students would comprise the third hour. This created sixteen discussion sections, and that, in turn, required four teaching assistants to lead them. An accurate, verbatim record of all lecture period presentations—available for review by faculty, teaching assistants, and students—was deemed necessary in case of a dispute over precisely what was said, as well as for use in drafting examination questions. This would be accomplished by tape-recording each formal presentation and transcribing the recordings. Since the diversity of topics precluded assigning a textbook, and the size of the class made required library readings impractical, we needed to duplicate reading materials and to provide handouts to students. The dean granted the funds requested.

We timed publicizing of the course to coincide with student registration for the subsequent term. A flashy, one-quarter page advertisement appeared in four issues of the student newspaper. Posters were displayed around campus, concentrating on the Undergraduate Advising Center where 500 mimeographed descriptions of the course were placed. Several meetings with student advisors, who were crucially important, were held to gain their support. If numbers are a measure, the publicity campaign was successful; over 300 students enrolled.

With eighteen faculty participating, organizing the course into coherent units was not simple. Personal contacts were required with some instructors to convince them of their needed contributions and with others to settle details of required and suggested readings and audiovisual needs. I tried to group presentations into meaningful units so that the several lectures on gender roles would make one group and those related to medical anthropology another. Other factors had to be taken into account; e.g., the dates when some faculty would not be available, trying not to divide units over holiday weekends, and attempting to schedule the most attractive presentations just before the time students registered for the next term so that those taking the class would recommend it to their peers.

Acquiring and arranging for the distribution of required readings proved somewhat problematic. Some articles in journals or parts of published volumes required publisher permission for reproduction. Some of the required readings were published modules or offprints that students could purchase at the university bookstore, but others were out of print and a permission charge had to be imposed for duplication and distribution.

The final major preparation for the course was the selection of four teaching assistants whose principal responsibility lay in directing the discussion sections. Because of the novelty of the course, and particularly because of the diversity of its subject, it was important to have experienced assistants of demonstrated ability. One was appointed *primus inter pares* to handle minor problems that arose among the assistants

and to serve as liaison between them and me. Each was assigned special responsibilities; e.g., tape recording, audiovisual equipment, cleaning blackboards and supplying chalk, distributing handouts. Although I always was available for consultation, we had weekly meetings to assess the progress of the course and to deal with problems. I decided against my original idea to participate at random in the discussion sections because my appearance might be construed by students as a lack of confidence in the section leader.

Since we thought it important that students regularly attend their discussion sections, we considered means to so motivate them. It could have been done by holding weekly or surprise quizzes in the sections. Instead, each assistant drafted questions—based on the discussion in each section—that were included in an appendix to the midterm and final exams, worth 10 percent of the final grade. Students were alerted to this.

Operating the Course

At the beginning of the term, I sent a memo asking the participants to confirm the correctness of their presentations and requesting them to submit draft questions for the examinations. To assure that each appeared at the proper date, time, and place, a reminder was sent and a telephone call was placed to each about a week prior to the scheduled lecture.

As coordinator, I delivered the opening lecture, describing the mechanics of the course and speaking generally about the nature of anthropology and its relevance to modern conditions. At the beginning of each class, I also made announcements and introduced the speakers. A coordinator must be prepared to handle such emergencies as the failure of a lecturer or a scheduled film to appear at the designated time, a task made more formidable by a class numbering in the hundreds and requiring the wit and courage of a stand-up comic facing a sensorious Borscht Belt audience. It is the coordinator's task to see that the tape recordings are transformed by the typist into a sensible typescript, to distribute transcripts to the relevant presenters, and to draft examinations from the submitted questions. The teaching assistants correct the exams, but the final grades are determined by the coordinator.

To inhibit cheating in a large class where students must sit cheek by jowl, we drafted three versions of each exam, with the same questions arranged in different order. Three coded cover sheets that appeared identical indicated the versions contained. Eventually the students caught on but could do little about copying answers from their immediate neighbors, each of whom had an apparently different test.

Toward the end of the term the course was first offered, students returned a questionnaire evaluating it and offering suggestions for improvement. Most disconcerting to students was the diversity of topics, a condition exacerbated by contrasting lecture styles and differences in intellectual demands. When we repeated the course, we tried to

ameliorate these problems in several ways. First, we emphasized the relatedness of the presentations by grouping them under common headings like Religious and Social Movements, or Sex Roles. Second, to keep the lectures focused for the students, each lecturer provided a short paragraph emphasizing the main points of his or her contribution; this appeared as part of the syllabus. Third, each teaching assistant began the discussion section meeting with a brief review of the main points of the previous week's presentations and attempted to show the relatedness of those grouped together under a general heading. For some topics we distributed a glossary of significant terms and key concepts.

Conclusions

Our experience suggests that a large department at a campus with an undergraduate student body numbering more than 5,000 can boost its introductory class enrollments and introduce a large number of students to its faculty under circumstances in which the instructors are encouraged to perform at their best. During the several terms the course was offered, it met its objectives of increasing enrollments in the regular introductory and upper division courses offered by the "better" lecturers.

It is difficult to determine whether we succeeded in challenging students to view contemporary phenomena from a cross-cultural perspective. How can this be measured? We firmly believe, however, that we did introduce students to examining contemporary issues from an anthropological perspective, and it appears that others within the university recognize and value this. Subsequently, introductory anthropology courses have become required or strongly recommended for students in nursing and other professional schools.

Other social science departments did not follow our example but tried other innovations to attract students. These measures ceased, and we discontinued offering the course, when the university's undergraduate curriculum was restructured to minimize elective options. By then, however, our introductory and other class enrollments had stabilized at a satisfactory level.

Although this course was inspired by panic and was nourished by a large faculty and generous financial aid, its demonstrated advantages are not limited to conditions of grand scale, as SUNY Brockport has shown. Small departments should attempt this even with moderately sized classes and modest resources, and should view the faculty team effort as a challenge and an opportunity; a challenge to demonstrate the relevance and value of anthropology to important contemporary matters, and an opportunity for faculty to break out of old pedagogical molds when treating subjects that do not conform readily to the standard curriculum but are personally and deeply involving.