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A tale of two courses: challenging Millenials to experience culture through film

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A tale of two courses

Challenging Millennials to experience culture through film

Katie Kirakosian, Virginia McLaurin, Cary Speck

Abstract

In this article, we discuss how adding a final film project to a revised 'Culture through Film' course led to deeper student learning and higher rates of student success, as well as increased student satisfaction. Ultimately, we urge social science educators to include experiential projects in their courses that connect to all learning styles. Such projects should also challenge students to 'create', a task that requires generating ideas, planning, and ultimately producing something, which, according to Bloom's revised taxonomy, engages students in the highest cognitive process (Anderson and Krathwohl 2000). Although this class focused on the intersections of culture and film and was taught at an American university, we believe these lessons apply broadly.

Keywords

Anthropology, culture, experiential learning, film, higher education, learning styles

Introduction

First offered by the Anthropology Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMA) in 1990, 'Culture through Film' (CTF) is taken by between 150 and 300 undergraduates each semester. As an elective general education course taken by a variety of undergraduate students from schools and colleges across the university, this class fulfills a 'global diversity' degree requirement and is intended to provide breadth and depth to a student's early course of study. This course is taught as a cultural anthropology course in which films are used to illustrate cultural diversity and complexity. In 2014 and 2015, for example, the films shown in CTF included influential ethnographic, documentary, as well as popular films, which allowed students to learn how to identify diverse cultural representations. Films such as *The Split Horn* (Seigel and McSilver 2001), *Soul Food Junkies* (Hurt 2012), and *Skin* (Fabian 2008) were chosen to give students tangible examples of power, consumption, modernity and globalization – complex anthropological themes that are central, albeit often difficult, to see and describe.

The typical teaching team for this course consists of an instructor and three to six graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) depending on the number of undergraduate students enrolled. The instructor has either been a tenure-track faculty member from the UMA Anthropology Department or an adjunct faculty member who is either a senior Ph.D. student or a recent Ph.D. graduate from the UMA Department of Anthropology. The TAs have been Masters or Ph.D. students in the UMA Department of Anthropology or a closely related discipline.

Over the course of the 16-week semester in 2014, students attended two sessions each week. The first was a three-hour 'lecture' period that all students were expected to attend and the second was a one-hour 'discussion section' of no more than twenty-two students that occurred later in the week. During the lecture period, the instructor offered a short presentation on the assigned topic for the week, followed by one or two film showings. During discussion sections, led by one of the course TAs, students applied key course concepts to analyze the week's film(s) in small groups. Outside of class time, students completed assigned readings, weekly writing assignments and three exams. In this conventional course model, CTF students explored fundamental topics in cultural anthropology, ranging from the history of the discipline to the social construction of race and gender, to questions of anthropological ethics.

Early in 2014 however, key problems surfaced. Insufficient time to discuss films after they were shown, too many writing assignments, and less than a twenty-four-hour turnaround between the end of lecture and the start of discussion sections complicated students' ability to engage with weekly themes. In addition, many first-year students seemed underprepared to write concise weekly papers, requiring the TAs to teach basic writing skills in discussion sections in addition to facilitating a discussion of the week's topic. While a final ethnographic photo essay allowed students to explore

course concepts in a self-directed and experiential way, this capstone assignment was introduced late in the semester and did not allow students time to discuss their work collectively. Looking back, many students completed the course lacking a critical appreciation of key concepts in cultural anthropology. For example, many students' weekly assignments did little more than repeat definitions from the course textbook rather than apply these concepts to critically analyze the films. Also, in their final photo essays, students generally captured subject matter in a literal way as opposed to casting a more critical gaze on their surroundings (for example, sharing a photo of a farm field to show subsistence rather than considering the role of a supermarket in modern subsistence practices). In short, the deep and more analytical learning that we thought would occur did not for a majority of students.

Frustrations with these and other issues led the first and third authors – who taught the class in 2014 as the instructor and a TA – to redevelop CTF through a UMA Open Education Initiative Grant in the summer of 2014 (University of Massachusetts Amherst 2016a). These efforts yielded a completely revised syllabus, replacing the traditional course textbook with open-access films and articles (see Kirakosian, McLaurin, and Speck 2015 for all 2015 course materials). Other major changes included showing fewer films, which allowed for more time for discussion of them and structuring our weekly discussion sections with strategic pre-planned lesson plans to more effectively use this time each week. Most significantly, an experiential component was added to the course in the form of a final film project[1], which is described in much greater detail shortly.

By making the course open-access, multi-modal, and experiential, the hope was to re-engage Millennial students by galvanizing the under-utilized technological proficiencies and literacies that they are shown to possess (Kirakosian, McLaurin, and Speck 2015). We believe this was important because nearly all of our students (in both the 2014 and 2015 CTF class) were members of the 'Millennial' or 'Net' generation. Born from 1981 to 2000 and attending college largely between 1999 and 2022, their familiarity with burgeoning technology has altered their beliefs on learning, teamwork, social behavior, and marketing (Nicholas 2008 and Skiba and Barton 2006). Called 'digital natives' (Berk 2009: 5), they spend up to half of their day multitasking in a digitally-saturated environment. As a result, some argue that coursework should 'extend these capabilities' (Berk 2009: 6). Instructors should address Millennial students' learning needs and consider how modern social environments shape their learning styles (Berk 2009).

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[1] The final film project consisted of eight shorter assignments that were assigned throughout the semester as well as a final film and final paper that were due the last two weeks of the course.

	2014 course	2015 course
Readings	Textbook	Articles
Films	Two films shown in class each week, short clips also assigned with each chapter	One film shown in class each week
Discussion sections	Weekly, unstructured	Weekly, structured
Exams or quizzes	Three online exams	Weekly online quizzes
Papers	Ten short papers	Three short papers
Visualising culture assignment	Yes	No
Final film project	No	Yes
Final paper	No	Yes

Table 1. Two versions of Culture through Film

Creating knowledge through experience

Our revised course included an experiential learning component because we agreed that it would best address our key problem from 2014, where we felt students completed the course without a critical appreciation of key concepts in cultural anthropology. An increasingly popular pedagogical approach, experiential learning is meant to illuminate theoretical concepts, provide practical applications, present students with realistic projects, and challenge them to think through inherent practical and ethical issues. Experiential learning scholars embrace six key principles of learning, which contend that learning is a process, not an outcome; learning is really a 'relearning'; learning is best done through a combination of reflection, action, feeling, and thinking; learning is a holistic process that involves a whole person, rather than just the brain; learning is done by integrating new experiences into existing knowledge; and finally, learning is about knowledge creation, rather than transmission (Kolb 1984).

While experiential learning can take many forms, we added a film production component to our revised course for several reasons. First, the technology exists to easily incorporate an experiential, multimedia learning component into college courses. Specifically, the advent of digital recording technologies has made *filmmaking* accessible for beginner students. Secondly, Millennial students in particular, are eager for and able to meet the challenges inherent with filmmaking given their comfort with technology and their desire to see it used in new and innovative ways the classroom

(Artello 2013; Berk 2009; Englehart 2003; Mallinger and Rossy 2003; Nicholas 2008; Skiba and Barton 2006). Finally, filmmaking illuminated the ethical considerations involved, and the power intrinsic to filming and editing. In requiring students to do fieldwork for their final films, they were able to understand the constructed nature of ethnographies.

To best support the different learning styles present within a given class, Kolb and Kolb (2005b) urge educators to create environments conducive to experiential learning. Key aspects of this environment that we recreated in our course and, more specifically, through the final film project, included encouraging students to *create* knowledge rather than receive it, use lessons to build upon students' pre-existing knowledge and goals, and encourage students to practice inside-out learning, or to see 'practitioner-as-expert and theorist-as-practitioner' rather than 'theorist-as-expert and 'practitioner-as-consumer' (Hunt 1987: 137). Whether in the form of a written or audio-visual project, *creating* is the highest cognitive process and includes generating, planning, and ultimately, producing (Anderson and Krathwohl 2000). Thus, the final film project was an experiential learning exercise that exposed students to the 'behind the scenes' work involved in producing films, had them engage with anthropological techniques, and utilized their strengths as part of what Nicholas (2008) has called the 'experiential, engaging, and interactive' Millennial generation. We revised our course to further Millennials' understanding of cultural anthropology by harnessing their multiple literacies while we were also driven by a desire to help our students 'own and direct their learning' (Anderson 2013: 392).

Challenges and triumphs: reflections on the revised course

In the new iteration of the course, challenging students to capture – rather than simply analyze –culture through film required semester-long engagement in research design and implementation. In part, this new vision for CTF was inspired by a longer tradition of digital storytelling/photovoice projects done with/by/for local communities by UMA professors (i.e. Harper, Gubrium, and Otañez 2015; Gubrium 2009; Gubrium, Krause and Jernigan 2014; Gubrium and Turner 2011).

Over the course of the semester, students in the revised CTF course were required to complete the following eight short assignments, which were considered part of their final film project:[2]

1. Create a YouTube channel
2. Identify two potential research topics and choose one

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[2] The final film project was worth nearly 40% of each student's final course grade. The eight assignments combined were worth 10% of a student's final course grade, while the final paper was worth 12.5% and the final film was worth 15% of a student's final course grade. While the eight assignments were part of the final film project, they were not directly connected to either the final film or final paper score. By this we mean, a student could have received perfect scores on the eight assignments but done poorly on the final paper and/or final film, or done poorly on the eight assignments, but done very well on the final paper and/or final film.

3. Identify necessary film equipment
4. Draft interview questions
5. Create interview consent forms
6. Sketch out potential shots
7. Upload raw footage to YouTube
8. View and discuss fellow classmates' films

Staggering and scaffolding these assignments from simpler to more complex tasks always kept the final film and final paper in the forefront of students' minds throughout the semester, allowing them to grapple with anthropological ethics and refine their analytical lens over the course of a semester rather than towards the end of a semester through a culminating paper[3]. Staggering these assignments also allowed for the instructor and TAs to emphasize the anthropological research process of gathering and analyzing data. On the end-of-semester questionnaires, many students relayed that they would have simply asked subjects 'yes or no' questions or skipped informed consent entirely without the above assignments for guidance. An emphasis on informed consent, built into the course as assignments and through the lectures and discussions on ethics in social science research, must be repeatedly emphasized for any class with a comparable final project.

The assignments also directly related to the variety of learning styles we were hoping to engage. For example, creating YouTube accounts and uploading footage were activities engaging concrete experiences, working best for accommodating and diverging learners. Sketching potential shots involved abstract conceptualization, used by assimilating and converging learners. Gathering footage involved active experimentation, a key learning style of accommodating and converging learners. Finally, viewing and discussing peers' films involved reflective observation, a strong strategy for assimilating and diverging learners. By intentionally choosing activities which would engage different learning strategies, thus targeting Kolb and Kolb's (2005a) four major learning styles, students with a variety of backgrounds and learning styles were able to engage meaningfully in the final film project.

Overall, students did enjoy and engage with the final film project, although the technical knowledge required and the time needed to complete the project were two key difficulties from their perspective. Of the 84 students who completed an end-of-semester questionnaire, there were approximately a dozen specific comments on improving the final film project. Since gathering footage occurred outside of class time, students suggested we add more 'how to' readings on filmmaking. And while several TAs with former experience in video editing were able to assist students who felt that they did not have the skills necessary to edit their films, ensuring that TAs have this training would allow them to uniformly guide students through the process. Although some students were daunted by the prospect of editing their own films, we

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[3] To view several student films, visit https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrF-MDEViTuP5rqzu5XVgnA/videos. Films have been shared in consultation with UMA library staff and the Anthropology Department's IRB representative.

soon found out that many had, in fact, already edited at least one video using either YouTube editor or other software and could easily complete the project without assistance. While we did not collect data on students who did require assistance, we know that several were able to do so through tech-savvy friends and TA support, and that help was primarily focused around editing issues. Furthermore, many students utilized the resources and technical help provided by the Digital Media Lab at the UMass Amherst Du Bois Library (University of Massachusetts Amherst 2016b).

While many students cited a need for more technical help, from our perspective we would also add that many students needed guidance in 'digging deeper' into the cultural components within their chosen film topics. For example, perhaps influenced by travel shows on television, several students focused on the sensory aspects of a culture (food, clothing, music, etc.) with less attention paid to the culture's dominant ideologies, worldviews, economics, or politics. Perhaps requiring that students attend their TA's office hour during one or two key weeks to discuss their progress would have helped ensure an inclusion of these systemic processes, and a more robust analysis. Nevertheless, many excellent and thoughtful videos were produced, and the topics that students chose to film were far ranging. Students explored topics as diverse as gendered body language, cross-cultural adoption, street art, interracial dating and marriage, Pagan belief organizations, Portuguese-American heritage, and board gaming societies, to name just a few. Innovative filmmaking approaches were often employed to highlight these topics. One student used time-lapse photography to capture his hand-drawn illustrations, while another filmed the public to capture body language, editing out faces and adding his own soundtrack in post-production. Most students attempted at least some experimentation with camera angles, lighting, and close-ups.

Finally, for their final paper, students were asked to directly address the following six questions:

1. What was one major theme addressed in your film and how does this relate to anthropology and the course?
2. How did taking this course and learning about anthropological topics affect your views of your film choice?
3. How did you apply this anthropological theme and relevant literature within your film?
4. If you had never taken this course and you had investigated the same topic, how would your final film be different (i.e. ethics, ethnocentrism, point of view, cultural relativism)?
5. Using the concept of reflexivity, defined as 'turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference' (Davies 1999: 4), what was one ethnographic challenge (a non-technical challenge) that you encountered while making this film and how did you overcome this challenge? If you did not overcome this challenge, in hindsight, is there anything you wish you did differently?

6. After completing this project, do you think ethnographic/documentary film can address anthropological topics in ways that a written ethnography cannot? Explain using specific examples from your film and chosen topic.

We estimate that the final film project took far more time than the final papers or final projects of most other courses. Some students felt that they were rushing to complete this project as well as their other course finals, although the preparatory assignments – especially the assignment where students were required to upload raw footage – ameliorated the urge to procrastinate and ensured at least some backed-up data, making computer crashes less catastrophic. With this said, the final film project took a great deal of time and energy from the teaching staff as well – particularly in terms of planning and grading. TAs who were familiar with editing software and who volunteered to assist students put in extra hours to do so. This is something that anyone considering this type of project should anticipate. Our hope, realized in some students' course feedback, was that students would enjoy the final film project despite the amount of time and effort involved - echoing Postman's belief that 'both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities' (1985: 148).

Understanding student success and considering student feedback

In this section, we discuss student performance data and consider whether certain student populations excelled over others and, if so, why that might be[4]. To be clear, defining 'success' is not easy. While each student in our class likely defined *their* own success differently, we define success as earning an A (90% or higher) on the final film, final paper, or the course overall.

The overall class mean score for the final film was a 94.9 per cent, using our sample of 118 students.[5] Students that scored a 90 per cent or higher came from all but two of the thirty-two majors represented in the class as well as 100 per cent of the students who had not yet declared majors (or 'undeclared' students). Declared majors included Animal Science; Anthropology; Biochemistry and Molecular Biology; Biology; Civil Engineering; Communication Disorders; Communication; Computer Science; Economics; Engineering; Finance; History; Journalism; Kinesiology; Legal Studies; Management; Marketing; Mechanical Engineering; Nutrition; Philosophy; Physics; Plant, Soil and Insect Sciences; Political Science; Psychology; Public Health Sciences; Resource Economics; Sociology; Sport Management; Sustainable Community Development; and Turfgrass Science and Management. These diverse students, whose learning styles certainly ranged across Kolb and Kolb's (2005a) four-part typology, excelled in the new version of CTF for these and other reasons:

- the final film was experiential and project-based

[4] To be clear, different subsample sizes can affect group scores.

[5] Although there were 153 students, we only considered 118 of them. Students who did not complete a final film and/or final paper, failed the course, took the class Pass/Fail, or requested an incomplete were not included. Students with two majors were counted once per major.

- the preparatory assignments were staggered, varied, and scaffolded
- the final film and final paper connected in some way to all four learning styles
- students were able to choose a final film topic that interested them
- students worked alone on the final film project rather than in a group
- students received detailed grading rubrics and expectations for the final film and final paper

In addition, this high percentage of student success may be explained by the fact that the final film and final paper were experiential. In a recent study, experiential learning was shown to help students of diverse learning styles learn more effectively. A comparison of STEM-related courses that utilized lecturing versus some form of active learning found that 'average examination scores improved by about 6% in active learning sessions, and that students in classes with traditional lecturing were 1.5 times more likely to fail than were students in classes with active learning' (Freeman et al. 2014).

We were also interested to see that students within particular colleges and schools appear to have excelled at either the final film or the final paper, although few excelled at both, as seen in Figure 1.
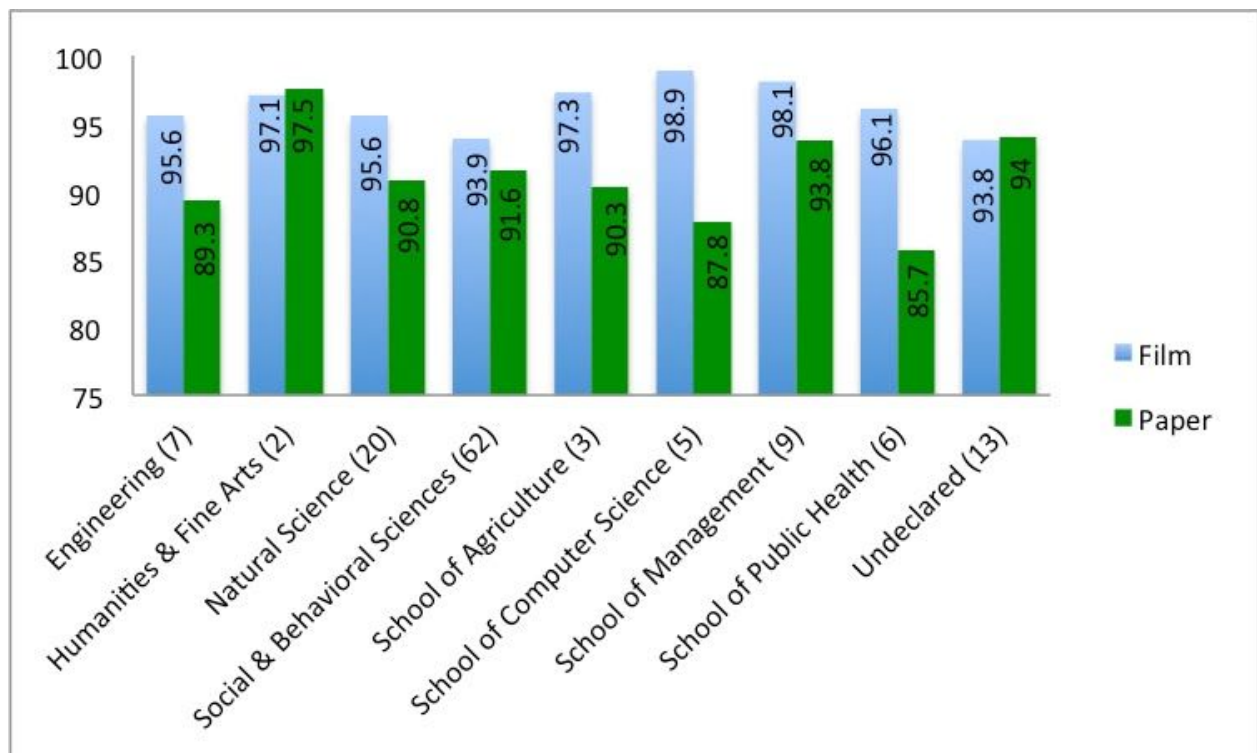
Figure 1. Mean final film and final paper scores based on college/school affiliation

For example, the students with the highest mean score for the final film were those with a background in computer science, although they scored significantly lower on the final

paper. In fact, these students had the largest point spread for any college or school with 11.1 points. This is interesting, as the students in this school seem to have used their technical expertise to excel with the final film, while the final paper necessitated a different skill set.

Conversely, colleges and schools with little difference between final film and final paper scores were students with a background in humanities and fine arts (.004) and the undeclared students (.002). These students did consistently well on both the final film and final paper. The only group of students who did better on the final paper than they did on the final film, albeit by a small margin, were those with a background in humanities and fine arts and the 'undeclared' students, while all other groups did better overall on the final film than the final paper. In some ways these results were surprising, as one might expect the students with a background in social and behavioral sciences, where Anthropology is located, would have done the best overall.

Students with backgrounds in engineering and natural sciences, for example, may have been more challenged by this final film project, which required both technical *and* creative skills. Overall, these data support our argument that while particular majors foster different skill sets, a student should not be pigeonholed in terms of whether he or she would excel at an experiential multimedia project based on his or her major and chosen career path, as many have interests and skills outside of their academic and career interests.

To summarize, our students' success *may* have been impacted by their school or college affiliation, although the diversity of students who did succeed on the final film project from an array of schools and colleges seems to imply the opposite. Students with amazingly diverse majors, excelled on the final film and final paper. Based on our definition, a majority of students in the class were successful, which we believe connects to both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. We believe the latter, which is never easy to foster, came from the intrigue and creative and technical demands of a real-life, experiential project.

The introduction of a final film project challenged students to go out into their world and capture a seemingly elusive subject on film: culture. Students responded to the course's newly introduced final film project in their end-of-semester questionnaire.[6] From a student perspective, our redeveloped course allowed students to excel because the course led to deeper and a more memorable learning experience. In one questionnaire, a student explained: 'Making a film was really cool. I have never done it before and I had no idea how difficult editing it would be' (Student 4, 2015). As already mentioned, we also believe that many students succeeded in this course because we

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[6] These questionnaires consist of twelve questions asking students to rank various aspects of the course and the course instruction on a scale from 1-5 (one being a strongly negative and five being a strongly positive assessment). Questionnaires also include four open-ended questions inviting students to reflect on their experience in more detail. These diagnostic questionnaires are used to assess the quality of instructors' and course effectiveness from semester to semester.

broke this complex project into many stages, completed throughout the course. As one student admitted to the instructor on the last day of class, if we had not broken the project into smaller assignments, he would have been 'completely lost'.

From here the question becomes, was there a difference in the quality of the overall student experience from 2014 to 2015? Using the count data shown in Table 2, we performed a test to understand the 'overall rating' of the course between 2014 and 2015. From this test we note that there was a difference between the two years and that difference is attributed to some sort of change in the course itself.[7]

#	Question	Spring 2014	Spring 2015
1	The instructor was well prepared for class (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	4.3	4.5
2	The instructor explained course material clearly (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.8	4.4
3	The instructor cleared up points of confusion (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.7	4.4
4	The instructor used the class time well (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.6	4.3
5	The instructor inspired interest in the subject matter (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.2	4
6	The instructor showed an interest in helping students learn (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.7	4.3
7	I received useful feedback on my performance (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.3	4
8	The methods of evaluating my work were fair (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.7	4.5

[7] The hypotheses considered: the two years are ranked in the same way (null) vs. the two years are not ranked in the same way (alternative). We conducted a test for independence. There is no indication of a relationship between year and ranking preference; the two years are not ranked in the same way. (Chi-square, alpha = 0.05, p-value = 0.009208).

9	The instructor stimulated student participation (5=Almost always, 1=Almost never)	3.1	4.1
10	Overall, how much do you feel you learned in this course (5=Much more than most, 1=Much less than most)	2.7	3.3
11	Overall rating of this instructor's teaching (5=Almost always effective, 1=Almost never effective)	3.2	4
12	Overall rating of this course (5=One of the best, 1=One of the worst)	2.9	3.5
Number of questionnaires received		120	84
Number of students enrolled in course		198	153
Percentage of students that responded		60.60%	54.90%

Table 2. Student feedback on two differing approaches to Culture through Film

When comparing the end-of-semester questionnaires between 2014 and 2015, as seen in Table 2, students in the 2015 version of the course responded much more favorably to the course than those in 2014. Within the questionnaire, overall scores rose across the board. Given the changes already discussed between 2014 and 2015, we were not surprised that students scored the first author's ability to stimulate discussion in lectures much higher in 2015. Students, on average, also reported feeling as though they learned more in 2015, and there was a marked increase in student impressions about the instructor's teaching and overall ratings of the course. While this rise could, in part, be attributed to the first author's rising comfort level teaching a large lecture, this does not solely explain the consistent and significant rating increases.

By the end of the course, many students were proud of their films, although as noted above, the road to completion may have been bumpy. As one student admitted in the end-of-semester questionnaire: 'The final project was stressful from the start, and not something I expected to have to do, but I'm glad I did' (Student 5, 2015). Another student summarized the overall course experience succinctly, '0 tests, 0 book expense, with project-based learning? Awesome. More classes like this please' (Student 6, 2015). And although we can only assume that another student was referring to the final film project, they admitted that 'I had fun learning' (Student 7, 2015), which, as an educator, is always great to hear. In short, the addition of an experiential learning component in the 2015 redesign of this CTF course not only led to a deeper

appreciation of the course concepts, but also higher grades for students and a marked increase in student satisfaction on the end-of-semester questionnaires.

Who knew? culture is everywhere!

Our revised CTF course had deep and authentic learning at the forefront. Other ethnography-based courses have chased a myth, best articulated by Goldschmidt (1972) who defined ethnographic film as 'film which endeavors to interpret the behavior of people of one culture to persons of another culture by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the camera were not present' (Goldschmidt 1972: 1). Again, by requiring students to do fieldwork for their final films, they were able to understand the constructed nature of ethnographies and to expand anthropology's scope to include a range of cultures and communities as legitimate fields of inquiry. Taken together, the *experience* of creating a film mimicked and elucidated the artistry and educational promise within ethnographic films.

Although viewing films may 'bolster myths about the perfection of knowledge' (MacDougall 1978: 423), we instead encouraged our students to critically examine the politics and practices that inform production, and finally asked them to take up the camera themselves and all its implied authority. By serving as anthropologists, directors, camerapersons and editors, students were able to see how each step of filmmaking affected the final product. A focus on such an experiential project, completed in steps, also allowed students with diverse academic interests and learning styles to succeed in the course, and even enjoy the final film project. In the end, by following these suggestions while making their films, student learning was enhanced and we hope that from this publication, similar projects will be undertaken.

Acknowledgements

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