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Creating a Virtual Ethnographic Field School in an Off-line Community of Practice

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Abstract

This paper describes the creation of an asynchronous on-line ethnographic field school experience for lower division undergraduate students. Our Virtual Field School course offers a field school experience that accommodates the unique make-up of the University of Alaska Fairbanks (where fifty-five percent of undergraduates are “nontraditional” students). Typical ethnographic field schools demand that students can spend four to six weeks in an international fieldsite. Alaska’s geographic remoteness makes travel abroad prohibitively expensive for many students. Pedagogical and technological concerns are outlined, including the utilization of the SELIN distance delivery platform, coupled with Blackboard Learn. SELIN was created by anthropologists at the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland) as a means of teaching upper division anthropology majors inductive reasoning and observation skills. SELIN courses are centered on authentic multimedia documentation of fieldsites, rather than texts or lectures. The pedagogical merits of the choice of the ethnographic site—the Alaska dog mushing community of practice—are discussed in light of novice anthropology students’ interests and abilities. The paper concludes by discussing the potential appeal of the virtual field school model to archaeology and the value of the unique type of multimedia materials created for the course for educational outreach.

Introduction

Participant observation fieldwork is regarded as foundational to cultural anthropology and fieldwork experience is considered sacrosanct in the professional development of scholars in many observational sciences. Particularly the case in cultural anthropology, it is taken for granted that during training one must immerse themselves in a physical or geographic fieldsite(s). With the growing interest in online and digital communities, cultural anthropologists have rethought what a fieldsite is, while probing how ethnography of virtual communities might look (e.g., Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2015; Horst and Miller 2012). This development has meant that distance-delivered methods courses examining digital cultures can allow students to have an authentic fieldwork experience from the comfort of their own homes. This is the context in which we approached, with some trepidation, the idea of creating a “virtual” field school that examined a “meatspace” (or physical) community. Our motives for doing so were not primarily driven by an administrative push to create more online content (although such pressure is increasingly felt at our institution), but rather by the needs and demands of our undergraduate anthropology students. While there are opportunities for students in Alaska to participate in local summer archaeological field schools,

there are no local field schools for cultural anthropologists. Roughly fifty-five percent of the undergraduate student body at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) is “nontraditional” (over the age of 25) and the geographic remoteness of Alaska makes travel even to the “Lower 48” as costly as travel from the continental US to Europe. With full time jobs and/or families, few of our students are able to travel abroad and spend four to six weeks away from home. Moreover, language barriers would prohibit us from ever taking the majority of our students to the non-US fieldsites where we work, even if money and time were not factors. Furthermore, many students who enroll in courses at UAF do so from throughout the state, including enrollees from rural campuses in Alaska Native communities. Such courses often rely on teleconferencing or are delivered asynchronously. However, there is a great amount of interest on the part of undergraduate students in opportunities to do fieldwork and learn ethnographic methods. Our cultural and linguistic anthropology undergraduate students routinely lamented being unable to do face-to-face fieldwork under the guidance of a professor. These barriers are coupled with the fact that UAF’s reputation is based largely on circumpolar research. Anthropology students at UAF are therefore often more interested in researching the arctic culture of their backyard than students in the Lower 48 are in domestic fieldwork.

Aware of this situation, we asked ourselves whether it was possible to offer a quality fieldwork experience on Arctic themes to students in an asynchronous online format that could accommodate working students, stay-at-home parents, and those who simply could not meet on campus.¹ We decided that four dimensions of such a course were non-negotiable. First, we would integrate cultural and linguistic anthropological methods. Working in a four-field anthropology department, we find that anthropology textbooks are notoriously outdated or inaccurate (often both) in discussing linguistic anthropology. Meanwhile, methods textbooks aimed at undergraduates do not include linguistic analysis or analysis of language form, only language content, if linguistic anthropological methods are included at all. As a research team composed of a linguistic and cultural anthropologist, collecting the data for the course together, we became ever more convinced that the analytic perspectives of our respective subfields had much to offer for each of our understandings of the circumpolar region. Secondly, we wanted to recreate the rich visual experience of people, places and things that researchers gain from doing face-to-face situated fieldwork. Thirdly, given the appeal of the Arctic to students across the University of Alaska campuses and our commitment to teach even non-anthropology majors the benefits of “living ethnographically,” we sought to design a class that would be beneficial for students regardless of their previous coursework. Lastly, in order to deliver a rigorous and reasonably thorough training in methods, we needed to provide a tightly controlled experience in which we and our students had equal access to the ethnographic data. The latter consideration immediately ruled out modeling it after the typical campus-delivered methods class in

which students independently venture into public spaces to observe and write up field notes. Having given such assignments in courses before, we found that students were often reluctant to go outside of their comfort zones and it was impossible for us to verify the accuracy of their detailed work. These requirements demand a new brand of online pedagogy. Fortunately, we were invited by colleagues at the University of Neuchâtel to utilize their recently developed e-learning platform, SELIN (Self-Induced Learning Infrastructure).²

SELIN: A New Digital Platform for Teaching Observation Skills

As we describe the SELIN platform, we ask the reader to keep in mind that we were successfully able to offer the class the second year via Blackboard Learn (the learning management system utilized at UAF), using the same pedagogical principles. The SELIN platform is unique because it is based on a pedagogical philosophy that centers on rich, raw, authentic ethnographic multimedia data.³ Assigned readings in SELIN courses are minimal and not taken from methods textbooks or ethnographic descriptions of the fieldsites under examination. Additionally, there are no video recorded lectures.

In brief, SELIN courses are composed of modules or units in which students navigate among three tabs, labeled “Field Data,” “Questions,” and “Theory” (Figure 1):

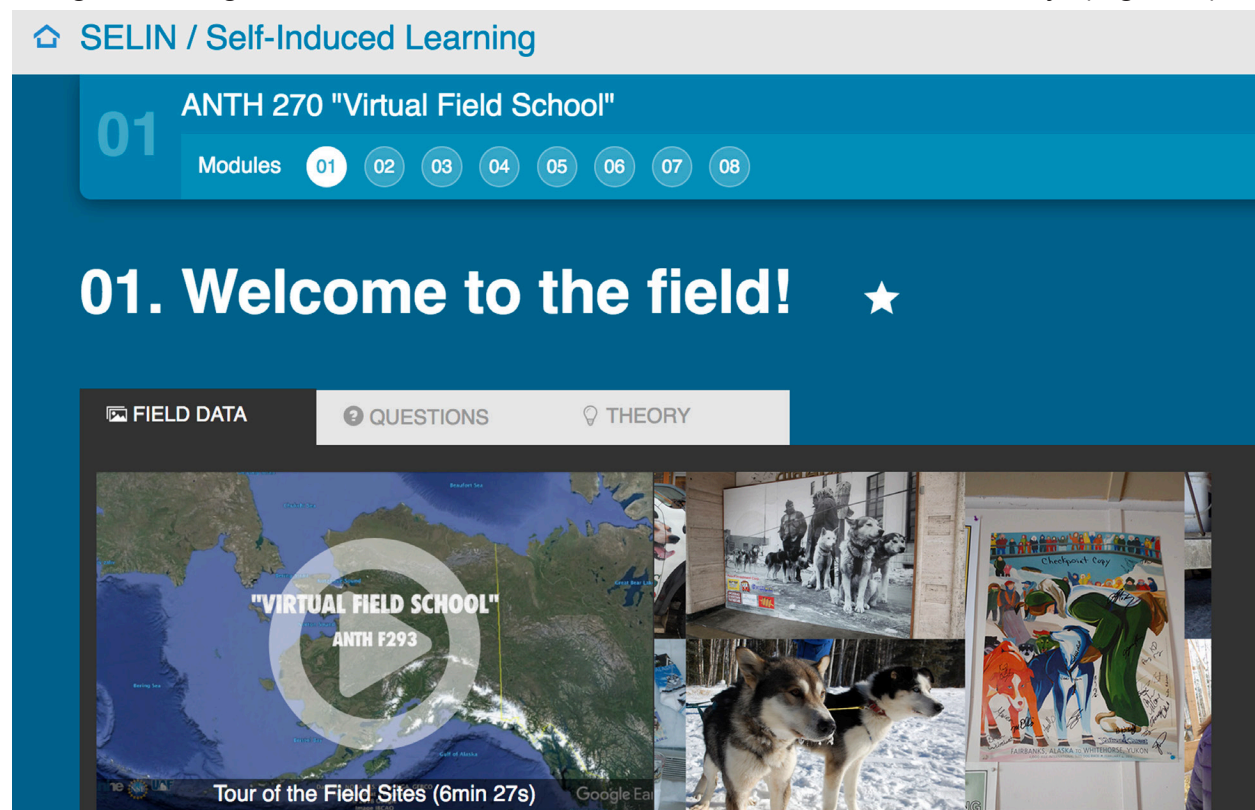


Figure 1. The SELIN student interface features three navigation tabs.

For our course, the first Virtual Field School SELIN course, every module presents a distinct method, beginning with learning objectives (Figure 2):⁴

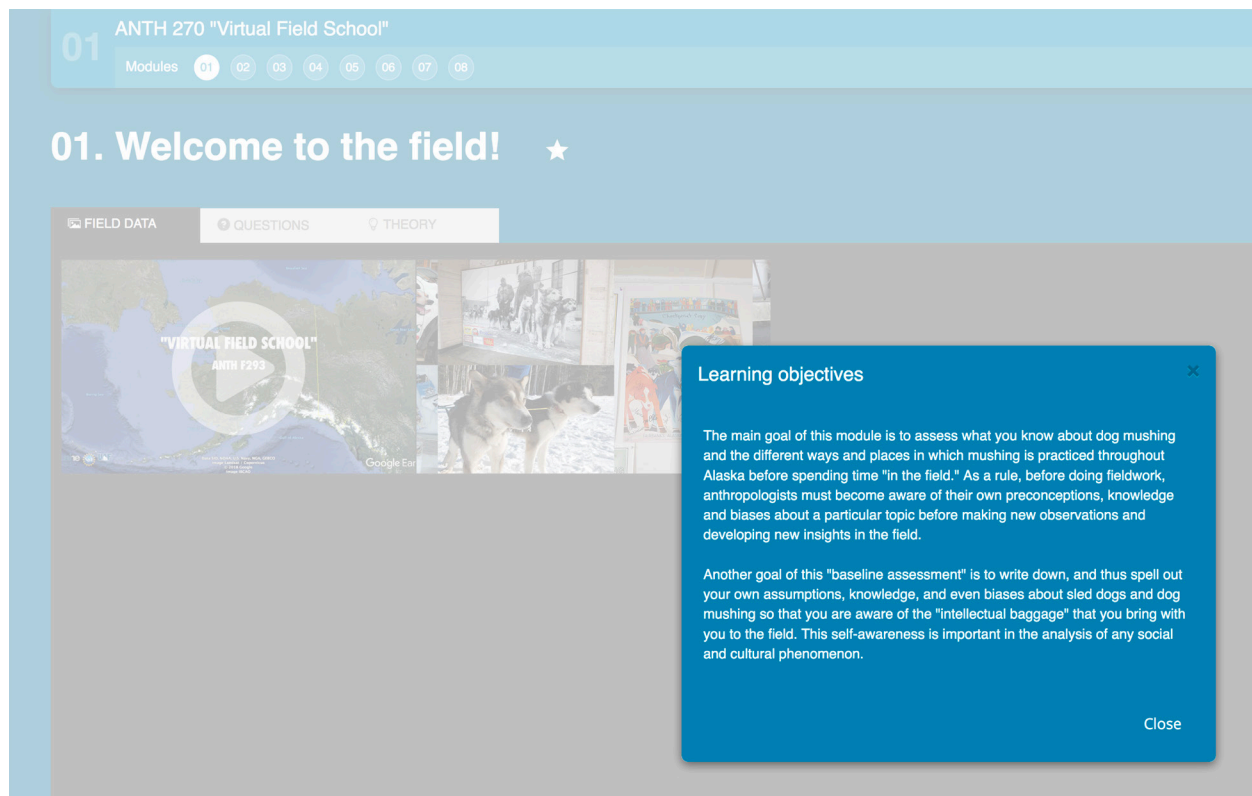


Figure 2. The learning objectives for module 1 of Virtual Field School.

A media gallery containing photos, audio and video recordings from the fieldsite (“Field Data”) serves as the primary entry point for each module or unit. Students can access a “Note Pad” window (Figure 3) for creating field notes as they view data:

01 ANTH 270 "Virtual Field School"

Modules 01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08

02. Participant observation ★

FIELD DATA QUESTIONS THEORY

Note Pad

- Module 1
- Module 2**
- Module 3
- Module 3 cont.
- Interview Notes
- Module 4 (1)
- Module 4 (2)
- Module 4 (3)
- Module 5 (1)
- Module 5 (2)
- Module 5 (3)
- Module 5 (4)
- Module 6 (1)

Module 2

Flight to Eagle
90 min flight
dirt runway, surrounded by trees
Yukon River
small plane, Bush plane

Dog Mushing 101
Naomi Helmer, parents Megan & David Helmer
Anthropologist Thierry Wendling
Naomi explains how to run the sled to Thierry, verbal commands for dogs while running
Shows Thierry how to put the harnesses on the dogs
repeats "good boy" "good dogs" as she walks through dog yard
"This guy is a little harder to harness." Reference to dog's individual personality
Dogs look excited to see people, though one dog (around 6:10 minutes) seems resistant to being hooked to the sled

+ Create new note Close

LIBRARY NOTEPAD

Figure 3. Field notes are taken in the Note Pad window, accessible at all times.

Our guidelines and comments on their field notes prepare them to utilize this common ethnographic practice and help them see the distinction between raw field notes and write-ups of research conclusions or formulations of arguments. Students are encouraged to begin each module by viewing and taking notes on the multimedia materials before they read "Theory" or respond to questions.

Selecting a Fieldsite and Collecting Multimedia Materials

The multimedia materials were collected during two years of ethnographic and linguistic anthropological fieldwork on dog mushing that we conducted jointly at a variety of locales in Alaska. We selected Alaska dog mushing as the fieldsite for multiple pedagogical reasons:⁵

- Dogs are relatable: students can contrast and reflect upon their own experiences with pet or service dogs
- Sled dogs confound expectations (for example, they do not always resemble Siberian huskies) and having assumptions challenged is key to the ethnographic experience

- Mushing has a strong media presence: students can access journalistic coverage of the sport, mushers' personal webpages, race organization websites and social media discussions and thereby collect their own data (which can be viewed by instructors and peers)
- Authentic (vs. ethnographically descriptive) print materials document mushing culture and provide data for discourse analysis of interdiscursivity and genre
- Dog mushing is an iconic arctic activity and part of a quintessentially Alaskan lifeway
- Because of their enthusiasm for raising awareness of what outsiders may see as a controversial sport, Alaska dog mushers provide a good example of a "community" and the ethical procedures that anthropologists must follow in order to develop mutually beneficial collaborative research with its members (IRB protocol, informed consent, etc.)

Before designing the course neither of us had much prior experience with dog mushing. This turned out to be advantageous for several reasons. As scholars who work with indigenous peoples (in Beringia and Mesoamerica) we are wary of having our consultants be subject to romanticizations of Otherness to which beginning undergraduates from developed countries may be particularly prone, especially if they are unable to forge long term, personal relationships with individuals. Importantly, entering the field for the first time with the dual motives of conducting research firsthand and creating course materials, allowed us to document the unfolding process of fieldwork. We utilized recordings of ourselves conducting interviews and speaking to consultants for the first time. In fact, one benefit of working as a multiparty team was being able to film each other conducting interviews and engaging in participant observation. This was more authentic to the "meatspace" version of a field school than it would have been had we tried to shoot the "greatest hits" from our established fieldsites or attempted to recreate old conversations with key informants for the camera. The fact that we were novices to the fieldsite, although not to ethnographic research, also meant that students could look over our shoulders and view us in the field as fellow apprentices. They could even witness some of our mistakes (asking what our consultants were too polite to tell us were "dumb" questions).

We created a corpus of over a terabyte of field data, ranging from audio and video interviews, to filmed kennel and private home visits, to visual documentation of public events. A selection of the material that we collected, as ethnographers undertaking research, makes up the core of the course content. Each module contains a distinct media gallery. However, we were mindful of how students' knowledge of the fieldsite would unfold. For example, some modules revisit physical locales during different times of the year or feature lead consultants in different contexts (e.g., a kennel tour and an award ceremony speech). We also came back to some of the same specific events with the aim of demonstrating how they could be viewed from different

analytical perspectives. Such a controlled and rich experience of the fieldsite would not be possible if students were assigned to visit a local church, mall or cafe on their own, for example, as is typical in traditional methods courses. Likewise, such assignments do not foster the collective experience of a fieldsite or shared, even simultaneous, access to data that a physical field school would.

A crucial pedagogical objective was to spark discussion and discovery among the students. SELIN does not currently offer a discussion tool, so we made use of “VoiceThread” to facilitate student interaction. The VoiceThread tool that is available through UAF Blackboard allows instructors and students to share and annotate (both through audio and textual comments) multimedia files. We and our students found it to be a more dynamic forum for online class participation than discussion boards. VoiceThread allowed us to center discussion on particular aspects and segments of data that had already been presented via the SELIN platform. While SELIN was the main ethnographic and theoretical entryway to the field, Blackboard and VoiceThread were used to work with selected materials in a collaborative and reflexive way, in light of recent research that finds that students in online courses value dynamic modalities to collaborate and interact (e.g., Waugh and Su 2016).

Theory

In SELIN the “synthesizing notes” for each module (under the “Theory” tab) are akin to the textbook for the course and present analytic tools that students are expected to use to respond to prompts. We specifically created the notes not only because we thought that other methods textbooks were not entirely appropriate (for example, the course is designed for students with no background in anthropology), but also because we wanted the text to replicate the apprenticeship type of learning offered by physical field schools. The notes are based on situations that we experienced in the field—both with mushers as well as our recollections of our days as anthropology students first conducting fieldwork in Guatemala and Russia. They contain links to annotated PDFs of classic articles and monographs that we offered as recommended or further readings (Figure 4). Through sharing our personal field experiences in informal prose (as embedded “An anthropologist says” boxes) we progressively addressed a series of situations that novice anthropologists are likely to encounter, while also providing some points of contrast with our fieldsites among people who do not share a native language or many cultural similarities with the researcher.

01 ANTH 270 "Virtual Field School"
Modules 01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08

03. Semi-structured interviews ★

FIELD DATA QUESTIONS THEORY

SYNTHESIZING NOTES

LEARNING HOW TO ASK: SOME RECIPES FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS - (by Robin Shoaps and Patrick Plattet)

Linguistic Anthropologist Charles Briggs famously claimed that part of an ethnographer's job is "learning how to ask" (Briggs, 1984b). Asking is not straightforward for a variety of reasons. Imagine if a researcher who spent some time chatting with you suddenly started asking you about details of your sex life. Every society has "taboo topics" and rules of etiquette regarding what can be spoken about with strangers. In the mushing context, prices of dogs and details about bloodlines were sensitive, perhaps even taboo topics. A dog's bloodline is its traceable pedigree and because people breed strategically and ultimately hope to create their own bloodline with the goal of producing "super dogs," they do not want other people to copy or "steal" the bloodline. We discovered that these topics were taboo because people provided vague information about prices and abandoned the topic (whereas most mushers were eager to relate their expertise and expand on responses to our questions about other matters). When we asked about bloodlines people did not want us to record the discussion and even referred to the information as a guarded secret.

Genre
However, learning what is and is not appropriate to ask about directly is only part of the process of "learning how to ask." During his fieldwork with a Spanish-speaking *Mexicano* community in northern New Mexico in the late seventies, Briggs found that his interviews with consultants fell flat—they were not

Even if you think you already have enough contacts in the community and official permission is not required (for more on formal permission, see Dr. Shoaps' vignette below), it is still recommended that you introduce yourself to gate keepers as an act of deference. For example, Dr. Shoaps gained initial access to a family living in the town center of the *municipio* of Sacapulas through her graduate advisor, Dr. John Du Bois, a linguist who introduced her, via letter, to one of his former lead linguistic consultants. Despite the fact that, through this man and his family, she had a place to live and a willing collaborator, she still introduced herself to the president of the local language revitalization committee, the Comunidad Lingüística Sakapulteka (which had not existed when her advisor conducted his research there). She did this in hopes that someone in that office would be willing to introduce her to other potential consultants or a language instructor or that he himself would volunteer to work with her, but she was not so fortunate (things are not always so easy!). However this visit was still important to her fieldwork because it performed deference to the local organization and the expertise and importance of the (male) leaders in particular, who would have taken offense if they had learned secondhand that a North American researcher was conducting research on the language without recognizing their authority and seeking their "blessing." She was told, twenty years later, that had she not spoken to unofficial gatekeepers that they may have dissuaded people from working with her and thus could have, from behind the scenes, undermined her ability to do successful linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork in a village outside the town center altogether.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

BERNARD, H.R., P.J. PELTO, O. WERNER, J. BOSTER, A. KIMBALL ROMNEY, A. JOHNSON, C.R. EMBER and A. KASAKOFF (1986) "The Construction of Primary Data in Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 27(4): 382-396.
Data construction; Structured vs. unstructured interviewing; Direct observation

BRIGGS, Ch. (1983) "Questions for the ethnographer: A critical examination of the role of interview in fieldwork," *Semiotica* 46 (2/4): 233-261.
Verbal repertoire; Ethnographic interview; Communicative event

GOODENOUGH, Ward (1970) "General and Particular"
Describing a culture; Emv vs. etc; Comparative study

Figure 4. Excerpt of the Synthesizing Notes for Module 3.

Questions

The way the questions are designed is another distinctive feature of the SELIN pedagogical design. Responses to the prompts and composing fieldnotes are the only mandatory written assignments (students in Virtual Field School can participate in discussion orally if they choose). After viewing multimedia data and reading the synthesizing notes, students can navigate to the "Questions" tab (Figure 5). Questions focus specifically on the data in that particular module's multimedia gallery. They emphasize observation skills over jargon and lead students to synthesize and employ analytical tools rather than describe or define them. Students are expected to draw from their fieldnotes to provide specific examples (often by referencing the time count on a video).⁶ After composing their response (which are typically 500-1000 words) they receive automatic feedback in the guise of "tips" that encourage a more thorough response by nudging them toward closer examination of data and inclusion of analytic concepts. After they submit their revised and final version, they immediately receive a first round of automatic comments—"What the anthropologists say"—that provide observations from trained anthropologists (namely us), often with additional examples from the fieldsite (Figure 6). Lastly, we provide individual feedback and evaluate responses.

01 ANTH 270 "Virtual Field School"

Modules 01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08

04. Transcription and discourse analysis ★

FIELD DATA QUESTIONS THEORY

CORRECTED 01/02

Question 1

After examining the field data, identify three utterances (segments of talk) where a different selection of prosody, words or sequential ordering would change the social, but not the "dictionary" or "literal" meaning of the utterance. Write out the utterances, describe the context, indicate the time stamp in the recording and then suggest a rewording or reworking and describe how you think the alternative form could change the social meaning.

MY ANSWER FOLLOW-UP CORRECTIONS

While Jen is talking with Rob, next to his truck, sharing stories from various races, she talks about a race where her dogs did something very unexpected and she loses, she finishes by saying, "Carl, like when it was all done...he was like "what happened that's a rookie mistake" (2:00). First, by referencing Carl, she shows that she knows Rob knows who she is talking about. If she were talking to someone who didn't know who Carl was, she might have said "my husband" and clarified that he was also a musher. Second, the intonation she uses while quoting Carl (lengthening vowels, for example) indicates that he has knowledge about mushing and that what had happened in the race was unexpected (something that would happen to an inexperienced musher, not to Jen). If someone who didn't know Jen well or didn't know much about mushing, this probably would be taken as more insulting than humorous.

In the same video with Rob and Jen, she mentions something about being at these races and then getting to the point where "from here on out we just play" (3:12). This utterance could mean something different in a different context, where there she may have ran with some really good times and didn't need to worry about going as fast in the rest of the races or at the end of the sprint season where they weren't preparing for specific races. But if this were uttered in the alternative context where she was very confident about winning, she had run good times, and was going to just let her dogs do what she wanted in the rest of the race, and to say that same phrase to another musher who was also competing would be "unsportsmanlike," or if it had been uttered in an over-confident, cocky intonation.

During the awards ceremony for the Race of Champions, Rob Peebles, who tied for second, says "Some guys go a little too fast from Germany... some from the States go a little faster" (1:03). This joke references the fact that the musher he tied with was from Germany and that the musher who won first was from the States (not Alaska or Canada). His prosody and intonation makes it clear that he is joking about how he "lost", because other teams were "too fast", but if he had said the same thing with different intonation, he would have sounded unsportsmanlike or insulting to the other mushers. Joking provides a way of "lamenting" that he didn't win while retaining good sportsmanship.

LIBRARY NOTEPAD

Figure 5. Example prompt with student video response.

01 ANTH 270 "Virtual Field School"

Modules 01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08

05. Analyzing stories ★

FIELD DATA QUESTIONS THEORY

CORRECTED 01/02

Question 1

Watch the Hugh Neff award ceremony speech and look for a narrative—as defined in the theory note. Referring to specific line numbers on the transcript, identify some narrative event clauses—for example, the precipitating or complicating action and a result or resolution. Identify some of the resources that Neff uses to fend off the "so what?" question: how does he make his story engaging or present it as pertinent to the Award Ceremony (refer to line numbers and linguistic or visual features on the lines). It may be helpful to consider Allen Moore's speech as a counterpoint: Moore's speaking style is very different but they both spoke to the same group of mushers on the very same night.

MY ANSWER FOLLOW-UP CORRECTIONS

Follow-up

Was there more than one narrative? On which line numbers did the narrative(s) begin? Did you find any lines that you may consider "abstracts," "codas" or "orientations"? Describe any hesitation or uncertainty you faced in identifying a second or third narrative—we realize that narrative analysis is complex and when you begin analyzing talk in this way you are likely to encounter a lot of possible "candidates" that could be considered narratives. Our aim for this prompt is to offer feedback not only on the parts of your response and analysis that you are confident about, but also on segments of the transcripts that you think are borderline narratives.

What the anthropologists say

Hugh Neff tells one narrative that fits Labov & Waletzky's criteria. We considered line 240 to be a sarcastic "abstract" of the narrative that follows. Neff transitions from thanking Matt Hall and the "people of Eagle" for letting him "sleep in." We can think of this as an "abstract" because this line tells us that the story is about oversleeping in Eagle. Of course, if Neff had continued to thank other people, without elaborating on that line, it could not be considered an abstract because it would not be followed by other narrative elements.

Figure 6. Example prompt with automatic feedback and the first round of comments.

Would This Work for Non-Anthropology Students? Potential Applicability to Other Observational Sciences

Clearly the course we created was specifically oriented around cultural and linguistic anthropological field methods, however, we think that the SELIN pedagogical platform and virtual field school concept will be of value to other subfields of anthropology. While we would not suggest that it replace a face-to-face fieldwork experience (we still expect our graduate students to conduct firsthand fieldwork), we believe that, as part of a hybrid course environment, it may offer some advantages to traditional methodological instruction, while being particularly compatible with training concerns in many observational disciplines.⁷ In a traditional archaeological dig, for example, not everyone is able to look over the instructor's shoulder simultaneously—not all students have immediate, simultaneous and equal visual access to the process of excavation. We can imagine the use of film to allow archaeology students to observe various excavation techniques as carried out by a seasoned fieldworker—utilizing voice-overs explaining the selection of tools, the decisions made about how to excavate, what to write in field notebooks, and how to interpret what emerges. With such a course design there is no danger that a novice student will damage a fragile artifact while excavating it, (say by mistaking a bone comb for a deer bone fragment and handling it without the proper care). The technology frees instructors from the pressure to continuously observe and monitor students. Another advantage is that the data that students are exposed to are collected and recorded (in real time, not after the fact) by course creators, thus allowing a more controlled pedagogical experience. The educational value of handling artifacts could be provided by making them or facsimiles available in a lab. The automatic feedback structure of SELIN could free up the amount of instructor time required for teaching lab sessions (a teaching assistant could merely monitor the room). A hybrid experience of this sort may help emulate some of the positive dimensions of a cohort-based or collective experience that students physically at a dig gain because they could attend lab together. Students can film themselves holding, describing or sorting artifacts and upload these videos to VoiceThread or within the “Library” window of SELIN, a portal where they can share their own data.

Conclusions: Lessons Learned and New Opportunities for Community Outreach

Virtual Field School was first offered at UAF in Spring 2019 but its contributions to the dog mushing community and to our scholarly research began when we commenced fieldwork. In gaining informed consent, we presented our project as primarily concerned with higher education and made all recordings available to participants. The dog mushing community is very concerned with the sustainability of the sport and its unique culture, particularly in the face of misdirected activist critique and climate change. The

idea of a course aimed at college (or potentially high school) students was exciting for them because it would help raise awareness of the sport. Collaborating with us was much more appealing than if our primary objective were to publish scholarly monographs aimed solely at advancing anthropological knowledge. In short, consultants viewed the course as beneficial to their community of practice.

When we initially conceived of the course we knew it would be innovative if for no other reason than the exploitation of the SELIN platform for undergraduate instruction. However, it was only through the long process of course creation and the experience of delivering the course asynchronously to actual students for the first time (three quarters of which had no prior background in cultural anthropology or ethnography) that we were able to see the true strengths of a virtual field school model. The University of Neuchâtel is dedicated to expanding high quality SELIN course offerings by making the platform available to others (for free) and is interested in the inclusion of methods-oriented courses from other subfields of anthropology and other disciplines that rely heavily on observation. Creating a course of this quality will surely be easier for us a second time, with the platform in place and pedagogical vision and techniques refined. In fact, we offered the course entirely through Blackboard in Spring 2020 to see if it was compatible with a conventional learning management system. The fact that we created the course in SELIN first spurred us to use Blackboard in creative and innovative ways. In retrospect, we believe the fact that the data was collected as part of research and not filmed specifically for the course was also inherent to its success.

Frankly, a course that requires instructors to engage in and document fieldwork does not come easy or cheap. Members of our multiparty team had to learn to work together and abandon the “solo anthropologist” model they knew from previous fieldwork experiences. Special equipment had to be purchased (360° cameras, GoPro cameras, wireless mics, etc.) and the learning curve for using these tools and accompanying video editing software was steep. However, the fact that much field research and traditional field school instruction is funded by granting agencies, we suggest that colleagues interested in potentially offering a virtual field school or hybrid experience include the live multimedia documentation of their field research in grant proposals. Having this footage (up close, over-the-shoulder viewing of field activities with voice-over) allows course content creation as well as other creative educational outreach opportunities to community members who are not interested in training to become an archaeologist, or students who, due to mobility restrictions or other health conditions, may not be physically able to undertake a traditional field school experience.

Acknowledgments

Creation of this course would not have been possible without the assistance and the goodwill of a variety of people and organizations. The National Science Foundation (NSF), Arctic Social Sciences Program provided funding for the SELIN-UAF project in 2016-2019 (Award #1623813). We are grateful to Ellen Hertz at the University of Neuchâtel (UniNE) for sharing the SELIN platform with us and inviting us to be part of the SELIN adventure. Thierry Wendling at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) brought his expertise with SELIN to Alaska, where he joined us in some of the fieldwork and documentation. The Alaska dog mushing community of practice was extremely generous with their time. We also received guidance and support from the Alaska Dog Musers Association and the Tok Dog Musers' Association. Students in our Spring 2019 iteration were patient guinea pigs and provided excellent feedback. Lastly, we would like to thank Doug Knight from the University of Alaska Fairbanks Office of Information Technology for deploying the SELIN application at UAF and UAF eCampus for support and encouragement in shepherding this asynchronous course through the curriculum committee and helping ensure that it worked seamlessly with Blackboard.

Notes

- 1 Many lower division UAF students reside in rural Alaska and take courses online through branch campuses. These communities, many of which are not even on the road system, do not always have fast or reliable internet access. The potential interest in Alaskan cultural practices among these students motivated us to design the course for asynchronous delivery. Our materials and pedagogical approach could easily be adapted to work in a face-to-face format.
- 2 Anthropologists Ellen Hertz, Alice Sala and Thierry Wendling created the SELIN online platform in 2012 at the University of Neuchâtel as a response to the distinctive challenge of teaching ethnographic methods online. The platform was launched in 2015 with two courses utilizing bingo parlors and skateboard parks in Switzerland as fieldsites. These popular courses are excellent methods courses but are not designed for novice or non-anthropology students, nor are they “virtual field schools.”
- 3 The fact that video (and photographic) field data is the only visually dynamic or recorded content in this course puts it at the foreground. All other aspects of the course revolve around this content. This makes it easier for students to recall from which part of an individual lesson information was gleaned and refer to it again. It also allows for a holistic integration of our visual data, an approach that has been called for by researchers who have identified students' experience of video content in conventional on-line courses as “blurred” (Hibbert 2017:103).
- 4 We created eight modules for a fifteen week semester: 1. Welcome to the field (introduces the idea of a fieldsite and how ethnographic fieldwork in anthropolo-

gy is distinct from other disciplines), 2. Participant observation, 3. Semi-structured interviews, 4. Transcription and discourse analysis, 5. Analyzing stories, 6. People, places and things (the documentation of events through examining participants, spatial interaction and material culture), 7. Building anthropological arguments from field data, and 8. Communicating research findings. Modules 1, 2 and 3 emphasize ethical concerns in selecting a fieldsite and working with human subjects, while module 4 addresses ethical issues in presenting transcriptions of non-Standard language varieties.

- 5 Fieldwork for this project was carried out under IRB protocol # 899985-5. Informed consent for involvement both in research and appearance in the course was obtained from all participants. The ethnographic fieldsite was oriented around a community or communities of practice rather than a “team,” a “sport” or a primary geographic locale (Lave and Wenger 1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). A community of practice is made up of social actors who share a set of semiotic resources (languages, symbols and values about them) and engage in joint actions. We have found it to be particularly useful in delimiting what our fieldsite is and who it includes and are careful to describe the community of practice (our fieldsite) as “Alaska dog mushing” and not “Alaskan dog mushers” as it includes not only human participants from outside of Alaska but also canine athletes who compete here. The action of mushing in competitions that take place in Alaska brings people, canines, handlers, commercial sponsors, veterinarians, fans and spectators together.
- 6 The pedagogical emphasis on fieldnotes and incorporation of specific examples in analysis sets our dog mushing course apart from the other SELIN courses, where students do not share their fieldnotes with the instructor(s) nor receive instruction in that genre of writing.
- 7 It goes without saying that “traditional” field schools in most disciplines are more susceptible to disruption and cancellation than had been imaginable prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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