



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Virtual Pedagogy

New Media for the Anthropological Classroom

ANAND PANDIAN
CHITRA VENKATARAMANI
MARIEKE WILSON

JOHNS HOPKINS U

Media technologies saturate contemporary life globally, remaking the very texture of ordinary experience. We report here on an experiment in undergraduate teaching that sought to push the pedagogic potential of new media, as both objects of study and educational tools. Our fall 2008 Anthropology of Media course at Johns Hopkins University explored media as diverse as film, television, radio, mobile phones, medical scanning and virtual gaming. The course challenged the image of media as transmitting information, pleasure and ideology along a one-way channel from producers to consumers. Finding that academic coursework is itself often organized through a similar model—using assignments to test effective transmission of knowledge from teacher to student—we attempted to make our coursework echo more closely the recursive loops, flows and feedbacks that the course explored.

We chose to elicit all coursework from students online, in a form accessible to them all and to a larger potential audience. We designed a web interface in summer 2008 (www.jhu.edu/anthmedia) as our virtual classroom space. For their main project over the semester, students were asked to produce individual webpages concerning popular media artifacts of their choice. We instructed them to incorporate audio, video and still image clips on this page to support their textual analysis, and to conduct ethnographic research with producers or consumers of their chosen media artifact. The course website provided links to all of these projects, and students were encouraged to consult the extensive academic resources made

At the outset, we provided a basic template whose layout could be followed, and taught the students how to create and manage their own web content on university webspace. We collaborated with the campus Digital Media Center (DMC) to organize a training session on the basic web design features of Adobe Dreamweaver, and invited the university's Office of General Counsel to offer guidance on the "fair use" of copyrighted materials in educational contexts.

This training was in part meant to ensure that none of our students, with varying levels of technical proficiency, would find the medium itself discouraging. Despite the willingness of DMC staff to guide the technical development of their pages, many students expressed ambivalence about the uniquely promising yet complex nature of the exercise. Some struggled with basic attempts to upload content, organize text and manipulate layout, while others encountered the limits of their technical knowledge in their desire to engage in more creative production. Many students appeared to have begun the semester with an image of their projects as papers—composed of linear text—that happened to be posted online, only gradually opening themselves up to the aesthetic conventions and possibilities of the medium itself. As they moved more radically beyond the initial templates we had provided, some felt pressured to add stylistic features—an internal link structure, for example—that they could not master themselves, likely because they had seen these working in the pages of their peers.

Student choice of project topics often reflected personal preferences in music, technology and entertainment, typically focusing on American media. Many students clearly came to identify very closely with the content of their project pages, contrasting their degree of involvement

I find that pretty exciting," one wrote, while another reported that her "email and Facebook are flooding with responses" from those with whom she had excitedly shared the link to her page. "My friends who would never have read an anthropological article have been drawn in by the multimedia aspect of the project," she added. Our students' efforts to form their own publics

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appear remarkably successful in some cases; at the time of this writing, a Google search for the words "iPod" and "ethnography" turns up one of our student pages as the third among 90,700 hits online.

Anticipating such visibility, students reported feeling empowered by the web projects, which were intended from the outset to involve them as co-producers of knowledge in the course. We recognize that there are potential pitfalls to grapple with here. Though some of these students felt that they could describe themselves by the end as "sort of expert" on their chosen topics, they were still undergraduates working with limited training and short research periods, "publishing" online work of greatly uneven quality. Nevertheless, most promising was the way that some began to perceive themselves as mediums for the transmission of knowledge, coming to look critically at their own work as if it were being seen and judged by an unknown audience. In their creative integration of text, image, video and sound, one may find at work new means of both knowing and conveying knowledge.

Anand Pandian is assistant professor of anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. He is conducting an ethnographic study of the experiential texture of commercial film production practices such as direction, cinematography, acting, scoring and editing in south India. He taught this undergraduate course along with the assistance of the coauthors.

Chitra Venkataramani is an anthropology graduate student examining representations of space in Mumbai, India in drawings, graphic books and other media.

Marieke Wilson is an anthropology graduate student studying evangelical filmmaking techniques in southwestern Nigeria and the visceral modes of perception they activate among their viewers. □

TEACHING STRATEGIES

available through the website. Students were also asked to post their reflections on course readings to a blog we created; many began to illustrate their own blogs with audiovisual content available online.

Nearly 60 students enrolled in the course, many new to anthropology and nearly all unfamiliar with web design. They chose topics as diverse as fantasy football leagues, weekly television shows, mobile phone texting, handheld gaming cultures, public radio broadcasts, online search engines and corporate advertising campaigns.

with "relatively meaningless" term papers they might have written otherwise. As one of them wrote a week after the semester had ended, "I thought that this project was phenomenal. It gave me a chance to show my family over break something that I was proud of doing, as opposed to a paper which I dread showing my parents." Much of this appeal concerned public visibility: the sense among students that they would "share with the world" their classroom work, however daunting that seemed at first. "My ideas are actually out there for people to see and read and