

Stephen Bond and Luke Freeman DART: Digital Anthropology Resources for Teaching

Conference paper

Original citation:

Originally presented at: C-SAP eLearning forum, 6 May 2005, Higher Education Academy, University of Birmingham.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/4562/>

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2008

© Stephen Bond and Luke Freeman

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

DART: Digital Anthropology Resources for Teaching

Steve Bond and Luke Freeman

Abstract

This paper summarises the presentation we gave at the C-SAP E-Learning Forum on 6 May 2005. In it, we describe our project to address problems in the undergraduate teaching of anthropology at LSE through the development of digital learning tools and other learning activities. We provide demonstrations of these digital tools and show how they may be customised for use in different contexts, even for teaching different subjects. We also discuss our non-digital innovations in teaching, and how these, together with the digital tools, contribute to our overall philosophy of experiential learning.

What is DART?

DART is a joint project between the London School of Economics and Columbia University, funded by JISC and the National Science Foundation in the US. The project aims to develop digital resources for the teaching of undergraduate anthropology. At Columbia, the emphasis is on the development of the infrastructure and content of a digital repository of anthropological teaching materials, whereas at LSE we are developing innovative learning tools and other learning activities, and integrating them with undergraduate courses. This paper focuses on the LSE side of the project.

What's Going On?

The initial target of our work was a first-year course entitled “Reading Other Cultures” which aims to introduce students to techniques of ethnographic research. Our aim was to give students an experience of the process of constructing an ethnography, from the collection of ethnographic data in the field, through the interpretation and analysis of that data, to the writing of the ethnography itself. In this way we hoped to give students an insight into the provenance of other researchers' ethnographies, and thus enable them to critically examine such work.

The first of our digital tools attempts to simulate the experience of undertaking the early stages of ethnographic fieldwork. “What's Going On?” is a video interpretation exercise in which the student can watch a short piece of video which is enhanced by way of subtitles and synchronised background information. At first, the subtitles and other information are consistent with what might be available to a fieldworker who has spent only 3 months in the field. The subtitles are therefore very incomplete, reflecting the poor grasp of language that a fieldworker has by this stage, and the additional information is similarly sparse. After watching the video, the students are required to produce a 150-word analysis of the scene, explaining what they think is “going on”.

This is best experienced first hand, by trying the demonstration at:

<http://clt011.lse.ac.uk:8383/steve/wgo/index.html>

After this first exercise is completed, it is repeated, this time with the subtitles and information enhanced to represent 9 months' experience, and the students submit a second, 300-word analysis in which they also reflect on any changes in their understanding. Finally, after a third viewing representing 18 months' experience, they submit a final 600-word report. All pieces of work are assessed, and discussed in class after the end of the exercise.

The aim of “What's Going On” is to let students experience the ever-changing nature of anthropological knowledge – how no ethnography is ever 'complete' – and to challenge their subjectivity and cultural bias. In addition, while doing this exercise over a 2-week period they also read an ethnography of the Mbendjele people of Congo-Brazzaville, who are the subjects of the video clip. The exercise therefore feeds back into the reading and leads them to critically question

how the ethnographer arrived at his conclusions.

Student response to “What's Going On?”

Our evaluation of the exercise included a student questionnaire. One of the key questions we asked was “What do you think you learned by using this tool?”, to which the following responses were representative. The first three indicate that the tool successfully achieved some of its goals:

The anthropologist has to constantly re-interpret what is seen, as awareness of culture and language ability increases

Don't make assumptions ... try and think of many possibilities not just the obvious one

I was able to apply what I had learned from the thesis to an actual exercise which put the reading into context

In addition, this comment suggested a further learning outcome of the exercise:

I think by the end of using the tool I was more aware of the nuances of Mbendjele culture than [the ethnographer] had presented in his thesis

So here the student has gained an insight beyond that which the text affords him, by 'doing the fieldwork' himself.

Customisability of “What's Going On?”

This tool has been designed so that all of the content – the subtitles, background links and the video clip – are independent of the function of the tool. This means that all the content can be easily removed and replaced with completely new material. This allows re-use of the tool in new contexts and in different subject areas. We are currently involved in a project with the University of Waterloo in Ontario to use the tool with a different piece of anthropological video, which will demonstrate its customisability in practice.

The content is specified by way of XML files that can be edited in order to alter the content. For ease of use by teachers we are also working on an authoring version of the tool that will allow the teacher to easily insert subtitles and links, without the need to understand XML.

Betsileo Rice Challenge

The second phase of the “Reading other cultures” course deals with the Betsileo people of Highland Madagascar. We wanted to develop an activity that would allow students to experience the decisions that are made daily by Betsileo farmers in trying to cultivate enough rice to feed their families, and how such decisions are influenced by the traditional Betsileo world-view. To this end we developed the *Betsileo Rice Challenge*, a rice cultivation model in which students take on the role of a Betsileo farmer from a given social bracket. In this role, they decide which cultivation methods to pursue in each of their fields, as well as making decisions about the education of their children and the holding of traditional ceremonies. The model simulates the results of their cultivation, operating within a Betsileo world-view in which adherence to traditional methods and honouring one's ancestors can have as much effect on rice yields as the use of the latest farming techniques. In this way, the model challenges the students' assumptions and gives them an experience of the difficulty of surviving as Betsileo, especially those from the lower strata of society.

The game can be accessed here: <http://clt011.lse.ac.uk:8383/steve/brc/login.html>. Use the username “guest” to log in.

Student response to the Betsileo Rice Challenge

Again, as part of our evaluation we asked “What do you think you learned by using this tool?”. In

some cases, the students' feedback was a fairly straightforward response to their success or failure as a farmer:

The effect of socio-economic status on people's ability to feed themselves

More about actual daily decisions Betsileo face and how these are influenced by a number of factors

Meanwhile, other students seemed to have picked up on our aim to challenge their cultural assumptions:

That other cultures approach things in entirely different mindsets i.e. growing rice – rational/ancestral

In one case, the student appeared to have experienced the game as we had intended, but did not gain the understanding that we had hoped for:

I generally got confused, methods I assumed would work didn't, and I found it difficult to see how my knowledge of the text aided my complete lack of knowledge of rice cultivation

Possibly this student had failed to appreciate that the methods that work in her world might not be considered appropriate for the Betsileo; on the other hand, it could be that she felt that the model did not adequately reflect the Betsileo world-view. Such issues were brought out by the exercise and developed in the subsequent class discussion.

The Kolkata Explorer

The third tool we have been using was developed for a different course altogether, the 2nd year “Anthropology of India” module. The idea here is to give students an experience of collecting ethnographic data in an urban environment – specifically the city of Calcutta (Kolkata). The tool allows the students to roam about a map of the city, visiting key locations and examining the pieces of ethnographic evidence (in the form of texts, articles, images and video) to be found there. Using the tool they can collect a portfolio of evidence with which to tackle an anthropological question set by the lecturer. This exercise aims to give the students experience of identifying and evaluating sources of ethnographic information.

The tool can be seen in action here: <http://clt011.lse.ac.uk:8383/steve/investigator/index.html>

This tool has only recently been completed and used in teaching, so no evaluation results are yet available.

Customisability of Kolkata Explorer

The *Kolkata Explorer* is an instance of a generalised tool called *Investigator*. In the same way as with “What's Going On?”, the content has been divorced from the functionality, so the tool can be used to create exercises in different contexts and different subject areas. The map can be replaced by another map or any other image, so the same tool might be used, for example, for the examination of a photograph of a geological formation, or of an anatomical diagram. All of the content is stored in XML files, so changing the content is simply a matter of editing these files.

Our first trial of customising this tool will take place at Columbia University in September where the tool is to be used in the “Introduction to South Asian History and Culture” course. This will involve the production of new content to reflect the different aims of the course.

A new approach to anthropology teaching

The DART project at LSE has been concerned with all aspects of the “Reading other cultures” course, not just those relating to digital learning tools. We have sought to provide experiential learning for the students, using whatever level of technology best supports our aims. One part of this is the use of image-based lectures, where PowerPoint is used not to project bullet-pointed

lecture notes, but solely to display images which the lecturer uses as a series of prompts to get students interacting with himself and with each other. The idea is to have students continually active in class, not just sitting back as passive receivers of information. In addition, use of images avoids the cognitive dissonance that occurs when students attempt to listen to a speaker and at the same time read (different) text off a screen.

Another innovation has been the use of the *Ba-Li Ethnographic Experiment* as the opening class of the course. This is a role-play game in which the students are divided into two groups, and taught how to behave as members of two caricatured cultures, the Ba and the Li. Having learnt the rudiments of their own culture, a small group of “anthropologists” is taken from each group and sent off to visit the other group and conduct “fieldwork” amongst them. When all participants have completed their fieldwork, they are required to write assessed ethnographies on what they have discovered.

[Watch a montage](#) of the Ba-Li game in action and the subsequent class discussion [add link].

This exercise gives students a first taste of the difficulties of collecting ethnographic evidence, confronts issues of subjectivity and cultural bias and thus lays the groundwork for the more real-life experience of “What's Going On?” later in the course.

Conclusion

The DART project at LSE has attempted to completely revise the way ethnographic techniques are taught to first-year anthropology students, to allow them to gain understanding not second-hand by being fed information, but first-hand through experience. Where appropriate we have developed online exercises to support this process, and these exercises have been designed to be generalisable so that the learning principles they embody can be transported into new contexts.

Our approach is summed up by the following aphorism:

What I hear, I forget

What I see, I remember

What I do, I know

– Lao Tzu

If you would like to know more about the project, and especially the work being done at Columbia University which we have not discussed here, please visit the project website at <http://www.columbia.edu/dlc/dart/> or contact us at s.bond1@lse.ac.uk and l.e.freeman@lse.ac.uk. We are particularly keen to hear from you if you think you might be able to use one of our generalisable tools in your own teaching.