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A transferable multimedia tool for blended learning in introductory anthropology: results from Canada and the UK

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ABSTRACT: The use of ethnographic film to give students a sense of “being there” is a standard in contemporary sociocultural anthropology courses. This paper examines the introduction of a video-based learning tool developed at the London School of Economics and employed at both LSE and the University of Waterloo. The tool, called “What’s Going On?” aims to introduce students to the process and experience of ethnographic fieldwork.

The tool employs a short ethnographic film clip which is synchronised with subtitles and contextual links to other resources that allow students to interpret what they are watching. One goal of the exercise was to provide introductory students with an opportunity to engage in the kinds of interpretations that professional ethnographers do.

The tool is designed to be content-independent, which allows us to use different film clips, in different teaching contexts, at LSE and Waterloo respectively.

Our paper discusses the pedagogical objectives of the “What’s Going On?” tool and discusses the distinct approaches and pedagogical outcomes at the two institutions. We conclude with some suggestions for future directions.

KEY WORDS: anthropology, video, fieldwork, ethnography, customisability, transferability, reusability
experiential learning, ethnographic film

Introduction

The current cohort of university students, sometimes referred to as *Millennials*, are typically described in terms of their relationship with technology. As Gregory Roberts, a member of this cohort, explains,

The Internet and related technologies have had a major influence on my generation’s culture and development. Many, if not most, [students] have never known a world without computers, the World Wide Web, highly interactive video games, and cellular phones. . . . It is not unusual . . . to multitask using all three communication methods at once [instant messaging, telephone, and electronic mail], while still surfing the Web and watching television. (Roberts, 2005)

In light of this kind of facility with multimedia, there has been a growing call for the use of visual stimuli as well as experiential, interactive and authentic learning methods to supplement more traditional teaching and learning practices in higher education. In her article “Boomers, Gen-Xers and Millennials: Understanding the New Students,” Diana Oblinger (2003) declares that “the aging infrastructure and the lecture tradition of colleges and universities may not meet the expectations of students raised on the Internet and interactive games.”

Universities and other agents of higher education have responded by providing ever more visually rich educational media and learning environments which promote interactivity and experiential learning, particularly for introductory and survey courses. Introductory textbooks, for example, once dense tomes, are now illustrated with colour photographs and other graphics, and many are packaged with supplemental CDs or access to proprietary online resources. In lectures, too, professors come under subtle pressure to enliven their presentations with visual software packages such as PowerPoint on the assumption that students learn better when the material is presented to them visually as well as verbally.

In this paper we report on the introduction of a video-based learning tool developed at the London School of Economics (LSE) and employed in anthropology courses at both LSE and the University of Waterloo (UW). The use of ethnographic film to give students a sense of “being there” is standard in contemporary sociocultural anthropology courses, and the application of a video-based learning tool builds on that tradition in the discipline. Academic anthropology is explicitly oriented toward cross-cultural comparison, and one of the primary goals in undergraduate anthropology courses is to expose students to the diversity of human cultural activities in order to counter ethnocentric views that their own cultural practices are normal and natural, but that those of other peoples are not. In addition to learning about various peoples and cultures, students in anthropology courses learn about anthropological data collection and analysis.

The tool, called *What's Going On?*, aims to introduce students to the process of anthropological data collection and analysis while allowing them to virtually experience a major component of professional anthropology – ethnographic fieldwork. Designed to be content-independent, the *What's Going On?* tool presents a short (5-6 min.) ethnographic film clip which students are asked to interpret as anthropologists. While the students at LSE and UW watched different film clips, the learning activities were similar at both universities. The students watched their film clip three times, each time with more textual data intended to simulate growing linguistic and cultural knowledge produced by extended fieldwork. After each viewing the student “ethnographers” wrote brief response essays interpreting what they had witnessed. The second and third essays also called for them to reflect upon how their interpretations changed over time. At both universities, additional ethnographic information about the culture presented in the tool was incorporated into class lectures and assigned readings.

The primary data for analysis are the visual and audio data contained in the film. However, the tool also provides synchronized subtitles and contextual links to other resources. These textual data are meant to assist the student ethnographers with their ethnographic interpretations of the video. As the third author explained to students at UW, *What's Going On?* simulates ethnographic fieldwork among an unfamiliar culture. The subtitles increase with each viewing to reflect the ethnographer’s growing cultural and language familiarity. The information in the contextual links could be understood to constitute some of the ethnographer’s academic preparation for fieldwork.

Pedagogical Context and Objectives: LSE and UW

The Department of Anthropology at LSE is one of the top-ranked departments in the UK for anthropological research. It offers undergraduate and Master's degree programmes

and a postgraduate research programme leading to the MPhil/PhD. A key characteristic of the Department is its emphasis on long-term anthropological fieldwork. All members of staff and PhD students conduct ongoing field research in a wide range of settings around the world.

Since 2003 LSE has been involved in the DART (Digital Anthropology Resources for Teaching) project, a joint project with Columbia University in New York. DART has been funded by the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the US National Science Foundation (NSF). The project aims to develop new digital resources for the teaching of anthropology and to bring about meaningful and sustainable transformation of undergraduate education. At Columbia, the team are addressing large-scale issues through the development of digital library technologies, whereas the LSE team are working on the small-scale, building digital learning tools to tackle specific teaching problems in anthropology. These tools have been designed to be completely customisable, so that their content can be replaced, and the tool re-used for teaching a different subject. *What's Going On?* is one of these tools.

The initial target of the LSE work was a compulsory first-year course entitled "Reading Other Cultures", which aims to introduce students to techniques of ethnographic research. Our aim was to give students the experience of the process of constructing an ethnography: from the collection of 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 insight into the provenance of other researchers' ethnographies, and thus enable them to critically examine those works. *What's Going On?* is part of a suite of digital learning tools the students use for this purpose. Its purpose is to simulate the experience of undertaking the early stages of ethnographic fieldwork.

The University of Waterloo, located in southern Ontario, Canada is a comprehensive university which enrolls approximately 22,000 undergraduates and a much smaller number of graduate students. Although the largest percentage of students (30%) is part of the Faculty of Arts, the university is internationally recognized for and directs its mission toward the Faculties of Engineering (18%) and Mathematics (21%). The city of Waterloo is a computing and high tech centre of Canada, and is home to a number of corporate leaders in wireless communications and computing, most notably Research in Motion (RIM) the maker of the Blackberry.

There is considerable institutional support at the University of Waterloo, particularly at the senior administrative levels, for pedagogies that involve blended learning and multimedia technologies, especially those that can be delivered via the Internet. Certainly, university administrators favour these kinds of learning technologies for both their presumed learning value and their applicability to Distance Education, but institutional identification with computing and communications technologies makes this type of pedagogical tool especially attractive to senior administrators at the University of Waterloo.

In the 1990s, institutional commitments to information technology innovation at UW were broadened to include learning technology applications. National leadership in this area became an institutional objective. The first step toward this kind of national

leadership was to establish a new research and development centre on campus, the Centre for Learning and Teaching Through Technology (LT3). The general mandate of LT3 is to act as an innovation catalyst for the University of Waterloo in the area of learning and teaching with technology. For over five years, LT3 staff have worked with teaching faculty to explore effective ways to enhance student learning through technology. Also to this end, Learning Initiative Funds (LIF) have been made available to faculty members who wish to use technology to develop innovative learning approaches and solutions to instructional challenges. The *What's Going On?* project at UW represents a successful LIF application, enabling the faculty author to purchase film footage and employ an undergraduate research assistant to help with the preparation of the learning materials as well as a graduate teaching assistant to mark the students' written assignments.

What's Going On? was introduced in "Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology" (Anthropology 102) at UW during the Fall 2005 term. The course is a survey of sociocultural anthropology and is a foundational course required of majors, but is also taught as a service course for the university as a whole. Approximately 1000 students each year from all areas of campus take Anthropology 102, which is offered as a large lecture-format class with enrolments of 150-225 students per section. The section of Anthropology 102 that used the tool enrolled 157 students. Among those, anthropology majors and potential majors were relatively few (n=10). Nonetheless, Arts students comprised more than half of the enrolment. The second largest cohort came from Engineering whose students take the course towards the end of their degree program in order to satisfy a distribution requirement in the area of technology and society.

This diversity in student background was a major impetus for experimenting with the *What's Going On?* video tool at UW. In previous terms the third author and course instructor for Anthropology 102 found it difficult to meet the distinct interests and pedagogical needs of Arts and Engineering/Science students. In her interactions with students she found that the Arts students need a course rich in anthropological method, theory and disciplinary history, while many of the engineering and science students have neither patience nor interest in those kinds of details. The latter group, however, is willing to accept a generalized introduction to different modes of interpretation and analysis. In addition, she found that while students frequently expressed interest in and curiosity about the specific processes involved in anthropological fieldwork, the explicit science and technology orientation of the University of Waterloo produces (or attracts) students with a strong positivist orientation. They are often reluctant to regard interpretivist social sciences, generally, and sociocultural anthropology, in particular, as capable of truth claims. *What's Going On?* acquaints students with different "ways of knowing" by allowing them to try on the hat of the anthropologist. The tool enables them, in other words, to "collect" their own ethnographic data in a highly controlled setting and then use the data to make their own anthropological inferences.

Pedagogical Approaches: LSE and UW

The video footage embedded in the *What's Going On?* tool for use at LSE comes from the lecturer's own fieldwork amongst the Mbendjele Yaka (Pygmy) hunter-gatherers of Congo-Brazzaville. The protagonist is a Mbendjele who achieves great success in hunting, but suffers from repeated attacks from gorillas in the forest. He believes that his

fellow Mbendjele ascribe his success to sorcery, and that they have therefore placed a curse on him that causes him to be plagued by gorillas.

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. The above story is therefore far from obvious upon the first viewing. After watching the video, the students are required to produce a 150-word analysis of the scene, explaining what they think is “going on”.

While there are a number of subtle visual cues in the video, the animated conversational style of the primary interlocutor focuses the student observers on the linguistic data in the video. Over the three sequential viewings, subtitled translations of his speech, and the accompanying linked resources, become more detailed to reflect the growing language and cultural competence of the ethnographer. The linked resources include extracts from the lecturer’s doctoral thesis that relate to the topics that arise in the clip. 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.

While doing this exercise over a 2-week period, the students also read a full ethnography of the Mbendjele. The exercise therefore feeds back into the reading and leads them to critically question how the ethnographer arrived at his conclusions.

As noted earlier, the framework of the *What’s Going On?* tool is independent from its video content, which can easily be changed. While retaining the basic student assessment tasks developed at LSE, the UW video presents a different cultural group – Chukchi reindeer herders from the Siberian Far East, which aligns with the circumpolar ethnographic research of the instructor. The first level of the UW version of *What’s Going On?* can be viewed at http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~pstern/WGO/Pegtymel1/wgo_full.html.

In contrast to the conversation which is the focus of the Mbendjele Yaka video, the Chukchi video has little verbal information. In fact, the lack of conversation is an important ethnographic fact that students are expected to observe. The Chukchi clip concerned the celebration of a religious ritual associated with the fall roundup of reindeer. The six minute clip contains an enormous amount of visual data: Students observe the Chukchi preparing new skin clothes, moving their skin house, lighting a ceremonial fire, rounding up the reindeer herd and sacrificially slaughtering two deer, painting human faces and effigies with reindeer blood, and drumming. The subtitles, which become more detailed with each viewing, signifying greater cultural competence,

explain or describe specific actions in the video. For the popup links the instructor created short customized content relevant to events in the video and to anthropological concepts that are useful in interpreting those events. For example, the ritual presented marks the seasonal transition between summer and fall. One of the popup links the instructor created describes the astronomical basis of the extreme seasonal changes in photoperiod in polar regions and goes on to discuss human cultural responses to seasonal climate change.

The instructor reorganized the course only slightly to foreground the importance of the video component. In general, however, she retained the normal schedule of lecture topics, adding the Chukchi to the repertoire of ethnographic examples. The class is an introductory survey of sociocultural anthropology and thus she was able to include Chukchi examples in the lectures about time and calendars, language, kinship, economic, cosmology and religious practice, and indigenous peoples. For instance, when discussing anthropological approaches to human language she included a description of the distinctive men's and women's vocabularies in Chukchi and also discussed some of the consequences of the activities of the Soviet Committee of the North in establishing written orthographies for Siberian languages first with the Roman alphabet and later with the Cyrillic alphabet. The video tool showed Chukchi engaging in presumably traditional activities associated with reindeer herding, but the informational links in the video tool, lectures, and assigned reading presented a broader range of practices and living conditions. The intent was for students to understand that cultures develop and change in response to a variety of structural forces, and that people continue to derive value and meaning from their activities both "traditional" and "modern."

Pedagogical Outcomes: LSE and UW

Our assessment of the pedagogical value of the *What's Going On?* tool derives from students' written course work based on the tool and from a brief paper and pencil survey completed by students.

In response to the LSE student surveys, across three cohorts (in 2004, 2005 and 2006), the results were broadly similar. The students found the tool easy to use, it encouraged them read the set texts, helped them appreciate the difficulties of learning another culture, and was considered an effective way to learn.

However, a significant minority in each cohort did not feel that the tool had helped them learn how to analyze ethnographic data. The qualitative feedback suggests that students did not know how to approach task they had been set, so perhaps more guidance is required along the way from lecturers, to help students develop these skills.

The most commonly stated purpose of the tool, according to students, is to help them understand the difficulties involved in comprehending ethnographic data. This tallies with one of our objectives, as do these other purposes suggested by students: to give the student direct experience of being a fieldworker, to show how understanding develops over time when doing fieldwork, and to give them experience of observing and interpreting ethnographic data in the field.

The main thing that LSE students felt they had learned was the difficulty of interpreting ethnographic data when one does not have the necessary linguistic or cultural

knowledge. The importance of language in general in fieldwork was another thing that several students said they had come to appreciate through using the tool. Only a few students mentioned one of our key aims, that understanding is progressive and incremental.

A significant minority in each cohort reported technical difficulties. Some of these were in fact not directly related to the tool, but the main issue arising was the slowness of the video clip to load over certain network connections. Furthermore, when asked how they suggested we improve the tool, the main request was for a larger video screen size. There is an obvious tension here with the main problem identified – slow video loading – since greater screen size necessarily means greater bandwidth. There is a balance to be struck between video image size, video quality and file size, and the relatively low number of complaints about these aspects suggests that we probably have this balance about right.

In order to be able to compare results, the students at the University of Waterloo were given writing assignments similar in structure and length to those done by the LSE students. UW students were instructed to write 3 letter-style essays addressed to their parents or professor describing the events they observed during their virtual fieldwork. The final letter was to include a discussion of how their interpretations of the events they observed had changed over the course of the fieldwork. As the instructor explained, ethnographers really do write letters of that sort from the field.

University of Waterloo students also completed a brief survey about their perceptions of the educational value of the *What's Going On?* tool at the same time that they completed the ubiquitous course evaluation survey. Again, with an eye to comparability, the survey questions were mostly the same as those asked at LSE and included both 4 point Likert and open-ended questions. 77 (49%) students completed the survey. This sample of respondents corresponded closely to characteristics of the class as a whole in terms of year in university and faculty of major study. While it is impossible to say anything about the students who did not complete the survey, the fact that the respondents were attending class on the day the survey was distributed suggests that they may be more positively disposed towards the course overall than the students who were absent or declined to complete the survey.

All of the respondents reported that they learned something about Chukchi reindeer herders by using the tool and slightly more than half (53%) said that they were interested in learning more about Chukchi as a consequence of having used the *What's Going On?* learning tool. A small, but vocal minority of students regarded the tool as ineffective and gimmicky. There were no statistically significant differences in the responses of Arts and Engineering/Science/Math students.

**Student survey of *What's Going On?*, administered at LSE (2006) and UW (2005)
(mean of responses, 1=agree strongly, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4=disagree strongly)**

	LSE	UW
The instructions were clear and relevant.	2.00	1.6
I had technical difficulties with the tool.	2.85	3.6
I found the tool easy to use.	1.67	1.4
The tool helped me appreciate the difficulties of learning another culture.	1.42	1.9
I learned something about Chukchi reindeer herders by using the tool.	N/A	1.5
The tool helped me learn how to analyse ethnographic data.	2.31	2.0
The tool made me interested in learning more about Chukchi.	N/A	2.5
This was an effective way to learn.	1.92	1.9
I enjoyed doing the “What’s Going On?” exercise.	1.92	N/A
The tool encouraged me to read the text.	1.69	N/A

According to the survey, most University of Waterloo students understood the explicit goals of the *What's Going On?* tool – to learn something about ethnographic data collection and analysis, and the overwhelming majority of respondents (81%) claimed to have learned something about how to analyze ethnographic data. Focus group sessions likewise revealed positive learning outcomes from the exercise, although the student sample was not representative. One student reported for instance that “the learning process was different from other academic courses because you are observing and making your own judgments; you’re involved in the learning process rather than just reading about something,” and noticed a change in herself “from judging the culture from my own culture to judging it from their perspective – from ethnocentrism to understanding it from their perspective – this was powerful because I was actually observing the culture” (Agnes, focus group session, Jan 19 2006). Another explained that while “here magic is considered hokey, participating in the exercise made you understand it differently... I wasn’t surprised by what I saw and even understood it in the context of their culture” (Steve, focus group session, Jan 19 2006).

Student essays, however, paint a less convincing picture. While a few of the essays showed ethnographic insights based on their observations of the video footage – the UW students as a group did relatively well analysing Chukchi cultural responses to extreme season change in temperature and photoperiod and in discussing the sociality between reindeer and people – overwhelmingly the students transferred the textual data from the subtitles and customized popup links to their essay in an uncritical and unreflective manner. This was especially true for their second and third essays. With more textual information available, many of the students opted to mine it rather than the video for data. It is possible that they assumed that they had gotten all they could from a video that did not change from one viewing to the next. In fact, several students indicated on their surveys that the tool would be improved if the video also changed. Alternatively, they

imbued the textual data with more validity than they assigned to their own observations. As at LSE, the UW students had a great deal of difficulty with the notion that knowledge is incremental.

Conclusions

Our experience with an interactive, multimedia-rich *What's Going On?* learning tool was mixed. The tool clearly provided some of its intended pedagogical benefits and our evaluations suggest some areas for improvement. In particular, a significant number of students at both LSE and UW required assistance and encouragement to take intellectual risks by interpreting unfamiliar material. Furthermore, while students report that they like visually rich and multimedia presentations, our experience with *What's Going On?* tool suggests that they are less well able to analyze and interpret visual data than we had assumed. This was particularly the case at UW where the informational popup links were brief customized summaries of anthropological theory. Rather than using the information in the links to guide their own interpretations of the visual data, a majority of students mined the links for factoids which they inserted into their essays – perhaps thinking that there was one correct answer. In future, UW students will see research articles, similar to the material provide to the LSE students, rather than condensed summaries.

Our experiences suggest that digital learning tools such as *What's Going On?* are valuable additions to pedagogy, but that their use requires continuous evaluation and assessment.

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