STUDIA UBB SOCIOLOGIA, 70 (LXX), 2, 2025, pp. 71-90
DOI: 10.2478/subbs-2025-0010

TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE TIK-TOK AND AI ERA. ON TRANSFERABLE SKILLS BUILT THROUGH PRACTICAL EXERCISES AND FILMMAKING PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines methods of teaching introductory anthropology to non-anthropology students in the context of digital culture and post-pandemic social realities. Drawing on courses taught between 2018 and 2025 within the Documentary Filmmaking master's program at Babeş-Bolyai University, it explores how anthropology can be made relevant to film students shaped by constant online interaction, social media, and artificial intelligence. The study presents a pedagogical model based on experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and international filmmaking teamwork involving students from Romania, the United States, and Italy. Emphasis is placed on "hands-on" projects that encourage direct engagement with people and communities beyond digital environments. Student feedback indicates that anthropological methods and skills were transferable to filmmaking practice and other professional contexts. The paper argues that experiential and collaborative approaches can make anthropology accessible and meaningful for digital-native film students.

Keywords: anthropology education; experiential learning; digital natives; interdisciplinary collaboration; documentary filmmaking.

Introduction

"When I was your age, I used to read hundreds of pages of monography and anthropological theories" is the first line I have in mind when I talk to my students, but then I quickly suppress the words mainly for two reasons. When I was a student, I really disliked anything that started with "when I was your

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age" and mostly important, today, students who were born and raised in a digital world, are learning in a completely different era than mine, although we are only twenty years apart.

Trying to build up a syllabus that would make the students not necessarily fall in love with anthropology but at least get them excited about the topic and finding it relevant in their world, I remembered why I chose anthropology in the first place. It was the fascination with the people, culture, various ways of living, communities, sights and languages. The idea of going away from my home and experiencing how other people live, understanding the diversity while understanding my own culture kept my energy alive all these years.

With this in mind, I started to think of ways of teaching anthropology to students who live in the tik-tok and AI era. The main question was "How can I teach the basics of anthropology to students who are not majoring in anthropology, who are surrounded by screens 24/7, connected to the internet all the time but who were physically so disconnected from their peers and the rest of the people during the pandemic years?" In a world of thousands of digital interactions each day, where students are positioned in the role of heavy consumers of digital products that requires very little (if any) initiative from them, where physical interaction seems to pose challenges, making the students lament that "it is difficult to talk to people in real life, I don't know how to start", the question is "how can anthropology make a difference"?

Relying on examples drawn from anthropology courses taught between 2018-2025 to students enrolled in Documentary Filmmaking master program within Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babes-Bolyai University, this paper presents and discusses methods of teaching the basics of anthropology to students who are not majoring in anthropology, highlighting "the hands on" experience and the need to involve students in interdisciplinary, collaborative projects. As described in the paper, the feedback from students emphasized that methods and approaches learned in these anthropological projects helped them significantly in other cases, successfully transferring the skills in other assignments and jobs.

In the first part, the paper offers details on the pedagogical model employed for teaching the basic concepts of anthropology to students who are not majoring in this field and who are preparing for a career in documentary filmmaking. The second part of the paper describes the way students from documentary filmmaking program (Romania) worked in international, interdisciplinary and collaborative teams with students enrolled in anthropology (USA) and communication and film students (Italy). As we are living in a world permanently connected to internet and to artificial intelligence chatbots, with everything

reachable just one click away, the paper aims to show a version on how to tailor a basic anthropology class to digital natives, encouraging critical thinking while exposing the students to real life experience, beyond the blue screens.

Framework and theoretical approach

Anthropology's distinctive contribution to higher education lies in its ability to cultivate cultural relativity, deepen understanding of human diversity, foster critical thinking, and employ ethnographic methods to engage students with alternative worldviews. Scholars consistently argue that anthropology's greatest value does not lie solely in training professional anthropologists, but in cultivating perspectives that are broadly applicable across disciplines and careers. Across recent scholarship (Stein et al. 2016, Hernandez Sanchez 2013, Hoag 2024, Copeland and Dengah II 2016, Demerath 2019), educators have argued that anthropology should be widely taught beyond the discipline itself, especially to non-anthropology majors, as a way of equipping students with the interpretive frameworks and methodological tools necessary to navigate a multicultural world and to critically engage with cultural difference, question ethnocentric assumptions, and recognize the variability of human experience.

This relativistic perspective is particularly important in increasingly globalized and multicultural societies, where misunderstanding and stereotyping can reinforce social inequalities, promoting instead empathy and analytical rigor rather than judgment. This article draws from these frameworks and the approaches employed by the authors mentioned above, while this concise section briefly discusses the key contributions that address *why* and *how* anthropology education benefits students from diverse academic backgrounds, focusing on three main key points: (a) critical thinking, (b) ethnographic methods and (c) interdisciplinary/ collaborative, hands-on experiences.

Critical thinking

Anthropological pedagogy challenges students to interrogate dominant narratives, question claims of objectivity, and reflect on the relationship between power, knowledge, and representation. This intellectual practice is particularly beneficial for non-majors, who may have limited exposure to qualitative reasoning or reflexive analysis in their home disciplines. By confronting unfamiliar cultural logics, students are compelled to examine their own assumptions and recognize the partiality of their viewpoints. This process strengthens analytical reasoning and promotes intellectual humility, both of

which are essential skills beyond the classroom. Anthropology thus contributes not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable competencies valued in professional and civic life.

Ethnographic methods

The use of ethnographic methods plays a critical role in helping non-anthropology majors engage meaningfully with cultural difference. Ethnography, with its emphasis on participant observation, interviewing, and contextual interpretation, allows students to encounter culture as lived experience rather than abstract theory. Stein et al. (2016) critique the traditional image of ethnography as an isolated, individual endeavour and instead advocate collaborative and locally grounded research models that are more accessible to undergraduates.

Students who conduct small-scale ethnographic projects—such as observing community spaces, interviewing peers, or reflecting on everyday practices—gain firsthand insight into how culture shapes behaviour and meaning. This experiential approach has been shown to increase student engagement and deepen understanding, particularly for non-majors who may initially view anthropology as distant from their primary fields of study.

Interdisciplinary/collaborative, hands-on experiences

Collaborative projects further promote dialogue among students from different disciplinary backgrounds helping them acquire essential transferable skills such as teamwork, communication across difference, and ethical decision-making. Stein et al. (2016) argue that presenting anthropology as inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary helps students recognize its relevance to a wide range of careers. By integrating teaching, research, and service, anthropological pedagogy demonstrates how ethnographic thinking can be applied to real-world problems, from healthcare and education to business and public policy.

Pedagogical models that prioritize experiential learning and applied engagement further demonstrate the advantages of anthropology for non-majors. Copeland and Dengah's *"Involve Me and I Learn"* (Copeland & Dengah, 2016), articulates a pedagogical shift toward collaborative, applied anthropology that engages students directly in research and community-based projects. They argue that mentorship, collaborative fieldwork, and applied projects help students move from passive learners to active participants in knowledge production.

Generative AI in teaching anthropology

Probably like many other anthropologists, right now I find it impossible to assess how is AI shaping our domain, let alone our world, and this paper is not trying to open a debate on this matter. However, discussing pedagogical approaches for Gen Z, the "elephant in room" should be addressed, but not in terms of how and if we could detect the use of generative AI in students' assessments, as it is a fact that they are using it (Fukuzawa 2025). Beyond it, questions such as "Where does the student's work end and ChatGPT begin? Can we, and should we, create generative-AI proofed assessments? How do we make assessments 'fair' for those students not using generative AI? Are these new academic offences or does generative AI amount to plagiarism and collusion?" mentioned by Weston and Djohari (2025, p. 76) are probably in the mind of many anthropology pedagogists, me included. In addition, the questions of students are equally important: "What AI relevant skills do I need to become competitive in a changing marketplace? What jobs will remain as AI takes on more and more tasks?" (Weston and Djohari, 2025, p. 76).

The study of the impact of Generative AI is in its very incipient phase and like many others in the domain of technology, the answers become more often than not, obsolete, with the fast advancement of the information technology. However, the few attempts to shed some light should be briefly mentioned here, as the technique of "hiding the head in the sand" is definitely not an option, while the history of anthropological pedagogy proves that this domain has always been adapting to the technological development (Weston and Djohari 2025).

In the special issue dedicated to teaching anthropology and AI published in RAI's journal "Teaching Anthropology", Weston and Djohari conclude that the five essays on the matter "offer pragmatic paths for engaging with AI to enhance learning, but with a healthy critical eye" (Weston and Djohari 2025, p. 78). Hornbeck and Lin address concerns about the negative impact of generative AI on essay writing as a pedagogical practice by exploring more constructive applications of AI in learning contexts. Drawing on analyses of AI chat logs from students, their findings indicate that students who approached these conversations through reflection on their own personal experiences were better able to ground abstract theoretical concepts than those who adopted more straightforwardly explanatory approaches. The study highlights both the limitations and affordances of AI as a learning tool, while suggesting that more reflexive and exploratory uses can foster deeper intellectual engagement.

Krause-Jensen and Hau situate the emergence of AI chatbots and large language models within a broader disciplinary trajectory, comparing their impact on anthropology to the crisis of representation of the 1980s. Focusing

on the use of AI in academic writing, theoretical application, and fieldwork analysis, they examine the challenges generative AI poses to experiential research. While acknowledging the risks involved, the authors advocate for a cautious and strategic adoption of AI that builds on existing disciplinary strengths, emphasising the importance of AI literacy among teaching staff.

Finally, Longkumer explores how students engage with generative AI in taught anthropology courses. Using classroom-based case studies—including simulated interviews, co-created fictional fieldnotes, and analyses of AI-generated essays—he demonstrates how AI can function as a source of distributed knowledge that supports creative and critical learning. The article argues that, when approached with ethical and critical care, generative AI can productively augment traditional anthropological methods.

As this summary shows, chatbots can enhance the learning outcomes, could stimulate the students in simulated conversations or create fictional fieldnotes. As the ban on the use of AI is not an option and the incipient studies suggest that the chatbots are doing a good job in training students with false ethnographic accounts and made-up interviews, I find Weston and Djohari's (2025) question "What Now for Anthropology?" very relevant. Reflecting upon this paradigm shift in anthropological pedagogy and upon the role of us, the educators, in a generative AI world, my intuition is taking back to where I started: to humans and to our real, living culture. Furthermore, to the students' questions regarding the future jobs in an AI world and the skills they should learn in school, the answer seems to me to be the same: human skills.

Learning to see, listen, understand, and collaborate with other humans, will probably be the key skill in an ever-technologized world, with endless virtual interactions and anthropology should be taught in schools starting with elementary level. However, for now, this paper is concerned with the present, and the following sections describes and discusses how the syllabus for students not majoring in anthropology was built around the concepts of critical thinking, ethnographical methods, "hands on" and collaboration, with the aim of creating a set of transferable skills that help the graduates navigate the world of flesh and bones, not of bytes and binary numbers.

Teaching anthropology to documentary filmmaking students

This paper discusses the methods employed for teaching anthropology between 2019 and 2025 to students enrolled in the first year of documentary filmmaking master program at Faculty of Theatre and Film, at Babes-Bolyai University, Romania. Around 50% of the students have graduated a film school,

while the others have a degree in majors such as journalism, philology, psychology, management, IT and so on. After two years, the graduation exam consists in making a documentary on the topic chosen by the student. The idea of being taught and guided on how to make their voice heard through making their own documentary seem to be very appealing especially to candidates outside the film schools. Within the large aim of the master program, anthropology was introduced as a compulsory course with the aim of training students with concepts of objectivity/ subjectivity, understanding the other and ethnographic methods in the first semester, and anthropological documentary approaches, in the second semester. The master program was launched in 2015 and I was the first to teach anthropology here, starting with 2016.

Anthropology and Documentary filmmaking class- fall semester

The first semester, the name of the course is Anthropology and Documentary filmmaking and it is focused on the following objectives: understanding the anthropology's main concepts, research methods and the ways they can be used in building a visual project; Understanding the concept of subjective-objective, cultural stereotype and cultural relativism that occur when meeting "the Other"; Learning about the main anthropological theories to understand the context that produces the visual projects. The course has 2 hours of lecture and 2 hours of seminar each week, over a period of 14 weeks.

There were three main key points that guided the syllabus construction: the need to introducing basic anthropology concepts to non-anthropology students, especially focused on applying in documentary filmmaking, the need to engage students in hands-on exercises to be able to understand the notion of culture, objectivity/ subjectivity, stereotyping, etc in everyday interactions, and the need to teach ethnographic methods in a way that is relevant for their non-anthropological, short-term projects, while interacting with real human beings and not generative AI chatbots. Consequently, the 2-hour lecture focused on specific topics, would be followed by a 2-hour seminar where students would leave their laptops, tablets and phones to go out of the classroom and take a look for an hour, at the world around them, and would come back to discuss it in class, for another hour.

Hoping that other anthropology pedagogists would find it helpful in their own endeavours, the following paragraphs describe the approach to each topic, with an emphasis on the practical part. This section offers suggestions on how students can be involved in short exercises that cut them off the chat bots and screens and connect them to the palpable world around them, to start reflecting

upon it, upon their own assumptions while building transferable skills applicable in their future projects.

The introduction lecture discusses the concepts of anthropology, cultural anthropology, culture with an emphasis on material and non-material products of a culture, especially sign and symbol. After offering the definitions and a few examples, the students are being asked to go outside the classroom, in the downtown streets and squares, nearby the department's location, to look around for an hour and to identify symbols of Romanian, Hungarian and European culture. This exercise is meant to make them become aware of the use of everyday symbols, the way they are surrounding us and create meaning. I am offering here a few results from this exercise. Students immediately identify Romanian, Hungarian and European flags as symbols of the cultures, but they have troubles finding more, as they usually associate the culture with the dominant religion. Therefore, some say that the Orthodox church is a Romanian symbol while the Catholic church is a symbol of Hungarian culture. "A green gate is a Hungarian gate" is an example of extreme generalisation coming from a student who explained that to him a gate painted in green means Hungarian, as it is one of the three colours of Hungarian flag. In terms of European symbols, the most common symbol recognized in the street is the Euro sign in the exchange office window. Again, students have difficult time in finding other symbols and they find for example Italian, Spanish, or German symbols and they generalize them calling European symbols. The discussions upon their return in the classroom evolves around decodifying the symbols and being aware of the generalizations in everyday use.

The second lecture discusses the concepts of race, ethnicity and stereotyping, emphasising how our perceptions are being moulded by our cultural background and upbringing. For the practical part, the students go outside the classroom for an hour to count how many Germans, Muslims, Orthodox, Ukrainians, Roma, Italians, etc they meet in the street. I am selecting here only a few of their answers to emphasise how based on their perceptions, we are trying to de-construct the stereotypes and become aware of our biases and preconceived models of seeing the world. " I saw two Germans, they were speaking German". I asked the student "How do you know they were not Austrians? or maybe one of them was Romanian speaking to a German? Or even two Romanians (or other ethnicity) practicing German among themselves?, etc". This way we are discussing how the use of a language and ethnicity is many times a false overlapping that we take for granted. The student in charge with counting the Ortodox, went near an Orthodox church, and counted the people going in and out of the church. When I asked whether we could assume all the people in a church are followers of that religion, maybe some are just visiting and accompanying other Orthodox,

etc, the students reflected upon this and also on the possibility of other Orthodox believers that were passing by, without going to church and therefore not being counted.

The same happened in the case of Hungarians, when another student counted the people in a Catholic church as being all Hungarians, opening the discussion on stereotypes on ethnicity and religious practices. One student said she could not count any Muslim in the street, and this added up to the conversation that many times we recognize members of a certain congregation only if they display visible signs but in the everyday Romanian streets, these are not so visible. In terms of Roma, as the most prevalent stereotype is a negative one, a student considered as being Roma the street sweepers he met in his way. The class debate was mostly around de-constructing this stereotype, trying to understand how it was formed, after 500 years of Roma slavery, passed on through generations and how it is still persistent today in various cultural forms.

The third lecture on language is focused on relationship between culture and language and the way language shapes our understanding of the world. During the lecture, I presented cases of gendered nouns in Romanian and their non-gendered equivalent nouns in English, nouns that are feminine in Romanian but masculine in French or German, pronouns that suggest social status in Romanian while in English carry no load, phrases that have no meaning in other languages or in other cultural context, etc. At the same time, as students are mostly Romanians but some of them of Hungarian ethnicity, the discussion is being enriched as they point Hungarian examples, or with cases from Portuguese, Turkish or German offered by the international Erasmus students attending the class.

After the lecture, the students go outside the classroom, to look at the streets, buildings and actions and to identify things, situations or actions that in English (or other language they speak) have different meaning or interpretation than in Romanian. The examples identified by students refer to the gendered way Romanian see the world due to the gendered nouns, the impossibility of translation some actions in English as the Romanian cultural context is very different, the distortion of the meaning through word-by-word translation and so on. Through discussion, students admit that they take a lot of linguistic aspects for granted and they discover how a simple walk through the downtown could mean different experience for people of different languages, as the language offer particular lens through which we see the world.

For the world-view class, the students watch a documentary of their choice and then they discuss in pairs, the filmmaker's view of the world, in comparison with the one of their own and their pair. This way, they have three world views or parts of them to relate to and spot the differences or the

similarities. This reflexive exercise helps the students be aware of the own world view, how the ethnic, linguistic, geographic, cultural, religious, etc background is shaping their view on the world. Furthermore, discussing it in relation to their peers and the film, students analyse how the world view is playing an important part in everyday interactions and how it is portrayed in a documentary film. There are some examples when students have a difficult time recognizing their subjectivity saying that "this is how the world is" instead of understanding that it is a view formed in certain cultural context. When discussing with their peers, when spotting and comparing the differences, the students understand better the subjective approach. In relation to film, some also have difficulties in de-constructing the visual message and finding the world view that is shaping it. Again, discussing with their peers, hearing their thoughts and suggestions, and reflecting upon their own, is an important step in acknowledging the subjectivity and accepting the alternative ways of seeing the world.

The lecture on ethics is built around colonialism and the "colonial gaze" that created for centuries so many visual products dramatically shaping our perception about "the exotic other". After a brief tour through the history of colonial gaze, the discussion is centred on present days visual representations. For the practical part, students need to find documentaries or social media posts that display unethical approaches or representations. Especially in the past 2-3 years, students become quite aware of the unethical approaches, while earlier I find it sometimes challenging to make them spot them, as they said "that is the reality, they only filmed it, that is not unethical. What, we should not film the reality anymore?". In response to that, we de-construct the term "reality", try to see whose reality is actually portrayed and from what angle. Moreover, I ask them the question. "Would you be comfortable with that video if the person exposed was someone from your family?", triggering an "aha moment". It is only when the students imagine their kin in the same situation that they take a different stance, and I think this is a pivotal point. Unethical methods and approaches seem to be more difficult to spot as they are applied to "the other", while the reversed angle, the "own example" brings back into discussion the fairness and the ethical issues.

After familiarizing the students with the basic concepts of cultural anthropology, the lectures are focused on ethnographic methods. Over a few weeks period, students learn about observation, participant observation and interview, while in seminar they practice with their peers. In the following paragraph I will discuss the exercises students need to do outside the classroom, as homework. They are asked to choose a group that they are not necessarily part of, such as sport club, book club, student association, volunteer group, etc.

After informing the participants about their presence and getting access, the student needs to attend their meetings and do an ethnographic description, for the term exam, at the end of semester.

During the seminars, the students mention that in the beginning they felt awkward and uncomfortable at the groups' meetings, as they were outsiders, felt estranged and most of all, they lacked a video camera. Further discussion reveals how they are used to be in unfamiliar places/ groups as filmmakers and the camera provided them a shield. Without it, they felt exposed, especially if the group consisted in less than 6-7 members.

The main reasons I ask the film students to do observation without a camera was, first to experience how to get in touch with people they do not know, in flesh and bones, with no technological layer between them. And secondly, to understand how the camera empowers them, putting them in a privileged position and to reflect upon how it changes the perspective from the very beginning.

Furthermore, through this exercise students acknowledge how as filmmakers in new context, they are concerned with technical aspects such as lights, angles of shooting, framing, etc, while being without a camera, they were able to observe far more details and let the events unfold for themselves. This way they recognize how their attention is very selective and guided by the technical priorities and how their understanding of the new context is distorted even more in the process. The goal here is not to get the naïve and utopic "biased free" look, but to train students in documentary filmmaking to let the people and the environment "do the talk", paying attention to details, relationships and actions and only after that, to bring the camera in.

The pieces of ethnographies created by students have one thing in common. Although for the past few years the situation has improved, the students are very challenged by the emphasis on "description", stating facts, describing people, places, actions. Their ethnographies have a very subjective tone, the writing is a constant mix between some descriptive fragments and personal explanations, assumptions and opinions presented as "ethnographic description". It seems that describing just what they see, hear and smell, there and then, is a real challenge. One student mentioned at some point that she felt strange not to offer any analysis the way she was taught to do all the gymnasium and high school years in Romanian literature classes, while the other students nodded their heads in approval.

The seminar discussions are usually carried around the topic of objectivity-subjectivity and de-constructing the idea of "100% objective look". The purpose of ethnographic exercise, among others, is to make them aware of

the distinction between facts developing before their eyes and their opinion or assumption on those facts. The discussion at seminars provokes them to see that as filmmakers of documentary films, their subjectivity is part of the artistic process and is central to the visual project. The anthropology class does not try to erase their subjectivity and force them to create "objective" accounts, but rather to be able to have an objective look, separate facts from opinions, understand how their own cultural background offers them a lens through which they perceive reality, and reflect upon their own subjectivity.

Although the ethnographic exercise created many relevant discussions, in this paper I will focus my conclusion on the feed back provided by the students when they were asked to reflect upon it. "It gave me a brief moment of joy to realize that for the first time I got out of my comfort zone and went somewhere where I knew absolutely no one, I was not sure I would find people who would be open with me or if I would be welcomed, because I have not experienced in my life too many interactions with communities." (student, female, 24 years old). "This whole experience really pushed me to step out of my comfort zone [...]. The hardest part was learning how to resist the urge to jump in or voice my opinion when things weren't going in the way I thought they should" (student, female, 25 years old). "Most importantly, my interaction with the group transformed my scepticism into appreciation, my anxiety into openness, and my detachment into a real desire to participate" (student, male, 24 years old). These three examples are not an exception as most of the student feed-back gravitates around the idea of breaking out of their bubble, overcoming the fear of meeting new people and being open to new communities.

Social and anthropological documentary- spring semester

The second semester is focused on social and anthropological documentary, for the same students who attended the first semester "Anthropology and documentary filmmaking" class. Having in mind the necessity of collaborative and interdisciplinary projects where students would develop transferable skills, this class witnessed various forms or collaborations. This paper discusses the spring 2023 class, which has a few particularities while at the same time does not represent a unique, "a one of its kind" class, as it stands in line with the other classes taught between 2020-2025. This class represents an example of international, interdisciplinary, hands-on experience as detailed in the following section.

The class of 2021 and 2022, Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babes-Bolyai University, Romania (UBB) students collaborated with other students enrolled

in anthropology programs at University of Wyoming or elsewhere (Europe, Asia and Africa). Based on these previous experiences, the class of 2023 brought together online, documentary filmmaking students from UBB (coordinated by the author), master level anthropology students from University of Wyoming (USA, coordinated by Dr. Michael Harkin) and communication students from Universita Cattolica (Italy, coordinated by Dr. Alice Cati).

Hoping that other anthropology pedagogists would find it useful while encouraging them to take this path, this section describes the logistics and some of the projects resulted from this encounter. The aim of this class was to offer the students possibility of developing teamwork skill by working in international, interdisciplinary teams, to break the language barrier while developing video projects that include three perspectives from three different countries. The syllabus was built after online meetings between the three coordinators, and it would comprise topics relevant to all the programs as it follows: teamwork in filmmaking, international collaborative documentaries, objectivity, subjectivity and reflexivity in filmmaking, ethics in filmmaking, representing "the other" in films, international collaborative ethnographies, social documentary and participatory video making. Each topic would be taught online, by one of the three coordinators, through rotation, followed by a 2-hour seminar.

Organizing and preparing the class was quite challenging especially due to the time zones and academic calendars. As University of Wyoming spring semester started in January and ended in May, while Babes Bolyai University and Universita Cattolica started in March and ended in June, first we had to overlap the 3 academic calendars, taking into account different spring breaks and Easter vacations. We were able to identify March, April, May available to everyone and consequently the online class were taught during these months. Next, we were able to set the time for the class between a very small window due to the 9-hour difference between Romania and USA. So, we had the class at 6 pm in Romania, 5 pm in Italy and 9 am in USA.

The introductive lecture presented the general aim of the class: ways of collaboration through anthropology filmmaking in international and interdisciplinary context, emphasising that present work system and the future one (in all domains, not only in filmmaking and anthropology) is based on teams with members scattered all over the world, speaking different languages, living in different cultures. Acquiring skills in teamwork, communication, interdisciplinary approaches is a must for the future jobs and students have the chance to practise them within this international class.

After all participants introduced themselves, we created teams of 3 (one student from each university): One American, one Romanian and one Italian get together to make a film, sounding like the beginning of a joke. The teams would

work together until the end of the semester, with the goal of creating a 10-minute video project on an anthropological topic of their choice, approached from 3 cultural angles. War in Ukraine, death, religion, home, etc were some of the topics proposed by students. The class meetings were twice a week, following the schedule presented above, while students would organize themselves and meet online to discuss the project according to their chosen topic. The instruction language was English, known and spoken by everyone.

During the first meeting we presented the work method, we offered them guidelines on how to organize their teams and coordinate their work, we emphasised the focus of the class on the collaboration itself, rather than solving technical filmmaking shortages. We discussed especially how to perceive the differences in languages, approaches and cultures as a great opportunity for learning essential skills for working in international and interdisciplinary teams and creating short films that would offer three perspectives on the same topic.

Prior to the class and during the first meeting, there was a strong sense of excitement among students, with lots of anticipation, curiosity and energy, which unfortunately turned quickly in frustration. It seems that students had a difficult time in organizing themselves, first of all. "I don't know his email address", "She doesn't answer my messages", "When I want to talk about the project, it is too late in the day for the others, while it is still morning in my time zone", "Two of us are talking but our third member does not get involved", etc were few of the complains mentioned. Furthermore, it seems that Italian students had an inferiority complex regarding the use of English, feeling embarrassed that it might not be good enough.

Discussing openly these issues during the seminars helped fixing the communication and management issues. American students said that they were impressed with the high level of English of their Romanian and Italian teammates and how they were able to develop a project in their non-native language, making them more confident and surpassing the language barrier. Also, the cultural differences were visible during the class interactions. It seems that American students had a more relaxed and casual approach, easily offering their opinions, being outgoing, while the Romanian and Italians were formal, answering mostly only when specifically asked. However, at the student team level, while meeting only among themselves, it seems that the collaboration was improved and all students contributed equally, regardless of their cultural background. After choosing a topic, each team developed its own visual project with all the members involved in brainstorming on script writing, filming and taking interviews in their own country, discussing editing choices.

At the end of semester, there were ten short documentaries produced by the student teams on various anthropologic or social topics, approached from

three perspectives. As the students had different technical skills in filmmaking, some documentaries were less articulated while the lack of student involvement in some projects were visible in the results. On the other hand, some films managed to convey a strong message while successfully debate the topic from various angles.

My opinion (in agreement with Dr. Harkin and Dr. Cati) is that the class reached its aim. Through anthropologic documentary film production, the students from three different countries were exposed to different cultures, managed to build up essential skills in teamwork, listen to opinions and perspectives from their international peers, turning them into a documentary script and a collaborative video. A totally hands-in experience, while dealing with 3 different time zones and cultural backgrounds.

In support of my argument, here are two feed-backs received from our students: "The joint course with other two universities opened my perspective to new ways of approaching the world and art. It made me much more open and tolerant toward other cultures. I realized that documentary film is a universal language and that the desire to create something beautiful is a shared goal. I developed my leadership and communication skills. I would like future students, not only those in the documentary film master's program, to have similar opportunities (Romanian students, 42 years old); "Having different cultural reference points, two people can read the same message and understand two different things. To be honest, my teammates did not collaborate very well, but we made the film in the end. It was very interesting to see the perspective from another country" (Romanian student, 24 years old). At the other end, one student said that he really hated the class and he would never work again with people he did not know, he would only work with his friends, highlighting the frustration he felt when working with strangers and inability to find a common language.

It is worth mentioning that after class ended, two of the projects were further developed by film students from Babes-Bolyai University, who turned them into two short documentaries. "One Click Away" (directed by Janine Grun), on how students perceive death, and "Morning Routine" (directed by Robert Kocsis), about war in Ukraine and its representation on tik-tok, were selected to multiple international film festivals.

Discussion and conclusion

"How can an anthropology class make a difference" for the Generation Z in the context of an ever growing technologized and digitalized world? was one of the main questions that I asked myself a few years ago and I tried to offer

parts of my answer through this paper. Research in the anthropology of education and pedagogical studies has emphasized that anthropology's value in higher education lies in its role as a *liberalizing* discipline—one that sharpens critical thinking, ethical reflexivity, and interpretive skill rather than merely transmitting content knowledge (Demerath 2019; Copeland and Dengah II 2016). From this perspective, anthropology's methodological emphasis on participant observation and ethnographic reasoning offers students practical tools for engaging with unfamiliar social worlds, encouraging empathy while simultaneously demanding analytical distance (Spradley 1980; Bernard 2017). These skills are increasingly recognized as essential in a globalized, pluralistic society, and as recently, AI driven, particularly for students pursuing careers outside the academy.

Educators have therefore argued that anthropology should be positioned as a foundational component of undergraduate curricula, especially for non-anthropology majors (Stein et al. 2016; Hernández Sánchez 2013). Introductory anthropology courses, in particular, serve as critical sites for challenging ethnocentrism and destabilizing taken-for-granted cultural assumptions, a pedagogical outcome that has been identified as central to anthropology's public relevance (Eriksen 2017). Within this line of reasoning, the present paper discussed various ways of engaging students, developing their critical thinking through practical exercises that call them to take a different look at their familiar places. Inviting the students outside the classroom, for a simple walk around the university's building and asking them to find examples of signs and symbols, to look at the surrounding through the lens of different languages, to identify members of various ethnicities or religious congregations, challenged their assumption and created space for de-construction of stereotypes. By exposing students to these simple yet effective cross-cultural comparison embedded in everyday practices, they were encouraged to recognize both the contingency of their own worldviews and the legitimacy of alternative ways of being.

The use of ethnographic methods plays a significant role in enabling non-anthropology majors to engage meaningfully with cultural difference. Ethnography's core practices—participant observation, interviewing, and attention to social context—encourage students to encounter culture as a lived and relational process rather than as an abstract or static body of knowledge (Geertz, 1973; Spradley, 1980). When students undertake small-scale ethnographic projects—such as observing community spaces, conducting peer interviews, or reflecting on routine social practices—they gain firsthand insight into the ways culture operates in everyday life. Research on experiential learning suggests that these hands-on approaches promote deeper understanding and sustained engagement, particularly among students outside the discipline (Kolb, 1984;

Kuh, 2008). In anthropology classrooms, field-based assignments have been shown to enhance critical thinking, cultural awareness, and reflexivity, even among non-majors who may initially perceive anthropology as distant from their primary fields of study (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

Besides gaining cultural awareness and reflexivity, the examples from our class of anthropology emphasises some points that brings conversation to the very beginning: before talking about applying ethnographic methods, we need to talk about how to support students to start a simple conversation with someone they don't know, how to encourage them to break their own bubbles, how to navigate the anxiety of meet a new group. Before teaching how to apply ethnographic methods, we need first to get off the screens and into real life, to meet real people.

I believe this discussion requires further research, and it is even more timely now with the rise of generative AI. While some studies show how chatbots could stimulate engaged dialogue and help students with false field notes, the present paper shows how students should be engaged in real life experiences. Chatting with bots that are simulating an open dialogue with others, could offer the student a sense of comfort and ease in dialogue, creating the false impression that the student is acquiring and eventually is mastering the necessary skills to engage with other people and other cultural groups. "I have not experienced in my life too many interactions with communities", "This whole experience really pushed me to step out of my comfort zone", "My interaction with the group transformed my scepticism into appreciation, my anxiety into openness, and my detachment into a real desire to participate" are some of the feed back received from the students. I do not believe that any chatbot would have been able to trigger these reactions. After learning the lesson from Plato's allegoric cave (2004), where prisoners mistook shadows on the wall as real people, and later on, from Baudrillard's (1994) simulacra pointing to the copies without originals, completely replacing reality, why would we teach our students today about human interactions through practicing with generative AI? Teach them about reality through simulacrum of a simulacrum?

After years of lockdown, thousands of digital interactions per day, extreme polarization through social media, the anxiety, the scepticism, the fear of rejection are real and leaving a deep imprint. When teaching ethnographic methods, first of all, we need to encourage and support students to meet new people, to take the first step into the real life. Simulated dialogues with chatbots could offer some fictional ethnographic information based on algorithms, taking the students even farther away from what it means to be in the field. Years of practice show that students today have a real difficult time to start an

interaction with the others and in this sense, this paper presented ways in which they can be involved in short ethnographic exercises, interacting with people in various off-screen contexts.

"What jobs are still relevant in an AI world" is one of the most frequent questions coming from students these days, regardless of the field of study. This paper does not have an answer for this question, but it has some suggestions regarding the transferable skills. Team work, collaboration with other humans, interdisciplinary approach and communication are already crucial and they will probably be key assets in the future as well. Collaborative pedagogical projects play an important role in fostering dialogue among students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds while supporting the development of transferable skills such as teamwork, communication across difference, and ethical decision-making.

Framing anthropology as an inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary field has been shown to increase its accessibility and relevance for non-majors, helping students recognise the applicability of anthropological perspectives across a wide range of professional contexts (Stein et al., 2016). By integrating teaching, research, and service, anthropology courses demonstrate how ethnographic thinking can be applied to real-world challenges in areas such as healthcare, education, business, and public policy (Lassiter, 2005; Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). Pedagogical models that prioritise experiential and applied learning further highlight the value of anthropology for students outside the discipline (Copeland & Dengah, 2016). These approaches align with broader research on experiential learning, which shows that active participation enhances engagement, critical thinking, and students' capacity to apply knowledge beyond the classroom (Kolb, 1984; Kuh, 2008). The anthropologic documentary class developed in collaboration with University of Wyoming and Universita Cattolica, engaging students from three different languages, cultures, study majors and academic traditions offers evidence in line with the main framework.

As teamwork, collaboration and interdisciplinarity are concepts whose value had been proved over the decades, the present research was focused on how they actually work between the walls of classrooms and online meetings. Challenges like synchronizing three time zones with 9-hour difference between them, overlapping academic calendars with different structures and breaks, coordinating syllabuses from three different disciplines into one, were overcame through patience and many hours of discussions between the coordinating professors. At the student level, the initial excitement turned quite fast into frustration, and much time was allocated to simply find ways of communicating outside the common lectures, managing false expectations, and encouraging open dialogue. Cultural, linguistic and personal barriers have been eventually broken through documentary filmmaking, as the class offered a real hand in

experience, where students from film, communication and anthropology managed to write a script, film and edit together, following a common goal. Consequently, this research argues that collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches should not be taken for granted or implied just because they have been around for decades. The experience shows that time, efforts and patience are required, especially in the case of generation z, born and raised in social media bubbles.

Teaching anthropology in tik tok and AI era? From the multitude of pedagogical approaches, in my case, practical exercises investigating everyday encounters and the streets near university, short ethnographic research, collaboration and interdisciplinarity through filmmaking seem to get students' attention and engagement. Instead of a concluding, final line, I end this paper with a quote from my student's essay. "You can't truly understand the 'true' spirit of a community if you are too afraid to participate in their activities. This group taught me that authenticity is better than aesthetics. Because of them, I am returning to my studies with a new goal: to stop trying to make everything look perfect and start trying to make it feel real".

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