

## Practicing Life Worlds: Theory and Reality in Teaching Design Anthropology Through Entrepreneur Collaboration

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### **Abstract**

In the contemporary neoliberal university, practice-based learning is increasingly necessary as a means to foster dynamic thinking and bolster student employability. However, for students who feel like customers, this type of 'messy' practical experience is difficult to reconcile with their expectations and anxieties about the future. Students who embrace the 'customer' education approach expect their learning to be packaged in a manner that practice-based programs are ill-equipped to provide. Based on our qualitative observations teaching a collaborative design anthropology subject at the University of Melbourne, we unpack the various ironies and disconnections between theory and practice around practice-based learning. While experimental, practice-based courses such as ours entail multiple challenges, they are nevertheless worthwhile and necessary, not only for the continued evolution of anthropology but also for our students.

### **Key words**

Design anthropology; neoliberal university; pedagogy; practice-based learning.

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## Introduction

Debates around the benefits of practice-based learning in universities have been gaining increased salience in recent decades, with moves being made across disciplines to provide students with practical experiential learning beyond the confines of theoretical knowledge. While practice-based learning has been adopted with enthusiasm and success in some schools and departments, there are concerns regarding the impact that such a change might bring to traditional, theoretical teaching and learning methods.

Within anthropology, the techniques of ethnographic research are generally held to be so time-consuming as to be inappropriate for undergraduate courses. Thus, “too often, students are taught, rather than shown methods” (Copeland and Dengah 2016: 120). ‘Real-world’ opportunities for ‘doing anthropology’ are restricted to graduate courses, leaving undergraduate programs reliant on theoretical deconstruction and critique. As a result, graduating undergraduates remain largely unfamiliar with the realities of conducting ethnography. In order to rectify this prevailing reality, anthropologists such as Tamara Hale are asking themselves: “How can we provide undergraduate students with the experience of ethnographic fieldwork, as well as help them put anthropological thinking and skills to practice in fields where such skills are needed, and where they might one day work?” (2016: 207). This is a particularly relevant question in the contemporary political and economic climate, where research and teaching in the arts and humanities, including the social sciences, is facing increasing threats of erosion. Can we, as educators, still adopt a “critique-first” approach to education, without equipping students with the specific skills needed to succeed in an increasingly corporatized, neoliberal world? *Beauty as Ethnographic Practice*, an anthropology subject for third-year arts students at the University of Melbourne, was our attempt to tackle this challenge. The course was an experimental program aimed at providing our students with ‘real-life’ experience in conducting ethnographic research for a ‘client’ (in this case, Masters of Entrepreneurship students), encountering the field of design anthropology, and working collaboratively across disciplinary boundaries. The idea was to push students to shift their critical approach from one aimed at endless deconstruction, to one of critique as collaboration (Forlano and Smith 2018) that could be utilized for new productive endeavors.

Given these ambitious aims, the course was both a challenge and a success, punctuated by three instances of disconnection between theory and reality. First, there was the slippage in our own understanding of how the course would – theoretically – proceed, and how it did – in reality. As a social anthropologist and a cultural studies scholar, respectively, we have each been trained in critical traditions which span across (post)Marxist and poststructuralist theories. We have both undertaken

extensive fieldwork in our research and are deeply attuned to the social and cultural dynamics of design, particularly in the fields of architecture and fashion. However, neither of us have extensive employment histories as design or corporate anthropologists. Like our students, we learned by doing. And like our students, we faced a self-directed, critical review of our own practice. How could our teaching-by-doing prepare students to be better citizens? How could it empower them to find ways to implement their theoretical critiques, given the limitations of designing and executing practical collaborations with entrepreneurs? Was our teaching just yet another case of surrender, where we ultimately taught a bastardized version ethnography, but really did consumer research?

Second, there were the expectations of our students. Our thirty-four students had a very specific concept of what the program would entail, yet the reality was quite different from these original ideas, leading some of them to disengage from the learning process. Finally, the student experience of conducting ethnographic research in practice conflicted with their previous knowledge of ethnographic texts discussed in relation to theoretical or political dimensions.

In the following sections, we outline the theoretical foundation of the course we developed, in line with theory concerning practice-based learning and collaborative methodology more broadly, discuss the reality of teaching this subject, and the various challenges entailed in creating an innovative method of study, and finally consider the results of this 'experiment,' from student responses to learning outcomes. Our experiences suggest that practice-based teaching and learning methodologies are crucial, especially in the context of a corporatized education sector (and world). However, the kind of 'messy' experience generated by practice-based courses also needs to be approached with great care. While students gain significant benefit from learning the applied skills that come from practice, the requirements of this method also sit ironically at odds with some of the expectations of those students who are approaching education as neoliberal 'customers,' anxious about their futures.

### **Theorising and Applying Practice-Based Learning**

Since the publication in 1997 of James Peacock's article "The Future of Anthropology," anthropologists have been spurred to think about ways by which they can ensure the survival and thriving of the discipline. Over two decades since Peacock's article was published, the extinction scenario seems far-fetched. However, attempts to meet Peacock's third alternative – that "anthropology would remain intriguing and creatively diverse, iconoclastic and breathtaking in its sweep and perception, profound in its scholarship, but would also become integral and even leading in addressing the complex challenges of a transnational, yet grounded,

humanity” (1997: 9) – remain as pertinent as ever. One of the ways in which this challenge – of continued scholarly profundity coupled with great social consequence – is being met is through the development and introduction of new and innovative anthropology courses aimed at developing applied learning outcomes. Not only do such courses stand up to Peacock’s demands, they are also necessary within an education sector where scholarship and teaching in the arts and humanities, including the social sciences, is increasingly under threat.

David Kolb’s *Experiential Learning* (1984) and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s *Situated Learning* (1991) set the tone for much theorizing of situated and experiential practice-based education. While both texts have been crucial to the development of contemporary practice-based learning and teaching methodologies, they also “underestimate the extent of multidirectional learning flows and co-learning in practice-based learning exchanges [and] cannot account for emotional and transformative learning elements” (Hodge et al. 2011: 168). In their survey of practice-based teaching in Australia, Hodge et al. argue that these previous experiential and situated theories of learning tend to “posit universities as primarily ‘acquisitional’ (and formal) and workplaces as ‘participational’ (and informal)” (2011: 168). Such dichotomies crucially overlook the multiple ways in which different actors within an exchange – not only academics and students but also collaborators – learn in different relational contexts. Hodge et al. therefore encourage a move beyond the dialectical positioning of the ‘ivory towers’ in relation to the ‘real world’ and emphasize the necessity of an alternative understanding of the ways in which educational institutions function and learning occurs across the various relational dynamics within the university environment.

Of course, such a pedagogical move risks seconding the particularly anti-intellectual mood accompanying the corporatization of universities. Indeed, in Australia like elsewhere, universities find themselves under pressure to conform to a corporate model becoming increasingly what Tunstall (2015) has called Uber-versities (see also Donoghue 2008; Hyatt, Shear and Wright 2015). In this context, practice-based learning could appear as a pernicious alternative to established intellectual traditions, encroaching on spaces of theoretical, abstract, and critical thinking. As Henry Giroux put it, “increasingly defined in the language of corporate culture, many universities are now pulled or driven principally by vocational, military, and economic considerations while increasingly removing academic knowledge production from democratic values and projects” (2014: 138). If ‘practice’ emerges as the new metric of knowledge, students and institutions alike might become less concerned with the intrinsic value of knowledge and appreciate instead its applicability to develop operational skills for the workplace (Lyotard 1984).

But is it fair to consider practice-based learning an instance of workplace training? For many social theorists, 'practice' constitutes a complex social field that extends well beyond what is useful and encompasses modes of action shaped by the social order (Bourdieu 1977). When students engage in practice-based learning, they have the opportunity to experiment and tinker with the complexity of human action in first person – a holistic process that can overcome “cartesian” divides between the body and mind, the teacher and student, the academic and the applied (Yakhef 2010). As Hodge et al. note, many theories of situated and experiential learning “are inadequate to encapsulate the full extent of learning in practice-based learning exchanges” (2011: 180). Rather than being limited to contemplative or short-sighted thinking, practice constitutes a process of discovery, whereby students can generate their own language to appropriate (symbolically and materially) the real (Bruner 1997; Edwards and Gandini 2018; New 2007; DiCarlo 2018) – a necessary step if the goal of learning is to empower individuals to construct meaning and participate in their social worlds.

While practice-based learning has been adopted enthusiastically in some disciplines, more traditionally theoretical fields have been reluctant to change their pedagogical praxis. Despite the fact that anthropology is based upon applied methods and has increasingly taken on practical aspirations in a political sense (Hale 2012; Caplan 2014; Scheper-Hughes 1995), many undergraduate programs continue to exclude practice-based approaches, confining the experience of ethnographic application to methods modules. In part, this is a logistical issue. Ever-expanding class sizes do not allow instructors to devote significant time to individual student projects. And yet, our experience suggests that the discipline's pedagogy might reflect a broader diffidence towards practice-based learning. For many classically trained anthropologists, ethnography remains an artisanal method which entails an individual experience (Lassiter 2005). In order to 'nobilitate' that methodology from other practitioners who circulate in the same space (Missionaries and Travelers during Malinowski's time, Consultants and Journalists in our age), anthropologists have tended to assign peculiar qualities to their time on the field. During recent decades, this romanization of what 'going native' entails has generated a ferocious backlash, deconstructing the discipline as an imperialistic fantasy, rooted in a positivist view of knowledge – an epistemological bloodbath that continues today under different forms and debates (Clifford 1997; Marcus 2008). Caught in this methodological crossfire and burdened by university ethics' processes, anthropologists remain cautious about experimenting with practice-based courses – after all, is any 12-week program worth opening a pandora's box of disciplinary crises?

In the testimonies of scholars who have experimented with ethnography as a pedagogical tool (see the 2016 special issue of *Annals of Anthropological Practice* “‘Involve Me and I Learn:’ Teaching and Applying Anthropology”), however, these debates seem marginal. When a teacher engages students in collaborative, practice-based, applied anthropological projects, the binary distinctions between objective knowledge and subjective reflection, authority and experimentation are minimized, even dissolved. These examples depict collaborative communities of practice that allow students the experimental space to embrace ethnographic paradoxes in order to fully participate in the world around them. US-based anthropologists, including Christina Wasson (2013, 2014), Jeffrey Snodgrass (2016), François Dengah et al. (2016), Tamara Hale (2016) and Blakely Brooks (2016), each discuss their respective experimentations with collaborative teaching and learning methods, including the development of innovative research labs such as Snodgrass’ Ethnographic Research and Teaching Laboratory (ERTL) and Dengah et al.’s Collaborative Anthropological Research Laboratory (CARL). What becomes clear in these examples is that students engage with objective theory in tandem with subjective reflection; collaborative experimentation is valued equal to individual authority. Dichotomies between body/mind, teacher/student, academic/applied are upended, challenged, overcome. Undergraduate students are given opportunities to experience hands-on anthropological research methods, working alongside faculty members and graduate students to advance collaborative activities and engage in relationships of mentorship.

Given these positive examples, and the promise of practice-based learning to develop skills that might be needed in the future ‘real world’ careers of our students, we approached practice-based anthropology as a natural evolution in the discipline’s pedagogy and an exciting, fun experiment in our (early?) teaching careers. As it turns out, developing practice-based anthropological subjects can be a complex, ambivalent endeavor, especially for scholars who have themselves been trained in critical theoretical traditions. In what follows, we discuss the practice-based third-year anthropology course *Beauty as Ethnographic Practice* that we developed and taught at the University of Melbourne in 2018. The subject proved to be challenging precisely because of the corporatized context in which it took place, thus highlighting some of the structural complexities of teaching practical anthropological courses in contexts where students’ expectations are so shaped by anxieties about their futures.

### **Entrepreneurial (Design) Anthropology – An Innovative Method?**

The objectives of *Beauty as Ethnographic Practice*, for us as educators, were three-fold. First, to incorporate practice-based learning techniques

into anthropology in order to give our undergraduate students the opportunity to put their knowledge of ethnography into practice. Second, to introduce our students to the field of design anthropology, giving them the opportunity to practice ethnographic research in the context of design and learn new skills they might require in a large variety of future endeavors. Third, to provide our students the chance to work collaboratively with students from another discipline. Following in the footsteps of Hale at Colorado State University (CSU), we attempted to meet these tri-part aims through the application and teaching of design anthropology in collaboration with startup entrepreneurs.

A relatively new but fast-developing academic field combining aspects of design and anthropology, design anthropology interrogates “how cultural contexts, social practices, embedded meanings and social relationships affect the way in which human beings interact with material objects, services and policies in everyday life” (Design Anthropology handbook for students CSU quoted in Hale 2016: 208). While designers first became aware of the value of ethnographic techniques and data for the monitoring of production processes and the design and development of products in the 1970s, it has been only recently that design anthropology has come of age as a distinct (sub)discipline (Otto and Smith 2013). In addition to the usefulness of ethnographic research for the field of design, there is also what Ton Otto and Rachel Charlotte Smith call a “genuine affinity between design and ethnography as processes of inquiry and discovery that includes the iterative way process and product are interconnected” (2013: 15). This sense of an *affinity* has not only led to the growth of the field but has also contributed to a range of different theoretical approaches to, and expectations of, design anthropology. For example, scholars such as Christina Wasson (2000), and Paul Rainbow and George Marcus (2008) have suggested that design anthropology is a positive evolution of anthropology, necessary for productive understanding of changes in the contemporary world. In contrast, Lucy Suchman has leveled criticism at what she sees as overly optimistic attitudes to innovation in the design world, arguing that rather than applying a reinvented anthropology to design what we need is a critical anthropology of design (2011). Responding to Suchman, Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold suggest that design anthropology should be “an anthropology not of, as, or for design, but an anthropology by means of design” (2013: 132; original emphasis). Otto and Smith take a fourth position, arguing that design anthropology is a “distinct style of doing anthropology, with specific research and training practice” (2013: 22; original emphasis). This style of anthropology, they suggest, is not only more readily able to respond to challenges in the contemporary world but it is also more able to have a critical impact on design. The *style* of design anthropology established by Otto and Smith is future-oriented and interventionist; it has the capacity to make both design and anthropology “more broadly humane and ‘decolonized’” through the use of specific anthropological

attributes such as “the critical use of theory and contextualization; the extension of the time horizon to include the past and long-term future to ensure sustainability; and sensitivity to and not least incorporation of the values and perspectives of the people whose worlds are affected by design” (2013: 22).

Design anthropology is a branch of anthropology many students are unfamiliar with yet might find themselves working with in future given the increased relevance of ethnographic research to assess how human societies will react to technological changes (Baer 2014). It also provided the parameters within which our students could apply ethnographic practices to real world examples, putting their theoretical knowledge of the tools and traditions of anthropology into practice. Given that we had only four hours a week for 12 weeks (one semester) in which to deliver the course, it was imperative that we worked within a framework that gave our students the time to conduct valid research as well as to analyze their results and produce valuable recommendations. Design anthropology, and the methods of corporate ethnography and ‘rapid’ or ‘agile’ research (Yury 2015), fitted within these tight requirements. Design anthropology also fit our third aim of engaging our students in a program characterized by collaboration with practitioners in another discipline. Otto and Smith note that while design is (almost) always a process of collaboration, anthropology remains a solitary tradition, whereby a lone researcher conducts individual fieldwork and produces individual scholarship. “Design anthropology radically breaks with this tradition as its practitioners work in multidisciplinary teams, acting in complex roles as researchers, facilitators, and co-creators in processes of design and innovation” (Otto and Smith 2013: 16). Design anthropology cannot be conducted as a solitary pursuit; it is defined by reflective action and the co-creation of research outcomes. As Otto and Smith put it, design anthropology takes the traditional qualities, tools and techniques of anthropology and applies them to “new modes of research and collaboration, working towards transformation without sacrificing empathy and depth of understanding” (2013: 16).

In putting these aims into practice, we partnered with the Wade Institute, a center for entrepreneurial training hosted by Ormond College, which runs a Master of Entrepreneurship at the University of Melbourne. Our students were given the task of working with the Master of Entrepreneurship students as their design ‘clients.’ While Hale had all of her students working with the same business, a Fort Collins-based global manufacturer of smartphone covers called Otterbox (Wasson, at the University of North Texas, did the same with her students, partnering with Motorola Mobility Inc. (2013) and Nissan (2014)), our student teams worked with nine different startup businesses, establishing individual Proposal for Services documents for their clients and undertaking targeted research for the particular startup project with which they were



partnered. We decided to collaborate with emerging entrepreneurs because, being a Master project, these startup businesses offered a relatively horizontal space of collaboration between clients (Wade students, aka entrepreneurs) and our students (arts and anthropology students, aka researchers). These startups were also in a stage of development where the insights of design anthropology could be of critical influence. The partnership gave our students the chance to work with a variety of different projects, with variable pace and breadth, and to learn something about the ways in which entrepreneurs and startup projects work. There were certainly complexities to working with entrepreneurs (as will be discussed later in this article), however, this collaboration largely met our expectations. Our students were partnered with teams of entrepreneurs working on startup businesses as diverse as: fresh dog food for the Chinese market; silicon lids to cover deli goods in supermarkets; car insurance targeted at young drivers; an app connecting micro Instagram influencers and hospitality businesses; and a gamified method of teaching soft-skills to university students.

Just as there are challenges to running a startup so too were there multiple challenges to conducting this course. As Hale noted with regards to her innovative Design Anthropology course at CSU: “It had all the elements of an experiment and was, at best, unpredictable and evolving” (2016: 207). We had clear expectations for the course. However, given its experimental status we were also prepared for working fluidly through the process, aware that we would be learning alongside our students. It was only once the program got underway that we realized the extent of complications that can come from working with people who have very different expectations, priorities, time frames and value systems. ‘Entrepreneurs’ are dedicated to their project on a 24/7 basis, which leads them to change plans, ideas, and targets much faster than our students could keep up with. However, it was also in negotiating some of these differentials in perspective that some of the most rewarding outcomes were observed. For example, our students quickly picked up the language of entrepreneurs – of ‘value propositions,’ ‘ideation,’ ‘pain points’ and ‘pivoting’ – and became adept in applying this language to their ‘client’ communications. They also started to understand that their clients’ pitches were much more coherent than their actual plans, and that as an ‘expert’ of ethnography, it was our students’ role to take initiative insofar as research was concerned. Adapting to these sorts of collaborative requirements reflects the ‘real world’ scenarios to which practice-based learning is so attuned. Learning how to successfully negotiate different skill sets and approaches to solve problems is one of the primary goals and desired outcomes of practice-based learning methodologies.

### Theory in Practice – Teaching and Learning

The first weeks of the class were spent introducing our students to the field of design anthropology. The name of the course, *Beauty as Ethnographic Practice*, proved an immediate point of contention as students were surprised to see that the focus was less on the theoretical study of beauty and more on the practical understanding of what makes something desirable through an ethnographic approach in the design sphere. We determined to make it immediately clear what the course would entail. While some students were excited and enthusiastic about the prospect of conducting ethnography in practice, with ‘real’ clients, others were far more reticent. Our final group consisted of thirty-four students, primarily anthropology majors, with only a small number taking the course as a ‘breadth’ or interest elective. The group was largely made up of domestic students, with just five international exchange students. The gender dynamics of the group were heavily weighted towards the female (perhaps in response to the expectations fostered by the program name and description), with only four male students in the group of thirty-four.

In the third week of semester, we participated in a pitch session at the Wade Institute, in which the entrepreneur teams presented their projects and had the opportunity to chat informally with our students. This event was the first instance in which it became clear that our concept of collaboration in theory would be very different in practice. While we had briefed the Wade Institute course leaders in what we envisioned the collaboration to look like, when we met with the budding entrepreneurs it became apparent that they had not yet grasped what ethnography entailed, and what the collaboration would look like in practice. The session was taken up primarily with formal presentations, rather than the informal chatting we had hoped for. The entrepreneur students/‘clients’ were quick to outline where they thought our students could be of help to them and our students were immediately caught up in the minutiae of personality and product politics, drawn to the entrepreneurs who had a charismatic presence on stage and to the projects that appealed ethically or aesthetically. This was not so much a surprise – given that “not all practice-based learning exchanges go according to plan” (Hodge et al. 2011: 180) – as a hurdle that made developing genuinely collaborative relationships and allocating our students to the startup teams far more complex than we had initially anticipated. We encouraged our students to think beyond what the entrepreneur ‘clients’ had ‘asked’ for and to reflect strategically on the insight they felt they could realistically provide in the short research period. However, they invariably made shortlists based on the entrepreneurs they thought they would like to work with and the projects they were interested in being involved with. Of the nine startup teams who committed to the collaboration, three were most popular with our students, meaning that we had to conduct some delicate

matchmaking balanced between gentle persuasion and compromise to ensure that teams were evenly and happily assigned. Even when we thought that we had effectively managed to assign all the teams, changes continued to occur into week five, significantly cutting into our teaching time.

By the end of week five, our students were expected to have finalized and shared with their 'clients' their research plans, which we called Proposal for Services documents. They were also required to have consent forms prepared and an ethics checklist completed. In week six, final amendments were made to their research plans before going into the field in weeks seven and eight. The research period was necessarily an 'agile' one. Not only were we working within the parameters of a 12-week semester, but we were collaborating with entrepreneurs who work at a rapid rate, adapting and 'pivoting' their business with great frequency and regularity. As one of our students remarked, the ethnographic timeline is very different from the startup timeline. We had to bring the two together in such a way as to satisfy both student researchers and clients. Discussing the use of agile methods and ethnographic praxis at *BeyondCurious*, Carrie Yury writes about conducting successive two-week "agile sprints," which leads to cumulative research results (2015). While this cumulative approach was beyond our scope, our students had the chance to conduct one two-week research "sprint" in which to collect "minimum viable findings" (Yury 2015). For our international exchange students, most of whom had conducted multi-month-long situated ethnographic research, this method was unusual and confronting, going against their perceptions of ethnographic research and expectations of anthropological practice. The directness of this rapid method was such that one student suggested that it was "offensive" to the traditions of anthropology that take time to engage in the research site in an authentic participatory manner.

For our domestic students, this rapid research method was similarly challenging, however, for different reasons. The majority of our students had never before had the opportunity to apply their theoretical anthropology learning in practice. As one student noted, it was the first subject that allowed students "to actually conduct an ethnographic study instead of reading about it." While this was a welcome change, the reality of having to go into the field and conduct ethnographic research with participants was daunting. These students had not conducted interviews, engaged in participant observation or collected field notes. Knowing that they might feel overwhelmed, we scheduled in-class feedback sessions on aspects of research design and planning and during the non-teaching research weeks we made ourselves available for one-on-one and group consultations beyond our normal class or student hours. To our (perhaps undue) surprise, none of our students actively sought our assistance outside of assigned class time until it became clear that their research was

not going to plan. While some raised their concerns about their lack of skill or experience and were certainly made to feel out of their 'comfort zone,' they also reported to be doing 'fine' every time we checked in or offered new perspectives on their results.

At the end of the fieldwork period, students submitted a research diary; a curated collection of relevant findings from the weeks leading up to and over the research period. Weeks nine and ten (as well as the one-week mid-term break) were then spent in data analysis. Again, this was a skill the majority of our students had little experience with. While they were adept at theoretical analysis and critical thinking, they did not know necessarily how to recombine conflicting information from multiple interlocutors. In some cases, not having a clear narrative seemed to them like a failure, rather than an important finding in and of itself. It was in this phase of the research project that the insights of various guest lecturers came into service, and that issues of perspective and underlying conflicts between team members and across the collaborative relationships came to the surface. We had elected to have four guest speakers over the course of the semester to share with us their experiences as designers, academic anthropologists and applied design/corporate ethnographers. Perhaps the more significant and relevant insights offered by our guests was the reminder that the design anthropologist is not the designer and that the role of the design anthropologist is not to conduct market research but to conduct ethnography to gain deeper understandings of why and how users might interact with the product or service in question (Wasson 2000). The reminder to our students not to take on the role of the designer/entrepreneur was timely and necessary. We observed our students getting caught up in the details of the product, looking at ways to "fix" the product, or confined by the narrative of pain-points and value proposition championed by entrepreneurs, rather than offer sound advice based on data for their clients. Thus, getting our students to step back from the product and its target market and to instead spend time with and think deeply about their observations and interview data, focusing on details of the people they spent time with, their attitudes, and emotions, made for much more valuable results.

In week eleven, our student teams presented their findings along with advice and recommendations in semi-formal presentation sessions. This was an assessment task and also an opportunity for the teams to present their work to their entrepreneur 'clients.' We invited our colleagues from the anthropology department to attend the sessions and share in the fruition of our experimental teaching. These sessions were interesting demonstrations of the research process and findings, as well as of the team-working relationships, both across our student teams and between the student-entrepreneur/client collaboration. While the majority of the entrepreneur teams attended these sessions, not all did.

This variation in response was reflective of broader disconnections between the two groups of students. The majority of the groups worked effectively together, particularly when our students did not rely on the entrepreneurs for connections to potential interview subjects, introductions to particular research sites, or guidance on what sort of research to undertake. When our students took the initiative to design their own research plan and seek out their own participants and sites, they achieved excellent results. On the other hand, when our students depended on the instruction or demands of the entrepreneurs, they struggled. The presentation sessions clearly reflected these differences in approach.

### **Crisis of Identity – Student Expectations and Experience**

The dissonances between theory and practice, expectation and reality in this course were varied and many. Already, we have outlined some of the ways in which these disconnections brought about challenges in our teaching of the program. Here, we consider some of the student expectations and experiences and discuss the variation in responses to the course in its entirety. Many of these observations come from our conversations with our students. However, we also gained great insight into the perspectives and responses of our students to this method of teaching, and this course, through the final essay questions (which asked about the turn to practice-based learning in anthropology and about the ethical dilemmas involved in conducting corporate anthropology) and through end-of-semester survey results.

For many of our students, the field of design anthropology offered an alternative to what they had previously thought of as a discipline plagued by historical colonial dynamics. A number of these students told us that their experiences with the “identity crisis” (Shore 1996) within the field of anthropology had led to similar personal crises of identity. They were nearing the end of their tertiary education yet felt they were under-prepared to apply the skills of their degree to a career. These students told us of how the course had re-invigorated or re-established positive attitudes towards the discipline. They felt that the techniques of practice-based learning and design anthropology employed in *Beauty as Ethnographic Practice* had been empowering; they had helped to mitigate their self-doubt and to foster a path forward. These students remarked on how grateful they were for the freedom to develop their own approach to research, the autonomy to lead their own project. They appreciated the challenge of spending time in the field, conducting research *with people, not books*. They enjoyed the independence we allowed them, took the initiative we expected of them, and conducted research of the sort of interest and relevance that we had hoped from them.

For others, the opposite was true. Design anthropology was seen

as a decidedly capitalist enterprise, a way to engage the skills of anthropologists to further increase the profit margins of corporate conglomerates and entrepreneurial elites. The ethical dilemmas of producing research findings for a (potential) company were at odds with what these students identified in anthropology as a field of study. To them, it seemed antithetical to the entire anthropological enterprise and its history, no matter how complicated it was. Some students were also disparaging of the entrepreneurs and felt that they had been unappreciated by ‘clients’ who did not have a deeper understanding of anthropology and did not always recognize the value of qualitative research. One of our students told us that they felt “othered” as an anthropologist and patronized when presenting their results. These students expressed feelings of frustration, having been engaged in an “extractive” relationship carrying out what they understood to be “free labor” for Masters students trying to launch products and services that they hoped would make profits.

This concern about the ways in which ethnographic findings will be employed by for-profit organizations is not unique to our students (Caron & Caronia, 2007). While our intentions when designing this course had been to provide a means through which to challenge the neoliberal methods of the tertiary institution, the teaching of this course also played into the hands of the neoliberal culture of capitalism. Far from solely providing an antidote to ‘user’-centered university education, our course also, ironically, played into the ‘user’-centered field of for-profit entrepreneurship, reproducing in some ways the very neoliberal status quo that we had set out to undo (Hale 2018). This specific issue was complicated by the fact that the “clients” were themselves students of entrepreneurship who were trying to devise social solutions—but were specifically trying to format them in projects that could be scalable and appealing for investors. Working in a very intense program, where they were asked to challenge their assumption, the “clients” were eager to work with anthropology students. At the same time, they were often overwhelmed by their own program and unable to find the mental space to incorporate advice that did not come in ready-to-adapt formats. This horizontal, and continuously shifting learning environment, moving across financial and social values, increased the variety of commitment, communication and consensus across the ‘client-researcher’ relationships and led to some unexpectedly complex breakdowns. Indeed, even when entrepreneurs praised our students’ research, most of the final recommendations were not (immediately) followed up.

In terms of the structure in the program, a number of our students noted that they found the loose, organic, somewhat *unstructured* form – which we had specifically designed to give our students freedom, autonomy and independence – confusing, disorganized and unduly stressful. Having become accustomed to traditionally structured linear

methods of teaching and learning, the design of our course set them adrift and gave them a sense of dislocation. While this was not our intention, it was also interesting to note the students who appreciated the freedom we afforded them, and those for whom such liberation felt like restraint. Today's Australian university students enter the classroom with a very particular set of expectations in mind; they conceive of the course as a predictable product – aptly packaged and presented to them. Like some prestigious universities in the US (Blum 2016), students at the University of Melbourne, the Number One University in Australia, attend years of lectures where they are coached in essay writing. In order to succeed, they develop strategies that curb their own creative thinking and initiative, focusing instead on a specific form of (short) academic writing – and to gain the desired average which comes to define a university-centric metric of worth and success. When asked to engage in a more active, horizontal learning process our students found themselves in new, unfamiliar terrain, which caused confusion for some and distress for others. From the get-go, many students were anxious about our grading system, and when we introduced rubrics or made other adjustments based on their feedback, they often reacted negatively. And yet, those who did not fall back into their own strategies felt liberated by being able to express their creativity and actually discover that several years of university career had not been wasted but had given them plenty of useful skills.

In acknowledging the disconnect between the ways in which our students are accustomed to learning and how we taught them in this course, we understood something of what Dori Tunstall said when she wrote about the un-doing of her Design Anthropology course taught at another Melburnian university, Swinburne University, in 2015. “It reflects systemic changes in the Australian tertiary education system that makes having a program like Design Anthropology feel as if it does not belong” (2015). Tunstall argues that the Uber-ification of the university sector has meant that learning is increasingly treated as a commodity that can be bought and sold online. Students want to know what they are getting out of a course before they commence. The ever-increasing costs associated with studying at university, which at the University of Melbourne is particularly burdensome for international students, means that decision-making around programs of study are informed by economic imperative, not merely interest. In a context where education is increasingly seen as the defining moment for one's career, getting a high grade becomes a validation of a student's existential journey. Such economic and professional stakes have contributed to what Catherine Herring and Paul Standish call “a hierarchical structure that elevates the future self and its considerations above those of the present” (2019: 71). Students have been conditioned to focus on the future, instead of the present. This future-thinking is a large part of what makes a course like Tunstall's, imbued with “the sacredness of teaching and learning,” feel as if it does

not belong. Ironically enough, Tunstall's program, like ours, was informed by precisely the sort of future-thinking that these students are concerned with – designed to teach students how to apply ethnographic skills in a 'real world' scenario and a field where anthropologists are being employed in increasing numbers.

### **The Future of Practice-Based Learning**

The varied outcomes of this course demonstrate the vast discrepancies that existed in our theoretical expectations and the experience in practice. While some students were swift to point out that this course was one of the most practical and worthwhile courses they had taken throughout their academic career, that it had prompted self-reflection more profoundly than any other university course they had taken and that there was nothing that could be done to improve it, others were adamant in their opinion that the course needed complete restructuring or, indeed, cancellation. These disparate responses are indicative not only of the challenges of establishing a new, innovative course of study and of teaching it successfully, but also of "a strident contrast between the pretense of flexibility and the construction of rigid educational schemes" (Roggero 2011: 83) found in corporatizing universities. Indeed, after years of learning how to navigate a rigid system that is increasingly concerned with their experience as customers, many of our students were less equipped for a discovery project, where they had to reinvent their learning strategies and reassess their definition of 'success.' Neoliberalized academia has, in other words, become part of the cultural landscape in which students operate and it is only by taking seriously these expectations, learning methods, and expectations that we can improve the learning experiences and outcomes of our future students.

Returning to the work of Hodge and his colleagues and their question of "how we learn" (2011), it is clear that practice-based learning occurs along multiple, multi-directional lines. It is also clear that this method of learning engenders emotional and transformative responses that are difficult to predict or to explain through theories of situated or experiential learning. Learning is not confined to the student. Rather, it is shared and co-created by students, teaching academics and collaborators. Outcomes include the learning of practical skills as well as the mitigation of self-doubt and the production of new understandings of self-identity and personal life worlds. While our students did not have the luxury of extended periods of time working or conducting research in a particular site on placement or as interns as the participants in the Hodge et al. study did, they were nevertheless involved in complex, multi-site research, engaged in detailed practice-based learning exchanges. Collaborating with student entrepreneurs (rather than an established company, as Hale had done) clearly generated unforeseen challenges, and



conflicting responses from our students. Despite the difficulty of some of the relationships, other students were remarkable in their self-awareness, approaching these differences as opportunities to expand their experiences, finding new language, lenses, and approaches to appropriate the world around them. Out of this learning exchange we have established four key insights to apply in further development of practice-based learning within the social sciences, particularly in anthropology.

First, the methods of practice-based learning are fundamentally different from what university students enrolled in humanities and social science programs are currently used to. For this reason, it is important to make clear the expectations associated with practice but also to build pathways to develop research and collaboration skills throughout the curriculum. Our students tended to think about theory in a very abstract manner, rather than grounding it in the everyday. By including or devising supplementary practice-based activities in a handful of learning spaces throughout the curriculum (subjects, optional trainings, field schools etc.), these students will have the capacity to more fully engage with the theoretical dimensions of their learning, as well as being equipped with the skills to apply this theory in practice.

Second, practice-based learning has the potential to foster true interdisciplinarity. Even when they stumbled on the research components, our students learned in a rich and dialogic relation with entrepreneurs, expanding their vocabulary toolkit and diving into different approaches to solving issues. Working with entrepreneurs forced both students and instructors to become more flexible, ready to pivot, and willing to take challenges with some degree of irony from our critical thinking. Given the threats to research and teaching in the humanities and social sciences, we are induced to think seriously about the interdisciplinary nature of our work. The kind of practice-based learning we encourage prospers only when interdisciplinary collaboration is applied in earnest. This requires a paradigmatic shift – away from critical deconstruction and into a different modality of design critique – where multifaceted understanding of issues is used to propel one's endeavor forward through collaborative support.

Third, this kind of teaching can only work if the instructors find context-specific ways to support horizontal learning with their own example. Breaking the lonely practice of studying for essays or going to lectures means first and foremost giving an example of collaboration between students and instructors (something we achieved in the second year of teaching through online community tools like Slack or Teams). In addition, we found that being present at meetings between the two groups, and pushing for extra-class debriefs, gave anthropology students an ethnographic anchor. Our mere presence, and occasional interjection to keep the meeting on track, sheltered students from having to prove the

very usefulness of anthropology to their partners. Framed as expert (in relation to their entrepreneurs) and collaborators (with us) allowed students to feel that they had an important expertise to offer. Having that emotional as well as experiential support, proved crucial in our second run of the course to guide students in finding a productive balance between absorbing entrepreneurs' worldview and maintaining an ethnographic, critical independence.

Finally, the skills (in both thinking and practice) that students gain from practice-based learning are invaluable. Several of our students felt that applying anthropology in practice helped them escape the crisis of identity they had come to associate with the discipline (and themselves, as anthropologists-in-training). Others realized their potential as researchers beyond anthropology, with three landing jobs or internships thanks to the skills and experience they accrued in our course. A year later, when we invited some of our students back to mentor the new cohort, we found that this experience helped them grow, personally and professionally—helping them find their own approach where they could make some positive impact in the real world.

Establishing and teaching practice-based anthropology courses is extremely difficult. It demands a much higher level of emotional and practical investment from instructors--who, at first, might find themselves underappreciated by colleagues and students. It also forces instructors to confront some of the blind spots of the (sub)discipline, including how to carve a space of transformative learning, which shows the applicability of anthropology without accepting practices that simply reproduce the status quo—or simply dilute ethnographic practices into the space of market research. Yet, it also opens up some of the most rewarding spaces of genuine collaboration we have experienced over our teaching career. More importantly, the value in developing practice-based approaches in disciplines across the arts and humanities, does not only apply to students. It expands to instructors, who expand their understanding of their own roles, and to the discipline, insofar as it ensures the continued evolution and thriving of study and research in a fast-evolving world.

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