Enhancing constructive alignment in a Medical Anthropology, Advanced Course: Design for a diverse classroom

Bodil Just Christensen

Department of Biomedical Sciences
University of Copenhagen

Introduction

The Medical Anthropology, Advanced Course is a 7,5 ECTS course and a component of the Department of Anthropology's medical anthropology specialization, which students can pursue as part of the department's master's programme. The course runs every spring semester as an elective and is mandatory for students who aim to obtain the medical anthropology specialization. Bachelor's degree students and non-specialized anthropology students are also eligible to enrol.

When I taught the course for the first time in Spring 2024, I was surprised by how diverse the student population was. There were participants from many different academic backgrounds, including both BA students and Master students - some in the process of writing their thesis. Most students came from Europe, Australia, the US, and Canada, but there were also participants from other parts of the world, resulting in a group of students that was both multinational, multidisciplinary, and included participants from very different academic stages and any idea I might have had about the implied student (Johannsen et al. 2015:119) was challenged. When I taught the course again in 2025, I created a collaborative discussion forum on the course website, encouraging students to share their academic background and indicate whether they were studying at the Bachelor's or Master's level. The 2025 class included 39 students from 11 different disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from journalism and data science to psychology and political science – and of course anthropology enrolled. Fourteen different international

universities were represented, and the students were evenly distributed between BA and MA levels.

Teaching is organized as classes every week (3 x 45 minutes) over 14 weeks from February to May. The course consists of lectures, seminars and exercises based on in depth reading of the syllabus consisting of ethnographic texts on health, illness, healing and medical technologies organised around different themes. Students are expected to engage actively in oral presentations, discussions, group work and exercises. The course aims to provide students with insights into the research field of medical anthropology, exploring how health and illness are conceptualised and experienced within the context of cultural, historical, and political forces with a special focus on technological innovation. The course content cover ethnographic and theoretical debates on e.g. care, personhood, medicalization, politics and governance. Emphasis is placed on understanding lived experience and the intersections of health, illness, and society across diverse contexts.

Disciplinary focus and student diversity

Although the elective is open to students from across faculties - including both Danish and international students from a range of European and non-European countries - it is a discipline-based elective and designed as an advanced course in medical anthropology - hence the title of the course. This course is the continuation of an introductory elective offered the preceding semester and therefore presupposes substantial foundational knowledge in anthropology, especially regarding core epistemological and methodological principles (see e.g. Eriksen 2015). The curriculum and intended learning outcomes (ILOs) are centred on core anthropological competencies: read ethnographic texts critically, identify research problems related to medical anthropology, analyse empirical material articulating key theoretical concepts, and write coherent and analytically structured texts.

Thus, despite the diversity of the student population, this is NOT an interdisciplinary course. Rather, it builds directly on core texts, authors, and debates that have formed the subfield of medical anthropology, such as the theoretical contributions of Arthur Kleinman,

Margaret Lock, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, and Paul Farmer, among others (Kleinman 1988; Lock & Nguyen 2010; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Farmer 2004). This knowledge forms the foundation of the course, and since some students - especially those studying anthropology - already possess it, repeating this content would undermine the purpose of the course as an advanced medical anthropology course. Yet, it creates several implicit or shadow learning outcomes (see e.g. Semper & Blasco, 2018), as this basic knowledge is presupposed.
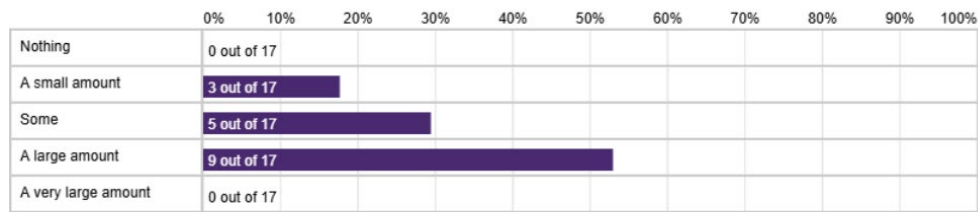
The challenges

It was a head-start to teach the class in 2024, notably because of the very diverse group of students. I did my very best to try to design group exercises and assignments that could cater to the very different academic and anthropological skill levels that students had, but many times I had to explain basic concepts or go over foundational anthropological (e.g. methodological) knowledge to make the less experienced students capable of participating in group work and contribute to discussions in a meaningful way.
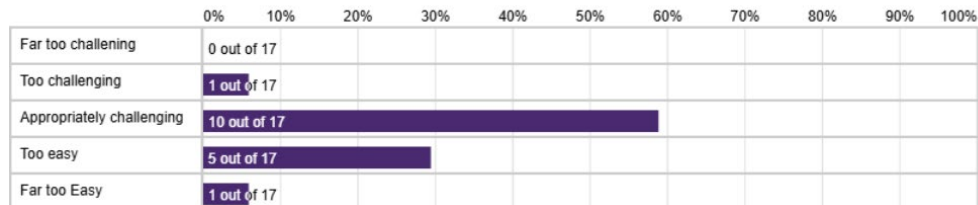
　　While the heterogeneity of student backgrounds could, in other settings, be leveraged as a resource for interdisciplinary learning (Repko & Szostak 2021), the primary aim here is to teach elements of the anthropological tradition and discuss methods and analytical tools. As I teacher I found it challenging to transform the diversity into an asset. E.g. articulate students' diverse skills and thereby validate them as learners and knowers (Rendon 1994), since it is the disciplinary focus on anthropological methods and approaches - not interdisciplinary learning - that is the course aim and thus emphasized in the readings and assignments.

　　These challenges were mirrored in the course evaluation:

1 How much do you feel you have learned from this course?

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Nothing	0 out of 17										
A small amount	3 out of 17										
Some	5 out of 17										
A large amount	9 out of 17										
A very large amount	0 out of 17										

2 Is the academic level of the course far too challenging, far too easy, or appropriately challenging?

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Far too challening	0 out of 17										
Too challenging	1 out of 17										
Appropriately challenging	10 out of 17										
Too easy	5 out of 17										
Far too Easy	1 out of 17										

Fig. 1. Student responses from 2024 course evaluation, Medical Anthropology, Advanced Course.

As the student responses show (Figure 1) students were overall happy with the course, but the learning could be enhanced. In the open comments students e.g. wrote 'I was disappointed by the caliber of this class. Being an advanced course, I had expected a greater challenge', or 'I would have liked even deeper theoretical explorations of the topics' or "on the first day of class, it became evident that the readings were too much of a challenge for many people of the course, some of whom had never taken a medical anthropology course, or were not even studying anthropology […] in Bodil's defense, it seems like she adapted the course to cater to the fact that many people were unfamiliar with basic concepts. Good on her for catering to those who were not adequately prepared, but I do not think that should have to be done in an advanced course". Notably, the group of students—whose main discipline was anthropology due to administrative reasons—who had previously taken the Medical Anthropology Introductory course, made valid and relevant comments that their expectations of progression and levelling up in theoretical focus were not met due to the necessary levelling-down of theoretical content and discussions to include the group of students with non-anthropological background.

Another significant challenge was the assessment and grading of students' exam essays. I was confronted with the dilemma of whether

assignments should be evaluated primarily according to students' relative progress throughout the course or based on the absolute quality of the final submission (see Ajjawi et al., 2024). If the grading criteria were set in alignment with the anthropology students who already possessed advanced skills in critically reading ethnographic texts and composing coherent, well-argued anthropological analyses drawing on a broad theoretical foundation, it would be difficult to appropriately recognize and reward the substantial progress shown by less anthropology-experienced students - even if their essays ultimately remained relatively weak in anthropological terms.

This issue underscored the presence of the 'shadow' ILOs mentioned above (Semper & Blasco, 2018), which became particularly evident in students' exam submissions. As Biggs et al. (2022) argue, constructive alignment involves ensuring coherence between learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessment criteria to facilitate effective student learning. However, in this context, the implicit expectations shaped by the disciplinary background of some students complicated the alignment process (see also Sadler, 2005). The balance between recognizing student progression while maintaining academic standards (Sadler 2005) was not easy to strike. I chose to prioritize individual progress, while still acknowledging the importance of the absolute standard of the submitted essays, but softening the more tacit ILOs operating in the course but still retain reliability (Andersen et al. 2015).

The changes

When I was to teach the Advanced course again In 2025 I made a number of changes based on my experiences from the 2024 class. The restructuring of the course followed Biggs perception of the curriculum as a rectangle, "the area (breadth × depth) remains constant. Take your pick. Breadth: wide coverage and surface learning giving disjointed multistructural outcomes. Depth: fewer topics and deep learning giving relational and extended abstract outcomes" (Biggs et al. 2022: 153), but with a focus on an equitable course design (Lattuca 2024), where the diversity of students' competences and skills could be accommodated

despite the discipline-based focus. The aim of progression from the introductory course was central to the revision of the syllabus. Five themes that built on selected concepts or debates taught in the introductory course was developed to secure depth over breadth (Biggs et al. 2022).

To accommodate both students without an anthropological background and those anthropology students who had not taken the introductory course, the syllabus was organized into three levels: Foundational, Mandatory, and Facultative. For each teaching session, readings were assigned across all three levels. Foundational texts typically included material previously covered in the introductory course or other foundational readings relevant to the theme. Mandatory texts constituted the core readings required of all students for that session, while Facultative readings were suggested for students particularly interested in further exploring specific aspects or perspectives of the theme. This approach was an attempt to accommodate the interdisciplinary, multi-level classroom in a way that allowed for progression in theoretical concepts and debates, while enabling students without the same prior knowledge as the anthropology students to orient themselves towards the concepts and debates their peers already knew, thereby enabling access to the tacit knowledge base on which the teaching built.

Additionally, the entire first session was dedicated to presenting and discussing the epistemological and methodological norms and practices specific of anthropology – e.g. fieldwork and participant observation, cultural relativism, and reflexivity. The course's formal ILOs, as well as the more tacit "shadow" ILOs, were discussed in a plenary session that followed a think-pair-share activity (Slavin, 1980). The aim being to try to make tacit expectations more explicit and to foster a shared understanding of expectations among students (see Biggs et al, 2022).

Challenges related to fair assessment and grading of exam submissions were addressed by implementing a series of portfolio submissions throughout the course, allowing students to practice and receive feedback on how to apply anthropological concepts analytically (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Furthermore, alternative forms of submissions

were accepted - such as research proposals, poster and popular dissemination products (e.g. an op-ed or opinion piece, SoMe posts, infographics or short video essay) to enable students less experienced in anthropological essay-writing to draw on other communication skills, thus providing a more equitable opportunity for producing a strong final piece (cf. chapter 7 in Lattuca et al. 2009).
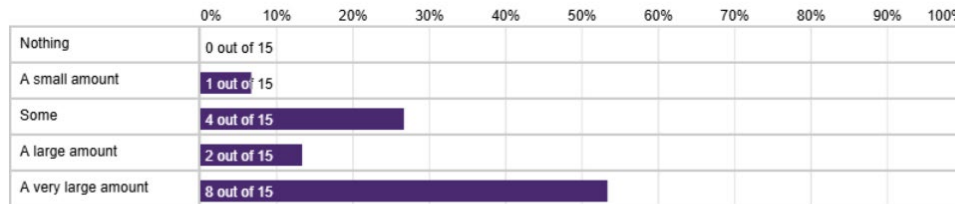
The outcomes

To evaluate the changes, I created an anonymous collaborative discussion thread on the course page and devoted time in the final session for students to discuss and provide feedback on the changes, based on five specific questions regarding the syllabus, group work, teaching approach, assignments involving creative components, and the academic level. Overall, the students offered positive feedback; they appreciated the three levels of readings in the syllabus (foundational, mandatory, and facultative). and wrote, for instance, "I think the three levels work well as an easy way to see what is required reading while also accessing extra texts for specific themes" or "I have only read the mandatory readings. However, I think it is a really good resource to have—especially when writing portfolios—because then you have more texts and more literature to benefit from and refer to, without having to search a lot yourself" though they also noted the difficulty of prioritizing time for reading more than the mandatory texts. Nevertheless, they found the supplementary readings useful, especially for assignments or further study.
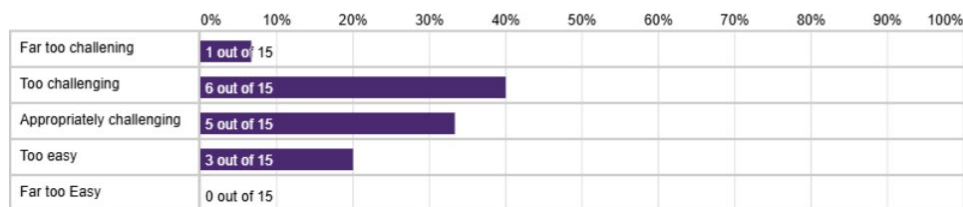
Feedback regarding group work indicated that the highly diverse student population still present challenges, particularly as anthropology students often felt (too) great a responsibility to assist and support their non-anthropology peers. One student, for example, commented: "I feel that the student presentations have taken up too much time in the teaching [...] mostly because of my own negative experience with group work in a group consisting of students, who neither participated in the group discussion nor took initiative. This made the discussion almost impossible, and I did not gain any new learning from it." In general, however, students expressed satisfaction with the academic level. This pattern was also reflected in the formal course evaluation. Figure 2 shows

2025 student evaluations with many more students indicating that they feel they have learned a large or a very large amount than in the 2024 evaluation.

1 How much do you feel you have learned from this course?

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Nothing	0 out of 15										
A small amount	1 out of 15										
Some	4 out of 15										
A large amount	2 out of 15										
A very large amount	8 out of 15										

2 Is the academic level of the course far too challenging, far too easy, or appropriately challenging?

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Far too challeing	1 out of 15										
Too challenging	6 out of 15										
Appropriately challenging	5 out of 15										
Too easy	3 out of 15										
Far too Easy	0 out of 15										

Fig. 2. Student responses from 2025 course evaluation, Medical Anthropology, Advanced Course

At the same time, a significantly larger number of students also reported that they found the academic level either far too or too challenging. Compared to the 2024 evaluation, this feedback likely indicates that increasing the academic level has succeeded in enhancing student learning; however, it also comes partly at the expense of a group of students who experience this higher standard as demanding. Unfortunately, due to the design of the evaluation, it is not possible to determine how anthropology and non-anthropology students are distributed in terms of perceiving the academic level as either too challenging or too easy, but it would be very informative knowledge.

The lessons for next time

I am likely to teach the course again in 2026. The intention is to maintain the changes introduced in 2025 but add changes that might offer greater support to students without an anthropological background and enhance overall learning outcomes. To more systematically address the group work element, which constitutes a significant portion of the course, could

be one way to go. For anthropology students especially, group work has at times been a source of frustration and a sense of disproportionate responsibility towards their peers from other disciplines.

In both the 2024 and 2025 editions of the course, students organised their own groups. Going forward, it may be helpful to design groups and learning activities in a way that creates different learning pathways, thereby better using the diverse strengths within the student group - even though this is a discipline-based elective. For example, students with greater experience in popular communication (such as those studying journalism, communication, or visual design) could be designated as 'group leaders', while other tasks might be allocated to groups arranged to activate different skill sets. This could help ensure that anthropology students do not always carry the majority of responsibility. Furthermore, it would be interesting to consider whether the overall academic standard might be raised through a more systematic approach to feedback. Although portfolio submissions have proven effective, they do place a considerable workload on the teacher and still tend to provide only limited individual feedback. It would therefore be worthwhile to explore the potential for implementing more structured peer feedback.

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