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To cite this article: Alissa Ruth, Melissa Beresford, Elisabeth Kago Ilboudo Nébié, Amber Wutich, Robin G. Nelson & Katherine Mayfour (2024) Scaling up Through Online Research Mentorship – Lessons Learned, *Practicing Anthropology*, 46:2, 124-127, DOI: [10.1080/08884552.2024.2345812](https://doi.org/10.1080/08884552.2024.2345812)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08884552.2024.2345812>



Published online: 11 Jun 2024.



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BRIEF REPORT



Scaling up Through Online Research Mentorship – Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

The NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) first iteration was a hybrid virtual model due to the world pandemic. Drawing on established pedagogical principles, the program combined asynchronous lectures with synchronous online instruction, hands-on activities, and mentorship sessions. The curriculum encompassed a diverse range of activities, including research project development and problem-solving exercises. Despite the benefits of virtual learning, managing time zones and ensuring inclusivity presented unique challenges. Leveraging technology, such as Zoom and Google Classroom, we facilitated collaboration and engagement, while making deliberate efforts to foster an inclusive community through orientation sessions and guidance on inclusive language and practices. Overall, the transition to an online format expanded accessibility and learning opportunities, highlighting the potential of virtual training programs in academia.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

The NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) had to switch to a hybrid virtual format because of the pandemic. The program used a mix of prerecorded and live online classes, practical activities, and mentorship. It included various tasks like developing research projects and solving problems. While virtual learning had advantages, there were challenges like dealing with different time zones and ensuring everyone felt included. Using tools like Zoom and Google Classroom helped us work together and stay engaged. We also focused on creating an inclusive environment with orientation sessions and advice on using inclusive language. Overall, moving online made the program more accessible and showed the benefits of virtual training in academia.

KEYWORDS

virtual learning; methods training; synchronous instruction; inclusive pedagogy

When first proposed, the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) was planned to be an in-person learning experience, like the summer methods training sessions before (see Bernard and Wutich this issue). While virtual learning has been around for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred the need to innovate how we delivered CAMP. This required us to question how best to design an effective virtual program.

The pedagogy of teaching methods effectively takes three key practices: (1) taking abstract concepts and making them concrete through real-world examples; (2) providing hands-on practice to engage in the method; and (3) allowing for time to reflect on the process of implementing the method (Kilburn, Nind, and Wiles 2014;

Lewthwaite and Nind 2016; Ruth, Wutich, and Bernard 2023). We took the challenge of translating what we know works best in person to the online environment. We chose a hybrid model in which we asked students to watch a series of high-quality recorded methods lectures in their own time prior to joining us for three weeks of intensive real-time, face-to-face (i.e., synchronous) online instruction.

Curriculum

We asked 46 faculty to record 60 methods lectures that students could view online for two months before synchronous online instruction started. Once the synchronous instruction began, each day progressed according to a set structure:

a visiting faculty member presented a live methods lecture over Zoom, followed by a hands-on activity in which they walked students through using the methods presented in the lecture (activities were a mix of individual pre-homework, small-group, and large-group activities). After a break, students engaged in one-on-one mentorship office hours with other visiting faculty; worked on their evolving research projects in small groups (see the NSF CAMP Feedback Method, this issue); and engaged in a problem-based activity in which we presented a research scenario and asked students to collaboratively work together to identify and solve the problem (e.g., determine a sample size or outline a plan for coding qualitative data). In later years, we added “Hidden Curriculum” sessions on Fridays in the months preceding the intensive start of full-time CAMP. Altogether, the program was intensive and fast-paced; an assistant with professional program coordination and communication skills planned the day-to-day events, provided clear instructions, and remained available for logistical questions from students and faculty.

Time

The benefit of a virtual program was that students could participate anywhere in the world, but time differences had to be taken into consideration. We chose to start at 7:00 a.m. US Pacific Time and 10:00 am US Eastern. We quickly learned how exhausting it is to be in a synchronous learning environment—in ways we could not have imagined without experiencing them. We found that it was important to build in short breaks and allow students to turn off their cameras as needed to eat something, use the bathroom, or simply disengage a little. Nonetheless, setting expectations for long, intensive days was essential in the orientation session.

Technology

We benefited from using an online conferencing platform that had the capabilities of breakout rooms, chat messaging, and the ability to react, share emotions, and raise hands (e.g., Zoom or Microsoft Teams). We encouraged students to

keep their cameras on during sessions and to use the chat and reactions functions (e.g., raise hand, applaud) to engage in real-time without physically interpreting someone. Some faculty used interactive tools such as Jamboards or Google Docs to spur collaboration. We chose Google Classroom as the learning management system (LMS) because it is free to everyone, accessible, and fairly easy to set up. We learned that testing the functionality of new tools was essential and found it helpful to watch video tutorials about capabilities before implementing anything new in real-time.

Building an inclusive community

Building a collaborative Community of Practice (see Negrón et al., this issue), including students and faculty from different institutions across the country, is no easy task. The intense, short-term, online setup made it all the more challenging. Before starting the intensive daily session, we held four, one-hour orientation sessions where we broke students into groups to do icebreaker activities. Question topics included: the story of your name, choose a picture on your phone of something meaningful to you and share with the group, what app on your phone do you find most useful, what is your favorite recipe, podcast, or TV show right now? We randomly assigned groups for these breakout rooms and for most activities, but sometimes students self-organized into their own groups based on their topical/content area of their research. When this happened, the groups often ended up uneven and the process of deciding how to even out the groups took valuable time.

During the orientation sessions, we provided faculty and students flyers about how best to use Zoom and key practices for online platforms that promote an inclusive environment (see Zoom Best Practices and DEI flyer links below). We highlighted concrete actions we could take, like placing pronouns next to screen names and using those pronouns. We also guided specific language practices, such as using they/them pronouns when uncertain of gender, using “people first” language (e.g., people with disabilities), and avoiding antiquated terms that can be perceived

as discriminatory. Faculty were trained to avoid “spotlighting” students—asking students to speak about a specific subject because they appear to fit certain demographics—and to not make assumptions based on names or appearance (e.g., to avoid stereotype threat by not assuming someone speaks a specific language or has specific knowledge about a culture).

Final thoughts

Creating an online methods training program with intensive synchronous learning components offers many advantages and provides greater learning opportunities (Bernard 2021). This includes allowing a wider range of faculty and students to participate since they can join from anywhere in the world without the added expense of travelling or leaving their day-to-day responsibilities. Another advantage is that recorded sessions allow anyone who was not able to join to watch later and provide students the opportunity to re-review the material. Based on our experience, we highly recommend creating online training programs and we hope these lessons learned can help others with planning and development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was funded under the US National Science Foundation Cultural Anthropology Program grant (Award SBE-2017491) to the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program.

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Melissa Beresford is an assistant professor of anthropology at San Jose State University and a faculty affiliate in the Center for Global Health at Arizona State University. Her research examines how humans use social and institutional arrangements adapt to water insecurity. She is also a methodologist and conducts research to advance social science research methods and research methods training. She is the

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Elisabeth Kago Ilboudo Nébié is an Assistant Professor at Arizona State University where her research centers on the human dimensions of environmental change, and food and water insecurity in the Sahel region of West Africa. She is trained as both, an applied anthropologist and international development practitioner. As part of her research and diverse consultancies, Elisabeth has collaborated with various organizations, including the International Development Research Centre, International Livestock Research Institute, and International Research Institute for Climate and Society, as well as UNESCO, UNFCCC, and the World Food Programme.

Amber Wutich is an ASU President’s Professor, Director of the Center for Global Health, and 2023 MacArthur Fellow. An expert on water insecurity, Wutich directs the Global Ethnohydrology Study, a cross-cultural study of water knowledge and management in 20+ countries. Her two decades of community-based fieldwork explore how people respond, individually and collectively, to extremely water scarce conditions. An ethnographer and methodologist, Wutich has authored 200+ papers and chapters, co-authored 6 books, edits the journal *Field Methods*, and directs the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program.

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