“I want this experience to be whatever you can make of it,” Dr. Michael Angrosino said to Ernesto Ruiz, my fellow teaching assistant, and me in a cramped office with books encircling his desk. It was his final academic year of teaching at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa. He was the only member of the faculty who had been at USF since it launched the country’s first PhD program in applied anthropology in 1984. Fast forward 22 years and it was the fall of 2006. I had just started the PhD program in cultural anthropology at USF. Before I entered his office, I asked around the department about his teaching and leadership. I wanted to know what I was getting myself into and everyone assured me he was “good to his graduate students.” The moment he said those words about making the most of my teaching assistantship, any lingering doubts about him and the program were put to rest. He set the tone for graduate learning at USF that encourages students to create positive social change. A case study of this change is presented below through participatory pedagogy where teaching assistants collaborate with...
their professor to improve the learning environment for undergraduates from one semester to the next.

The First Semester

I entered the PhD program with only a half-dozen or so anthropology courses under my belt, having previously focused on economics and business for my master’s degree. So when Dr. Angrosino gave Ruiz and me the opportunity to either teach for the latter half of a three-hour undergraduate seminar course titled *Rethinking Anthropology*, or else to do research for him, I chose the research option. My colleague offered to teach and I attended each class.

The scope of the class included broader theoretical and historical questions about what it means to be an anthropologist in the world we live in today. The course also spanned the four fields of anthropology as well as research methods and ethical considerations. It sought to provoke students into thinking about what they learned throughout their anthropological career at USF and it also gave them employment ideas to explore prior to graduation. The professor acknowledged there were many different ways to teach the course and he welcomed our feedback as to how to improve it.

It appeared to me that he had listened to critiques of his teaching style for over three decades and had refined it accordingly to create an effective method of lecturing that was well received by the students. His teaching evaluations attested to this. He would speak at a moderate pace, combining humorous overhead slides with his keen insight into the main ideas of the weekly readings. He did not discuss the readings in detail but welcomed questions about them or anything else. He would
pause at intervals throughout his hour or more of lecturing to invite student participation. During the fall 2006 semester, few students raised their hands or asked questions. There would be a short bathroom break approximately halfway through the three-hour class. Ruiz would then assume teaching for the latter half of class. He would either choose a particular theme of the professor’s lecture on which to focus and encourage classroom discussion or he would show a film and ask questions afterward.

The students’ interaction with Ruiz was minimal no matter how creatively or enthusiastically he engaged them. This included an attempt at classroom discussion by applying various anthropological theories to understand the parking situation on campus (i.e., thinking of the causes and solutions to the parking problem from a gendered or symbolic or political economic perspective). USF is a commuter school and parking is a significant problem with which many students can empathize. Few students engaged him during this presentation and I wondered why they were so reluctant to participate in general.

Was it the classroom? White paint covered pocked cinderblocks in a room that seemingly hugged the 30 or so students. They were crammed into six rows of plastic chairs with half-desks that would comfortably fit a middle school student. The classroom was normal for a state university in Florida. Was it the students themselves? They were mostly juniors and seniors who appeared to be in their late teens and early twenties, except for an older student who was likely a senior citizen. Perhaps, with USF being a commuter school, many students did not have the luxury of only focusing on their studies as they were married or had full-time or part-time jobs. Whatever the reason for minimal classroom participation, the only thing that could be changed from my perspective was the pedagogical approach to the course.
Participatory Planning of an Intervention

As the fall semester drew to a close, the students gave group presentations, which I thought did not allow them to demonstrate individually how they had rethought anthropology and explored the broader theoretical questions raised in the class. One presentation had students engage in a game show of anthropologists with Drs. Sapir, Whorf, Chomsky and Mead attempting to discuss anthropological theory. The game show idea was intriguing but unfortunately only one student had understood any theory and the others were waffling or painfully silent. Silence was common among many students whose participation was limited to either pushing play on YouTube videos they did not create or constructing elaborate backdrops or detailed PowerPoint presentations without contributing to the verbal content of the presentation itself.

With only a couple weeks left in the semester, I approached the professor in his office and asked if he would allow Ruiz and me to restructure the class according to suggestions from the students. He agreed and Ruiz and I returned to his office to discuss how to proceed. In an attempt to gather the students’ raw opinions about the class and their ideas on how to make it better, we asked if the professor would leave class early on the last day. We would then ask students for oral feedback. He welcomed the idea and asked us to take detailed notes of everything the students said.

On the last day of class, after he thanked the students for the experience and wished them well over the December break, he informed them that the teaching assistants would like their attention and requested them not to leave until we had addressed them. When the students’ eyes moved in sync from the door
clicking behind the professor as he left to the front of the class, Ruiz and I grabbed a marker and positioned ourselves at the white board.

We explained to them that in addition to the teaching evaluation scantron and written comments they had previously provided, we would appreciate their opinions in remaking this course for the spring 2007 semester. We made it clear that whatever they said was absolutely anonymous and it would help us tremendously. “If you could have made changes to this class, then what would you have done?” we asked. Silence. I had enough of their silence and respectfully expressed my frustration to them about it. Their responses first came as a trickle and then a wave.

We asked for clarification when they made general comments such as, “Some of the readings were boring.” Which readings, which chapters, what about the book overall? We asked if they could recommend readings or books. What about the group projects? What about the lecturing style? Ruiz and I had ideas of our own and shared those with them (e.g., “Would you all have preferred some of the class time to be devoted to sitting in smaller groups to discuss the readings?”). They seemed to like that idea. One student said he did not do many of the readings in class and encouraged us to create a grading /penalty mechanism for ensuring students came prepared to participate in a classroom discussion.

We went through all the suggestions of the students by writing them on the white board to make sure we understood them correctly. Any student who did not get a chance to contribute was invited to stay after class to address us. A couple of them came up and shared their suggestions or elaborated on others’ ideas. We transferred the notes from the board to a
computer and shared them with the professor. The strongest praise for the course surrounded the lecturing of the professor, which matched his teaching evaluation for the semester. One of the most significant changes they wanted to see was space to critique and question anthropological theories and ideas. This revelation was interesting considering they were relatively quiet throughout the semester and none of the eight written comments for the professor's teaching evaluation that semester requested more classroom discussions.

Ruiz and I offered the professor a template for the same course he would be teaching in the spring 2007 semester by drawing on the structure of a foundational theory class we were taking at the time. The format had a professor lecture for the first part of the three-hour class. We would then break into small groups to discuss the readings and then regroup as an entire class to share our conclusions. We also suggested that instead of leaving the last week of lecturing to non-academic employment opportunities the class could instead focus on this early in the semester. This would allow more time to provide students with job ideas and to assist them in exploring career opportunities, considering many students were graduating at the course's conclusion. We also suggested individual rather than group projects as a final presentation.

Ruiz and I left our meeting with a series of “next steps” that we would each complete in time for the spring 2007 semester, scheduled to start a month later. The professor agreed to first revise the old syllabus with our suggestions and then send it to Ruiz and me for comments. The book from the fall 2006 class, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Anthropology* (Endicott & Welsch 2004), was retained. The professor added another for the spring 2007 class: *Applying Anthropology: An
Introductory Reader (Podolefsky & Brown 2006), which Ruiz knew and approved. The professor agreed to allow Ruiz and me to develop a supplemental reading list as well.

Ruiz took the lead in developing an extensive list of supplemental readings and shared them with me. We whittled the list to one or two additional readings a week for the semester. He shared them with the professor who looked through them and asked us if the anthropological concepts for most of those readings would allow the undergraduate students to rethink their anthropological training or our own. We agreed with his point. The readings we selected came from our own anthropological orientations, focusing on cultural anthropology and political economy rather than reflecting the more general four-field education of the undergraduate students. All three of us decided against any supplemental articles. The reader from Podolefsky and Brown would suffice.

In terms of the final projects, the professor agreed with individual projects and provided students with the option of focusing on one of anthropology’s four fields. Students interested in cultural anthropology could evaluate cultural anthropology proposals awarded grants by the National Science Foundation, biological anthropology students could research primate behavior and perform observations at a local zoo, archaeology students could compare the work of state archaeologists, and linguistic anthropology students had the opportunity to research Native American language preservation and promotion.

The professor maintained lecture content similar to that of the previous semester. However, when he concluded after an hour or so we split the class in half. The groups were determined by the second day of class by having students randomly select the number one or two. The groups remained the same throughout
the semester. Ruiz and I would have a separate classroom to meet with our respective half of the class and we consistently arranged the group in a circle. Each week one student was assigned to be the discussion leader and tasked with coming to class prepared with questions that would initiate conversation. Ruiz and I would help the discussion leader or answer specific questions about the readings. After class concluded, Ruiz and I would e-mail a homework question based on the professor’s lecture, assigned readings and classroom discussion. The students were asked to write a 500-word response each week based on these questions. The professor would be the only one reading and grading their papers.

Initially, the professor was not present in either classroom after the group split. Based on previous experiences he knew that undergraduate students did not tend to engage in classroom discussions in his presence. He suggested they were intimidated by him. I found this peculiar since he was a very approachable person, quick with a smile and a joke. He consistently spoke to students in a calm voice, and his tone and gestures were never intimidating.

**Evaluation of the Intervention**

By the seventh week of class some things changed. The students expressed dissatisfaction with their grades. They felt they were answering the weekly questions correctly but not to the professor’s liking. They further added that because the professor was not present during the group discussions, he could not adequately determine grades for their written work, because their answers were often based on conversations he did not personally hear. Ruiz and I asked the students if we could see their graded
papers and perhaps provide feedback. We also inquired as to other issues about which they were concerned. They mostly reiterated the point about his absence in the class.

After reading a couple of their papers, Ruiz and I agreed with the professor that many of the students were not answering the question properly. For example, one week I asked the following:

Dr. Angrosino closed his lecture on Monday by asking, “How do we teach about race and evolution to a skeptical public?” We need not look any further than our own social circle to answer this question. Chose either race OR evolution and develop a well thought-out argument (the key here is arguing sensibly and clearly with fact, reason and logic to support your claims) that you would use to “teach” your social circle from an anthropological perspective about either race OR evolution. Draw from Dr. Angrosino’s lecture, our discussion and the readings to support your argument.

The students were asked to reflect and synthesize the information they were learning in the class to answer that question. I believe those who complained found this very difficult because to them the question was too broad, leading them to provide a vague answer. Rather than write a cogent argument they would instead pick a comment here from the reading and a comment there from the professor’s lecture and tried to cobble something together. It did not seem that rethinking anthropology was occurring for some of them.

Interestingly, right after we had this conversation in class, one student sent me an e-mail. I have cut and pasted the pertinent portion below:
The point I want to make is that in all fairness, it was clear to me what expectations were necessary when composing the papers. I came into this class expecting to think abstractly and not to follow a mechanical routine in grunting out a paper that simply regurgitates the readings of the week. I got the impression from some people that their efforts went beyond what was expected but I'm confident the grading reflected their efforts and what Dr. Angrosino expected in content.

This student’s sentiments complemented by own. The weekly questions and the manner in which the professor questioned the class during his lecture did not encourage call-and-response answers from the students. The questions were meant instead to interrogate the gray doubts with which anthropologists struggle. The questions were part philosophy and part theology; they were existential and challenged one’s faith in the certainty of what it means to be human and in our place in the world. After reviewing the professor’s teaching evaluation for the spring 2007 semester, there were 14 written comments compared with eight from the previous semester. Of the 14, six lauded the discussion groups and none opposed them. One comment was for “more switch of groups” and another requested more discussions during the professor’s lecture.

**Transforming the Graduate Experience through Action Research**

As applied anthropology graduate programs at both the MA and PhD levels continue to grow, graduate assistants in these programs have the opportunity to utilize what we are learning in efforts to transform our working environment and overall
learning experiences. Before aspiring to better the world “out there” we can focus upon our immediate surroundings “in here.” One method we might use is based on a participatory or action-oriented approach. This is the method I believe the professor, Ruiz, and I used to improve the class.

Stephen Kemmis (2007) describes three types of action research, each more intensive in the degree of seeking to create change (economic, political, social, cultural, etc.). The first is technical action research where measurable change or quantifiable outcomes are the primary goal. The second is practical action research, which includes the same qualities as technical action research as well as using the researcher’s self-reflection to understand social problems and to share these understandings with decision-makers, such as professors for whom graduate assistants are working. The third is emancipatory or critical action research, which is “emancipating people from determination by habit, custom, illusion and coercion” (Kemmis 2007:95).

Essentially, this means challenging others’ habitus or the unseen and unconscious structures that can order our lives (Bourdieu 1977:72).

I think action research rests along a continuum of maximizing beneficence, beginning with Kurt Lewin’s position that “[r]esearch that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (1946:35). Drawing from Lewin, graduate assistants may use technical action research to measurably improve their own or their professor’s teaching evaluations. However, the graduate students I know who teach would not likely be fulfilled nor motivated by researching ways of improving evaluations alone. They tend to be motivated by higher degrees of beneficence that go beyond the aggrandizement of self or their professor.
Sol Tax (1958:17) advocated for “participant interference” or practical action research by eliciting and documenting the reflections of research collaborators and research assistants. Such efforts were done to illuminate social problems and suggest possible solutions. This was the starting point from which we addressed the problems of the fall 2006 Rethinking Anthropology class. Though the professor, Ruiz, and I never discussed action research, we recognized a need for improvement and knew the solutions needed to come from the students’ reflections on their experiences.

Further along the continuum of action research are the writings of Paulo Freire (2000 and 2004, Freire and Freire 1994), who viewed consciousness as the source for social change. He argued that only by first creating mental emancipation can the oppressed then take action in the service of political, economic and social reform. But the Rethinking Anthropology course was not intended to emancipate the students from structured thoughts long reinforced by popular media and mainstream ideologies.

And action research is not without its shortcomings. Gaventa and Cornwall (2007) warn action researchers against the misconception that the inclusion of research collaborators does not constitute action research without working towards a greater goal of positive social change. Graduate students should ask themselves to what degree they feel comfortable relinquishing their power and control of a classroom full of undergraduates in order to maintain a participatory approach to learning. How effectively can a teacher accomplish the tasks of each class while encouraging a participatory approach from students? Can course goals and learning expectations still be met while changing the course according to students’ desires?
Even though action research can be understood as applied anthropology, its potential to contribute to theory formation, particularly pedagogical theory, should not be discarded. Marietta Baba has described five theories of practice traditionally found in Western anthropology (Baba 2000). The first is a positivist, linear model, where theory informs practice without a feedback loop of practice informing theory. The second model builds on the first, where practitioners test the theories of academic anthropologists and then inform them of the results through publications, allowing academics to create new theory. The third model focuses on policy and how theory and practice should be primarily devoted to the quantifiable improvement of people’s livelihood. Baba uses Marx’s idea of praxis as the fourth model, where “theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge develop together,” and the researcher becomes an activist who seeks to create more equitable sharing of power and access to resources between socioeconomic classes (Baba 2000:22–23). The fifth model that Baba proposes combines the previous four into “a spiral of new knowledge” (2000:36). Whichever manner in which action research is used, it can be a spiral of new knowledge for graduate anthropology students.

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