

Teaching Anthropology Virtually: learning communities at work

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Abstract

This paper presents the learning model of the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) through my experience as a teacher of anthropology on line for the last three years. I will suggest that in order to teach anthropology virtually, we need to consider not only the relationship between textual, visual and audio-visual materials, but also how the virtual classroom is constructed (*electronic setting*) and how social interaction through computer mediated communication (CMC) is conducted in order to create a collective dynamic for knowledge sharing and elaboration (*e-learning context*). Finally, I will argue, through various examples, that, in the interplay between setting and context, visual images play an important role not only as a pedagogical tool, but also in shaping the identity of the course.

Rethinking pedagogical models through online practice

Teaching Anthropology through the Internet does not only mean using a new medium for communicating anthropological knowledge, but also reflecting about our teaching practices and what we understand the learning process to be: how anthropological knowledge is produced and transmitted¹.

The Internet is a technology that facilitates communication over distance and quick transmission of textual, visual and audio data at a relatively low cost. In that sense, the Internet has brought about a revolution in communicative modes, allowing synchronic and asynchronous communication from one-to-many and the creation of virtual spaces for information storage and exchange. Online learning consists of the development of different pedagogical models based on Internet technologies that make distance learning possible through computer communication, and can also be a complement to face-to-face education, as well as a "revolutionary way" for continuous education to people throughout their lives. But, by the simple fact of introducing computer technologies in the teaching-learning process, can we speak about a "revolutionary change" in pedagogical models?

In contrast to the defenders of online teaching, other opinions maintain that e-learning is a poor substitute for "traditional" higher education. Those who believe that online teaching cannot replace the high-level knowledge production and exchange on "real" university campuses have sometimes questioned the degrees

obtained through the virtual system, arguing that face-to-face interaction is at the core of teaching-learning processes. But is this the only reason? Do we not idealise our “traditional” educational model? Are there not, in our resistance, other legitimate problems related to academic institutional and organizational pressures?

E-learning models not only question pedagogical models based primarily on oral transmission, but also, they most certainly introduce changes in academic structures, in university budgets, and in the daily teaching practices with regard to time management, preparation of class materials, student-professor relationships and roles. As Draklè (2002) and Noble (1997) point out², students and professors have not always accepted the mediation of new technologies. On the one hand, this is because not all universities have answered the economic and structural challenges that e-learning models introduce³, and on the other hand, because it might pull into question our teaching-learning model and our ways of understanding pedagogical practice.

Today, online teaching and learning is a palpable reality; there is an increasing use of the Internet in universities not only as a communicative tool, but also as a teaching-learning device with virtual campuses and online courses all over the world, which have spread throughout all continents. What can we learn from these new experiences? I will offer here my own experience at the Open University of Catalonia, Spain, teaching social and cultural anthropology, and how I view my current practice in course design and pedagogical interaction with students. Far from trying to compare e-teaching and e-learning processes with face-to-face processes in terms of impoverishment⁴, I will focus my analysis on the potential of computer-mediated communication for rethinking our teaching practice and the role visual images can play in this.

Conditions of on line teaching: *e-learning setting and e-learning context*

I will begin with two premises: the first is that the creation of a context of intelligibility through social interaction is at the core of the teaching-learning process, whether it be at distance, virtual or face-to-face. The second is that the role of visuality in teaching anthropology has been largely overlooked in the oral teaching tradition. The convergence of communication technologies on the Internet poses the question of image and aesthetics as an important means of anthropological knowledge transmission and acquisition side by side with verbal and textual communication. Our quest, then, is how to use textual and visual information to convey anthropological discourse through computer mediated communication, and how to transform electronic interfaces into social spaces, where a community of learning can grow up⁵.

The visual and social aspects of the learning process as part of the context of knowledge production have been largely ignored until recently (they remained “invisible”) since they were common, unquestioned assumptions of our tradition (graphics on the blackboard, non verbal communication, etc. were forms of “visualising” anthropology and ways of incorporating tacit knowledge in teaching practices). They were not recognised because attention was centred in explicit and verbal knowledge, and because the pedagogical model was based on unidirectional communication, where the roles were perfectly defined: the teacher was the transmitter of knowledge and the student was the recipient. However this learning model based on a cognitive process decontextualized from social action and sustained by a notion of communication as an emissary-message-recipient process

has been severely questioned (Martínez, 1992). Here, I will follow Chaiklin and Lave's concept of learning as a *situated activity*, as "knowledge and learning will be found distributed throughout the complex structure of person-acting-in-setting. They cannot be pinned down to the head of the individual or to assigned tasks or to external tools or to the environment, but lie instead in the relations among them" (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996:9).

Seeing knowledge as socially produced, and learning as a situated activity, how can teaching-learning activity be conducted in electronic environments? Virtual campuses, online universities and virtual classrooms are made visible through web design, through interactive interfaces based on visual devices that sometimes represent or try to emulate physical spaces. In *cyberspace*, social relations are constructed and maintained through text messages or electronic conversations. The relationship between text, images and the spatial design of screen environments, what I have called the *electronic setting*, mediates the communication process of the anthropological "content", but only the social interaction between students and teachers can guarantee the quality of that communication if we agree that knowledge production is a matter of the negotiation of social meanings (Geertz, 1983).

The context of the teaching-learning process through the Internet is the result of the combination of the *electronic setting* and the social context created by the interaction process. It is in that *e-learning context* where anthropological knowledge is shared and produced. Understood this way, *e-learning* is more than a commercial label to sell "pre-packaged" knowledge, it is also a new social practice of knowledge production, which is closely related to the formation of virtual communities of learning (Palooff, Pratt, 1999).

If we consider that the teaching-learning process is a process based on social interaction, then written or hypermedia materials are mediation devices that help but cannot replace human interaction in the negotiation of meaning, knowledge sharing and production. The *e-learning context* is constrained by interface technology, sustained by hypermedia and textual materials, but it is created and shaped through social interaction through computer-mediated communication (CMC). The reformulation of face-to-face communication to email-to-email communication is of fundamental importance in understanding online teaching-learning processes (Trias, 2002). Online teaching does not attempt to emulate face-to-face teaching, but the fact is that computer mediated communication allows the collective creation of a context of intelligibility through social interaction. It is in this sense that we can speak of the development of a virtual community where knowledge could be collectively produced (Crook, 1996).

The *e-learning setting* is composed of interface design and cyberspaces created for human communication, for recalling online information and university services, and for the sharing of physical and hypermedia documents produced by professors and students. The *e-learning context* is constrained by interface technology, but it is dynamically generated by social interaction through communication between students and professors⁶. As Barberà, Badia and Mominó (2001:75) point out, the context of e-learning emerges from the interplay of a multiplicity of *microcontexts* of a very different nature, such as the student's physical surrounding (at home, at the office, at the library), his or her relation to computer technologies, implicit and tacit knowledge; but specially from the social relations that students and professors engage in through computer mediation.



The e-learning context is a social process that remains invisible and that is more than the sum of setting components and personal micro contexts such as the physical place from which a student or an instructor is connected.

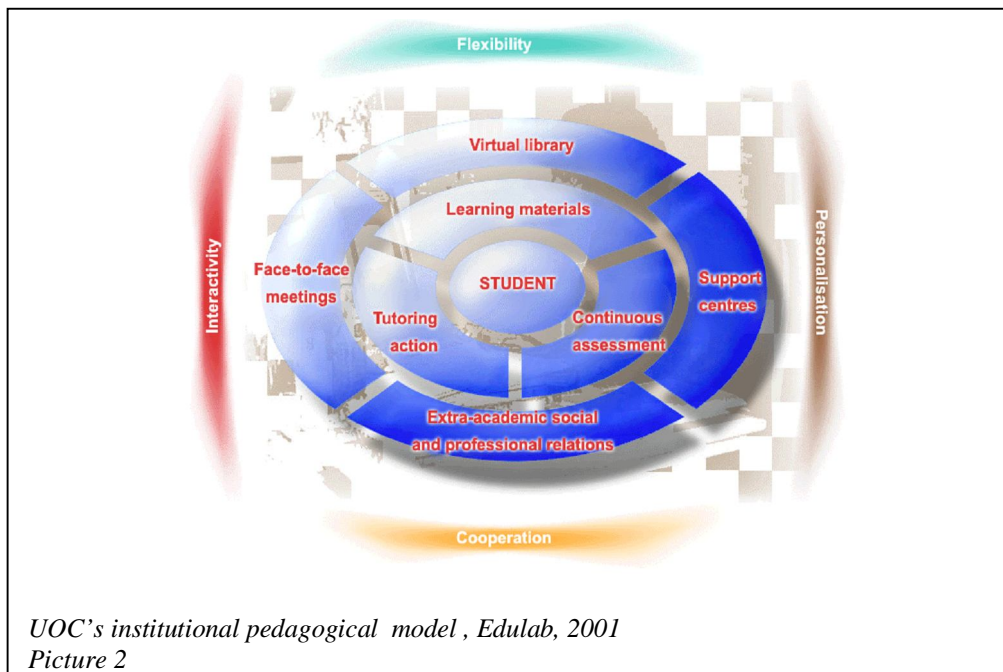
Picture 1

For me in my e-teaching experience, the *e-learning setting* is made up of the “given components”. The setting is the framework that constraints the teaching and learning processes, including the physical and hypermedia materials. Meanwhile the *e-learning context* is the result of the instructor’s pedagogical strategies and classroom group dynamics. Let’s see how the relationship between *setting* and *context* works in two examples of anthropology courses at the Open University of Catalonia.

The UOC pedagogical model: the definition of setting

The Open University of Catalonia (UOC) was founded in 1995 at the initiative of the Catalan Government within a new public-private legal framework as a distance-learning university based from the beginning on Internet technology. Today, the UOC is one of the fastest-growing educational institutions in Spain, with more than 20,000 students enrolled, most of whom are between 25 and 35 years old, university graduates and currently working.

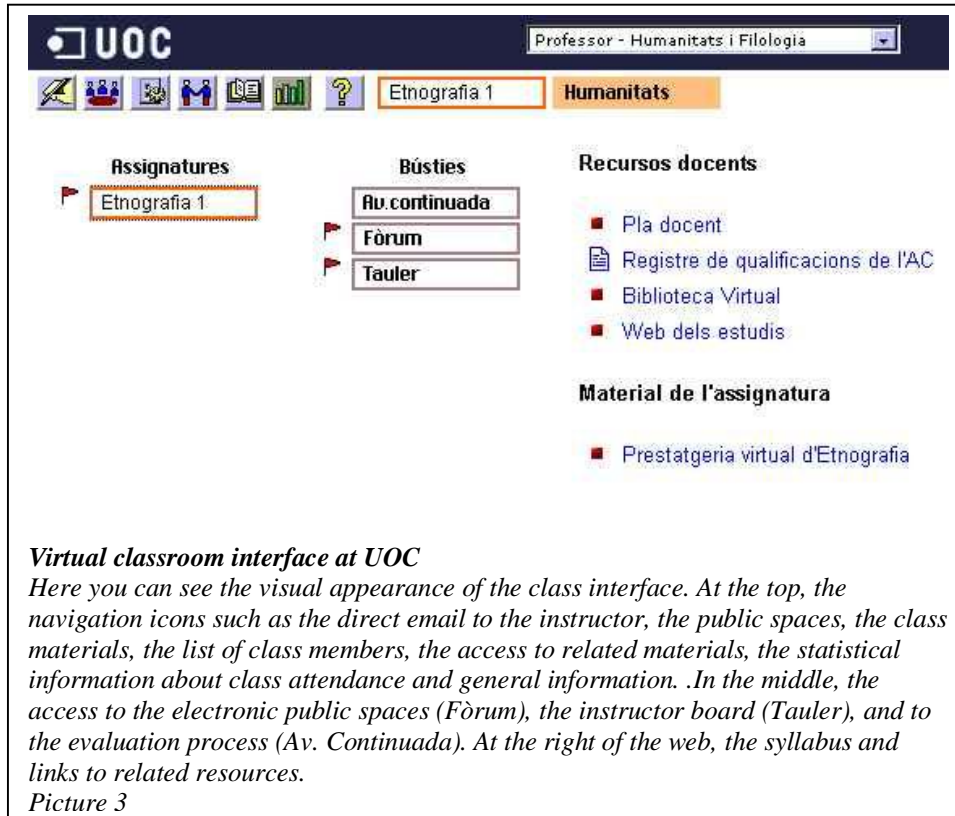
The Open University of Catalonia is a very young institution, which bases its academic, organizational and functional structure for learning and teaching on the Internet as its very basic tool. This means that academic and most extra curricula activities are conducted on line, through electronic spaces that are designed to fulfil almost all students' needs: enrolment, library, class materials, debates, tutorials, classes, informal chats in the 'e-bar', etc. The University’s goal is to develop “a new concept of university that places the student at the very centre of the learning process and which overcomes the barriers of time and space, providing education “any time, anywhere, any pace” (EduLab, 2001) (See picture n.2).



The pedagogical model of the UOC is based on the following basic components of its campus:

- a) *The Virtual Campus*: is the electronic environment of all communications at the University. Students, professors and staff find everything they need there, without having to use any other system of communication. The virtual campus has all the elements of a “real” campus: virtual classrooms, web-conferences, all the student services, places to go shopping, and places to meet other people. Email is the basic form of communication within the Campus, and the system includes in every email a photograph of the user and a short curriculum vita as a way of self-presentation.
- b) *Virtual classroom*: Each course has a defined electronic area for intercommunication, which is divided into three communicative spaces: one unidirectional from professor to students (the “instructor’s notice board”); and two for common communication and intellectual discussion, where students and professors can participate at the same level (*forum* and *debate*). In the virtual classroom, the student can also find a complete list of class participants and links to the virtual library, associated electronic material (articles, websites), and information about the evaluation process (syllabus, class schedule, own academic degrees, etc.). (See picture n.3).
- c) *Course materials*: the UOC students receive at home course physical materials (Handbooks, Videos and CD-Roms) developed by experts from various Spanish universities, which are designed according to UOC pedagogical principles.
- d) *Personalized support*: instructors and counsellors. Instructors are in charge of the learning process of each student in their classes. The instructor’s role is to plan a strategy for the continuous evaluation of students’ progress, as well as to solve any

question that they may have. Each student is also allocated a counsellor, whose role is to guide the student throughout the entire time she or he is studying at the UOC.



Virtual classroom interface at UOC
Here you can see the visual appearance of the class interface. At the top, the navigation icons such as the direct email to the instructor, the public spaces, the class materials, the list of class members, the access to related materials, the statistical information about class attendance and general information. In the middle, the access to the electronic public spaces (Fòrum), the instructor board (Tauler), and to the evaluation process (Av. Continuada). At the right of the web, the syllabus and links to related resources.

Picture 3

The class dynamics: the e-learning context

How can a participative learning process be developed through computer-mediated communication? How is the e-learning context generated? Below I present two examples of class dynamics and pedagogical strategies. The first, Social Anthropology develops a strategy based on collaborative thinking, while the second, the Ethnography class, is based on experience sharing.

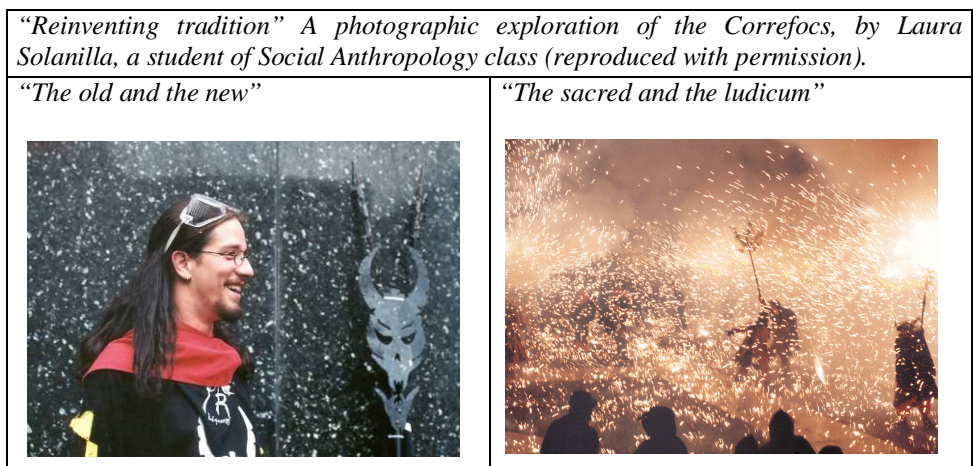
Social Anthropology: collaborative thinking

Introduction to Social Anthropology is a theoretical course, with the objective that students become familiar with anthropological concepts of culture and social structure (Llobera, 1997). One of the expected results is that the students use anthropological theory to understand current social and cultural events, especially those related to cultural diversity and ethnic identities. The pedagogical aim is that students make a creative use of anthropological information; that is not a passive learning of the different theoretical trends, but instead an active appropriation of them, to engage the student in a process of knowledge sharing and production.

The course activities aim to fulfil those objectives by motivating students through an alternative list of practical assignments such as:

- Compiling an electronic dictionary of anthropological terms: the students have to collaborate in choosing and defining anthropological concepts.
- Proposing and leading a debate in the electronic space of the class. The student must present a current social problem and try to analyse it using anthropological keys. All the other students' participations are welcome and at the end of the debate, the leader delivers a working paper with an analysis of the contributions and a conclusion.
- Producing a photographic essay in relation to anthropological matters such as kinship, public spaces, rituals, etc. (see picture n.4)
- Analysing an ethnographic film, considering aspects such as the mode of representation and the use of anthropological concepts.
- Conducting a cultural analysis of a newspaper article about ethnic conflicts, national identities or intercultural communication.

Implicit in these activities is the idea of promoting intellectual exchange through debates and public exposition of their work. The pedagogical strategy leads to solving tasks and to motivating personal commitment through personal and optional assignments. The collective spaces of interaction, although based on written expression, allow for the creation of an asynchronic debate that can be continuously reviewed and analysed. Students participate in relation to their experience, but they should attempt to use anthropological argumentation. For example, during a course of Social Anthropology with 45 students enrolled, 4 chose to lead a one-week debate as one activity in their continuous evaluation process. The subjects proposed were: *Child labour exploitation* (15 contributions, 2 from the instructor), *Tourism and anthropology* (16 contributions, 3 from the instructor), *Culture: do we "carry it" or do we create it?* (10 contributions, 2 from the professor), *Popular feasts: tradition renewal?* (19 contributions, 3 from the instructor). The one-week debate is a formula that allows students to progressively participate in the debate's proposals. The moderator writes an introduction, chairs the debate and sums up its conclusions,



which are also displayed in the *debate*. An analysis of the messages shows that a great deal of thought went into students' contributions, and that this work is backed up by their own experiences, contrasting anthropological theories and reflections about common beliefs. At the same time, they know each other's interests, recognise peers' contributions and defend their positions through argumentation.

In the Social Anthropology course, the role of the professor is limited to giving advice and orientation on request or as a response to students' contributions; it is "reactive" to students' work, so the *e-learning context* is constructed primarily through interaction amongst students. They also create a sense of group identity through their participation in public electronic spaces, which is basic for developing a community of learning. Nonetheless, at the end of the learning process they have to pass a "traditional" pencil and paper exam based on these activities in order to guarantee their individual work.

Ethnography: learning through experience

Ethnography is a practical course where students have to carry out ethnographic fieldwork. The pedagogical strategy in this case is that students learn what ethnography is about by going through the processes of ethnographic fieldwork and description. The Social Anthropology course is conceptually and structurally different to the Ethnography course because the emphasis is on gaining first hand experience of field observation, field social relationships, data construction, analysis and interpretation rather than on the correct use of theoretical terminology in anthropological writing.

Ethnographic knowledge is not only conceptual, but it is also based on the experience of the senses and the way people are taught to see the world. Dealing with impressions, emotions and intuitions is a very important part of ethnographic work (Davies, 1999). We need to develop a kind of fieldwork sensibility and a researcher identity. We learn through trial and error. We have to be careful with our relationships in the field, be aware of our ethical responsibilities, and acquire very practical knowledge through hands-on experience in the field that cannot be learned by merely assimilating abstract concepts.

For the design of the course, with these special characteristics in mind, I was thinking about the possibility of sharing tacit and implicit ethnographic knowledge using visual aesthetic devices, nonverbal communicative markers and visual and textual metaphors. I believed that the use of visual elements would allow for the introduction of the emotional component in ethnographic work and, at the same time, give a sense of the reflexive subjectivity of the researcher (Ardèvol, 2001).

In order to appeal to students' sensitivity, I decided to design an experimental website for the class that reflects my understanding visually of what ethnographic practice is about. That meant breaking out from the standard interface and introducing new "setting" elements in an attempt to satisfy two needs: a) to differentiate the special character of the course, b) to show my own perceptions as a fieldworker. In other words, through the personalised web design, I sought to give the course a sense of uniqueness and, at the same time, to show the students indirectly, by means of visual images and colours, some aspects of my own identity as a researcher and my own feelings about ethnography (see picture n.5).

But more than that and other unexpected meanings that the selected photographs might suggest, my aim was to pose indirectly that ethnography is about intercultural and intersubjective understanding, where the disciplined subjectivity of the researcher plays a fundamental role in fieldwork and in data analysis and interpretation (Bateson, 1991). The metaphor of photography as an intersection of gazes (Lutz & Collins, 1992) introduces another way of understanding knowledge construction as based on intercultural experience, not created in a sterile, decontextualized framework.



The useful aim of the website for the Ethnography is to integrate all the pedagogical instructions that the student needs for carrying out the continuous evaluation activities. There are a total of four assignments planned in progression over the 15-week course: a) the reading of an ethnographic monograph, b) the viewing of an ethnographic video c) an individual fieldwork project, d) the critical reading of other students' work. The students can consult the handbook (Pujadas, 1999) and other online articles and resources during the whole process. There is also an electronic space where the final works of the students are exhibited

The reading of the monograph and their work with the ethnographic video is oriented towards their fieldwork project. That means that from the very beginning they must think about their ethnographic project and relate their practical work with the written and audiovisual materials. The instructor takes a "proactive role", promoting the discussion of the individual projects in the electronic public debate spaces and orienting students as they carry out their fieldwork. At the end of the continuous evaluation process, the students share their final written reports, and as a final part of the evaluation process, they must read at least two other students' work and provide constructive criticism.

The learning process is aimed at integrating the learning experience of methodological practice and epistemological assumptions. The role of the instructor is to guide the student. The exercises are evaluated based on individual progress. This pedagogical model means a great deal of interaction in the virtual classroom between students and instructor, and also a lot of personal communication through public and private emails (in a virtual classroom with 15 students, the instructor received 178 private emails concerning the course and 71 were posted in the *forum* public electronic space). At the end of the course, the professor knows each student

and his or her learning process. The final marks strongly depend on fieldwork projects and no exam is required (first exercise 20%, second exercise 20%, fieldwork 50%, debate contribution, 15%).

To fulfil the course objectives and in order to create a group dynamics, I considered it was necessary to partially break away from the UOC's institutional program of distant learning based on the asynchronic policy of "any time, any pace". As in a face-to-face course, the syllabus is structured in week periods, and each task scheduled follows a recommended working rhythm. There are "class" tasks, which include the reading of the handbook, a virtual debate where we discuss about epistemological and general methodological aspects, and the activities. We have another electronic public space, the *forum*, where we discuss about concrete activities, and especially, about fieldwork experiences. Thus, asynchronicity is maintained, but not the "any pace" rule.

On the use of visual images in the teaching-learning online process

As Lewis (2002:29) argues, learning and working together are complex systems and more overlap is needed between intentional learning and tacit learning through experience. Instructors and academic institutions need to focus their attention on becoming process-oriented rather than content-focused. Both, the Social Anthropology and the Ethnography courses emphasise students' practical experience and self-responsibility. Pedagogical strategies are process-oriented and collaborative work is also promoted.

In both courses, visual images, photography and video are present in various ways. In the Social Anthropology course, photographs are used as concrete illustrations in the handbook and hypertext materials and an ethnographic video is provided as a case study of ethnic identity, where Raymond Barth's theory of ethnic groups are used for explaining the Pathans social organization and political conflicts. Also, students can choose a course activity based on photography for exploring anthropological concepts. In the Ethnography course, ethnographic videos serve as a way of exploring cultural diversity, but also, as a way to engage students in a reflexive analysis of ethnographic description and representation.

Finally, there is another use of video and photography that has been presented here in a very experimental and tentative way. The evocative power of visual images and our cultural use of visual markers as identity symbols makes the Ethnography course "unique" (process-oriented); for conveying and awakening emotional knowledge (appealing to the senses, values and subjectivity); and for representing the professor's personal relationship with the subject. This is very important when we are dealing with online courses, because the interface is standard for all courses and the students do not necessarily meet the professor personally. Visual images played in that sense, a role in defining group identity and in shaping our virtual community.

Photography and video play an important role in virtual teaching. Visual and audio images analysed or created by students represent an inestimable mediation tool for students and professors for the sharing of knowledge and the negotiation of meaning, especially if we consider that the communication mode is based on asynchronicity and non-presentiality. As Sarah Pink (2001) suggests, hypermedia possibilities, which depart from linear narratives, provide innovative ways of representing the relationship between ethnographic data and anthropological theory. But, more relevant here is that, these strategies also allow students (in particular on-line

students), to deal with the complexity of anthropological knowledge and to engage with it in meaningful collective work.

The interplay between images, text and social interaction shapes the arena for meaning negotiation. This interplay in shaping context and sharing knowledge has to be explored further. We no doubt need more research about e-learning processes and the role of visual images in them. The multivocality and openness of photographs, as Banks (2001) says, renders their use in anthropology teaching and researching problematic, but who says that words are unambiguous and communication through textual narratives unproblematic? Only through a continuous reflective use of visual images can we discuss our ways of seeing and interpreting visual images and how they contribute to create contexts of intelligibility for anthropological knowledge sharing and production.

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<http://www.uoc.es/web/eng/art/uoc/0107031/stone.html>

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Related Links

Social Anthropology Course Syllabus
http://cv.uoc.es/UOC/a/at_estudiant/secretaria/pla_estudis/04/017.html

Ethnography Course Syllabus
http://cv.uoc.es/UOC/a/at_estudiant/secretaria/pla_estudis/04/041.html

Working Images
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/workingimages/menu.htm>

Anthropology in Action
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/workingimages/menu.htm>

European Association of Social Anthropologists
Teaching of Anthropology network
<http://easa.uni-miskolc.hu/teachingnetpage.htm>

European Association of Social Anthropologists
Visual Anthropology Network
<http://www.iwf.de/easa/teach/teach.htm>

Documentary ethnographic films used in anthropology courses at UOC

Els illencs de Trobriand, Televisió de Catalunya, S.A, Granada Television, Disappearing World series.
Bruixeria entre els azande, Televisió de Catalunya, S.A., Granada Television, Disappearing World series.
Els pashtuns, Televisió de Catalunya, S.A, Granada Television, Disappearing World series.
Immigració, Televisió de Catalunya, S.A.
500 anys de viatge, Televisió de Catalunya, S.A.

About the author

Elisenda Ardevol, Social and Cultural Anthropologist, obtained her Phd. at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) for her thesis "The anthropological gaze or the Anthropology of gaze: from the audiovisual representation of cultures to the visual as an ethnographic research methodology". Currently, she is professor at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and member of GIRCOM (Interdisciplinary Research Group in Virtual Communities).

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² Noble (1997) states that "the high-tech transformation of higher education is being initiated and implemented from the top down" and he explains this reality (of alienation and opposition) in terms of what he calls "the commercialisation of higher education" — commoditization of the research and commoditization of the educational function of the university. In the same article, Noble finds other types of risk in relation to changes in the distribution of power in the new model of virtual universities (according to him, the autonomy and independence of faculty will be undermined). (Ros, 2001:2).

³ As A. Ros says "online education has generated new areas of questioning and dissatisfaction for both professors and students. To mention just two examples, at Toronto's York University, Canada's third largest university, professors went on a two-month strike in 1997 demanding better contractual protection and fighting for the right to keep their courses off line. At the same time, students supported the striking faculty and expressed their anxieties about the whole online educational system. In 1998, professors protested against an online initiative at the University of Washington, arguing that "education is not reducible to the downloading of information". (Ros, 2001:4)

⁴ For an introduction about social interaction through computer mediated communication (CMC) see the work of Susan Herring (1999). In relation to the comparison between online and face-to-face communication, see Mark Giese (1998).

⁵ For understanding virtual communities from a cultural point of view, see Elizabeth Reid (1994).

⁶ As Steve Bett (1999) says, the successful online courses depends on low student to faculty ratios, so e-learning is not a "cheap learning system".