

Creative activities/assignments for undergraduate Economic Anthropology course

(Compiled by Charles Dolph, CUNY Graduate Center)

In-class activities

Games: spheres of exchange, kula, monopoly, spent

- I made a "spheres of exchange" game based on Bohannan's article, with three colors of chips and the possibility of "making market" along with cards that say you have earned wealth or go plant yams (I call attention to the fact that to have any field for action in this game you have to play as a man). I have a number of games going concurrently, then halfway through I suggest to a few people that they could go to other games to try and make deals - this introduces Guyer's rethinking of Tiv exchange in regional context.
- One of my favourite assignments is to ask students to design a kula game. It doesn't matter whether the game is successful; it is the work of abstracting the important principles of the kula and thinking through how to enact them that is key. This is done in small groups and it is the discussion about how to design the game that is so useful.
- Make them design a monopoly-like game, but using the economic logic of some other culture system(s).
- I have not used this in class, but considered it! It is an online game meant to simulate decision making in the context of poverty. <http://playspent.org/>

Lesson plan-based activities

- There are some good activities in Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy's Take Back the Economy. I have found the market/exchange ones to be a little basic for students these days; work/labor is a step up; but the activities on business, property, and finance are really eye-opening.
- I have had good luck running an edited version of this simulation "Life in the Village" which was developed for training purposes at USAID. It provides good fodder for discussion about international development and inequities outside of the USA context. I have also assigned a reflection paper after the simulation, where the students are tasked with connecting the activity to course readings. <https://www.agrilinks.org/library/life-in-the-village-simulation-activity>

Creative activities/assignments for undergraduate Economic Anthropology course

Outside the classroom (at least partially)

Observation and interview-based

- I have had good luck having students conduct an in-depth interview with someone on a topic related to the course. One year I had them discuss the 2008 recession with an older family member, and then in their write-up had them connect to course themes and class readings. I like to use the StoryCorps app, because it allows them to post their interview recording and description to their online archive which is then housed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. with all StoryCorps interviews. <http://storycorps.com/>
- As an easy beginning, I had them observe a local workplace and write about the workplace interactions/relationships. If I recall, I then had them go back and interview at least one employee.
- I'm going to have my students next semester do an ethnography of an economic activity to uncover the social and moral rules of transactions. I'm expecting a final paper out of it, but I'll be checking in through the 2nd half of the semester with short assignments.

Field-trips (this one is NY-based)

- I don't know what the focus of your course is, but have you thought of taking your students on a tour to American Numismatic Society? They have a comprehensive collection of ancient and modern coins.

Social networks

- How about, find a fraud in your own social network? Possibly rephrased as, find a fraudulent practice, if you wish to broaden out from multi-level marketing schemes to the financial industry.

University as classroom

- Students decided to find out how the propaganda system of Penn State worked...and they get a lot done, and it opened their eyes in a way no books could have done....you could have students figure out the economic system of their own university...that would be mostly available in public records; and the students in my class were amazed at how open administrative staff were in talking to them...what are the different income streams? how are they related? what are the expenditure streams? how do they all fit together....much of this will

Creative activities/assignments for undergraduate Economic Anthropology course

have been done by administration, but it would be interesting to ground truth it with some ethnography...

Social life of things/commodity fetishism

- A good number of years ago I had students in a honors Intro to Cultural Anthropology class do a final paper on what I called “The Commodity Project.” I consider it my most successful assignment.

Students had to take some commodity that they used and trace its raw material production, its assembly and manufacture, and its sale. At each level they had to find out about who the workers were and the social relations governing them. In a complex commodity, such as a cell phone, they only had to focus on one part of the commodity.

The results were fabulous. One student took her favorite linen jacket (or pullover, I don't remember which) and in her oral presentation said that she will never think the same about her jacket again. Another worked on chocolate, focusing on her favorite Nestle candy bar, which opened her mind to some of the environmental issues and exploitative labor practices in its production.

What I loved about the project and its results was that students through their own research—were breaking down some of the commodity fetishisms that governed their thought about the objects they used. For the first time, many became aware of the complex social and environmental relationships that govern what they buy in the store.

If it had been an Economic Anthropology course, I would have then used the project to enter into some of the literature.

- I did something similar, and it really made the students think about where things come from, especially Smart phones.
- I have my Economic Anthropology class do a "Biography of a Thing" (a la Kopytoff) research project where they have to trace some thing from production to consumption (and re-consumption, where applicable), noting how value, meaning and singularization change along the way. They then present their findings in an AAA style poster session that is open to the campus. Students have researched great things, from family furniture heirlooms (John Adams' desk!), to their favorite sneakers, to their apartment building in the Bronx, to car batteries. For many of the students, this is the first time that they are doing interviews. They also need to contact retail outlet operators, factory managers, company representatives, library archivists, etc. in a formal way. It is one of my favorite projects.
- I assign James G. Carrier's “Protecting the Environment the Natural Way: Ethical Consumption and Commodity Fetishism” in my intro class. The students first gather their own ethnographic “footprint” data on their consumer behavior over a period of one week. They

Creative activities/assignments for undergraduate Economic Anthropology course

then “analyze” that data using Carrier’s explanation of the political economy that encourages fetishism of commodities and tends to subvert ethical consumption. It helps them understand how their behaviors are abstracted from their context and how they can demystify those processes to make choices that can help correct the ill effects of capitalist production and commerce.

- A couple of specific ideas...1. have students trace the route of some thing that they use/eat...where did it come from and by what means. 2. given my experience, I'd think of sending them to the docks to talk with longshoremen; in NY that would be International Longshormen's Association...and they're pretty mobbed up...so it could be too dangerous...but if someone had the right connections they might be able to sort how that works...and that's a critical link in the global economy. 3. On the other end of the spectrum, one could have them go to a farmer's market and trace the food back...maybe have them read *The Belly of Paris* by Emile Zola as a kind of example. 4. right now there's a lot going on there with the relationships among landowners (building owners, I guess), tenants, their associations, politicians and others that it would be interesting to explore. Or just ask the students what they'd like to do. That's such a rich and complex environment they're bound to come up with something interesting. If they do some good work, check w/ SEA about maybe having them present their work at a meeting. Should be interesting, however you do it...

Writing Assignments

- **Keywords Assignments:** In order to build a shared conceptual and analytical vocabulary for thinking, writing, and talking about themes and issues in economic anthropology, students do three “Keywords” assignments during the semester. These entail three short entries (roughly one page each) on a key term we have been discussing in class (examples include: “gift,” “reciprocity,” “exchange,” “value,” “formalist,” “substantivist,” “dispossession,” “production,” “consumption,” “informality,” etc.). Keywords Assignments contribute to the construction of a collective “word bank” as a resource that students can continue to consult beyond the course.
- **Sample Paper Assignment (#1)**

The purpose of this assignment is to give you some ideas about what it is like to do ethnography. Papers should be 5-6 double-spaced pages.

Choose one of the two assignments given below.

1. Discuss rules and behavior about borrowing things from friends. To conduct research for this essay, interview at least four people (not members of your family) about the following and anything else you find interesting related to this topic:

- a. What kinds of things do you borrow from friends? What kinds of things do friends borrow from you?

Creative activities/assignments for undergraduate Economic Anthropology course

- b. Which types of friends do you feel comfortable borrowing from? Which types of friends would you never ask to borrow something from?
- c. Would you ever try to borrow something from someone who is not a good friend? If so, why?
- d. What kinds of items are you willing to lend? What kinds of items are you reluctant to lend? What kinds of items would you never lend?
- e. Have you ever had problems related to lending or borrowing things from friends?
- f. When you lend or borrow something from someone, what are your expectations about (a) the return of the item lent or borrowed; (b) future lending or borrowing from that person?

In your essay be sure to do the following:

- a. Describe the people you interviewed.
- b. Indicate what points they agreed on and where there was disagreement.
- c. Give some examples that they mentioned when answering the questions.
- d. Say in what ways, if any, your own views differ from the responses given by people you interviewed.

2. 1. Discuss rules and behavior about paying when people in the United States share a meal at a restaurant. To conduct research for this essay, interview at least four people (not members of your family) about the following:

- a. Under what circumstances does one person pay the bill for everybody? If one person pays the bill, does that person leave the tip?
- b. Under what circumstances is the bill split? If the bill is split, when is customary for each person to pay for what they consumed? When is it customary for the bill to be split evenly?
- c. If a bill is shared, who decides how much to tip?

In your essay be sure to do the following:

- a. Describe the people you interviewed.
- b. Indicate what points they agreed on and where there was disagreement.
- c. Give some examples that they mentioned when answering the questions.

Creative activities/assignments for undergraduate Economic Anthropology course

d. Say in what ways, if any, your own views differ from the responses given by people you interviewed.

e. Describe the last several times you have gone out for meals with people and who paid for what. Did actual behavior match the rules that you and others gave? If it differed, how did it differ and why you think it differed?

- **Sample Paper Assignment (#2)**

The purpose of this assignment is to give you some ideas about what it is like to do ethnography. Papers should be 5-6 double-spaced pages.

Interview three people (preferably not relatives, preferably not anthropology majors) about what they think are the causes of poverty in the world. Use the following procedure:

(1) Ask them to name three rich countries and three poor countries.

(2) Ask them why they think the rich countries are rich and the poor countries are poor.

(3) Then ask them if they think that overpopulation is a major cause of poverty in much of the world. If they say yes, ask them why. If they say no, ask them why not.

Be sure not to give your own views when doing the interviewing.

Your paper should consist of two parts:

Part 1 Describe the interviews. Give some information (no names, you can use pseudonyms – made-up names- if you want) about the people interviewed – age, sex, interests, occupation (if a student, major if known), relevant background (for example, international experience, wealthy family, poor family, etc.). Then give their individual responses to your questions. Also, compare the responses. To what extent do the people you interviewed agree with one another?

Part 2 Compare the views of the people you interviewed with the ideas expressed in lectures and readings. In particular, to what extent do the people you interviewed agree with (or disagree with) the ideas in the book by Richard Robbins (*Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*)?