

**Capstone Reader: Introduction:**  
Angèle Smith, December 2022

**2023 Anthropology Capstone Reader**  
Angèle Smith, Editor

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The Capstone course in Anthropology is the last required course for all Anthropology major students before they graduate and is meant literally to “cap off” their undergraduate learning experience. Like the goal of other Capstone courses, it builds on what students have learned throughout their educational program and thus is culminating and integrative in that it reflects on and unifies the knowledge gained and experiences had through their degree. In anthropology specifically, the course aims to reinforce the essential holistic nature of the discipline across the sub-disciplinary specialities of sociocultural anthropology, archaeology and biological anthropology. Similar to other capstone programs, this course engages students in social issues where they may have some important impact. That is, students are able to realize how anthropology contributes to relevant issues and questions in society today, and their focus throughout the course is to highlight that relevancy in an anthropological topic that they are about passionate about.

The Capstone course is process-oriented rather than product-driven. While there are final projects that are submitted throughout and at the end of the semester, the whole course is devoted to the students and myself working together on these projects, step-by-step. It is a collaborative environment where students learn and support each other as they share and help to strengthen each other’s work. Often students go through a real journey in their capstone experience, facing challenges, and creatively and collaboratively meeting their goals. Thus, students build their confidence in a sense of who they are, what are their abilities, and what they are capable of achieving as a result of their education in the anthropology program. As students focus on the application of their knowledge and skills, there is a transformation and a sense of completion as

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they move out of their undergraduate experience into either graduate level education or the workforce. They leave this course with a clear list of transferable skills that they have attained through their degree in Anthropology at UNBC.

Before I began as the instructor in the Capstone course, it was taught as a readings-based seminar, where students had three or four readings per week that discussed the discipline of anthropology and its role in academia, society and in the future. Although I also wanted to arrive at some overarching lessons that the students could take away from the discipline and their application of it in their futures, I was hesitant about merely *reading* about the discipline – I wanted to *engage* with the students and with the ideas of anthropology in a more *lasting*, *meaningful* and *participatory* way. Thus, there is no new content information in this course, but rather there is a focus on reflecting on and learning from what has already been learned over the time in the Anthropology program, and applying that in meaningful ways through the Capstone course.

This really stems from an anthropological mindset. I cannot separate my teaching and teaching philosophy from my understanding of anthropology. As an anthropologist, I am interested in how people in the world across time and cultures make sense of the world around them, and how they live together – I am interested in the concepts of *community*, *place*, and *belonging*. I see the same concepts at work in the Capstone course. Communities are not just “out there” in some different world but rather, we are constantly “in community” and “in place”. In the Capstone course especially, we work together operating as a learning community, where everyone participates as teacher and learner in a safe environment to grow and learn through curiosity and

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engagement in, and application of, important social issues. I think this awareness helps students to recognize their own social responsibility and role in promoting and practising what it means to be a socially just citizen.

As this is designed as a “hands-on” course, the weekly focus is based on class discussions of the various assignments in-process. There is a Critical Reflections assignment that allows the students to reflect on their learning. This assignment asks students to reflect on aspects of the discipline of Anthropology itself, but also on how they have witnessed and experienced anthropological understanding in their own lives and worlds, and how they have come to recognize their own transformation. There is also a Creative Project assignment which asks students to apply their understanding of anthropological issues in a different medium than they are usually asked to do. In a format other than a written essay or presentation, they are asked to “think outside the box”, citing that outside of university, there will be many ways that anthropological learning can be applied in different contexts. This gives students an opportunity to practise the application of knowledge as a new skill, as students make creative projects that reflect an anthropological relationship.

However, the primary focus of the Capstone course is a research paper that tackles some key issue that the student is passionate about in Anthropology, to address the question: *How does Anthropology contribute to relevant issues and questions in society?* The idea is for students to take ownership of the material and their deep understanding of it. Focused around the broad research areas of social justice, identity, and heritage, students choose their own anthropological topic for their research paper. The goal is that this research paper allows students to fully

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appreciate the intellectual, social and practical applications of anthropology in contemporary society as they move into further education, into the job market, or into any area of their future life. The aim is also to produce the very best piece of work possible in order that together we make it publishable-quality in order that it may be published in a Reader for others to use, as I will discuss below.

The process of working on these research papers is the backbone of the structure of the Capstone course with scaffolded building block assignments that begin the work immediately at the start of the semester. In the first two weeks, the class brainstorms together the key themes and more specific topics that students are keen to explore in their papers. These anthropological topics can vary widely but usually stem from interest peaked in previous courses that the students have had during their degree, and often focus on one or more of the subdisciplines within Anthropology. In this early stage, we work with one of the reference librarians to conduct comprehensive reference searches and to fine-tune the research topic and research questions guiding the paper. As a class, we determine what the format of the papers should include and discuss the skills associated with conducting reference searches, writing annotations, and creating a paper outline. The first assignment is due after Week 3 and asks the students to prepare annotations of eight key references (a small portion of their final full set of references) that they have found that will help to shape their papers, along with a first draft of their research questions for the paper. Feedback is provided within the week so that in their second assignment students are able to incorporate that feedback as they revise their research questions and submit a detailed outline of their paper. Along with the feedback they receive on their outlines, students begin to engage in peer support and feedback as each student prepares and “teaches a class” on their topic. This is a

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way for students to move into the role of teacher. But also, allows the students to learn where the gaps in their thinking lie when they try to communicate their ideas to others. Thus this “teaching” a class also allows students to fine tune what is missing or needed as they work on their papers. The rest of the class offer input, highlighting areas that might need a bit more attention, or alternatively, how the topic might connect with some other student’s topic. Through this process students are engaged with each student’s ideas and concepts and are able to help each other think-through their research collaboratively.

By Week 8, the first draft of the paper is due. It is an early due date in the semester so that it is does not conflict with the onslaught of other course paper due dates and also so that there is time to do more rounds of revisions on the paper. Thus, this is not the final paper but is a complete draft which I carefully review and provide extensive feedback on. There is no grade for this draft but I do provide an “if/then” grade: “*if* I was grading, *then* the grade would be...”. I found that this helps students get a relative sense of where they are in the paper-writing process despite the extensive comments and suggestions as to how to improve the paper. Within two weeks, the students have revised their paper according to the feedback and submit it a second time in class for peer review. This is an important step for students. While they are having their own paper reviewed by a classmate, they are reviewing the paper for one of their classmates. I provide a peer review guide and detailed instructions for the students, and this and the review process itself, cultivates and hones their editorial skills. They receive more feedback on their paper and also have fresh experience of the editing process which they can then apply to their own papers. Again, this step is not graded but supports the students in their writing process. I have practised this process of scaffold feedback since I began teaching this course (it is now often referred to as

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“ungrading” in the scholarship and learning literature) and I have found that most students appreciate the experience of writing and editing at a heightened level because of it.

As before, along each step of the process, we evaluate what skills and knowledge that they are mastering and applying to their final goal. When the final paper is submitted, students also submit a full portfolio of their writing process including their annotated bibliography, paper outline, “teach a class” presentation, along with their first draft and review feedback, and their second draft and their peer review comments. This way, I am able to see their development and progress from start to finish.

The goal is for the best of these papers to be published as part of an online Anthropology Capstone Reader that will be used in our own first year introductory Anthropology course. This collaboration is a co-authoring with my students as we co-create this Open Educational Resource on a yearly basis and publish through the UNBC Institutional Repository. Often introductory courses use an edited companion reader along with their more traditional textbook to give the first-year students a broad sense of the discipline. Typically, these readers comprise articles that range across the subdisciplines of Anthropology and offer more detailed accounts of very specific topics thus providing a wide perspective of issues. These readers have been very expensive for students to purchase and it has become a tricky decision whether their benefits outweigh the cost for the students. As an online resource, the Anthropology Capstone Reader resolves that problem. The Capstone reader will explore the key concepts and issues that shape the current and relevant contributions to research and to the societies and communities with

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whom we work, laying down the building blocks of the discipline, as each paper addresses the question: *How does Anthropology contribute to relevant issues and questions of society?*

But what is best about our Capstone reader is that it is a reader by and for anthropology students: the graduating students are able to “give back” to future anthropology students; and the first-year students can learn from and be inspired by the graduating students. Linking the first-year and graduating students is important for emphasizing the holistic, collaborative, and integrative nature of the discipline of Anthropology. And what better way of highlighting these key concepts of Anthropology than having students at the beginning and end of their degree be fully engaged in enacting these concepts. Each year there will be new Capstone student papers edited and added to the Reader’s collection making this an ongoing “living” volume as a testament to the students as co-creators through the Capstone course.

Overall, this course and the Anthropology Capstone Reader project inspire creative and engaged discussions, reflections and interpretations. It is a challenging experience for the Capstone students but in the end, they come away with an idea of the value of their education at UNBC and within Anthropology, and have formed a tight and supportive learning community.