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The TikTok of Teaching and Research: The Pedagogical Possibilities of Collaborative Digital Ethnography

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Abstract
Working collaboratively with students, lecturers, and others, to conduct digital ethnography enriches the ethnographies produced, expands pedagogical possibilities, and allows us to rethink how we teach and do research in anthropology. This Special Issue is an output of such a collaborative attempt. In this Editorial we introduce the TikTok Ethnography Collective and the collaborative mode of research and learning we established in September 2020. The articles we have collated demonstrate that collaborative ethnographic methods are the ideal tool for researching algorithmically shaped digital spaces. But more than this, by sharing our collective experience, we make the case for incorporating collaborative methods into anthropological teaching and learning in order to disrupt traditional, hierarchical models of education and research. We propose that inclusion of students in the research process is imperative for facilitating a safe, creative sandbox environment that allows staff and students to explore and formulate theories and reflections somewhat liberated from the expectations around who should and should not be the expert. We invite readers to join us in considering the broader implications of embracing collaborative research and teaching methods.

Keywords: Collaboration; Teaching; Learning; TikTok; Methods.

Introduction

The term collaboration has long been one deployed in research proposals, anthropological methods classes, and in anthropological works that explore the ways in which we can meaningfully engage with our participants whilst being mindful of the power dynamics inherent in anthropological research. Recent years have seen experiments with collaboration lead to important insights into the pedagogical benefits of collaboration for teaching and learning anthropology (Weston & Djohari, 2018; Zang et al 2023). This Special Issue builds upon a research project inspired by the work of Weston and Djohari and explores the pedagogical possibilities of collaborating with our students to explore the digital world of TikTok. Drawing on collaborative research practices, and digital ethnographic methodologies (Miller, 2012; Pink et. Al, 2015) the TikTok Ethnography Collective (TEC) foregrounds staff/student collaboration as a key method for engaging with the micro-vlogging platform TikTok. Indeed, as the articles and reflections in this issue highlight, we believe that a collaborative methodology is, in fact, critical to ethnographically engaging with algorithmically shaped spaces such as TikTok. The articles in this Special Issue provide a powerful demonstration of the rich ethnography that can be produced using collaborative methods and highlight the epistemological and ethical potentiality of re-wiring the relationship between teaching, learning, and research.

TikTok: The App of the Pandemic

TikTok is a micro-vlogging social media platform where users create, watch, and share short videos that vary in length from 15 seconds up to 10 minutes, with songs overlayed and a wide range of editing features. It is a space where ideas are shared, recipes demonstrated, dances are performed, and events documented. Initially, TikTok was considered a dancing app, a place where dances were performed, replicated, and shared. Following the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent global lockdowns, the number of downloads of TikTok skyrocketed and, at the time of writing, it is the fastest growing social media platform, with more than 1 billion active monthly users. During the early lockdowns, TikTok became a place where one could access the outside world. A place of humour and levity. Where teenagers pranked their siblings, different challenges were attempted, and

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where the surreal and mundane nature of lockdown was recorded. A place of peculiar banality as captured by one of our participants who stated, “I first went viral for kicking a water bottle”.

Following the murder of George Floyd on 25th May 2020 which unleashed a wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests across the United States and the world, the nature of the content we were receiving on our For You Pages[1] (FYP) changed. Both of us began receiving far more politicised content which contained first-hand footage of the protests, TikTokers discussing issues of race and class, or sharing tactics for staying safe at protests. As the protests went on the content increased – teenage TikTokers were sharing histories they had learned on TikTok that contradicted or complicated the histories they had learned in school. TikTok seemed to be allowing for these conversations to be had in a different way to other social media platforms.

TikTok was also used as a tool for disruption. In June 2020 a group of TikTokers used the platform to coordinate with K-Pop fans[2] to block book a political rally in Tulsa organised by former US President, Donald Trump’s 2020 presidential campaign[3]. TikTokers and K-Pop fans from all over the world used Tulsa zip-codes supplied by other TikTokers and their relatives who resided in the state, to register for tickets for the rally. This resulted in the chairman of Trump’s campaign declaring that they had received more than 1 million ticket requests for the 19,000-seat stadium, and Trump himself announcing it would be the largest political rally in history. The Trump campaign hurried to book overflow stadiums to accommodate the anticipated throngs of Trump supporters, however, on the day only 6,200 tickets were scanned for entry. The TikTok/K-Pop collaboration had paid off.

TikTokers are using the platform creatively and innovatively. However, this is not limited to seemingly ‘progressive’ causes. TikTok has been used to organise campaigns against proponents of vaccinations, to harass civil rights activists, spread misinformation, and engage in far-right radicalisation. One particularly stark example of this is the dramatic increase in popularity of the self-declared misogynist, Andrew Tate. The popularity of his content led to it being promoted on the TikTok algorithm across FYPs of a huge swathe of TikTokers, including those whose algorithms up until this point had contained solidly progressive and feminist content. We, as a group, identified this trend due to the number of collaborators within the collective. We were able to cross reference our FYPs and identify that something peculiar was going on in relation to Andrew Tate and the rise of misogynistic content on TikTok and other social media platforms.

Many of the members that joined the TikTok Ethnography Collective joined precisely to think through these and other issues that demonstrated the impact TikTok was having on the world around. However, after a while, we soon realised that, as the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate, TikTok (and social media more generally) is increasingly part of and implicated in political, economic, and social spheres in much more complex and nuanced ways than just through organising protests. A number of TikTokers we have spoken with framed their politicisation on TikTok as a process of ‘learning’. TikTok is a place where people learn about BLM, issues of race, class, and gender, they learn about history of colonial violence, they learn about themselves, and put their live stories in conversation with others. Indeed, it is this process of learning that seems to be largely an unintended consequence that has emerged from TikTok’s algorithmically controlled interface. TikTok as a corporate entity is now capitalising on this phenomenon; #LearnOnTikTok (a campaign specifically organised by TikTok themselves – see Smout’s article in this issue) has received 360 billion views, and TikTok has spent millions to develop and position itself as an app for learning.

Communities have coalesced around particular themes, with education being central. Examples of these communities are ‘FoodTok’, ‘MoneyTok’, ‘ADHDTok’[4]. Participating in and being part of these communities involves processes of learning, whether these be how to cook the now-famous ‘TikTok Pasta’ or learning about the ways in which ADHD manifests in young women. Educational possibilities are being explored by TikTokers across the platform, by medical professionals, universities, and corporations, as well as by individuals wanting to share their own knowledge with their TikTok communities. TikTok’s potential as a powerful pedagogical tool is beginning to be discussed by educational theorists, universities, teachers, and many others. However, as Smout, Austin Locke, and Cerretani’s articles all point out, whilst TikTok may position itself as a classroom, there are

[1] The For You Page is the home screen of the TikTok app which feeds the user content recommended by TikTok’s algorithm.
[2] Shorthand for Korean Popular Music.
[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html
[4] The suffix of Tok implies a community formed around particular subject (food, money, and ADHD).

complex power relations that permeate these pedagogical endeavours, and important questions to be asked about the processes of teaching and learning that are unfolding on the platform.
The case studies presented in this Special Issue provide insight into a small but illuminating number of examples of teaching and learning taking place on TikTok, whether this is how the platform is facilitating explorations into the lived experience of ADHD (Austin Locke), the way in which the social spaces provided by the platform can be thought of as akin to pubs, where folklore and stories are shared (Hewlett-Hall), how brands are adjusting to the new, and often challenging, ways TikTok works (Smout), the role of algorithmically curated content mediating relationships between siblings (Cerretani), the limitations of the algorithm to reflect complex and intimate identities (Fahim), the possibilities presented by anthropology to explore digital witchcraft (Lloyd-Evans), or the light it shines on approaches to teaching and learning anthropology (Golebiowski and Liber). All of these articles and reflections demonstrate the kaleidoscopic nature of TikTok, the value and importance of taking an ethnographic approach to researching the platform, and the importance of research-based teaching for learning anthropology.

Educational Technologies

Social media has long been a central pillar of digital anthropology. Works such as the *Why We Post* project (Miller et. Al, 2016), demonstrate the breadth and complexity of social worlds formed on social media platforms. Developments in theories of polymedia reveal the movement between social media platforms and the ways in which varying forms of social relation unfold across and between different platforms (Madianou and Miller, 2013). Across the many field sites of the *Why We Post* project, it was revealed that alongside being seen as a distraction from education, "social media simultaneously assists informal learning"[5]. This research was carried out prior to the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic which saw the vast majority of teaching and learning moved to online and then subsequently "hybrid" modes. The sudden shift to online learning, to using digital platforms and tools for teaching, brought with it a huge number of anxieties. Could an online classroom provide the same learning experience as a physical classroom? Many experimented with break-out rooms, recording lectures in a podcast format to be listened to while walking, utilising different platforms to record digital educational content. Yet, many highlighted that to provide enriching teaching in an online format would require a huge amount of training, investment, and time in order for it to become a meaningful alternative to in-person teaching.

It has long been argued that education is one of the slowest sectors to respond to and adopt new technologies, an argument that pre-dates the emergence of social media platforms (Liber, 1999). Questions of synchronous and asynchronous teaching also pre-date the crisis of teaching during the pandemic. However, these discussions were confined to conversations amongst those concerned with the development of educational systems, rather than being part of everyday vernacular for teachers and students.

> [M]ost importantly, new ways of managing educational interactions are needed, that distil and keep the best of current face to face methods, while extending these with techniques made possible by new technology. Different blends of lectures, tutorials, computer conferencing (synchronous and asynchronous), group working, researching, experimenting (in real and virtual laboratories), reading, writing, arguing, and so on can be made possible using learning management systems, and virtual learning environments. (Ibid: 56-57)

The above quote could have been written in response to the challenges being faced by teachers and institutions during the pandemic yet was written in 1999 when Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and other forms of educational technologies were in their nascent stages. Liber (1996) argues that new technologies provide us with an opportunity to transform the ways in which we teach and learn, engage in politics, manage economies and so-on, if only we reach out to grasp them.

So, in a world transformed by a global pandemic, how might we accept this invitation to re-think our teaching and learning? And how might we make this meaningful for teaching and learning anthropology?

The TikTok Ethnography Collective

We have taken this invitation seriously, and since the summer of 2020, we have been engaged in various attempts to make the relations between the screen and the TikTok user, the anthropologist and the screen,

[5] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post/discoveries/2-social-media-is-education

anthropological research and teaching, more ethnographically fruitful. In thinking through how we can conduct meaningful and insightful digital ethnography, we found it most useful to rethink and complicate the relationship between teaching, research, and anthropological methods. These attempts coalesced in September 2020 in the founding of a research network - the TikTok Ethnography Collective. The collective consists of undergraduate and postgraduate students, research students, lecturers, dance therapists, social media experts, artists and activists. At the time of writing, it has more than 90 members from multiple higher education institutions and has had engagement from anthropology students and researchers from across the globe.

The collective was formed by us – Elena Liber and Yathukulan Yogarajah – as an attempt to understand how we can ethnographically get to grips with the political, economic, and social impact TikTok was having on the world around us, whilst simultaneously experimenting with the possibilities offered by collaboration. At the start of the 2020 academic year, we opened out an invitation to students, lecturers, artists, activists, to join us in thinking about how we could ethnographically explore TikTok. The response we got back was overwhelming. In our first zoom meeting, many attended with questions such as what is the TikTok algorithm? How is TikTok shaping our identity? Why does everyone on TikTok think they have ADHD? How are communities formed on TikTok? What political and social impact is TikTok having? How can anthropology help us to better understand what is happening on TikTok?

In the years that have passed between the first meeting and the time of writing, we have held fortnightly meetings on Zoom with members of the collective, we have collectively built a supportive and welcoming WhatsApp space where questions can be asked, TikToks shared, and help requested. The discussions we have had in meetings have been thoughtful, open, and at times personal. Like TikTok itself, they have been refracted with humour, and allowed a space for people to bond in shared experiences of using the platform – which is often a highly individualised activity. At one zoom meeting for example, Georgia – a first year undergraduate student at the time – commented that she was feeling despondent with her algorithm, she was not enjoying the content she was being shown and wanted to 'break up with her algorithm'. As she uttered these words we laughed, and realised this is a feeling many of us had felt at one time or another. This led to us reflecting as a group on our intimate relationship to our algorithms, which culminated in two of the members of the collective collaboratively writing together to produce an article for publication which offers the methodological approach of "ethnographic scrolling" as an approach to conducing immersive observations on TikTok and other social media platforms (Rodgers and Lloyd-Evans, 2021).

Working collaboratively, as we soon found out, was essential to working ethnographically with social media. Working collaboratively allowed us to navigate the highly fragmented and silo-ing landscape of TikTok, with people using it in different ways. Working collaboratively allowed us to traverse the algorithmically enforced boundaries of TikTok FYPs and develop a broader picture of the ways in which the platform functions and the ways it shapes online sociality. Taking a student-centred approach also led to lines of inquiry that forced us to question fundamental aspects of the discipline itself: 'Why do anthropologists have to do fieldwork alone? Isn't it lonely?' – asked one student. These were the kind of questions that emerge when one is not encumbered with the weight of anthropological canon, which forced us to interrogate what we, as those who are further along in our anthropological journeys, might take for granted. This particular question resonated with undergraduate students and made us collectively reflect on the implications of framing and conducting ethnography 'alone'.

The Lone(ly) Ethnographer

The discipline of anthropology is defined by a set of methodological tools that anthropologists use during fieldwork. A core method of ethnographic fieldwork is participant observation. Students of anthropology are taught that the method of participant observation was developed by Bronisław Malinowski during his research in the Trobriand Islands. This method is defined by a particular characteristic - the lone ethnographer.

> Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight… Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. (Malinowski, 1922: 4)

These are the words Malinowski writes in the opening to his famous ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific.* The notion of isolation from the familiar is embedded within his methodology and still forms the spine of how anthropology is taught and researched today, yet we know that this is a myth – Malinowski (and others such as Evans-Pritchard) were surrounded by missionaries, translators, and colonial administrators, but the story of the

intrepid "lone ethnographer" lives on, infusing methods lectures, MRes training sessions and PhD writing up seminars. The lone ethnographer is presented as 'accessing' communities by penetrating social boundaries, to get at some form of primordial ooze that constitutes sociality, belonging, and community (Seaver 2018). However, much of this seems to sit in direct contradiction to how we learn and teach anthropology. We cram into lecture theatres, seminar rooms, and (more recently) Zoom and Teams meetings, to discuss and share ideas, we read articles and share writing, we organise conferences where thousands attend however it is usually always to hear papers written about fieldwork conducted "alone".

This is also embedded within our production of outputs. PhD students are told that an article written alone is more valuable than an article co-written with a peer, students are set group presentations as a form of assessment yet receive individual marks. Our higher education system is set up to individualise the learner despite the fact that learning takes place in dialogue with teachers and peers. One member of TEC stated that despite the seminar being a space where discussions could be had, this was not always the case, and at the end you go back to your own thoughts, alone at your desk. This seems to demonstrate that our model of teaching anthropology also serves to replicate the notion of the lone ethnographer.

In addition, the topic of decentring and decolonising anthropology is one which has been ongoing for many years (Harrison, 1991) and has gained momentum in recent years. It has been propelled forwards by our students who have taken an active role in holding their teachers, departments and the discipline more broadly, to account. Students are actively engaging with what they are being taught and how they are being taught it. This is the cause of great discomfort for some. Questions are being asked about "cancel culture", no-platforming, and academic freedom. These are legitimate concerns. However, what if we were to approach this from a collaborative perspective? Rather than wringing our hands about the rejection of expert knowledge, perhaps this presents us with an opportunity to radically embrace ideas which have been discussed for a long time – the idea of truly collaborating with our students, colleagues and peers.

bell hooks wrote that "[t]he classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (1994: 12). We argue that embracing this radical possibility means to embrace collaboration with our students and each other. hooks also states that "[a]s a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence." (1994: 8). It is precisely this recognition and appreciation of one another's voices and presence that makes a collaborative approach to teaching and researching anthropology so exciting, and which challenges the centrality of the "lone ethnographer" in teaching and researching anthropology.

We are not proposing to erase this concept entirely – much inspiring and exciting research has been done with the ethnographer being the lone researcher on a research project. However, despite the ethnographer embarking upon a project as the sole researcher, anthropological fieldwork is never conducted alone. As Strathern (1990), Corsín Jiminéz (2014), and other anthropologists exploring anthropological epistemology highlight, anthropological knowledge is formed by existing in relation to a diverse set of actors that shape how we understand the world. Anthropology is a social discipline, and we spend our fieldwork often surrounded by our participants, learning from them, sharing ideas and stories. So, what if we were to do away with the notion of the lone ethnographer as our point of departure? What would the implications be for the discipline if we were to centre collaboration as an integral part of fieldwork?

The Covid-19 pandemic forced us into isolation. Teaching moved from the lecture hall and seminar room to online recorded lectures and seminars held on Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Fieldwork was suspended or postponed, and questions began to be asked within departments about what anthropology might look like in a socially distanced and self-isolated world. It was in this context that we began this project.

The methodology that we have developed and continue to develop hinges around two key elements – the digital and collaboration. These two elements, for us, are inextricably linked and inform one another closely. The digital has allowed for us to collaborate in a time of increased isolation, and collaboration has allowed us to explore the digital world in ways which would not have been accessible to a lone ethnographer.

Contributions to the Special Issue

Each contribution to this issue reflects on the myriad ways that people teach and learn on TikTok and, in turn, contributes important insights into the ways in which we teach and learn anthropology. Jenni Smout's article

explores the means by which organisations and brands find themselves at a loss when it comes to tailoring social media strategies to TikTok. Drawing on years of experience managing a large organisation's social media presence, Smout interrogates why more traditional social media strategies do not translate to TikTok. Through focusing specifically on the TikTok campaign #LearnOnTikTok, and drawing on ethnographic engagements with two particular cases, she demonstrates how the "memeification" of teaching and learning is unfolding on the platform.

Smout's insights into the minutiae of how organisations adjust their social media strategies to respond to TikTok, and the role they play in forms of education on the platform is complemented by Toby Austin Locke's contribution which directly engages with a more individualised, intimate, and highly popular theme that many on TikTok engage with – ADHD. Since the explosion in popularity of the app, many in our collective and anecdotally across the platform report a surge in content focussing on ADHD. From gendered experiences of diagnosis to deeper, auto-ethnographic accounts of managing the condition, ADHD content is something which many users of TikTok will have encountered. Austin Locke's article explores themes of self-diagnosis, misinformation, care and attention, deploying theorisations of the attention economy and "traps" to frame conversations around ADHD as a form of vernacular anthropology. Through his ethnographic engagements and his own autoethnographic experience, he demonstrates that what is formed through the discourses on ADHD on TikTok is a pedagogical community of care. That through teaching, learning, and sharing knowledge about ADHD and the experience of living with ADHD, discoveries are made, communities are formed and practices of care are engaged in.

The deeply personal nature of some forms of education and communication on TikTok is also reflected in James Cerretani's contribution. Through engaging with a series of 'TikTalks' with their sister Alanna, Cerretani carefully presents an account of two siblings navigating their relationship, mediated by TikTok content. By focussing specifically on their sister's relationship with her own health and the Ehlers-Danlos Sydrome (EDS) community on TikTok, Cerretani demonstrates how medical communities are increasingly formed and maintained on the platform. These communities, as Cerretani demonstrates, coalesce around processes of experience and education; through the sharing of the lived experience of EDS, insights and embodied knowledge is transmitted, forming an electric charge which fuels the community. Simultaneously, EDS content becomes a medium by which those living with EDS are able to communicate their experience to loved ones – by sharing TikToks and talking through them, the lived experience of EDS comes into view. Cerretani's article demonstrates the need to engage thoughtfully with the intimate and emotional nature of TikTok communities, and presents a toolkit which paves the way for conducting algorithmically shaped fieldwork. In doing so, Cerretani offers new ways of doing and learning anthropology in the digital age.

Continuing to reflect more directly on the experience of learning and doing anthropology in digital spaces, Joseph Hewlett-Hall's article draws on his own autoethnographic experience of being an anthropology undergraduate student during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. He reflects on the ways in which being confined to his home impacted and influenced his learning of anthropology. Through considering the forms of sociality that he encountered through the TikTok Ethnography Collective, and through his engagements on TikTok, he engages directly with the question of what digital ethnographic collaboration offers our understandings of teaching and learning anthropology. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and with extensive anthropological work on digital memetic storytelling, Hewlett-Hall challenges the idea that social media and the internet are expansive spaces of isolation, and proposes that it might be better to engage with the smallness of the internet – with the quotidian aspects of life and sociality as they unfold on the app. He makes a compelling case for rethinking our relationship with the anthropological and pedagogical possibilities offered by engaging with digital spaces in a world reshaped by Covid.

Intimacy and education are themes which continue to flow throughout the reflections in this Special Issue. Emily Lloyd-Evans considers her challenging introduction to anthropology in the midst of the pandemic and tells the story of her journey through her master's degree, as well as her journey into the world of WitchTok – a community of predominantly young women who practice and educate about witchcraft on TikTok. Through engagement with the WitchTok community, Lloyd-Evans demonstrates the unique journeys each of us embark on when we choose to learn anthropology, and the value of the serendipitous connections and opportunities presented to us along the way.

Identity on TikTok is explored in Hasina Fahim's work which explores ways in which the TikTok algorithm reflects (or does not reflect) the identities each of us carry with us. Engaging with her own Afghan-Finnish

identity, Fahim questions what happens when you do not see part of yourself mirrored back at you by your algorithm? She sensitively explores the complex experience of migration and the role of the digital in the formation of a sense of belonging and identity, and details the role social medias in her learning experience.

And finally, Georgia Golebiowski's reflective piece, written in conversation with Elena Liber, reflects directly on three years of anthropological education during the pandemic. Responding to prompts presented by Liber, Golebiowski insightfully considers the pedagogical implications of the ways in which teaching and learning is structured in higher education institutions. By interweaving personal experience with theoretical musing, Golebiowski demonstrates that teaching is indeed a dialogue between teacher and learner but at times is one where the listening only seems to occur in one direction. Through offering a thoughtful and critical perspective on her own education, Golebiowski's writing offers teachers and students alike a valuable opportunity to reflect on their own teaching and learning practices, and an invitation to do things differently.

The contributions to this Special Issue offer a kaleidoscopic view of the pedagogical and anthropological possibilities presented by engaging collaboratively with TikTok. As well as providing a window into the social world of TikTok, highlighting the structures that undergird it, they each challenge pre-conceived notions of what it means to teach, learn, and to know. The authors of these articles are members of TEC and reflect on their experiences of working collaboratively across pedagogical scales alongside presenting their ethnographic engagements from their work on TikTok. TEC provides a supportive and collaborative environment where each member can explore their own interests, with a network of peers and colleagues supporting their explorations. In this way, whilst the ownership and authorship of each article is solely that of the author, the presence of the collective shines a light on the networks of support that every academic publication emerges from. As discussed previously, we rarely, if ever, are truly alone in our ethnographic endeavours.

Ethical Considerations and a Loose Model for Others Hoping to Work with Tiktok

One key consideration of our project is how we approach the ethics of working collaboratively with students, lecturers, and those outside university. When we first embarked upon this project, there were no easy hard, fast rules, that could be applied to our project. This is a common dilemma, often encountered with anthropological research – each fieldsite, each project has its own ethical landscape which has to be carefully mapped and considered. Consulting the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA), American Anthropological Association (AAA), and Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) guidelines, and reflections from our colleagues, we began to establish a framework which took into account the ethics of research and pedagogy. Our approach to ethics can be understood through what Annette Markham (2018) and AoIR call 'ethics as methods'. This means that working with and on social media and the internet constantly churns new ethical considerations that must be addressed iteratively. Through this process of reflection, our methods, what we write about, and how we write, can shift and change.

As the organisers and founders of the research project, we have grappled with the question of how to make this research 'fit' the institutional ethics framework. We are fortunate to be working at a time where it is increasingly acceptable to encourage our students to conduct mini ethnographic projects. As such, we have made use of the ethical frameworks available to us to secure blanket ethical approval for the research, where we guarantee that members of the collective will undertake low-risk research with our supervision, with the understanding that should any member wish to carry out more ethically challenging research we will secure individual approval for that research. We also have separate ethical approval for the research we are carrying out as academic members of staff.

The ethics of conducting research in an emerging field is not something that we have thought about in isolation. As with all other aspects of the project, we continuously engage our students and all members of the collective in these ethical discussions. In doing so, we acknowledge that ethics is an ongoing, ever-changing dialogue rather than a solely bureaucratic exercise. In engaging with ethics this way, we are in a continuous process of learning, teaching, and thinking through the ethical implications of our work. The collective is also a space where any member can grapple with ethical questions in a supportive and responsive environment. This has been essential when working with a platform such as TikTok where user's algorithms are deeply personal to them. In group meetings and conversations, we have clear guidelines where we never asked directly about members' algorithms and make it clear that any volunteered information is treated confidentially within the group. As a collective we have discussed broader issues relating to how the algorithm makes us feel and how that autoethnographic experience informs our research. The sharing of personal algorithmic information is not a prerequisite to

participate in the collective – there are some members who have joined who do not have TikTok. The ethical discussions within the collective have led to some members choosing to set up a dedicated research account separately from their personal account to conduct research.

A particular ethical issue that we have encountered and discussed frequently is the question of how to ethically engage with publicly posted content as ethnographic data. Our general approach has been to think carefully through the following questions: are the communities being explored large or small? What constitutes small and large, and how do you establish this? Is this community formed of vulnerable people? Are the content creators individuals with large followings (in the hundreds of thousands or millions)? Consideration of these questions shaped how the contributors to this Special Issue wrote their articles. Cerretani's article engages with this issue particularly closely, given the focus on a TikTok's Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) community. Whilst exploring how the EDS TikTok community mediated their relationship with their sister, Cerretani did not employ direct quotes, screenshots, or identifiable markers from any specific content creators, and their methodological approach did not involve contacting other members of the EDS community. Others writing on less intimate or sensitive issues chose to use screenshots of popular public accounts, such as Ryanair's TikTok account, to convey the visuals of the account that were important to their analysis.

For those wishing to experiment with a collaborative approach, our advice is to embrace the subject of ethics as an opportunity to question and rethink the assumptions we have about anthropology – an opportunity to look upon the discipline with fresh eyes. This should include careful consideration and discussion of how ethical issues are to be addressed from the very outset of the research, and adopting a malleable, ground-up, 'ethics as methods' approach that will allow much needed flexibility for dealing with issues as they arise.

Conclusion: Proposing a Way Forwards

The study of TikTok and social media offers opportunity to enhance what students are studying in core learning modules and can provide tools to engage thoughtfully and creatively with anthropology as a discipline. Working collaboratively with students, also provides them with an excellent opportunity to see what happens behind the curtain that separates academic staff and students, and aid in the breaking down of hierarchies that permeate educational institutions.

As the contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate, working together across pedagogical scales offers rich possibilities for advancing not only the teaching and learning experience but also the scope and possibilities of academic research. The authors of the creative, thoughtful, and insightful pieces in this issue draw on work carried out in pursuit of their own anthropological interests, in the supportive environment of a research collective. Whilst often these communities and academic environments are reserved for doctoral writing up seminars, we propose that this approach offers a model for future anthropological teaching, learning and research across all education levels. Liberated from the constraints of competition, formal grading, restrictive classroom settings, and formalised learning outcomes, opens up the possibility for more organic students and staff engagement in ethnographic explorations.

In collating this Special Issue, we share the pedagogical/methodological experiment that is the TikTok Ethnography Collective and demonstrate how collaborating across various pedagogical scales within a university setting (and more broadly) can re-write what teaching, learning, methodology, and research means in a university setting. The collaborative methodological approach we adopted is particularly suited to new, emerging digital spaces, yet we believe that it should not be confined to the digital. We extend this pedagogical project to include the production of this Special Issue, taking the publication process itself as a pedagogical opportunity. The result has been high quality, insightful and creative articles and reflective pieces written by students for an academic audience. In breaking down the hierarchy of who publishes and who reads, we are hoping to further expand on the possibilities of true collaboration with our students and our peers. Through this Special Issue, we hope to provide a loose template for others who may wish to conduct collaborative digital ethnographic research, and/or explore the pedagogical possibilities of collaboration.

At a time where questions of power, positionality, and the methodological integrity of anthropology is being challenged, recentring methods in our discipline is essential. It is not just *what* we teach that matters, but *how* we teach. By learning through doing, through deploying practice-based, student-centred pedagogical methods, we can train a new generation of anthropologists who are, from the outset, sensitive to the ethical and methodological challenges presented by fieldwork – both digital and offline. Taking bell hooks' invitation

seriously, reshaping and rethinking our classrooms so as to mobilise the radical possibility present in these spaces is a fundamental way in which we can engage in processes of decolonising and decentring whilst also providing engaging, interesting and fun learning environments for ourselves and our students.

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