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The virtual field trip: conditions of access/ibility and configurations of care in teaching ethnography (during Covid-19)

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Online learning as an emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic provides a set of challenges that all educators had to navigate in their approach to teaching. This article details our experiences, as young educators, with developing a remote version of the anthropology field trip. The initial hard lockdown in South Africa determined the minimal conditions of emergency remote teaching (ERT). First, a necessary condition for the field trip was that teaching and learning had to take place asynchronously to account for the various contexts where students were situated. Second, we had to strike a balance between empathy towards students’ varying access to ERT and ensuring that the teaching objectives and standards remained appropriate for their level of study. Third, the role of mentorship in the process was a critical element of the virtual field trip and enabled us to engage affective learning strategies and facilitate epistemic access. Due to the shared navigation of ERT between students and educators, a reflexive and critical pedagogy strongly informed our later adaptations of the course. We conclude with reflections on the challenge of teaching/learning ethnography remotely and a brief statement on the value of critical and experimental pedagogies for remote situations.

O aprendizado online como uma resposta emergencial à pandemia de Covid-19 oferece um conjunto de desafios que todos os educadores tiveram que enfrentar em sua abordagem do ensino. Este artigo detalha nossas experiências, como jovens educadoras, ao desenvolver uma versão remota da viagem de campo em antropologia. O rígido confinamento inicial na África do Sul determinou as condições mínimas de Ensino Remoto Emergencial (ERE). Em primeiro lugar, uma condição necessária para a viagem de campo era que o ensino e a aprendizagem deviam ocorrer de forma assíncrona para dar conta dos vários contextos em que os alunos se encontravam. Em segundo lugar, tivemos que encontrar um equilíbrio entre a empatia em relação ao acesso variável dos alunos ao ERE e a garantia de que os objetivos e padrões de ensino permaneciam adequados ao seu nível de estudo. Terceiro, o papel da mentoria no processo foi um elemento crítico da viagem de campo virtual e nos permitiu utilizar estratégias de aprendizagem afetiva e facilitar o acesso epistêmico. Devido ao enfrentamento do ERE compartilhado por alunos e educadoras, uma pedagogia reflexiva e crítica influenciou fortemente nossas posteriores adaptações do curso. Concluimos com reflexões sobre o desafio de ensinar/aprender etnografia à distância e uma breve asserção sobre o valor de pedagogias críticas e experimentais para situações remotas.

Keywords: access; care; ethnography; mentorship; remote learning; teaching practice

Digital spacing during ERT

The technical shift to online learning as an emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent levels of lockdown across the world provided a set of challenges that all educators had to navigate in their approach to teaching. Social distancing requirements precluded the usual arrangements of on-campus presence, where students have access in one central place to classes, online services, computers, printing facilities, tutorials, in-person meetings and other features of on-campus student life. When the South African government announced in March 2020 that
students had to leave campus and return to their homes with immediate effect, forms of access to teaching became a central concern of emergency responses to the pandemic and the subsequent shift to online learning.

When students were sent home and universities declared “emergency remote teaching” (ERT) as solution for how to continue with the academic year, the spatial and temporal parameters for the anthropology field trip had to be reconfigured. The field trip course is a compulsory practical component of the anthropology methodology curriculum, intended for students to gain first-hand ethnographic experience in a particular (field)site to practice key methods like participant observation and thick description, usually over the course of a weekend. In other words, it is an experiential lesson where students get to apply what they learn in the lecture room for a hands-on experience of ethnographic research (see Fors, Bäckström and Pink 2013). When ERT took effect, we knew that students would be learning from where they stayed, and educators would be working from home. In a first move the university negotiated free data deals with major mobile communication networks and the zero-rating of the university’s Student Online Learning Management System (SOLMS), the already existing digital component of students’ daily field of interaction. Data bundles would be sent to each student’s mobile phone. The university also aimed to provide students with laptops, on condition that students would be financially liable if devices were stolen or damaged: effectively the laptops were thus offered on loan, leading some students to refuse them. Those who received laptops but had no Wi-Fi connectivity at home would have to use their mobile phones as Wi-Fi hotspots to access online resources. This immediately centred mobile phones as an important conduit for access to ERT. Based on this (albeit limited) access that mobile data bundles gave, and taking advantage of “new, networked opportunities for private and public communication and information flows” (Srinivisan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivanane 2019, 4), we then focused our efforts to transform the anthropology field trip into a remote, virtual experience. By using the term “virtual” we refer to remote means of communication (Domingo 2016). This meant that, unlike on previous field trips, students were not taken on a short excursion or to a particular location. The virtual was located in our use of remote communication platforms like SOLMS and WhatsApp to deliver instruction and mentorship, whilst student experiences comprised online and offline activities in their respective locations.

The shift to network-mediated facilitation (see Burrell 2009) was pedagogically exciting but not without challenges. At a rudimentary level we had to strike a balance between taking into account students’ varying access to ERT and ensuring that teaching objectives and standards remained appropriate for their level of study. The material shifts of lockdown conditions meant that we were unable to do in-person research, which was previously a key rationale for this practical course. If we now asked students to do research from their homes (Góralska 2020), we had to design a process that took into consideration the “messy and convergent nature of the communication ecologies that people inhabit” (Srinivisan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivanane 2019, 5). These ecologies include our geographical dispersion alongside various contexts that included time differences, the daily rhythms of home life and access to ERT (Plattet and Shoaps 2021). By designing a process in which students could choose their own individual research pathways, we ensured that the field trip would accommodate changes and adoptions when a student’s ability to participate was affected. This emphasised the need for our process to be reflexive but pedagogically structured (Apostolidou 2020).

In this article we describe our experiences with and lessons learnt from designing and running a virtual field trip for ERT. It reflects on our immersion in pedagogy and introduces a process of teaching and learning that relies on experimentation, iteration and revision. The next sections describe the field trip pre-Covid, the context of ERT and what we did in response to it. We then discuss the teaching practice we developed during ERT, which relied on the incorporation of care and affective learning into our facilitation. Lastly, we present a set of reflections on the challenges
we encountered, followed by a concluding remark on our pedagogical position as new educators in anthropology who are interested in the future of teaching ethnography.

**Face-to-face field trip**
The field trip is a long-standing component of the anthropology major and has been facilitated by different educators over the years. In 2017, the course was shaped as a face-to-face experience using a workshop-style pedagogy. The field trip was held over a weekend where students usually stayed together in organised accommodation, cooked and ate together, and grew together as anthropologists, classmates and friends. To foster a sense of togetherness, students were assigned to groups that they stayed in throughout the weekend. With only three days of face-to-face learning, the field trip had to be purposeful and robust enough to make the most of students’ time together. A great advantage of the workshop-style field trip was dividing each day into several sessions, each with its own objectives. Students had access to each other and to the field trip organiser, which meant that questions could be addressed immediately and collectively. Overall, despite being short, the field trip was an immersive experience that could accommodate several learning objectives per day.

The field trip was designed around three overarching components of ethnography. First, students had to learn how to orientate themselves towards the practice and spaces of research. Second, they had to engage with data collection and analysis. Third, students had to combine their experiences and findings from the first two days and come up with a way to represent that creatively. The last day was always filled with energy and even pressure as students prepared coherent and cohesive presentations and presented these to the rest of the group, utilising different mediums like drawing, poetry, drama and video.

From 2017 to 2019 the field trip was situated in Cape Town; the themes that students explored ranged from histories of forced removals to the relationship between people, nature and the environment. To explore history, students were taken to the District Six Museum Homecoming Centre and surrounding areas. Here they encountered stories of District Six, and some of the museum’s and the centre’s educational materials were used to facilitate the field trip. To explore the relationship between people and the environment, students were taken to visit different points of the Elsies River, a watercourse in Cape Town. Here they were able to observe and experience how people’s relationship with the river changes from place to place. In one of the field trip iterations, a small group of students visited two food markets in affluent parts of Cape Town. Here they explored how food was made, displayed and sold and observed particular kinds of socialising around crafted goods. Choosing an overarching theme provided the field trip with a focus that helped students take on the task of developing an ethnographic expression in which their own findings were analysed and presented.

The three components (orientation to research, data collection, representation) anchored the learning process for students, and smaller workshop activities were a space for reflection and consolidation. Each day began with a check-in and ended with a group or individual reflection; in cases where an activity was emotionally taxing, a debriefing session was held in order to process the experiences. In the field trip to District Six, students were asked to construct a historical timeline using labels on the floor. Another session asked them to use paint and other textures to represent their sense-scapes of walking through central Cape Town. Those who went to Elsies River picked up dirt along the river and reused some of the material for their final projects. Reflections on ethical concerns and questions were also discussed.

A valuable aspect across all field trips was students’ affective engagement with ethnographic research. Many recognised the intimacy of being with people and, from a facilitator’s perspective, this provided students with the space to express themselves and helped them understand the meanings of ethnography. The rich affective learning that emerged from these face-to-face field trips became a key consideration for our virtual field trip. In the design of both the face-to-face and
virtual field trips, the activities aimed to facilitate a learning process in which students would feel the efforts of doing ethnography. As we demonstrate in this article, the shift to ERT did not remove the feeling of practicing ethnography.

**ERT — the academic year must continue**

The realities of socio-economic stratification in South Africa meant that “going online” was not equally accessible to all during lockdown. Our first group of 25 students showed a vastly disparate access to ERT and learning resources from home. Whilst more privileged students had everything needed for online learning, including their own workspace, others had less access to computers and inconsistent internet access, whilst still others relied entirely on their residence at university hostels. Sharing mobile phones between students, with intermittent access, was a reality for a number of students. Home life during lockdown further shaped students’ day-to-day engagement with ERT. In many cases, they had to strike a balance between domestic chores, sharing a workspace with others and being in constant proximity to household members. This had a negative effect on students’ mental well-being and limited their capacity to engage with ERT.

Setting up time and space that was dedicated to schoolwork was a challenge shared by many students. One particular student shared her space with younger siblings and was in charge of their care during working hours. Her only opportunity to concentrate on her studies was at night, when everyone else was asleep and she was able to use the internet to access course material, via the phone she shared with her mother. For some, the days were littered with loud music and noise from neighbours, which made it hard to focus. Many students expressed that family at home did not understand why they needed so much time for coursework and would often demand that they cook, clean or run errands. Other students, however, found it more effective to work from home. They easily shared the home space with family members and had more flexibility with regard to schoolwork because access to the internet was readily available.

Limited technological and infrastructural access to ERT and a reconfigured field site became the first condition around which we developed our approach. From a pedagogical perspective, the apparent loss of a fieldsite necessitated rethinking the course design in order to retain the sensoriality of ethnography (Pink 2015; Sedlačko 2017) for experiential learning possibilities. The fieldsite of the field trip is not understood here as synonymous with the field of anthropological enquiry. Rather, it is the location and space that we use for collective learning. Previous iterations of the course visited places that offered a novel environment in which students could apply their skills. Here fieldsite and topic were prescribed, leaving space for students to explore the ethnographic concerns with fieldsite, positionality, ethical engagement, data collection, narrative and representation in more depth through group discussions and feedback activities. Student experiences served as a way to know that the ethnographer “is as crucial to the research process as are the people with whom the study is being conducted” (McGranahan 2018, 4). By situating students’ learning experience within a given location, the location itself became part of the pedagogical tools for learning about “the field.”

In light of the shift to ERT, we developed two aims: first, retaining the collective experience of learning whilst imagining the field trip differently; and, second, experimenting with different ways of teaching ethnography remotely (Bernard 2021), inspired by arts-based approaches to engagement (Lenette 2019).

**Shaping a flexible process for learning ethnography remotely**

In response to the conditions and asynchronous temporalities of ERT, we decided that the materials students needed to “do” the field trip would have to be available directly on SOLMS (through hypermedia, such as embedded links and descriptions) or downloadable as PDF files. This strategy of using digital resources that students were familiar with enabled us to be creative with how we designed the remote field trip. In our course design we took advantage of students’
digital literacies to create a process that would “de-center the instructor” (Kraglund-Gauthier 2014, 198) whilst opening possibilities for more engaged student participation. Our approach was further oriented by a recognition that our use of digital media and technology should not just be a “methodological perk, but utterly integral to our methodological process” (Gallagher and Freeman 2011, 359). Given the distance and isolation that characterised ERT, we wanted to write facilitation materials that could convey a sense of feeling and being-in-relation with remote others in the shared (pandemic) context. Through this we hoped to produce moments of pedagogic affect (see Healy and Mulcahy 2020; Russell et al. 2021) in which students could relate to an experience of “being and feeling in the field” whilst being asked to practice ethnographic skills (Davies 2010; Spencer 2011).

The face-to-face iterations of the field trip included arts-informed teaching practices that aimed to help students explore their research process through various media. Arts-informed methods, often applied in research settings, refer to an approach that “is influenced by, but not based on, the arts” (Guruge et al. 2015). The approach is considered supplementary to conventional ways of engaging with others in research and produces knowledge that is more generative than propositional (Guruge et al. 2015). This was exemplified in the final project format, where students could submit their work — an ethnographic expression — in any medium provided that a clear research enquiry was explicit in the work. The design and facilitation of the practical also drew on participatory workshop discourses around engagement, pedagogy and care, also emphasised in transformative storywork (Wheeler, Shahrokh and Derakhshani 2020).

In response to how the pandemic was limiting our ability to convene as a group in real time, we developed a process that would allow students to envision and engage with a multimodal experience directed by their own individual enquiry. As an educational endeavour we recognised that it would not be accessible or pedagogically desirable to try to convene students in the same online place and time in order to satisfy the condition of a field trip as a journey together to particular sites. We rather designed the field trip as situated in one overarching fieldwork context.

Figure 1: A personalised welcome image to represent the overarching theme of the field trip.
(Kurotani 2020), namely the Covid-19 pandemic (see Figure 1). This created scope for students’ own curiosity and focused the enquiry to avoid them being overwhelmed by the “freedom” of choosing a particular field site.

For the purpose of a remote field trip, the location was each student’s home. As contemporary anthropologists-in-training, students doing ethnography from home (Góralska 2020) during ERT were challenged to think with the idea “that the field site is in certain ways constructed rather than discovered” (Burrell 2009, 181). Whilst several students took their homes as primary research sites, others engaged with various online spaces, digital and other media, and whatever else formed part of their environment.1

The field trip was framed from the outset as each student “living as researchers during a pandemic” within their own spaces. Over the course of five days and at a scaffolded pace, we introduced students to the mode of doing research as a continuous exploration of lived experience through the purposeful use of research methods. This was a strategy inspired by critical pedagogy that situated students as the agents and knowledge holders of their own learning (Owen 2007; Lenette 2019; Rink et al. 2020). We encouraged students to explore their own research topic and make space to convey their personal ethnographies through different modes of expression, including art, writing, music and poetry. This gave students first-hand insight into the fluidity of ethnographic research experience whilst making sense of various Covid-19 realities. The multiple spaces students could engage explicitly marked the field as a changeable and contextual space, which challenged their expectation of the field trip requiring a fixed location. We, therefore, emphasised that the experience, and the ethnography itself, would be enquiry-driven and thus substantiated by students’ engagements with the people and spaces they could access, whether online or offline (Kurotani 2020).

We chose and designed three organising sub-themes for the virtual field trip based on aspects of Covid-19: information and misinformation during Covid-19; health and illness during Covid-19; and community meaning and making during Covid-19. Each theme had its own space on SOLMS with content tailored to its specificities so that students were oriented towards a particular thematic focus and set on a learning journey.

Virtual field trip 1.0: our response to ERT

Facilitator 1 Diary Entry: May 25, 2020

It was a cold, dark winter morning (what felt like the wee hours) when we sent each other “I’m awake” messages at 7 am. It was D-Day for the virtual field trip launch, when the first day and set of tasks were set to go live at 8 am that morning. We double-checked the content of our field trip; eight o’clock arrived, and we clicked “release”! The disparity between building up the suspense and releasing the contents of “Day 1 — Contextualising Ethnography” felt a little empty, compared to welcoming students into the first face-to-face session. All our work over the previous few weeks had amounted to the first “click” that set off a series of prompts, but my room was quiet with everyone in my home still asleep. This was the first memory I have of this field trip that made the marked difference between in-person and remote facilitation emotively clear.

With our splitting of “on-call” hours for the field trip between a late afternoon and an early morning shift, respectively, the 7 am “I’m awake” texts became our regular handover interaction for the first five (active) days of the field trip. We would each go to our laptops and log on to SOLMS, convening over WhatsApp as we switched back and forth between student/educator view of the platform and through the day’s content and layout on each theme of the “choose your own adventure”-style user interface. Once we were satisfied that all interfaces worked as we’d planned, I would start reading the reflections students had written the day before, whilst preparing and waiting for the buzzes from my cell phone when my consultation hour start at 10 am. It was quite a strange feeling at first, knowing that students would have our phone numbers; after a couple of
days, I would wake up to my cell phone blinking with multiple messages left by students during the
night or in the early morning. In a different time, I might have found such timing inappropriate; but these were pandemic times. We were clear about boundaries in the orientation, and students generally were fine with waiting to receive a response in the allotted time.

**Developing a shared language: phases of the virtual field trip**

As part of our concern with designing an accessible process, we developed a set of terms as important indicators of our objectives, such as “learning journey,” “ethnographic sensibilities” and “ethnographic expression.” We aimed to develop a shared language for the field trip and make this accessible to students. The term “learning journey” refers to a process that has a start and an end, with learning objectives in between leading towards a particular outcome. This overlaps with the definition of ethnography that, according to McGranahan (2018, 4), is “an embodied, empirical, experiential field-based knowledge practice grounded in participant-observation.” “Being there” in ethnography is a cultivated practice, where skills such as thick description (Geertz 1973) are acquired through experience.

As anthropologists, our sensibilities of practice (Sedlačko 2017) are located in “a commitment to interpersonal relations as the base of knowledge” (McGranahan 2018, 4). “Ethnographic sensibility” refers to a set of epistemic values that guide our ethical communication with others during research and frame our use of methodology. The term “ethnographic expression” was used in the course to centre the use of creativity and artistic expression beyond writing (McGranahan 2018), and thus to create a less daunting format for the final project.

The learning journey was developed to reflect the phases of research itself: preparation for research, data collection and final representation (that is, the ethnographic expression). The first phase oriented students towards specific concepts associated with doing ethnography and research as a situated practice. The second phase considered the ethnographer as an instrument of research, using activities that focused on “what can really be observed with our own senses before any meaning is attributed” (Sedlačko 2017, 53) as a starting point. Here, students were tasked with observation and mapping exercises of their familiar spaces, aimed at highlighting the concept of positionality and priming students to become aware of situatedness and subjectivity. The data collection phase required students to conduct an interview for primary data, later working with their own research content to analyse and organise into a short ethnographic project. Each activity required daily reflection, guided by probing questions based on each theme. This allowed us to engage closely with each student’s unique journey and ensure that students achieved every step of the learning journey before moving on to the next phase.

With the final submission framed as ethnographic expression, the aim was for students to conceptualise ethnographic work as purposeful and ethical representation, whilst considering new forms of expression appropriate to their research perspectives in the Covid-19 context. Part of our teaching practice was to nudge students out of their comfort zones, but we also recognised the importance of traditional academic routes such as essay writing (Garraway 2017). Our “Final Project Submissions Guide” included writing in story, essay, poetry or screenplay form, in conjunction with the use of mediums such as podcasts, videos, collage/poster work and other creative forms of expression. We wanted to foster a sense of creativity and possibility, and so encouraged students to use the guide as a starting point for telling the story of their field trip.

Students also had access to our handbook, the “Supplementary Guide.” This was a textual resource available on SOLMS that included advice and detailed guidance on various aspects of ethnography. We linked relevant segments of the guide to the SOLMS page for each phase of the field trip in order to help students draw connections between theory and practical reality of the process. This approach is articulated by Sedlačko’s (2017) concept of “sensibility of practice,” an approach that uses theory “lightly” during fieldwork, in order to retain the integrity of ethnography as practice-oriented research.
The virtual field trip in practice

Our pedagogy in this week-long virtual journey required that each phase/day carried a purpose and a lesson, and that the process would be considerate of pandemic conditions. To sustain student participation in the project, we incorporated different levels of facilitation with their daily tasks. To some, the daily tasks cut the full process into manageable segments that led to more confident engagement. As the first virtual field trip proceeded, students favoured one-on-one conversation with their assigned mentor and most students demonstrated investment and participation in the process. Of course not all students enjoyed the process, and their feedback remains a critical part of how we adjust the field trip design. One student said the process did not resemble previous field trips at all and that the workload felt lopsided in comparison. Some students felt that being unable to anticipate the next step of the process made it hard to plan ahead. This concern of not knowing what was expected of them showed that we had misjudged the motivation to engage with written facilitation materials. These insights influenced how we adapted our forms of mentorship and facilitation in later iterations.

Our results and experiences showed a mixture of anxiety and excitement as we, facilitators and students in equal measure, moved out of our comfort zones. For us, the success of the field trip was tied up with students’ presence and participation in each aspect of the process. Grounding our facilitation in an ethics of care fostered an environment in which students felt enabled to conduct their own enquiries (Wheeler, Shahrokh and Derakhshani 2020; Russell et al. 2021). Mentorship contact intensified and became more individualised after Phase Three, when we supported students’ thinking about data collection and analysis. Each mentor was able to identify those in their allocated group who, for various reasons, were struggling. In some cases, this was because students had underestimated the value of participation and presence in the course (Field-Springer 2020). Some student circumstances posed challenges that we navigated individually by adjusting their process. Generally, students who favoured dialogue with their mentor were enabled to move forward in their process. Building various forms of communication into the field trip played a significant role in the student experience.

Some of the general criticisms from students focused on workload and manageability, timing, uncertainty about instructions or expectations, and the lack of resemblance of the field trip to their expectations. We read these critiques together with difficulties participating as a pedagogical issue that is “entangled with questions of epistemic access” (Gyamera and Burke 2018, 15). We learnt that understanding the rationale of the process was as important for students’ epistemic access as was scaffolding its activities. Future iterations of the virtual field trip require more facilitation of how students understand the virtual approach itself, whilst we scaffold their pace and participation via submissions and feedback.

A pedagogic navigation of ERT: our reflections

Remotely together: the virtual shift and communication ecologies

Our navigation of the remote field trip was based on a common experience between facilitators and students alike: our shared proficiency in the vernacular of digital literacies (Coleman 2010). As young educators we have both grown up with personal computers and mobile phones that can access the internet. This allowed us to easily navigate the move to virtual and remote teaching as it meant tapping into our lived experiences as digital natives. Further commonality was that everyone had to make some adjustment to ERT, from navigating various “communication ecologies” to managing mental well-being and resource limitations. With this process thus designed by digital natives for digital natives (see Prensky 2001), facilitators and students could tap into shared vernaculars and pandemic experiences, enabling more dynamic modes of communication.

The shift to the virtual had us genuinely concerned about communication and ways to facilitate a sense of presence together, remotely. The role of group and individual “mentorship” in the process was a non-negotiable element and a way for everyone to feel our presence within the
boundaries of communication. In our remote settings, we were able to harness student participation via a combination of close mentorship and multiple modes of communication.

In addition to emails and SOLMS, we chose to use WhatsApp for communication because it was a frequently used and familiar application for most of our students (Gachago et al. 2015), so they would not be laboured with downloading any alternate applications. Students could access our feedback/mentorship via multiple communication pathways, and we set out communication boundaries to ensure effective and caring engagement. We achieved this by creating spaces to communicate and care, such as WhatsApp chat groups (organised by chosen theme), consultation hours and the supplementary guide.

The consultation process and relationships were significant pedagogical shifts in our experience. With consultations now exclusively taking place virtually, and specifically having the option of WhatsApp communication, many students felt more comfortable approaching us as facilitators, even with a small enquiry. It also fostered more informal exchanges where students felt able to express concerns and challenges more freely (Pacifico and Robertson 2021). Students could send us images, photographs and voice-notes through which they could articulate their ideas or questions in their own generational vernaculars (see Coleman 2010), rather than, for instance, by writing an email. WhatsApp thus became a boundary-crossing tool (Gachago et al. 2015) through which we were able to make immediate connections across dispersed locations, forego institutional communication formalities and enact and demonstrate our praxis of ethical sensitivity to interpersonal encounters (especially in pandemic times). The mutual work of boundary-making within the field trip cohort, made up of the student-facilitator-SOLMS-WhatsApp assemblage, speaks strongly to the sensibilities of care we hoped to foster with this participatory pedagogical approach.

The virtual field trip’s communication ecologies and strategies further encouraged students to move forward as knowledge producers and to “take responsibility for their own learning” (Rink et al. 2020, 11), with the help of mentorship. The combination of these communication and mentorship frameworks gave students support to complete this field trip and still feel that they were part of a collective, structured experience. One student wrote in the course evaluation:

I really liked the WhatsApp group with the other people, it was very supportive, and we helped each other through a lot. The other communication was pretty consistent and a reply was always quick, so [I] think the communication really worked. (Anonymous comment, May 2020)

It shows how the virtual modes of connecting with others in the field trip offered spaces for support. That said, student appreciation of such spaces differed, and any group chat space would only be useful if the members were willing to use it in that way. Some students found that group spaces did not help with their anxieties about the process. To us, the variety of communication pathways was one way to mitigate any lack of access to support. However, we could not anticipate how much rapport a group of students would find together, considering that Covid-19 had prevented the students in this course from being with each other in smaller third-year groupings or from attending tutorials together. In cases where the WhatsApp groups were quieter, students relied more on one-on-one mentorship support. The overall sentiment was that having a variety of communication pathways, with guidelines on how to use them appropriately, made space for a dynamic between facilitators and students that felt genuine, safe and productive.

A question of pedagogy

The lesson of situatedness through enquiry-driven practice did not land equally well across the virtual field trip groups we facilitated. Despite the material we designed to orient students to being in the field as a mode of enquiry, some students lamented the loss of the collective “feeling” of being on a field trip. Our shift to virtual facilitation removed a lot of the expected group intimacies that gave students immediate access to one another, the facilitator and, overall, to
interpersonal forms of mentorship and care. Whilst we had intended to bridge remote conditions by reconceptualising situated learning for this course, students’ references to expectations of tangible or shared space (one student suggested a virtual museum tour) showed that not all students were able to “buy in” to our strategy.

In our course evaluation we asked whether students felt that our aim to facilitate an ethnographic experience was successful. One student answered thus:

Yes and no. Yes in the sense that we experienced what the admin behind an ethnography is and all the hard work that goes on behind the scenes to produce the final product. But I feel as though all the students felt the absence of a physical field of study as opposed to a virtual one and how participant observation and the physical immersion into the study would have shown us the true meaning of what it is to conduct an ethnography. But of course this was out of the facilitators’ control due to the pandemic. (Anonymous comment — Virtual Field Trip 3, May 2021)

Following this response, we considered that students were not enabled to take up alternative ideas of understanding and doing ethnography, signalling that ethnography without a fixed location was unfamiliar and thus not accessible to them. The impetus to enact response-able and reflexive pedagogies (Bozalek and Zymbalas 2017; Rink et al. 2020) urged us to adjust subsequent iterations of the virtual field trip with a focus on orientation to alternative modes of doing ethnography. Orienting students to a sense of *enquiry-driven* situatedness (Rink et al. 2020) required that we draw on discourses and ideas from other contemporary anthropologists as well as our own research experiences.

Anthropologists like Góralska (2020) and Gunel, Varma and Watanabe (2020) have argued that ethnography must be dealt with differently, considering how pandemic conditions limit ethical possibilities for long-term, in-person ethnographic work. Responding to early lockdowns and people’s general observance of social distancing, Góralska (2020, 46) argues for an “anthropology from home” where research is “geographically restricted but digitally enabled.” Virtual enquiry is also supported by the conceptualisation of “patchwork ethnography” (Gunel, Varma and Watanabe 2020) as a new ethnographic paradigm that acknowledges and accommodates how “recombinations of ‘home’ and ‘field’ have now become necessities” (Gunel, Varma and Watanabe 2020). These alternatives challenge the long-standing notion that ethnography must be an immersive enquiry separate from our daily lives. It suggests that we “maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge and slow thinking that characterises so-called traditional fieldwork” (Gunel, Varma and Watanabe 2020) whilst we fully attend to our changing lives and conduct research through short-term visits “using fragmentary yet rigorous data.”

What emerged from our pedagogic process of iteration, reflection and adjusted practice was that the virtual field trip did not satisfy student notions of ethnography. Where students showed little confidence in their understanding of the basic concepts of ethnography, they also struggled to take on new ideas or try new ways of doing research from home. Whilst a few students boldly took up the task of doing research from home and expressed feeling situated in their work, the majority expressed confusion and reluctance to “take in the new.” We felt that we were trying to bridge an epistemic gap between, on the one side, students’ disciplinary and intellectual histories and, on the other, contemporary discussions on moving anthropology and ethnography forward. In our view there is an epistemic hesitance to take up newer and alternative modes of doing ethnography that persists (in our teaching context) even when new discourses on the issue are proliferating (see Boellstorff et al. 2012; Coleman 2010; Fassin 2013; Horst and Miller 2020; Srinivisan, Diepeveen and Karekwaivanane 2019).

**On ERT and student participation**

In four runs of the virtual field trip since early 2020, whilst the Covid-19 pandemic continues and remote learning seems poised to remain a reality for some time still, we have learnt valuable lessons from the way our students participated in and responded to the process. Through
facilitation and close mentorship we witnessed some students face significant challenges during the process. First, many students demonstrated a weak understanding of using methods during research, or research as using methods. Second, some students struggled with the open-endedness of the process and were very hesitant to make assertive decisions about their projects unless their mentor agreed with every step. Third, students contended with limitations at home that shaped their engagement with the field trip.

Ideally, the third-year field trip is an opportunity for students to practice what they have learnt in class over the previous few years. Instead, their struggles to interpret prompts and instructions reveals a poor understanding of the basics of anthropological praxis and the value of certain research methods and approaches. We thought that asking third-year anthropology students to write a thick description of their sensorial exercise in Phase Two was straightforward. Thick description is a key component of ethnography because it helps navigate the intricate work of storytelling and analytical writing (McGranahan 2018). However, a considerable number of students did not know how to write using thick description or why this method was valuable in ethnography. In addition this difficulty of grappling with methodology meant that these students struggled to articulate the relationship between their data and meaning-making through analysis.

In our interpretation this points to an imbalance in students’ learning engagements with ethnography in its analytical mode, without equal attention paid to ethnographic methodology. This was evident when students were anxious to make decisions about their methods and subsequent analysis, often worrying if what they were doing was “right.” Although guided through daily prompts and tasks, the field trip is relatively open-ended since each student’s enquiry is different, and how they construct their final project is up to them. We noticed that hesitant students would look to us as a first step to resolve their uncertainty or confusion rather than discussing it with peers or consulting the guides for support. In response, we facilitated problem-solving techniques with students (like collective brainstorming over WhatsApp) and, in so doing, further tried to facilitate their ability to move forward. One student showed appreciation for this strategy:

My mentor was incredibly helpful, especially with her WhatsApp consultations. She welcomed all manners of communication and also challenged the student to think for themselves rather than just give the student what she thought they needed in order to progress with their project but guided them into making their own realisations and decisions. (Anonymous comment, Virtual Field Trip 3, May 2021)

This comment affirms that a significant part of our teaching practice’s success came from the active presence of mentors (Pacifico and Robertson 2021). We found that “a constructive and ‘safe’ learning environment is crucial when adopting an affective learning pedagogy” (Russell et al. 2021, 41). Confidence-building became a core tenet of our mentorship praxis. In a context in which research can be daunting, students could build on their capacity to navigate a research enquiry by taking responsibility for their own project. With students taking ownership of their own decision-making, mentors could provide them with prompts to think deeper about their choices for moving forward, rather than giving permission.

Given the uncertainty of the pandemic and various “communication ecologies” we inhabit, we knew that the process had to work in worst-case scenarios. Students who struggled to access ERT due to limitations of time and resources were often behind on their daily submissions. This resulted in them struggling to remain confident that their work carried the quality that was expected. In such cases we responded by shifting or removing deadlines and outlining for students how they could proceed with their available resources. We reassured students that the process was structured in terms of a deadline but based on their presence and participation along the way. For many, this alleviated concerns with completing tasks on time, which meant that they focused more on being present in the activities at hand. By seriously considering and incorporating what students brought to the field trip, we were able to demonstrate a reflexive pedagogy that aims to learn as much as it aims to teach (Rink et.al 2020; Apostolidou 2020). Out of the various objectives that we set in this
field trip, we hoped that students would “stick with” the processual lessons and, more importantly, reflect on what these lessons could mean going forward.

On being “new” academics experimenting with pedagogy
As two young anthropologists who experienced or participated in #FeesMustFall as students, and as tertiary educators who inherited the urgency of decolonising the curriculum, we felt invigorated (whilst intimidated) by the call to think about teaching research methods in new ways (Rink et al. 2020). On a personal level of investment, we each bring our life histories and intellectual ancestries to the question of what it means to be a “new” academic. For Price, the issues of access to learning in academia and her experience in storytelling and arts-based methods strongly influenced the educator roles taken at university. For De Ruiters, who completed their undergraduate degree at a distance-learning university and whose master’s research is based on virtual ethnography, there is a personal investment in the work of innovative pedagogies and valuing virtual and digital worlds/worlding in our thinking about the future of ethnography.

Shifting the field trip experience to the virtual was an exercise in pedagogic thinking. For us, a particular focus was asking how a teaching praxis focused on fostering an engaging and expressive learning environment could encourage students to take more interest in their work. What we are interested in when reflecting on this experience is reimagining learning by doing, following Joy Owen (2007), as a purposeful, pedagogically informed process that preoccupies the conversation of anthropologists just as much as our research and disciplinary concepts. Drawing on the resonance that methods like transformative storywork (Wheeler, Shahrokh and Derakhshani 2020) had with our anthropological education and being able to incorporate aspects of both storywork and arts-informed approaches back into our teaching methods, we developed a process that actively draws students into engagement with the core tenets of ethnographic praxis. Evidently the process relied on reflexivity and experimentation (see Apostolidou 2020). As a result, each iteration of the field trip will look different as we incorporate the lessons learnt into new iterations.

As anthropologists, our disciplinary practice creates the expectation of a reflexive, considerate and mindful researcher. How do we then enable students to make sense of these expectations within a virtual field trip? Nind and Lewthwaite (2018, 399) contend that “building capacity in research methods requires building the pedagogic culture surrounding this field.” They state further that this is the intersection of general pedagogic knowledge (broad principles that transcend subject matter) and content knowledge (about the subject matter) in the form of pedagogic knowledge specific to the subject matter. … Pedagogic content knowledge allows what the teacher knows to be comprehensible to learners, because it involves knowing things like how to formulate explanations, represent content, and respond to misunderstanding. This is critically important praxis in the sense of reflection and action resulting in making prudent choices for bringing about change and new knowledge. (Nind and Lewthwaite 2018, 399)

In the context of higher education in Southern Africa and in our immediate spheres, colleagues have reshaped coursework programmes to respond to growing calls for transformative teaching spaces. Owen’s (2007) article “Building a Teaching Praxis in Anthropology” highlighted the need for critical pedagogy built on participation, direct experience and engagement. We thus write this article with the distinct sense that we are taking up and revisiting the conversation that Owen initiated more than a decade ago. In doing so, we join other “new” scholar educators who are unsettling the dust around the place of critical and reflexive pedagogies in the post #MustFall-era of the higher education landscape in Southern Africa (see Rink et al. 2020; Morreira, Taru and Truyts 2020). The call for building a pedagogic culture (Nind and Lewthwaite 2018) in our discipline acknowledges that educators have unique approaches, that there is no “one size fits all” methodology and that we tend to occupy different paradigms of education (Alexander 1990). The state of education has historically taken central priority in political liberation (Alexander 1990) and the recent resurgence of education protests laments uncoordinated and un-concretised strategies that have failed to make
education accessible to all (Naidoo 2015, 2016; Mbembe 2016). Like Morreira et al. (2020), Rink et al. (2020) and our other contemporaries, we situate ourselves and our work in pursuit of critical pedagogy, but we also acknowledge the need for a network of support to drive these innovations.

Concluding remarks
Amidst this pandemic there are many anthropology educators who are trying to figure out ways to teach ethnographic skills that best suits their teaching contexts (McGranahan 2018). For us the challenge has been designing a virtual field trip that makes learning by doing possible through remote conditions for students with varying access and in differing circumstances. In a complex navigation of ERT, asynchronous teaching and learning, and close mentorship, we were able to foster an explorative learning environment. Covid-19 and conditions of ERT forced us to consider what the core values were that we tied into our teaching objectives. For all of us — we, as facilitators, learning to be remote educators and the students remotely learning how to do ethnography — this has been a novel experience. The best outcome for our field trip has been students’ attempts to genuinely reflect more deeply on what they have learnt about ethnography and how it might benefit them in other spaces.

The lessons learnt in each iteration of this field trip drive us to continue learning and refining this teaching space and to share our work and lessons within a wider community of anthropologists who are concerned with teaching research methods. In this article we show how our process had to respond to a lack of proficiency that students had in the basic concepts of ethnography. This meant that our field trip became a mixture of consolidating existing knowledge, re-establishing basic concepts for use in practice and trying to push students to think reflexively about contemporary notions of the field, for example. Thus, instead of being an opportunity for students to put their knowledge to practice and explore different ways of doing ethnography, we readjusted it to accommodate different levels of interest, engagement and proficiency. Since students were engaged in their own individual ethnographic experiences with close mentorship, it was also possible for us to identify where or how the disjuncture sits between individual students’ theoretical understanding of anthropological praxis and their confidence to move forward in applying those skills.

The challenge we have at hand is to critically examine current and traditional ways of teaching ethnography to a generation of students who can learn differently (Kurotani 2020; Apostolidou 2020; Russell et al. 2021). In the current milieu of calls for transformation and decolonising education, there are anthropologists innovating to engage with students differently by “chang[ing] things up and adopt[ing] teaching methodologies that they can relate to” (Swai, cited in Davids and Maduna 2021). Their innovations speak to wider debates around the state of anthropology and anthropologists in Africa with specific calls to think with the heterogeneity and plurality of African students’ experience. We foreground these concerns in our work insofar as they are tied up with the following question: What kinds of anthropologists do we imagine we are training? Following the critical call by Mohamed (2012) to ask, Who is the imagined Southern African anthropologist? our pedagogy has centred around a process that enabled students to get a sense of who they might be as trainee researchers.

We understand pedagogy to be about fostering a learning environment with students in which everyone, from teacher to student, can participate in knowledge production. In this field trip, being responsible for a short ethnographic project, taking ownership of decision-making and experiencing the nuances of ethics in practice all contribute to students’ “experience [of] knowledge-making as self-aware praxis” (Rink et al. 2020, 12). What we want to carry forward from this work is a set of questions that we have continuously faced in this process and that we believe should be thought with by our colleagues teaching future generations of anthropologists.

How are we, as anthropologists from differing places, histories and contexts, trying to reimagine anthropologies from Africa? How do we situate our students and pedagogies within those imaginaries? How can we manifest these ideas into practice through transformed curricula
and other forms of engagement? How can we make use of external resources and influences, such as interdisciplinary work, to foster a learning environment where students can participate confidently in ongoing debates around the state of anthropology in Africa? We must also ask ourselves to what extent we are willing and capable to take up these calls for innovation. What we are asking requires a commitment to spearhead new ways of doing, to collaborate with others in whichever ways possible and to support and make room in our various professional spaces for those who will. It also requires future collaborations between educator anthropologists and broadening our pedagogic and epistemic communities.

The emphasis we want to make is on the collaborative nature of reimagining anthropologies in Africa and being very clear to ourselves and our colleagues about what possible roles we can play. From our end, we continue to explore what role a pedagogy of ethnography is in anthropology, and this article, by way of introduction, demonstrates our early interventions in crafting the pedagogic space we imagine possible.

Notes
1. The inclusion of online spaces was another opportunity afforded through ERT for students to learn about digital ethnography (Bernard 2021).
2. This is a reversal of how things were when Prensky (2001) first wrote about digital natives and digital immigrants. See also Makoe (2012, 92) who discusses the South African learning context where most “digital immigrants are teachers while digital natives are students.”
3. Anthropology undergraduate teaching in the department in which we taught has been “exam-free” since 2019, taking on a continuous assessment strategy instead. This means that regular consultation with your assigned tutor and their feedback on your work became paramount to a student’s learning journey. In our experience thus far, however, students still found the consultation process daunting. Through the remotely enabled pedagogies we practiced here, we realise that there may be value in reframing the tutor-student relation as one of mentorship.
4. The use of non-textual media, like GIF images and emojis, allowed for a more affectively intimate form of communication between students and mentor-facilitators, in which students could perhaps articulate more easily how they were feeling about their journey.
5. Although this was not generally the case in each iteration, it is significant that the third virtual field trip group (May 2021) struggled most with what we considered the basics. In contrast to the classes of 2020, these students had been at the receiving end of ERT for the greater part of their undergraduate careers.
6. These “new” scholar educators are more experienced than us but situated as “new” in their institutional positioning. We see ourselves as young anthropologists and have each variously been influenced and inspired by the Southern scholars we cite here.
7. We think here of educators who are innovating curricula with social justice/transformation paradigms such as Ngoasheng and Gachago (2017).

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