

How Are We Teaching? An analysis of introductory course syllabi in archaeology and biological anthropology

Maryam Harahsheh¹, Hayden Denby¹, Lauren Schauble¹, Eliane Spalding¹, Ezra Kucur², Kylie Quave¹
¹The George Washington University, ²Carleton College



Introduction: Introductory anthropology courses are the first glimpse prospective students have of the field, with the opportunity to either promote further study or dissuade undergraduates from future pursuit. This project surveys introductory archaeology and biological anthropology courses (including courses that combine the fields), examines the pedagogies visible within syllabi, and posits ways to better equip anthropology to show its relevance to students.

Methods: With an analysis of 57 course syllabi from 36 institutions, this project presents two essential variables in determining inclusive and equitable courses: multivocality (incorporating a wide array of voices) and epistemology (how anthropologists know what they “know”) (Heilbronn 2025). These variables were chosen as a follow-up to the research of Quave and colleagues (2021) that found that multivocality and a focus on epistemological issues garnered more positive outcomes for learning and inclusion in introductory archaeology for underrepresented student populations.

Table 1. Count of courses and institutions sampled. Some institutions yielded samples from more than one course/semester.

	Systematically sampled		Opportunistically sampled		Total sampled	
	Courses	Institutions	Courses	Institutions	Courses	Institutions
Biological Anthropology	11	9	21	14	32	23
Archaeology	11	9	7	7	18	16
Combination introductory course	5	3	2	2	7	5
Total	27	15	30	21	57	36

A stratified random sample of anthropology degree-granting institutions (AAA n.d., N = 637) was divided by Carnegie institution type and PWI/MSI (Predominantly White versus Minority Serving) status. Syllabi were solicited via email from 84 institutions and 15 were sent. Syllabi were also collected opportunistically through public domains (e.g., academia.edu, university websites, and Google Scholar). One to four coders reviewed each syllabus and recorded observations on multivocality and epistemological focus (on an ordinal scale from 1-3, see Figures 1 and 2).

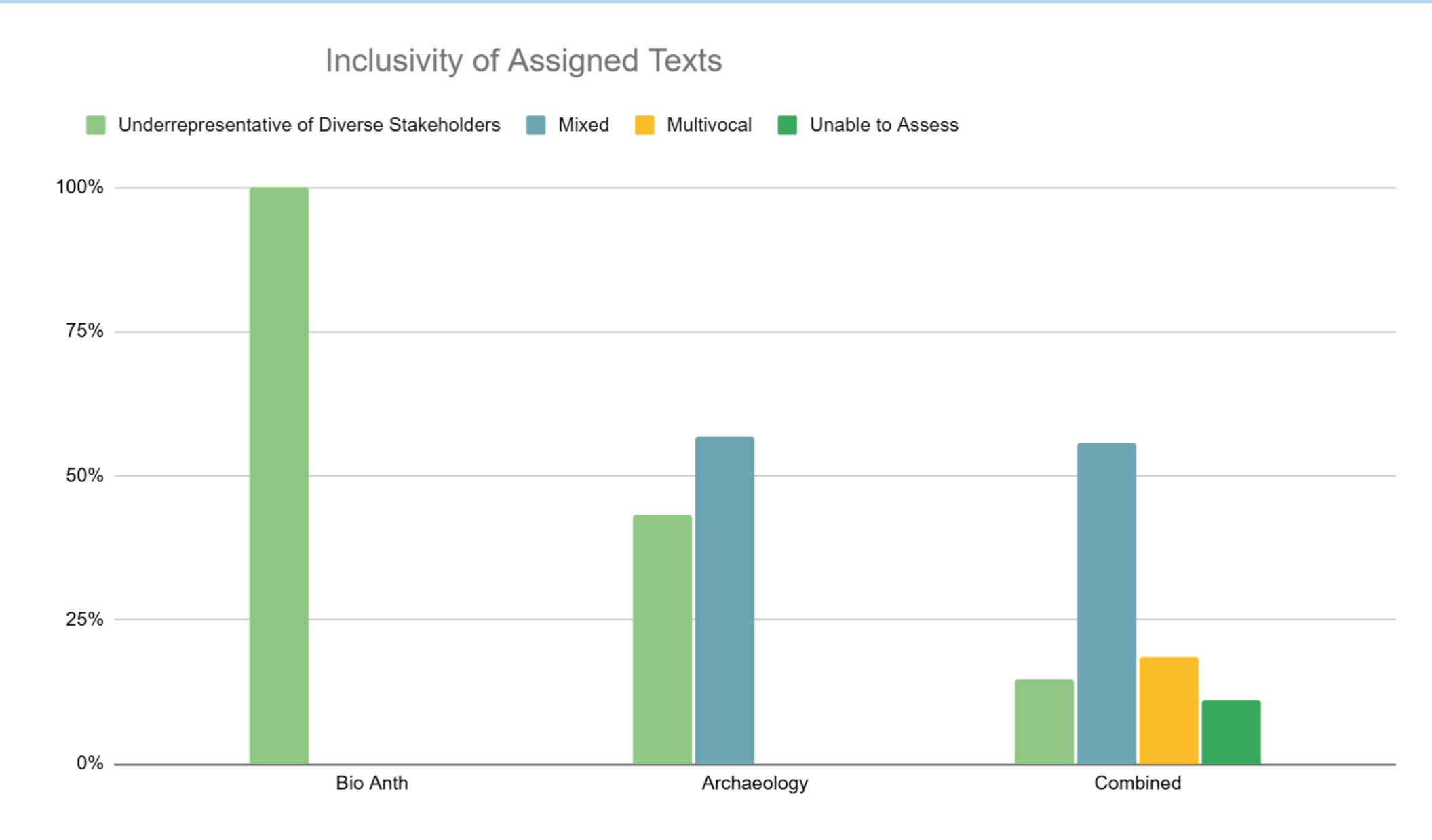


Figure 1. Percentage of assigned text scores for each class type, including scores from all coders.

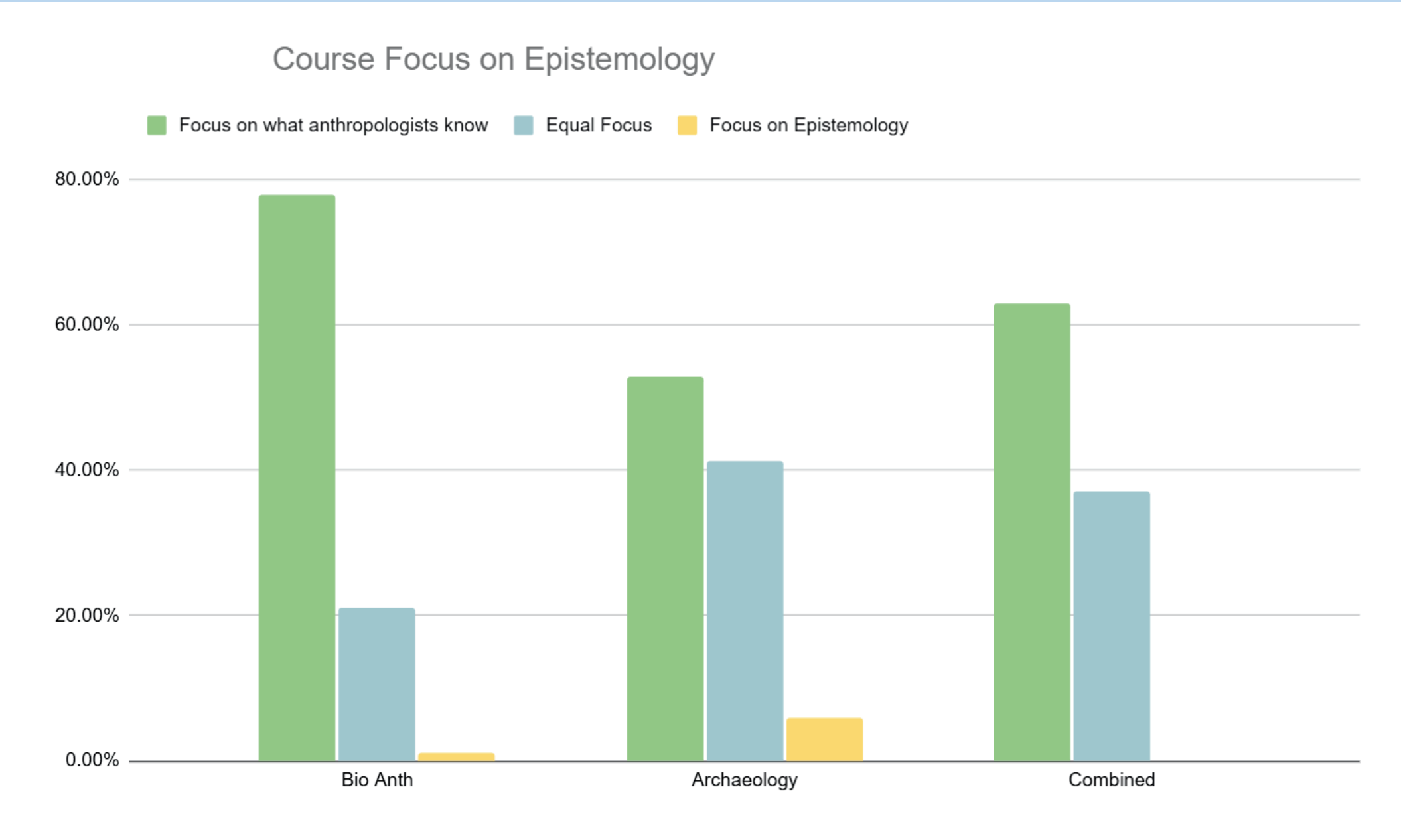


Figure 2. Percentage of epistemology scores for each class type, including scores from all coders.

Sources cited:
American Anthropological Association. n.d. “Degree Programs.” AnthroGuide. <https://guide.americananthro.org/39/Degree-Programs>.
Franklin, M., J. Dunnavant, A. Flewellen, and A. Odewale. 2020. “The Future Is Now: Archaeology and the Eradication of Anti-Blackness.” *Intl. Jrrnl. of Hist. Arch.* 24(4):753–66.
Gupta, N., A. Martindale, K. Supernant, and M. Elvidge. 2023. “The CARE Principles and the Reuse, Sharing, and Curation of Indigenous Data in Canadian Archaeology.” *Adv. in Arch. Prac.* 11(1):76–89.
Heilbronn, R. 2025. “What Does It Mean to Decolonise the Curriculum: Is It Possible?” *Ethics and Ed.*, Feb., 1–14.
Quave, K., S. Fie, A. Greiff, and D. Agnew. 2021. “Centering the Margins: Knowledge Production in the Introductory Archaeology Course.” *Adv. in Arch. Prac.* 9(2):87–100.
Rivera Prince, J., E. Blackwood, J. Brough, H. Landázuri, E. Leclerc, M. Barnes, K. Douglass, et al. 2022. “An Intersectional Approach to Equity, Inequity, and Archaeology: A Pathway through Community.” *Adv. in Arch. Prac.* 10(4):382–96.
Rizvi, U. 2022. “Community Engagement in Archaeology and Heritage in Pakistan.” *Jrrnl. of Comm. Arch. & Herit.* 9(1):1–8.

Results: Scores for multivocality of assigned texts and epistemological focus were low overall. In both subdisciplines, assigned texts were largely made up of a single textbook with one to two authors. Archaeology courses more frequently had diverse authors incorporated into the syllabi with supplemental readings. Archaeology courses had a larger focus on epistemology than biological anthropology courses, especially earlier in the academic term (the coders recorded weeks in which epistemological focus was evident). Epistemology scores were also low in all types, presenting few indicators of systemic engagement with such questions.

Table 2. Mean scores for multivocality and epistemological focus, calculated as the mean of all coders’ scores for an individual course.

Sample type	Biological Anthro		Archaeology		Combined Intro		Overall mean	
	Multivoc.	Epistem.	Multivoc.	Epistem.	Multivoc.	Epistem.	Multivoc.	Epistem.
Systematic	1.45	1.21	1.38	1.55	1.07	1.27	1.35	1.36
Opportunistic	1.29	1.26	1.57	1.74	1.00	1.17	1.34	1.37
Overall mean	1.35	1.24	1.45	1.62	1.05	1.24	1.35	1.36

Discussion: How these introductory courses are taught impacts students’ sense of disciplinary belonging and their understanding of the norms and values associated with the field. Pedagogical choices shape how (non-)anthropologists interpret human culture histories responsibly and empirically. For example, courses can work to counter misunderstandings about the inevitability of empires or show the damage of primitivizing nonwestern peoples. Values espoused by archaeology include ethical concerns for marginalized populations participating in or being subjected to research, data sovereignty, and looking to the past to understand present inequities (e.g., Franklin et al. 2020, Gupta et al. 2023, Rivera Prince et al. 2022, Rizvi 2022). By centering those values from day one, these courses communicate anthropology’s promise to students and invite them to engage with the discipline long after the end of the class.

Acknowledgements: The GW Institutional Review Board determined that the research was exempt from IRB review under DHHS regulatory Category 1 (IRB# NCR235004). We thank Sarah Kennedy for her consultation on the project. Funding support is thanks to the GW University Facilitating Fund.