Explaining Anthropology to People in Your Life

Most anthropology programs do not teach how to explain anthropology's value to those not trained in this discipline. This tool offers concepts and narratives that you can use as students, graduates, and instructors with the people who are part of your life. Eight work-relevant scenarios are presented accompanied by suggestions for responding to them. The goal is to have a productive conversation which:

1. Invites the people in your life to learn something about anthropology
2. Uses examples, including your own, to persuade them of anthropology's usefulness and relevance.

Anthropology Simply and Concisely

Anthropologists decode the complex patterns of human behavior across cultures and time. They are inspired to appreciate and explain how and why humans are both similar and different. Anthropological methods reveal the hidden forces shaping decision making, helping organizations and communities solve problems at their roots and navigate an increasingly complex world.

- **Cultural Detective:** Anthropologists uncover hidden patterns in perspectives and behavior that explain why people do what they do—even when they cannot articulate it themselves.
- **Empathetic Listener:** Hearing the experiences and stories from cultures local to global motivates anthropologists to promote understanding of other perspectives and ways of life and work.
- **Reality Checker:** Anthropological methods reveal the gap between what people say, what they do, and what they say they should do—critical insight for any organization or community trying to create meaningful change.
- **Pattern Recognition Expert:** Anthropologists identify cultural systems and behavioral trends that others miss, turning seemingly random human actions into predictable, actionable insights.
- **Root Cause Problem Solver:** Anthropologists figure out what the key questions are, use investigative methods to find the answers, and plan effective responses based on those answers.
- **Future Forecaster:** Understanding how humans adapt to change helps anthropologists anticipate how people will respond to new technologies, policies, social shifts, or challenges.
- **Perspective Shifter:** Anthropologists help organizations and communities see beyond their own cultural assumptions, to discover new possibilities and solutions invisible from within a single worldview.
- **Observant Illuminator:** Anthropologists spotlight our own unexamined rules and behaviors, transforming unconscious cultural practices into conscious choices.

Anthropology's Value Revealed

A basic model for explaining our value to others takes both context and narratives into account.

Context includes people such as:

- **Employers:** The people who are going to make decisions about hiring you
- **Colleagues:** Your office buddies or team members
- **Clients:** Those individuals who have a lot of control over what you work on, how you work, and whether you get paid
- **The General Public:** People in society who may read about you or listen to you. How do they know you have any claim to expertise?

Narratives are stories which vary in length and content depending on the context. Successful narratives tend to be those which create a connection between you and your listener. Most listeners in the workplace are involved in some form of problem-solving. When creating a narrative:

- Demonstrate your ability to solve problems
- Provide an example from your own experience or from the literature of practice
- Frame this example using the STAR method.

Scenarios
The eight scenarios represent common job-search or work-related situations that anthropologists face along with suggested response strategies. The situations vary from interacting with a recruiter to working with new colleagues, and from advocating anthropology's value with a new client to conveying relevant insights to a general audience. The anthropologists must contend with highly variable viewpoints including lack of knowledge, curiosity, interest, and skepticism.

#1: The Clueless Recruiter

Recruiters from many organizations attend job fairs on university campuses in the hopes of identifying potential new hires. The recruiters stand behind booths as students filter by. They do not spend much time with the students, talking to them for maybe 5-10 minutes tops. However, they take resumes that students hand to them and listen to their pitches.

One recruiter scans the top of your résumé , looks up at you, and says: *"Huh. Anthropology. That's dinosaurs, right?"*

Smile and use humor.

Opening Statements by Recruiters	Possible Responses by Job Seekers
"Huh. Anthropology. That's dinosaurs, right?"	"I love dinosaurs, but anthropology is actually the study of humans."
"Doesn't anthropology have to do with those people in pith helmets?"	"Ten points for knowing what a pith helmet is."
"Isn't anthropology about dead people?"	"It can be, but I work with people who are alive."
"You go out to study some exotic tribe, right?"	"Anthropologists learn about people and cultures in various places, but I learn about people here."

Providing information respectfully can be effective: "(Smiling) 'Anthrop' means people and I figure out how they might work together better to get their jobs done."

#2: The Harried Phone Interviewer

You are on the phone with another recruiter, this time for a 20-minute vetting call. You know you are a possible prospect. The recruiter is asking specific questions to establish what you know and how you might be able to help their organization.

The recruiter begins: *"We sell (e.g., medical devices, airplanes, school supplies, paint, hardware) all over the Northeast. I took an anthropology course in college, so I know a little about your specialty. What I don't understand, frankly, is how someone with an anthropology degree can help us in our business."*

Lead with how you think and what you have done, or what other anthropologists have done.

Response Strategies	Possible Responses by Job Seekers
Ask questions that relate to the business.	1. "Are your sales where you want them to be?" 2. "To what extent are your employees energized about the work they do?" 3. "Do some of your divisions have lower productivity and higher turnover than others?"

Response Strategies	Possible Responses by Job Seekers
Point out what you might do if hired.	1. "I can help you expand your customer base." 2. "Many of the problems that businesses encounter have a human dimension, and anthropology is equipped to help solve these problems. I have some thoughts on how you might improve user experience on your website." 3. "Have you ever assessed your organizational values that are most and least evident in your organizational culture?" 4. "Is everybody you work with happy and productive and thriving?" 5. "Let me ask you: What are you doing now that you should not be doing and what are you *not* doing now that you should be doing?" 6. "Does your company have a way to capture lessons learned and integrate them into the culture?"
Use the STAR method to tell a story about a success you had and its impact.	**S** "When I interned at Company X last summer, I was asked to help find solutions to its inventory problem. **T** I observed how work got done from the moment the parts arrived at the dock to their final assembly; I also listened to employee views of what was going on. **A** It turned out that blaming behavior was rampant because certain parts routinely ran short. Employees did the unexpected to avoid getting blamed: they hid 'spare' parts in their lockers just in case they needed them. You can imagine the difficulty tracking this inventory. I told the plant manager that hiding parts was a symptom of a larger organizational-culture problem—insufficient trust between the management and workers. **R** Company X has been consulting with me about next steps in mending plant relationships. I believe I could help your firm improve its effectiveness too."

Response Strategies	Possible Responses by Job Seekers Referencing a Successful Case Study
Use the STAR method to talk briefly about a successful anthropology project and its impact. Stronza, Amanda. 2022. "Ecotourism in One Amazon Community: My Role as Anthropologist, Witness, Scribe, and Facilitator," In Terry M. Redding and Charles C. Cheney, eds., *Profiles of Anthropological Praxis: An International Casebook*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 21-37.	**S** A Peruvian indigenous community, located in a buffer zone between a national reserve and a national park, was eager to gain a foothold in the new sustainable development economy. The community cultivated a relationship with a Lima-based ecotourism company which grew into a joint venture to build and operate an ecotourism lodge. **T** Anthropologist Amanda Stronza wanted to "document and share the story of how ecotourism was understood, planned, and experienced … and then to use that understanding in ethical and supportive ways…" (23).. **A** Returning almost every year from 1996 to 2020, Stronza's role shifted alternately from researcher to cultural broker between the community and the company, to fundraiser, to supporter, to lasting friend. She shared what she was learning with both the community and the company which led to honesty and transparency in the relationship. **R** Learning and telling both the community and company sides of the story captured a well-rounded understanding of change—well beyond the economic costs and benefits of ecotourism. "The successes include substantial economic returns, a variety of social benefits, cultural revalorization, effective resource management and conservation, and strengthened local self-determination" (33). Her longitudinal data demonstrated how conservation and development goals could be balanced and supported.

#3: The Group Interview

You were invited to talk to a small group of people, maybe six to eight of them, none of whom you know. You are not sure what roles they hold or what their individual expertise is. You are on a video call with them and your meeting with them is scheduled for one hour.

One of them says: *"We are a nonprofit involved in working with small business development. We also do a lot of retraining of people who have recently lost their jobs in the economic downturn."*

She glances down at the papers in her hand. *"It says here you wrote your PhD thesis on how Vietnamese rice farmers make decisions about how to irrigate their fields." She looks up. "Maybe you could explain to us how all that relates to what we do here?"*

Follow a research-oriented approach to enable robust discussion and problem solving.

Approach	Possible Responses by Job Seekers
Confirm a connection between your PhD thesis and issue X.	"I think my research on decision making might be helpful to you. I heard you were getting a low return on investment for your retraining program—that laid off workers participate in some of the retraining, but then leave your program before it has ended. Is that correct?"
Describe how you would investigate issue X.	"Here is how I would propose building on what you already know. I would collaborate with you to contact and then interview a mix of participants from your retraining program."
Explain that different groups in society have different decision making models.	"People don't always make the decisions others expect. We would want to discover the factors that contribute to their decisions not to complete the retraining. I can assure you that we will find one or more patterns that explain participant choices."
Suggest one or more possible outcomes of the investigation for the organization.	"Once we understand how and why participants made their decisions they did, we might be able to make changes in your retraining program to retain more participants in the future."

#4: One-on-One with the Boss

You got the job. You were hired by a project manager. Today you are meeting the CEO for the first time.

The CEO says: *"Shirley thought you'd be good for this position, and I've learned to trust Shirley. We're a pretty lean organization here, and to make it work, we all have to work together. Everybody's valuable, and everybody contributes. We've never hired an anthropologist before, so I have to ask you: what's the value-added that you're going to bring to Shirley's team?"*

Emphasize why Anthropology stands out and how you have put anthropological lessons to work.

Lessons from Anthropology	Applying Anthropology in the Workplace
Focus on people in their context	"I was trained to observe human behavior. I notice patterns that other people often miss—like nonverbals and silence."
Build rapport and communicate well, asking good questions	"I enjoy working with other people and taking the time to get to know them. I also know how to elicit people's views on various work-related topics by asking open-ended questions. This style of interviewing yields highly valid information compared to written surveys."
Compare what people say with what people actually do	"I can spot inconsistencies easily and identify organizational issues that merit attention. In one summer job I had, the managers kept telling us how important quality was. Yet, our product's repair rate was very high because no one ever had enough time to fix the errors. The result was that no one believed quality mattered, and this needed to be addressed."
Diagnose problems successfully	"When I was an intern, I supported the newsletter team of a large organization. We voted on which articles to publish—majority rule—while another team did the socials. I noticed and asked the socials intern why her team always seemed to be late. She said that they like to reach agreement *on everything!* Right then I realized that two different ways of making decisions in one organization can spell trouble. "
Identify possible solutions	"I am willing and eager to work with others to come up with original solutions. Problem solving is part of who I am. Done with others, it is especially powerful. Not only do you have multiple voices, but people can build off each other's ideas."

#5: Meeting Your Work Team

Now you are in the lunchroom with the rest of Shirley's team. The team is getting ready to bid on a training contract from the state government, and they are glad to have another person help with the work. They are thinking of how to approach the training of recently unemployed people in the community. One of the team members is an economist, one is a training specialist, and one is a sociologist with expertise in surveys and data analysis.

Over coffee and sandwiches, the team leader asks: *"How would you approach the question of training needs? What should we put in the proposal?"*

Ask simple questions about what is known and what is unknown to assemble collective knowledge and brainstorm together.

What is known?	Can we find out what is unknown?
Q: Who issued the Request for Proposal (RFP)? **A:** State government	**Q:** What kind of training is the state government looking for? What is their goal? What are their metrics for success?
Q: Focus of the RFP? **A:** Training of recently unemployed	**Q:** Has anyone spoken with people who have been recently unemployed? What kind of training would be helpful to them? Can we do some exploratory research to learn their perspectives?
Q: Location of training? **A:** Local community	**Q:** What kind of constraints or obstacles would prevent the successful completion of the training? What kind of support structure would be necessary to ensure internet access, transportation to the training site, and/or child care and elder care needs are addressed?
Q: Who is responding to the RFP? **A:** 1 Economist, 1 Training Specialist, 1 Quantitative Sociologist, 1 Anthropologist, and 1 Project Manager	**Q:** Can the training we provide address the state's goal and meet trainees' expectations? How might we combine methodological approaches to craft a mixed-methods proposal? Do we lead with ethnographic research followed by targeted surveys? How will we document the lessons from this project (e.g., PPT, video, prose report) so that other state agencies would have access to them?

#6: Making Your Case to the Skeptics

It is 15 minutes later. You have been explaining the need for qualitative data on the target population and their needs, and arguing that the best way to begin is with a series of open-ended interviews and focused groups, coupled with on-site observation.

The sociologist and the economist do not agree with you. "*We've already got state unemployment statistics,"* the economist says. The sociologist chimes in: *"And if there are gaps in the data, we can do a sample survey, by phone or mail. What you're proposing will take too long, and all we'll get are a bunch of stories. Anecdotes, really – that's not real data. How's this going to help us?"*

The rest of the team is looking at you. What do you say?

De-escalate and offer a rationale for incorporating a combination of methods.

Step 1: Defuse the situation	"We're all on the same team here, right? Let me try to respond to the question and offer some thoughts."
Step 2: Make the case that qualitative and quantitative data serve different purposes	"Fortunately, I've had a chance to work across disciplines before. I love that when different researchers work together, the qualitative and quantitative data complement and inform each other and project outcomes are more robust. Qualitative data is quite useful as an exploratory technique, when no one knows the best questions to ask. Initial conversations with the target group can help center the project, provide critical details, and offer the best chance for successful outcomes. Quantitative data works well in confirming the strength of the exploratory themes and patterns, and in revealing the degree of representativeness."
Step 3: Respond directly to critiques of qualitative data	"One of the projects I worked on was based on available demographic data from the U.S. Census. We all know about the undercount associated with it—often from immigrant groups and refugees. These groups are likely to be among those who would be part of any training program we develop."
Step 4: Lay out a research design that incorporates the team's expertise	"I would suggest an iterative approach in our proposal. We could begin by tapping into contacts at state and nonprofit organizations which have experience with unemployed community members. Word-of-mouth is also a useful strategy because of the trust involved in any referral between community members we know and people they know who are out of work. I'll bet we all know people in the state! Besides, this approach gets us out doing fieldwork. Then, after these conversations, we will be able to design a stronger survey instrument, identify specific economic indicators to follow, and create a really useful training program."

#7: Convincing a Client

It is one month later. Your team has made the short list for the state's training contract. You have been sent down to the capital to meet with the contract officers to negotiate a "best and final." Three of them are sitting across the table from you, each with a copy of the proposal in hand.

The head of contracting speaks: *"We like this proposal quite a lot," he begins. "But I'll be frank, it's more expensive than the other bids we got, mainly on account of all the interviewing and talking and such. We want to recommend that you guys get the contract, but we also know that sooner or later, we're gonna get audited and somebody's going to have to explain why we thought it was a good idea to conduct so many interviews, spend so much time talking to people in the community. Help us out here, if you can. Help us justify the expense of this thing."*

Make *three* simple points about conducting interviews by selecting from the points below.

Point A:	"Anthropology is about people. We know how to build connections, create a safe space for people to share their perspectives and stories, and explain the patterns in beliefs, attitudes, and behavior we discover. We are people experts."
Point B:	"We gather stories and viewpoints to understand the patterns. When those patterns emerge, we have 'sampled to redundancy,' the gold standard in qualitative work. We know when to quit."
Point C:	"Interviewing does not take long—usually between a dozen and two dozen interviews—and is routinely shown to be highly valid. We offer a high return on the investment and a longer-term cost-saving."
Point D:	"Cheaper methods like questionnaires are not effective for measuring sensitive or exploratory topics. People do not want to be reminded in a questionnaire of what they lost (e.g., salary), so they are unlikely to complete it, while people who cannot read will simply not fill out the questionnaire at all. Those people are the most likely to benefit from the retraining!"
Point E:	"Conducting interviews helps ensure that the project has buy-in or support, that verifiable issues are gathered, and that success has a high likelihood."

Follow-up "Let me ask you: Why would a state auditor question what anthropologists do and how we do it? Is it because the state has not funded anthropological research before and the auditor is simply unfamiliar with this type of work?"

#8: Presenting to a General Audience

A year later, you are in front of a group of community members in the auditorium of the municipal building. The training project has been a huge success. More than 85 percent of the program participants managed to get jobs, most of them at or above their previous wage levels. You have prepared a short speech for them about the training program and why it was successful.

You want to explain that it was the approach your team used that was one of the main reasons for the program's success. And the reason you want to explain this approach so that it can be used again for similar community issues in the future.

Tell the story of the project, emphasizing why it was successful.

1. Start with the success story: "Our training program helped 85 percent of participants secure jobs at or above their previous wage levels. Let me share how our approach made this possible."

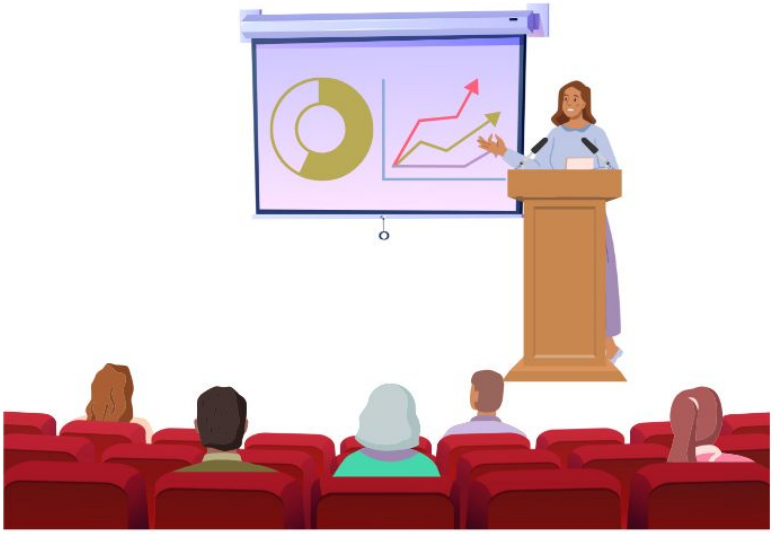
2. Explain the mixed-methods process in simple terms: "Our success came from combining deep listening with systematic data collection; we heard people's stories and documented the patterns."

3. Highlight community involvement: "You were partners in this process, not just subjects of study."

4. Use concrete examples: Share one or two specific stories that illustrate how the anthropological approach uncovered insights that led to program improvements.

5. Present visual evidence: Show simple charts or quotes that demonstrate both qualitative and quantitative results.

6. Emphasize the transferable framework: "This same approach can work for other community challenges like [relevant local example]."



Project Element	Why It Matters	Example of Impact
Building trust with participants through confidentiality and respect	Creates honest communication and reveals hidden barriers	"Participants only revealed their transportation challenges after building trust."
Using open-ended questions to discover unexpected patterns	Uncovers solutions that might be missed by predetermined surveys	"We discovered childcare was a bigger barrier than skills training."
Validating patterns through surveys	Ensures we address the most common issues, not just the loudest voices	"The same three barriers we identified were faced by 78 percent of participants."
Connecting stories to statistics	Makes data meaningful and actionable	"Behind the 65 percent transportation statistic were stories of people walking miles to training."
Incorporating feedback from participants	Ensures solutions work for all people	"Shifting class times based on participant feedback increased attendance by 40 percent."
Acknowledging all contributors	Reinforces community ownership of solutions	"This was truly a community achievement!"