



## An Evolutionary Anthropology Master Syllabus

Evolutionary Anthropology Society

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With the Fall Quarter/Semester fast approaching, many of us are scrambling to organize course syllabi. Whatever the specific course you teach, the required reading list likely reflects a carefully thought-out combination of foundational texts and manuscripts, personal favorites and recent developments. Now, imagine if you could round up *all* the syllabi from *all* the Evolutionary Anthropology-relevant courses taught over the last 15 years and compile one massive reading list from them. What a fantastic reference tool that would be! What a window into the changing trends and current pulse of our field! What if you could even point to one of your *own* works on that list? At last, proof that your scholarship is not just languishing in some obscure journal, but held to in such high regard that colleagues are using it to shape young minds for a generation to come! Glorious!

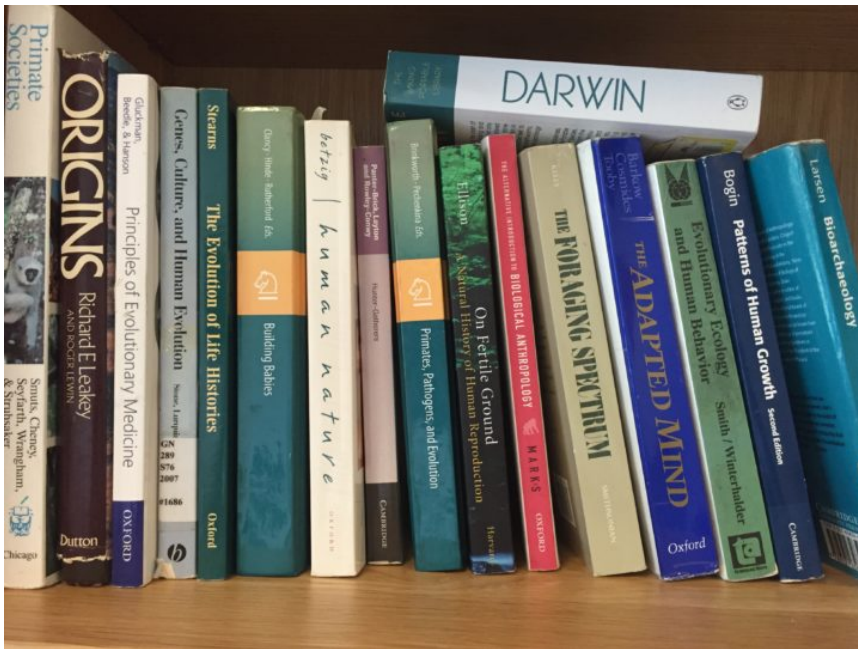


Photo courtesy Melanie Martin

The Open Syllabus Project [aims to do just this](#). So far, the developers have amassed over one million syllabi either available on public sites, or made available to them through university agreements and individual submissions. The texts listed on those syllabi (not the syllabi themselves) have been extracted, indexed and ranked on the site's [Syllabus Explorer](#). You can filter by academic fields and regions. Brief tutorial: each title's "count" refers to the number of times it appears in the database. "Rank" is based on that count (in a filtered search, these scores change relative to other texts indexed by the same criteria). Titles are also assigned a "teaching score", which [the authors propose as a new metric of scholarly contribution](#).

One idle summer day, I sat down to compile the rankings of "EvolAnthro-ish" texts. I filtered by "Anthropology" (alas, there are no subfield filters) and limited the search to the US (gotta start somewhere). This returned a list of 16,431 titles. I scanned the first 1,000 and recorded any titles relevant to Physical/Biological/Evolutionary Anthropology, including works from biology, primatology, osteology, bioarchaeology evolutionary medicine, demography, evolutionary ecology, cultural ecology, evolutionary psychology and anything else I recognized as written by an evolutionary-ish anthropologist. I did not include foundational ethnographies/ theoretical texts unless related to early Phys Anth, as I assumed such titles were assigned in non-evolAnthro courses.

Click [here](#) to view the top-20 titles for anthropology overall, and the 106 EvolAnthroish titles in the top 1,000.

Of course, my resulting list is *juuuuuust* a bit biased. For one, the Syllabus Explorer does not give a count of total syllabi indexed for a search, but at this early stage and given the limits of open-sourcing, any search is bound to return an unrepresentative sample. Even indexed syllabi can be unrepresentative, say, if required readings are formatted into a course reader or listed separately on a course website.

The site's algorithms may also incorrectly map syllabi to different fields. For example, a search for Kelly's "The Foraging Spectrum" yielded a count of 11 in my search, but a count of 25 on the full database. So, either Kelly is widely assigned outside of anthropology or some anthropology courses are not properly mapped to our field. There are other signs that the current algorithm is imperfect, like the seven variations of "On the Origin of Species" that appear on my list. Oh, and coming in at #556 overall with a count of seven? The classic anthropological treatise, Matt Groening's "The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to our Favorite Family History".

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With those many caveats in mind, the resulting list still set off a little *womp womp* sad trombone in my head. There's only one EvolAnthro-ish book in the top 20 overall—an introductory Phys Anth textbook. And in general, the list is heavy on classics, rendering a canon of work that is older, whiter, more male, and less dynamic than the current field really is. So yes, while Darwin is foundational, according to this list he accounts for 15% of all EvolAnthro-ish readings assigned!

How useful is the site as a reference tool? Errrrr..... right now, outside of searching for specific titles or glancing at a page of top ranked titles, the Syllabus Explorer is of limited utility. While I'm grateful to have now read Fedigan's 1986 article, "[The changing role of women in models of human evolution](#)", I did have to manually browse 1,000 titles to come across it.

I applaud the developer's aims and am optimistic that the site will improve with more traffic and contributions (you can help by sharing your own syllabus!). I'm a little more skeptical that the "teaching score" will evolve into a viable metric of scholarly contribution. Even if millions more syllabi are added, there will always be a bias towards classics and contemporary heavyweights in university courses. Manuscripts by early career faculty are never going to be as widely assigned as, say, contemporary texts by Boyd, White and Strier (#three, five and six on my list); books from mid- and late career anthropologists will have a hard time besting Goodall, Leaky and Dawkins (#18, 25, 28); and seriously, who can compete with Darwin?

But now I'm curious. If we *did* have a representative canon of EvolAnthroish texts—from foundational to contemporary books and manuscripts—what would it look like?

So, I'm open-sourcing a new list and starting it off with five works that were cornerstones in my graduate studies and a few of which I have assigned in undergraduate courses: Nesse and Williams' "Why We Get Sick" (which did show up on my list at #365), Ellison's "On Fertile Ground" (which did show up when searched for by title), Smith and Winterhalder's "Evolutionary Ecology and Human Behavior", and articles by [Lee \(1996\)](#) and [Gibson and Mace \(2006\)](#) (none of which show up in the database).

You can add to the list [here](#). Happy syllabus prepping everyone!

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