Students in ANT 481 Anthropology is Elemental teach elementary schoolers to appreciate cultural diversity by introducing them to a scientific field often reserved for higher education.

BY ERIN MOSLEY

In a not-so-far-away land, vibrant creatures adapt with ease to their rapidly morphing environment. Undiscovered clans with unique customs and cultures communicate in a variety of languages. The clans work together, each respectful of the others despite their differences. This world does not exist in a remote jungle, nor is it the fictional construct of a novelist.

It is the collaborative creation of third graders in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Every week, University of Alabama students help children at two schools learn about anthropology — broadly defined as the study of human culture — by creating their own. Kids have fun, unaware their activities are part of an anthropological exercise designed by Dr. Christopher Lynn, associate professor of anthropology at UA, with the aim of fostering a generation of socially conscious and sensitive adults who are understanding and receptive of others.

“We are trying to open the world to them,” says Ashley Stewart, an anthropology PhD candidate and instructor of ANT 481 Anthropology is Elemental: Teaching Anthropology in Primary and Secondary Settings. “Just because a culture is different doesn’t make it weird or abnormal.”

In Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, University of Alabama students enrolled in ANT 481 Anthropology is Elemental taught weekly anthropology lessons to third graders at Tuscaloosa Magnet School – Elementary and Arcadia Elementary School. More than 200 children have learned about anthropology from approximately 20 UA students through ANT 481, now in its fifth year.

In classes with the kids, UA students cover the four sub-disciplines of anthropology — cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, linguistic anthropology and archaeology. Lessons include topics such as food, body modification, ethnography, primates, evolution and race.

Lynn, a father of triplets enrolled at the Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools, initially wanted to find a way to introduce his children and their peers to the studies of anthropology and evolution, a topic often met with opposition in the deep South. “I never knew what anthropology was until college, so this was an opportunity that I could not pass up,” Lynn says.

According to a 2009 study titled Why Science Standards Measure Up, the United States as a whole has been falling behind other nations in educational benchmarks, particularly science literacy, since the 1980s.

The study repeated a review of state science standards conducted in 2000. Each state was assessed on a letter-grade scale in both 2000 and 2009. Alabama received an F in both years, and researchers noted “only Alabama dropped in the score for biological evolution.”

Kelsey Kennedy, a senior from Harvest, Ala., majoring in anthropology, says teaching children about anthropology lifts the veil on a field of study that can seem ambiguous and unclear to those not involved in it. “We can expose the kids to something that is positive,” Kennedy says, “and it doesn’t have to conflict with religion.”

Lynn says lessons help children understand all people are connected, despite racial and cultural differences. Recent exploration of the genome has shown all humans share the same set of genes. “Evolution shows us that biologically, we are not racially divided,” Lynn says. Anthropology examines cultural diversity while proving all humans are fundamentally the same, he continues.

Through the ANT 481 course, anthropology majors learn to translate basic anthropological concepts to a general audience. Before students begin leading lessons at an elementary school, they spend four weeks in training. Each student must lead a minimum of two lessons in a school and serve as a co-teacher during other lessons.

A typical 45-minute session includes a lesson and an activity to solidify it. Kids might spend time developing their own tattoos and tribal markings from body paint during a study on body modification, or they might create their own imaginary species when learning about evolution.

UA students enter information about the lessons they create and lead, along with details about their experiences in the elementary classrooms, into a blog: anthropology.ua.edu/blogs/tmseafins. The blog is public so parents and community partners can see what children are learning.

Tammy Barkey, head of the Parent Teacher Association at Tuscaloosa Magnet School – Elementary and a parent of two children who took the anthropology class, says the program is a wonderful way for children to gain exposure to an important field, and it could spark long-term interest. “It’s not uncommon for a child to do more research when the information really clicks,” Barkey says. Because TMSE is a project-based school, teachers encourage research outside the classroom setting.

Recently, Lynn received a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, a New York-based organization dedicated to advancing anthropology throughout the world. With the aid of this grant, Lynn and his students are further developing Anthropology is Elementary so it can expand across Alabama and into other states.

Tytus says by the time kids reach the end of the program, there’s a shift in their behavior, particularly in the way they treat each other. By studying other cultures, children learn to be empathetic and tolerant, she says. “They really internalize the message that they are supposed to be kind to one another,” she adds. “They are 8 years old and they’re telling each other to look through the eyes of someone else.”

Tytus says she’s learned children can be an agent for positive change in uncertain times. “Adults have a hard time doing that,” she says. “I now see that children are our most important resource.”

To learn more about Anthropology is Elementary, see anthropologielemental.ua.edu or contact Dr. Christopher Lynn at cdlynn@ua.edu or 205-348-4162 or Ashley Stewart at anstewart1@crimson.ua.edu.