Teaching Rites of Passage

Workshop summary

Panel 1 - Challenges

Twelve presentations, each of around fifteen to twenty minutes, were delivered in three different panels over the two days. The first panel, entitled Challenges, brought together four papers reflecting on the experience of changing from the transition from postgraduate research student to tutoring, teaching and lecturing.

Caroline Oliver, discussing her experience of teaching at Hull and Newcastle, reflected on the issue of one's structural transience as a temporary lecturer and graduate teacher, and the difficulty of planning longer-term research strategies in this context. Michael Wilmore compared the very different types and levels of support that he had received whilst teaching at UCL (as a Teaching Assistant) and at the OU (as an Associate lecturer). He felt strongly that there were lessons to be learnt from the OU's intensive approach to support for its staff.

Anselma Gallinat discussed the particularities of being a postgraduate student in anthropology. While students from other disciplines are publishing, anthropologists are in the field, away from a support network. She highlighted the low status of postgraduate tutors and the role mentoring could play in supporting their teaching.

Ian Harper, comparing his teaching experiences in three different institutions, noted the way in which he found himself often left alone, designing and delivering courses with very little input or support from his departmental colleagues. On the other hand he did feel a pressure to not teach certain subjects and texts, depending on the particular theoretical influences *au courant* within departments. This notion of self-surveillance, and the importance of being a good citizen and 'not making a fuss' if one wanted to get on, came up several times during the workshop.

The panel continued with four discussants, who used their own teaching experiences to draw out common themes from the papers. The first discussant, Jon Mitchell, felt that the experience of being pulled different directions was also the experience of being a permanent lecturer – and that there was a constant tension between flexibility and inflexibility, between research and teaching, between institutional demands and toeing the disciplinary line. Stan Frankland noted how the career hierarchy within anthropology departments is expanding, with an increasing reliance on short-term and casualised labour. Recent advertisements for teaching-only fellowships marked, he felt, a growing trend for teaching-only contracts. Griet Scheldeman commented on her experience of teaching both in schools and universities, pointing out the particular challenges in communicating anthropological knowledge to non-anthropologists eg in the medical profession.

Sian Lazar insisted that the focus of this workshop needed to be on students, and their learning needs, rather than on staff careers. She felt that within the pressure to enhance research ratings, undergraduates were not being valued within universities. She pointed out the contradiction of an anthropological apprenticeship offered to postgraduates. As postgraduate tutors, they neither received the support that apprentices deserved nor

appropriate payment. She felt that more explicitness about departmental expectations of the role was important, and that there was a need for closer departmental interaction with their postgraduate tutors, even at the simple level of regular meetings to discuss teaching issues and problems arising. All too often, departments neglected the key pedagogic role that tutors provided.

A general discussion followed. Liza Debevec asked about how much teaching experience was necessary for those job-hunting in anthropology? Jon Mitchell responded that whilst a variety of teaching experiences was valuable, more than a year or two of the same type or tutoring work was not. Several people agreed on the importance of mentoring schemes as a way of supporting junior staff and postgraduate teachers, provided it was done in a mutual way. Dimitrios Theodossopolous called for institutional incentives, such as taking teaching into account in promotion decisions, as a way of raising the profile of teaching. Anselma Gallinat brought up the need for training in marking There was some discussion of the better training received by US graduate students (over their longer graduate careers), and the demand for them in the UK. The poor working conditions often faced by US Teaching Assistants were not discussed. Finally, discussion turned to the origins of 'audit culture' , together with the Thatcherite challenge to universities to justify their use of tax-payers money, and their joint effect of making activities explicitly categorised and quantified.

Panel 2: Strategies

The second panel provided a number of contrasting narratives, both from those who had decided to leave anthropology posts, and those who were seeking to make an academic career in the discipline.

Amanda Ravetz gave the first paper, dwelling on her decision to leave anthropology. She described the tensions she faced over the form, content and amount of teaching expected of her, and her feeling of vulnerability as a new lecturer in a situation of growing departmental deficit. She suggested the growth of audit culture within universities had left little space for spontaneity, imagination and dissent, the very qualities that should characterise new lecturers' teaching and research. In contrast, she described revisiting her first career as an artist. She displayed her grandmother's painting box to participants, showing how she had transformed it and invested it with new meanings, expressive of her own ability to move between disciplines and genres.

Dimitrios Theodossopolous opened by questioning the privileged status of academics. He went on to discuss his own career trajectory in order to remain within the discipline, describing his migrations across Britain, and the different administrative and institutional demands placed upon him. He too pointed out the tension between formal job descriptions and disciplinary expectations, and felt that many people had unrealistic visions of the academic role.

Bonnie van der Steeg argued strongly that the focus of any event such as this had to start with the views of students, and on what would best help with their learning. She reminded the workshop that a great deal was still not known about the way that students learnt, and that many students struggled at university She focused on the lack of confidence felt by

many visiting lecturers, often the result of the lack of training and support they received. If academics weren't sure what the learning outcomes of a course or seminar were meant to be, how could the postgraduate tutors be? She went on to draw on her teaching experiences in schools to demonstrate the demands placed upon the teaching profession, and ended by urging academics to take control of the debate over learning within universities if they were to avoid even more centralised regulation and assessment of their role. Amongst her suggestions for better teaching was to work on ensuring that courses in different years were co-ordinated to ensure that skills were reinforced and developed, and the need for closer monitoring of students and their needs.

Hildi Mitchell described the tensions she felt in trying to develop a career in anthropology, and her decision to retrain as a primary school teacher and do a PGCE. She explored how her disciplinary training enabled her to take an anthropological perspective on the tasks demanded of student teachers, such as class-observation, and peer-review. She felt that the notion of 'learning objectives', even if viewed by academics as part of 'audit culture', was a valuable one, both for the primary school and university classroom. For her, the biggest challenge was in recognising the ways in which learning occurs in non-verbal and non-textual ways.

After a break, Tony Crook was the first discussant. He pointed out the contradictions inherent in an anthropological training, namely that the skills we acquire in one context suddenly come up against a new situation, learning and teaching, in which we haven't received a formal training. Can we use our ethnographic skills in this new context? Noting the focus in some of the presentations on gaps, such as the seeming absence of academic self-reflexivity, and the absence of training, he wondered if part of the problem lay in the frames we used to describe the phenomena. Perhaps we were relying too much on a top-down 'informational' paradigm of knowledge? He contrasted this 'Blairist' conception with a Papua New Guinean conception of knowledge as a bodily substance. Acknowledging the self-making being experienced by students and teachers, he wondered if the educationalists' language ever fully captured these experiences. For example, he wondered if a lack of fit between what was being taught and what was being learnt might not be a valuable thing. He ended by calling for greater attention to one's fieldwork training as a resource to bring into other contexts. Wendy Gunn talked of her research into learning and perceptions of skill, and asked whether creativity could be taught. She asked what couldn't be taught, and suggested that anthropology has critical insights into the learning process itself.

In the general discussion that followed, Bonnie agreed that learning did happen by accident, and that it was hard to benchmark learning experiences that could not be tabulated. But she also asserted that one could not simply rely on a learning process that was accidental. She also felt that there had not been enough emphasis on the intellectual satisfaction that teaching offered. Anselma argued for the importance of using anthropology to help one 'anticipate' learning situations, as a way of becoming better teachers. Meike argued for an ethic of care within the profession, and that one can see the same pattern of lack of care for struggling students in the way that struggling departments were treated. Later Caroline suggested the possibility of teaching ourselves – eg in having workshops on writing research applications, and others suggested bringing influence to bear on the ESRC regarding support for postgraduate teachers.

The conversation turned to the public position of anthropology, and the difficulty faced by the discipline in addressing the wider public. Different reasons for this were explored, from the individualism characteristic of the discipline to the arrogance expressed by some senior anthropologists. It was also acknowledged that the discipline was still characterised by middle-class people with independent incomes, who were able to make a research career because they could take unpaid leave. A related cause was that, despite teaching media studies, anthropology remained resolutely 'high culture' in its intellectual approach.

Panel 3 Challenges:

The final panel explored the race, gender, class and status hierarchies within higher education, and how these effected individual teachers and practitioners. Alberto Corsin-Jimenez contrasted the teaching of anthropology in Chile and the UK, exploring the implications of teaching the field whilst 'in the field'. He argued that, at its best, teaching was actually the paradigmatic form of anthropological knowledge, both in its intrinsic ethnographicness and in the way it involves the re-scaling of knowledge through a reverberating dialogue between student and teacher.

Meike Fechter described the implications of teaching anthropology in UK classrooms as a 'foreigner', and how the position was characterised by both ignorance and knowledge, by both limitations and possibilities. She argued that the rich dynamics within the classroom meant that it could be used as a field-site, and that one's own 'otherness' could be an anthropological resource to challenge the students' own ethnocentricity and inspire debate. Carpets in British bathrooms, she noted, were a source of horror for many Europeans. She also pointed out the limitations of her own cultural and linguistic competence in understanding student cultures, and the time it took for her to recognise the often functional course choices made by students

Robert Gibb and Jonathan Skinner discussed the experience of teaching in both old and new universities, and how these experiences were both the making and unmaking of anthropologists. Gibb challenged the usefulness of a concept of a term like 'rites of passage', seeing use of Van Gennep's focus on ceremonies of transition as somewhat mystifying the 'flexible' employment economy increasingly characteristic of universities, and a concept that considers their position only in relation to their professional and disciplinary career structure. Certainly there were ceremonies, such as induction courses and training workshops, but these were often relatively pointless exercises. For them, any focus on institutional cultures needed to be accompanied by studies of hiring practice and the restructuring of universities. Skinner, in his part of the paper, went to talk about the role of audit culture and the marketisation of universities in relation to his experience at Abertay, where all staff had to 'clock-in' on a daily basis, and an internal market model meant that the focus was often on 'rebranding' courses to attract students.

Finally, Lucette Labache talked of her experience as a black lecturer in Parisian universities. On arriving for her first class, the students asked her where the Professor was. She drew attention to the difficulties faced by individuals from French departments overseas (such as La Reunion) in not being recognised as French, and in gaining teaching posts in the metropole. She described how she had been told by her fellow professors that she would never get a permanent position because of her colour, and went on to talk of managing the resultant tensions, where teaching becomes an emotional issue, linked to issues of power, ethnicity and competence. A recent French move towards affirmative

action has confirmed the levels of discrimination faced by black French students and faculty.

Salma Siddiqui, as the first discussant, pointed out the importance of attending to the inequalities that we continue to reproduce within academia. Liza Debevec noted the irony that racism was being discussed only in relation to France. She also asked why applied anthropology had not been talked about at the conference, the way it was still seen as an 'evil', and the importance of talking about the wider use of anthropology. Kathy asked about whether one could become an anthropologist if one wanted to teach? She also asked about the implications of a growth in the use of digital education.

In the general discussion, Stan felt that we needed to attend more to the way in which students were not a homogenous group, but a category to be explored. He felt that the different changes underway were being discussed as a single issue – should they not be analysed separately? Noting that anthropology is a privileged discipline partly because of the good education received by its practitioners, he reminded us that education was a classic means of social mobility. Anselma pointed out that there was an assumption in Durham that Stockton students were less able to be independent learners - a class-based assumption that was not borne out in her teaching experience. Meike focused on the process of acculturation within institutions, such as with regard to the form an essay should adopt. Finally, Tony felt that the papers revealed that one can learn through recognising what was missing, and the importance therefore of not trying to teach everything. If learning has a dynamic of its own, he suggested, so that people can learn things that they are not being taught, then perhaps teaching turns knowledge inside out.

In a provocative diversion Nigel Rapport asked whether the identity of being an anthropologist was important to participants. The comment stirred a good deal of discussion, both for and against the importance of an anthropological identity. He himself felt that it did not matter, and that his own identity was essentially hybrid, but others felt that this was a position easier to adopt once established within a specific disciplinary profession.

Plenary:

The event ended with a plenary where people asked about one aspect of the event that they had enjoyed, or one insight they would take from the workshop. Many of the comments welcomed the workshop as a constructive environment in which teaching and learning had been taken seriously, and its challenge to the isolation many postgraduate teachers and new lecturers found themselves in.

Several expressed the wish to continue the discussion, whether through an email network, subsequent workshops or a publication of some form. A number felt that a support network for new lecturers would be appropriate, but the view was also expressed that support was of less use long-term than a more active campaign to seek to challenge some of the working conditions faced by the casualisation of teaching.

A few specific comments bear repeating. Anselma felt that the workshop could be retitled 'rights of passage', given its attention to the needs and rights of those new to teaching. Dimitrios spoke of the events hosted by the NNTLA (National Network of Teaching and Learning Anthropology) in the late 1990s, and how, whilst briefly creating a strong sense of

communitas, they had left few visible records in the disciplinary archive. Bonnie suggested that anthropological fieldwork could be the basis of training teachers in anthropology, and Mike summed up the importance of changing teaching practices by insisting that 'either we change organically or they'll GM us'. For Jon, an understanding of peoples' working conditions in different places had been valuable, and he had been reassured by the workshop both that teaching and research were still intimately related and that an atmosphere for activity rather than passivity had been created. Two of the St Andrews postgraduates admitted, on the other hand, that the workshop had left them highly uncertain that they wanted to go on to become academic anthropologists. Tony Crook commented finally that 'we', rather than impersonal institutions or an abstract disciplinary logic, are the future of anthropology

The organisers carried out an email evaluation of the workshop. Responses were mostly positive, but several people expressed the view that more time should have been provided to allow people to respond to and discuss individual papers.

Outcomes

A number of ideas were raised in the workshop for future training/support needs:

a) Workshops on mentoring for new staff, including training and support for mentors.
b) Support for postgraduate teachers and tutors eg. through a 'road-show' of workshops in departments for postgraduate teachers.
c) Encouraging more peer-reviewing of teaching.
d) Professional skills workshops :eg getting published, job interviews etc.
e) Research on how anthropology students learn
f) A web-based handbook for new anthropology lecturers

An event for new lecturers can either focus on developing and supporting practical skills or attempt a more analytical look at the broader political, economic and educational issues facing those new to teaching within the discipline. Whilst this workshop focused on the latter, it is clear that there is demand also for the former.