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Chapter 4

Creating a Dialogue: Bringing Anthropology to the University Campus

Madeline Moison

Introduction

Traditional academic anthropology centers on fieldwork and the production of publications that contribute to a growing body of scholarship. In the past several decades, this collective knowledge has primarily circulated only within the discipline itself; in addition, the present day structure of academic anthropology has played a role in its isolation from other disciplines and the general public (Checker et al. 2010). This state of affairs is partially due to the expansion of the discipline in the 1960s, which made it financially possible to support many discipline-specific books, book series, and journals geared exclusively toward trained anthropologists rather than the lay public. This shift removed many anthropological arguments to an exclusive, professional-only realm resulting in decreased dialogue with audiences outside of the discipline (Borofsky 2011). But all is not lost. A growing field in the discipline, applied anthropology, branches away from this traditional academic model and is pushing the boundaries of what is considered anthropological research.

Within sociocultural anthropology there is an ongoing debate surrounding applied anthropology, which seeks to use the discipline's collective knowledge of various cultures and culture processes to enact real social changes using anthropological knowledge and methodologies. Critics of applied anthropology note that by encouraging such social change, researchers run the risk of causing harm to their study subjects and further, that this line of work

could prevent traditional theoretical anthropological research from taking place. Alexander Ervin, an anthropology professor at the University of Saskatchewan whose work focuses primarily on policy analysis and applied work in Western Canada notes, however, that “Anthropology does not reside in a set of codified knowledge and principles strictly governed by an academic “priesthood.” It is reinvented and practiced through the activities of thousands of anthropologists” (Ervin 2005, 12). Between hardline theoretical and practicing anthropological models lies a continuum of anthropological work that can be conducted (Ervin 2005, 2). Each variation and degree comes with its own challenges but all bring something to the table in terms of understanding the totality of what it means to be human.

Public anthropology, a sub-discipline of applied anthropology, is one domain that challenges this hegemonic framework within the discipline. This sub-discipline of a sub-discipline is centered on the promotion of anthropological knowledge to the public. It is a way for the discipline to interact with a larger audience outside of the academic “Ivory Tower,” which allows a broad audience to interact with anthropological material in a way that is both accessible and engaging (Borofsky 2011). This paper will look at the benefits of employing a public anthropological perspective in a university setting.

Carol McDavid, an archaeologist and executive director at the Community Archaeology Research Institute, Inc., has described her work on a historical plantation research project using a public anthropological framework. The project engaged the community by way of a webpage that fostered a dialogue about the research being conducted at the plantation excavation. As McDavid succinctly put it, “presenting the data in a more fluid, conversational, and contingent terms would help create a communicative environment that could open the discourse about the data and encourage people to challenge and even elaborate on the original interpretations”

(McDavid 2004, 50). Public anthropology seeks to address broad and critical concerns of the community so that others beyond the discipline are able to understand the purpose of anthropology, as well as anthropological explanations and inferences, thereby encouraging the public to engage with the information (Borofsky 2011). With her public outreach initiative, McDavid was able to gain deeper insight into the cultural significance of the finds and the local community got a chance to interact with the archaeological material through excavation, giving them far more intimate knowledge of how anthropology, and more specifically archaeology, is conducted (McDavid 2004).

Another venue where public anthropology can be implemented is in Museum Anthropology. Museum exhibitions are a highly visible way to educate the public about anthropology, especially when the information is presented in a way that makes the academic research accessible and engaging for a non-anthropological audience. For example Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology (MOA), located at the University of British Columbia strives to bring anthropology to the public and campus community. In his welcoming statement on the museum's website, museum director Professor Anthony Shelton notes that, "The cutting-edge scholarship of the Museum makes possible a range of exhibitions and events that cut across traditional disciplinary divisions to provoke creative engagement and dialogue" (Shelton 2015). Founded in 1927, MOA has built a long-standing history of bringing cultural and anthropological research to the public. The museum's history includes working closely with First Nations groups in British Columbia, and has co-developed exhibitions of both cultural historical items and more modern works of art. In recent years the Museum has also acquired more works from Africa, Asia, Polynesia, and Europe, with the goal of increasing public education and outreach (Mayer and Shelton 2009, 1–13). This particular museum-based method of disseminating anthropological

knowledge is crucial, as it increases the visibility of the discipline and fosters conversations between the discipline, the public, and other stakeholders (such as the First Nations groups). This model also works as a useful guide for the project described below. As the MOA is located on a college campus, it provides a touchstone for our own exhibition “What is Anthropology?” that took place at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Durham Campus in the spring of 2015.

From the Ivory Tower to the Public: Goals for Introducing the Discipline to the Campus

There are many misconceptions about the practice of anthropology among students at UNH. These misperceptions often center on the idea that the discipline is focused only on material remains such as bones and fossils, as well as the idea that fieldwork is similar to the exploits of fictional characters such as *Indiana Jones*. Popular television shows such as *Bones* help to foster some of these misconceptions as well (Royal Anthropological Institute 2015). This is not an issue specific to academia either, as evidenced by similar findings from The Denver Museum of Nature and Science. There, curators also encountered the problem of how to accurately represent this broad discipline in their archaeological and ethnographic displays. They realized that the only permanent exhibits presented Egyptian archaeology and Native American ethnology. These exhibits provided a very narrow view of all the ethnographic and archaeological cultural material in the museums collections, yet they are also representative of the subjects that resonant most with museumgoers. In order to bridge this gap, the museum curated a detailed collections book to shed light on the wide variety of cultural and archaeological works in the museum’s possession (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010, 3–4).

In order to counter some of these misconceptions and lessen the distance between the student body at UNH and the wide variety of work being done by anthropological faculty, I proposed the creation of a gallery exhibition showcasing the work and research of professors in

the Department of Anthropology at UNH. I chose this method and format for several reasons: (1) a gallery exhibition provided an effective platform to reach wide audiences and foster a dialogue between the discipline, department and student body as a whole; (2) a gallery style exhibition of work is also uniquely designed to showcase the wide range of work conducted by the department's faculty; and (3) images and artifacts can be engaging and accessible to a much broader audience that may not have a background in anthropology.

The goals of this project were centered on fostering multiple dialogues: a dialogue between the anthropology department and the student body of UNH; a dialogue between students in the anthropology department and their professors; and finally a dialogue between anthropology students and non-anthropology students. Ideally, anthropological research and methods should be seen for their important contributions to public knowledge and cross-cultural understanding. The gallery exhibition attempted to make some of this work visible to those students who had no prior knowledge of the subject in a hands-on, experiential manner, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of the discipline and the resources available on the UNH campus.

Creating Public Knowledge: the Gallery Exhibition

The gallery was located in the Memorial Union Building, the main student center on campus, between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. on April 20th and 21st, 2015. The exhibition was comprised of display boards and a variety of cultural and archaeological artifacts provided by professors. Each display board showed images provided by professors about their research and a brief description of their work. These boards were designed to be informative, straight forward, and engaging pieces. A side table opposite the boards was covered with artifacts excavated by students in Professor Meghan Howey's "Lost Campus" archaeology course (ANTH 444). Pottery

sherds, glass fragments and a clay sewer pipe from the early 1900s were available for students to interact with. Students frequently asked about these archaeological artifacts, and more importantly, when the “Lost Campus” course would be offered next (Figure 3.1). This part of the exhibition received the most attention from students.



Figure 3.1. Left: Two students ask questions about pottery fragments on display at the exhibition. Right: Display boards and artifacts.

On the first day of the event, April 20th, only a small number of students attended (approximately 30), in addition to the author and faculty from the Anthropology department. The few students who did attend were extremely interested in the exhibition, and asked many questions pertaining to anthropology. One female biomedical student stopped in to ask how anthropology could be useful for her major. I showed her some of the research of medical anthropology Professor Natalie Porter. A recently declared anthropology student attended who was uncertain of what branch of anthropology to focus on in his studies. I demonstrated to him the wide array of valuable work that can be done with anthropological training, using the professors’ profile boards to indicate what kinds of research is being done. Several other

students, who were not anthropology majors asked questions about the anthropology classes being offered in the coming semester, and about what these classes could offer them. I asserted how incredibly interdisciplinary the field of anthropology is and how linkages can be easily drawn to a variety of related fields of study.

On the second day, April 21st, many more students attended the event (approximately 70). Two professors from the Department of Anthropology brought their classes to see the exhibition (Figure 3.2). An ESL (English as a Second Language) professor also brought his class of 15 students to the exhibition. For each student group, I gave a brief talk about anthropology and the Department, and then answered questions about what anthropology is on a broad scale, citing the examples in the gallery. This type of interaction with a group of students who had little or no previous knowledge of the field of anthropology, or the Department, was perhaps the most influential outcome of the exhibit.



Figure 3.2. Students from an anthropology class wander around the exhibit.

Conclusion: Evaluating and Moving Beyond the Gallery

Given the aims of the project listed above, the gallery exhibit was deemed a success. First, though it may have not reached a large portion of the student body, the exhibit did begin a dialogue between a segment of the student body and the Department of Anthropology. Non-anthropology students were able to see the value of developing an anthropological skill set and how the Department can help them gain some of those skills. Second, current Anthropology students gained a deeper understanding of the research of their professors, which will hopefully lead to new conversations and perhaps internships or senior projects. Third, the interactions of Anthropology students (such as the author) and non-anthropology students provided an original, fresh, and overall successful way of educating the student body on a peer-to-peer basis. Last, while not an explicit goal of the gallery exhibition, news of the event managed to reach an audience beyond UNH through social media, with Instagram “likes” from the American Anthropological Association!

Despite achieving its goals, this event did not reach as large a portion of the student body as was hoped. However, in referring back to the public anthropology model described above, I continue to brainstorm ways in which this dialogue could be more effective in the future, with anthropology students acting as bridges between the Department and the larger student body on campus. To further the educational outreach begun by the gallery exhibit here, I also decided to create an Anthropology Club for students. Encouraged by the department to pursue creation of the club, I have taken on an internship with Prof. Sara Withers in order to make the Anthropology Club a reality at UNH.

This club will be open to all students interested in anthropology, regardless of their major, and will provide a space for further anthropological discussion outside of the confines of the classroom. My vision is for the Anthropology Club to host guest speakers and discussion

panels that revolve around anthropological subjects, and to collaborate with local organizations, museums, and institutions. At the time of this printing the Club has held several preliminary meetings and has begun the process of becoming a recognized student run organization at UNH.

Importantly, public anthropology will continue to be used as a framework to structure the mission and goals of the Anthropology Club. As two of the MOA curators put it, “events that cut across traditional disciplinary divisions... provoke creative engagement and dialogue” (Mayer and Shelton 2009, 2). The aim of the Anthropology Club will be to bridge the anthropology department and the larger student body at UNH, with anthropology students acting as the ambassadors for both the department and the discipline, a role that will hopefully inspire public engagement and dialogue.

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