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A Good Straight Road: Reflections on the Development of Pre-University Anthropology in the UK

Bob Simpson
University of Durham

The articles assembled in this collection provide a timely focus upon a critical issue for the reproduction of anthropology as an institutionalised form of knowledge in the UK and more widely. Simply stated, the problem they identify is as follows: anthropology is a relatively small discipline with low visibility beyond the sites in the academy where it is taught and where research is carried out; there are currently significant threats to the future of anthropology as practised within British higher education and in other countries too [e.g. in terms of its funding, sustainability, perceptions of relevance, the current nature of evaluation and audit]; one of the main areas of vulnerability, in this regard, is the recruitment of new generations of students into the discipline, which is variable and volatile across the sector; and, finally, a significant factor here is the virtual absence of anthropology in curricula at pre-university level, particularly in the UK. In addition, the papers show a strong conviction that anthropology has something valuable and engaging to offer at this level and into employment possibilities beyond.

The idea of ‘pathways’ into anthropology is a trope that is used by the editors of the issue to bring the problem into focus. At the moment these pathways appear to be poorly sign-posted and are a bit haphazard, as they do not figure on most maps. People tend to stumble upon their destination serendipitously, if at all. Whilst those who arrive are usually delighted when they do so, not everyone is up for the risks that come with off-road adventure or, more likely, even know that it is a possibility. Consequently, relatively few find their way into the discipline when compared with the thousands that annually pour down the wide and clearly sign-posted boulevards that lead into, say, sociology or psychology. The solution explored in this collection is the construction of a good, straight road which will not only be pleasant to travel down for its own sake but, will also increase the traffic into under-graduate anthropology programmes.

To extend this metaphor yet further, building such a road requires a good deal of ‘civil’ engineering: plans have to be made, routes have to be mapped, materials have to be assembled and objections have to be met from those whose territory it might have to cross or those who are opposed on the grounds that they do not see the purpose of such a road in the first place. The contributions in this special issue bring to our attention the road-building work that is currently

going on as well the work that has gone on previously, alongside lessons that might be learned from other places: they state the case clearly for why a road is needed (Callan and Street); they summarise progress to date (Bennett), they provide useful comparators (Popson and Witteveen, Balzani); and they offer solutions to the problems that are faced which are practical (Basu and Coleman, Hawkins and Mills), creative (Bunn) and ambitious, culminating in the long awaited realisation of an A-Level in anthropology being available in UK schools (Callan and Street). On the evidence presented here, progress has been significant. Building roads is one of the less glamorous tasks that an anthropologist might take up and those involved in this one are to be commended for their efforts.

Acknowledging people hard at work on meaningful endeavour would in itself be a fitting way to end such a collection but, in any construction enterprise, problems arise that could never have been anticipated – they only become apparent as the elements begin to be assembled on the ground, as it were. To this end I would like to use the space given me here to elaborate on some of the tensions that emerge once the articles are put side by side and begin to enter into dialogue with one another. The three tensions that I wish to highlight are: the externalities of the discipline versus its internalities, disciplinarity versus interdisciplinarity, and knowledge versus practice. Finally, having concentrated on ‘pathways’ into anthropology, I would like to give a brief comment on the pathways that take people beyond their degrees and consider briefly the question of the application of what they have learned. These pathways, I would maintain, are similarly haphazard and unclear, only this time for anthropology undergraduates, many of whom are stepping into an increasingly uncertain and inclement world of work. Important for the argument developed here, however, is that the pathways out of anthropology are linked in important ways to the ones that lead people in.

Externalities vs internalities

The attempt to improve the visibility of anthropology in schools is not a new endeavour, with efforts going back at least to the 1980s.¹ An important question to ask about the progress that has been made in relation to the development of an A-Level in anthropology is, why now? What is the change in ‘climate’ that Callan and Street (this issue) refer to? Why might efforts succeed in the present when they manifestly failed in the past? Is progress down to the fact that current exponents have worked more effectively than those who went before and learned from their efforts; been more

¹ In the UK, the RAI was active by way of its Education Committee throughout the 1980s. In the 1990s a Pre-University Anthropology Forum briefly flourished organised by staff at the University of East London. The current initiative came about as a result of a Strategic Review which established a Committee on Anthropology in Secondary and Further Education (chaired by Professor Brian Street).

canny in dealing with the world beyond academe; found ways of identifying resources and personnel specifically for the task; and generally been better co-ordinated across the discipline? The answer to all these questions is probably 'yes'. However, there is always the question of how the specifics of such activity articulate with the externalities of Higher Education – the operation of power, governance and resource.

UK HE has undergone some significant changes in the last decade. A massive expansion of the numbers of undergraduates has come hand in hand with expectations of greater accountability for the use of public funds. The latter have been a major driver in the growth of audit in higher education as evident in the apparatuses of benchmarking, research assessment, teaching quality assessment and national student surveys that now form part of the fabric of work in a university (Power 1994; Strathern, 1997, 2000; Shore and Wright 1999; Brenneis 2009 ;Brenneis *et al.* 2005]. Under these changing conditions, a key objective is to demonstrate explicitly the ways in which publicly-funded knowledge transfer operates in the service of society and economy. For example, simple claims to maximise the 'knowledgeability' of students are no longer adequate (Nowotny *et al.* 2001: 80). They are eclipsed by policies which demand that the ways in which knowledge transfer serves a wider set of needs is made explicit and, moreover, instrumental. The correlate of this strategy is often one of figuring out what skills and training are wanted by employers and businesses and folding these back into undergraduate programmes (Simpson 1997). For UK anthropology, a consequence of this change in the atmospherics of Higher Education has been to stimulate debate on policy, relevance and application (e.g. Sillitoe 2003; also see Sillitoe 2007; Pink and Fardon 2004). Indeed, some have argued that without closer attention to these issues the viability of anthropology as a subject with a broad student base is brought into question. Sillitoe, for example, argues for the need to increase the profile of anthropology in fields where it has obvious 'relevance' such as development, forensic science, the media, museums and intercultural work, but also other occupations where the benefit of an anthropological training is less clear, such as law, banking, social work, human resources, retailing, management and the armed forces (Sillitoe 2003:2).

In many respects, the changes outlined above are symptomatic of attempts to re-position British Higher Education in terms of its public accountability. The niche that anthropology might come to occupy in this re-positioning is a distinct one. It is often pitched somewhere between widening access to higher education (and to anthropology as a low visibility discipline) and facilitating communication and understanding at the interface between global and local processes (which is, in itself, taken to be a good thing). However, these responses are shaped by a broader set of concerns

about democratic participation and the making of ‘good’ citizens, as articulated by government, enshrined in policy and driven by resource allocation. Much of this thinking was triggered by reflections on the UK’s general election in 1997. Apart from the return of a Labour Government, this election was noted for its poor turn out. Concern about voter apathy prompted politicians, led by the former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, to set up a working party to investigate the problem. The group was to be chaired by Sir Bernard Crick, a well-regarded academic and democratic socialist. The working party’s brief was to investigate and make recommendations about the state of ‘education for citizenship’ [QCA 1997]. Significantly, the key to future democratic vitality was located among pre-16s and the emphasis was on how to insert a programme of citizenship education into the UK’s National Curriculum framework (see Breslin and Dufour 2009). Citizenship thus began to appear both as a topic and an aspiration throughout educational policy in the early part of the last decade.² It was recognised that the kind of citizenship envisaged needed to move beyond the political scientist’s classical notion of citizens as bearers of rights and responsibilities. In the intellectual space that this debate subsequently opened, anthropological disciplinary expertise was offered as a way to provide more meaningful insight into the challenges of cultural diversity, conflict, communication and translation - in other words, what it means to be an effective citizen in a complex, pluralist democracy. Anthropology’s promise was to offer both a de-mystification of the world as well as the skills that enable one to see it as others do.

The claim thus far is that ‘citizenship’ education has created a curriculum space that anthropology might fill. In this space, a more anthropologically informed citizenship might be articulated and a healthier and more sustainable flow of students into anthropology might be assured as a useful by-product. These are laudable goals, yet vectors of opinion within the discipline do not all point in the same direction when it comes to this issue. As Mills has suggested there are ‘missionaries’ and there are ‘mandarins’: those who see anthropological audiences as made up of a wider public and those who see them as essentially made up of other anthropologists (Mills 1999). In other words, the zeal – on occasion evangelical – with which some people approach the expansion of anthropology, is not shared by all. There is a quiet resistance to the idea of widening access and the vulgar massification that comes with it – why do we need a road, what’s wrong with the footpath! In this view, the value of anthropology is to be found in its scarcity and elusiveness and, in any, case the priorities of the academy lie with higher -level research, not lower level curricula. As has

² For example, the Learning and Skills Act was passed in the UK in 2000 and this resulted in the establishment of a new Learning and Skills Council with a wide remit for the modernisation post-16 training and education. Its vision of the nation was, *inter alia*, one in which individuals would achieve their full potential and companies would thrive; that is, confident, socially inclusive, with strong families and neighbourhoods, where people could grow and be equipped to play a full part in their community; in which creativity, enterprise, and a regard for learning could flourish.

already been pointed out in the introduction, Leach once asked how people could learn about other societies when they hadn't learned about their own (Leach 1973:4, cited by Bennett this issue). In this view, anthropology is presumably something that one only moves into when assured of an identity and a place within one's own society. Such a formulation ensures a perpetual game of catch-up because one can never be at the same place as the previous generation; they will always know more (as my own supervisor once pointed out when I marvelled at Lévi-Strauss' octogenarian musings: 'anthropology is not a young man's game'). But, what anthropology in schools is doing is arguably something else – learning about one's own culture through a dialogue with others, and moreover, in settings that have themselves long been ethnically diverse. The endpoint, here, is not a superior understanding of other cultures *per se* but of a better understanding of one's own, one's place within it, its relation to other cultures and, most important of all, the improvisatory skills that give social life its plasticity and dynamism. The difference captured here is one highlighted some years ago as the one between pedagogical strategies that are either 'substantivist', that is, draw attention to the tradition of enquiry out of which the contemporary discipline of anthropology is fashioned, or 'imaginationist', in that the emphasis is on apperception, ways of seeing and anthropology as a kind of social skill (Mascarenhas-Keyes and Wright 1995; Coleman and Simpson 1999; Mills 2003). As I go on to argue, this tension around what it is that anthropology has to offer is one that runs through other aspects' of the debate about the relationship between anthropology in Higher Education and the creation of a viable precursor in schools.

Disciplinarity vs interdisciplinarity

When the road is built and the first students set foot on it, so to speak, an important milestone in disciplinary development will have been reached for anthropology in the UK. Curricula will have been agreed, examination protocols put in place, text books identified from the existing introductory literature and new ones written to meet the anticipated demand, teachers will have been trained and anthropology will have taken its place in the list of well over 100 subjects taught at Advanced Level. Ironically, this heightened disciplinary visibility will have taken place at a time of growing uncertainty around the place of disciplines in British Higher Education. Historically, British universities have evolved as 'diversities', that is, clusters of disciplines each with their own distinct identities, traditions and boundaries in which deeply engrained divisions of intellectual labour are protected and reproduced. Deviation from this model is often seen as tantamount to defection, resulting in a dilution of disciplinary vigour. Yet, there are many who would argue that the institutional arrangements that underpin the reproduction of disciplines do not facilitate the

production of new knowledge but rather impede it. One consequence is a call for greater inter-disciplinarity or even trans- and post-disciplinarity (see Chandler 2009 for an overview; also Biagioli 2009). In these approaches, collaboration, dialogue, borrowing, hybridization and the loosening of attachments to disciplinary identities are encouraged in order to better address issues of common concern. The promise is that, in a two-heads-are-better-than-one sort of way, a problem will be more effectively solved by bringing multiple perspectives to bear. It is assumed that the disciplinary alternative is to look at the problem through many different lenses and thereby fragment it such that it is only ever partially solved. Yet, in recent years, a paradox has been in evidence: whilst inter-disciplinarity has been widely favoured and promoted (e.g. by research councils), the apparatuses that are used to monitor and assess teaching and research performance are mostly tied to disciplines and allocate resources accordingly (e.g. the Higher Education Funding Council of England and Wales).³ Trying to resolve the paradox has thrown up lots of hybrids in the form of ‘studies’ (gender, science, environmental etc.) and ‘centres’ linked to specific research agenda; but, in pragmatic terms, a rather primordial take on disciplinarity has hitherto tended to win out.

The development of anthropology as an A level could thus be seen as consistent with, and a further expression of, the robustness and persistence of disciplinarity. Yet, the case that anthropology presents in this regard is far from straightforward. As a discipline it is rather like the Tardis, the time machine disguised as a humble police patrol box in which the fictional character of Dr Who travels; it appears very small from the outside but is vast on the inside. As the UK Quality Assurance Agency’s ‘Anthropology Benchmark’ statement opined: ‘Anthropology as a subject is concerned with the study of the social, cultural and biological diversity of humans. Its various branches embrace the study of human relations (both biological and social), historical and evolutionary changes, ways of making a living and governing, bodies, artefacts, knowledge, emotion and cognition’ – which doesn’t leave much that would have to be left out! (QAA 2002:1). Clearly, the task of deciding what, from this massive landscape, might find its way into something as ‘disciplined’ as an A-Level curriculum is going to be contested, to say the least. In any case, the claims that are made for anthropological knowledge are not generally of the substantive-knowledge kind. Anthropologists operate with some highly interdisciplinary currencies; the stock-in-trade is the claim to holistic approaches in which knowledge advances are accomplished through an endless play on comparison, connection, juxtaposition, bifurcation etc (Strathern n.d.). Indeed, in this collection, Basu and Coleman make a splendid case for anthropology as just such a ‘bridge’ between existing disciplines. Anthropological insights, creatively applied to museum collections,

³ For example, see the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise and discussion by Brenneis 2009.

prove to be an excellent way for students and teachers to make connections between objects, day-to-day experience and education. Arguably, such approaches, which fall clearly in the ‘imaginationist’ camp – student-led, reflexive, synthesising, stimulating and useful – could work even better in a context where curriculum crunching was less in evidence (see Popson and Witteveen this issue). However, in the highly prescribed curricula of contemporary UK education, a ‘subject’ with quite this level of ubiquity is not easily packaged and operationalised; simply arguing that anthropology is what it does, may not get very far. Sillitoe had a similar idea in mind in his piece on applied anthropology where he argued that attempts to argue anthropology’s ‘relevance to almost everything ..[.].. ultimately begs the discipline’s existence’ (Sillitoe 2007:148). So, how does a subject that makes claims about its capacities to make other things visible make itself visible? The answer to this question, I would maintain, can never satisfactorily be answered as it goes to the very core of what anthropological knowledge is and ought to be about – the dynamism and creativity of human social and cultural life, and how we are all both object and subject within any attempt to understand these processes. This observation leads me to the third of my tensions.

Knowledge and practice

As Callan and Street cogently argue, there is a need to give an account of anthropology in terms of its own substantive traditions of enquiry into the causes, forms and consequences of human diversity. Without a systematic account and the external recognition and validation this enables, progress with current plans is likely to be slow, if not impossible. But, Callan and Street also make a compelling case for the place of ethnography in educational practice, delivery and content – it is not only what anthropologists know, but how they come to know it, that is important, and with this assertion we cross into a rich and problematic arena concerning the place of practice in pedagogy.

Learning what ethnography is and what participant-observation is about is one thing; trying to integrate these practices into teaching, as ‘imaginationist’ strategies are wont to do, is quite another. Again, the issues are not new. Some years ago there was an interesting debate about whether fieldwork should be taught in undergraduate curricula. Those in favour argued for de-mystification of the fieldwork process, better pedagogies for life beyond the academy and more effective ways into what anthropological knowledge is all about; those against pointed to the resources needed to properly supervise projects, the impossibility of achieving an appropriate level of immersion in other lifeworlds, and the possibility that promoting an anthropology of ‘home’ would domesticate and undermine anthropology’s hitherto global vision (Coleman and Simpson 1999; Thorn & Wright 1990; Ingold 1989; Sharma 1991). Interestingly, most undergraduate programmes do now include

research methods modules and many encourage elementary exercises in data collection and observation for dissertation purposes. There will no doubt be continuing disquiet about the inclusion of fieldwork practice in a future A-Level curriculum; that ‘students will carry out a small-scale investigation on an anthropological topic of their choice’ (Callan and Street this issue 32) will no doubt cause some consternation. However, as Bunn wonderfully demonstrates, in her contribution to this special issue, the pedagogical gains that can be made when students are allowed to incorporate their own experience into their learning are substantial (see also Popson and Witteveen). Her focus on ‘enskillment’ as a dimension of anthropological pedagogy shifts learning into an experiential register which is both exciting and creative; synthesising rather than analytical; accessible rather than exclusionary. It would be over-stating the case to say that anthropology was the only subject that could inspire passion and enthusiasm for teachers and pupils alike, but the possibilities for enchantment are indeed rich.

Pathways beyond anthropology?

In this essay I have said a good deal about the pathways into anthropology and the tensions that surround making these more visible and accessible. In this final section I want to turn briefly to the other end of the process and to what happens when anthropology graduates prepare to leave university and find their way in the world of work. Arguably, this transition is also one that has ‘pathways’ that are less than obvious and the question ‘what is anthropology?’ is now one being asked by employers rather than sixth formers and their tutors.

Some years ago, this was one of the issues that we gathered information about in a survey of Human Sciences students who graduated between 1995 and 2002 (Simpson *et al.* 2004). The survey captured graduates’ reflections on a Human Sciences (anthropology) degree taught at Queen’s Campus Stockton, in the North of England and, furthermore, how this degree figured in their employment seeking and their working lives after graduation.⁴ Of the small percentage who did respond, the majority were in employment or further education (only 2% reported being unemployed) and of these most were accounted for in terms of jobs within local government, the NHS or the voluntary sector. Just over two-thirds (67%) of respondents reported that their employers had been interested in the subject of their degree and the type of employment being

⁴ We sent survey questionnaires to all students who graduated from the Human Sciences programme between its first cohort, in 1995, and 2002. The questionnaires covered general queries regarding financial situation, personal development and the use of the degree, as well as more specific questions about an applied anthropology module. Out of a total of 437 questionnaires, 121 were returned, giving a response rate of 27.6%.

sought appeared to have a significant bearing on this. Where employers were looking for applicants with good ‘people skills’ the links were readily evident:

Since my employers were looking for a person who had knowledge of people as well as someone who could interact with them, they were very interested in the subject of my degree.

And in another instance,

Within this field of training, the "human" element has always sparked interest and led to discussion (and debate!). They have been interested in the topics I studied and how my skills can be applied to a working environment.

One particular aspect of employer interest arises because anthropology is a little out of the ordinary and does seem to offer something that other disciplines do not:

‘Each interview panel has shown curious interest in the anthropological view’ or ‘over the past 2 years I have had to liaise a lot with local midwives, community workers and Pakistani Women’s Centre officials for my current research. I have discovered that many of these groups are very interested in my background and how often many anthropologists are aware of the intricacies of community life. Many practitioners do not share the same issues of sensitivity and confidentiality’.

Other respondents reported a healthy interest in anthropology but with qualification: ‘Yes – but often required some explanation. E.g. putting "applied anthropology" in brackets after it on CVs etc’ or ‘Very much so, once it was explained to them!’ or ‘Always look surprised when you say "medical anthropology", then you explain and they turn to being interested’. However, one of the commonest responses of employers was indifference, particularly in circumstances where the job involved was of a more general nature. This was evident from comments such as: ‘only on a chatty level’, ‘never been asked about it at all’ and ‘"What did you study?" – a common question, more getting to know you than an intrinsic interest in the subject’. For others, there was an element of surprise and frustration at the extent of ignorance of employers:

They don't know what it is. Even when you explain that it's 'anthropology', they look at you blankly. They think it's some airey-fairy course and would probably prefer an Economics degree or something.

Or, 'If I say I did Human Sciences, people don't know what that entails. If I say anthropology, they look even more baffled'.

Nonetheless, the results of this survey were very reassuring and indeed encouraging in thinking about the more generic applications of an anthropological training. But the findings do point to the need to support students in their endeavours to present themselves and their training as something that is of value in a wide-range of employment settings. Some progress has been made in the attempts to map the connection between anthropology degrees and careers for students of anthropology.⁵ Such initiatives are becoming increasingly important when it comes to graduate employment statistics and university league table performance. More importantly, however, they will also be vital in providing students with the ideas and strategies needed to make the case for anthropological input into the policies, practices and technologies through which society might in future be transformed.

Perhaps, there is another road-building project in the offing!

Bob Simpson is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Durham. He has had a long-standing interest in the relationship between anthropology, pedagogy and publics beyond the academy.

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⁵ For example, the RAI has launched its own 'Careers in Anthropology' leaflet (<http://www.therai.org.uk/education/publications/>) also see Coleman and Simpson (1998: 93-99) Nolan (2003), Sabloff (2009).

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