



Teaching experiences

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Teaching Anthropology at Godalming College

Josie Gadsby

This article explores the experience of teachers at Godalming College with delivering the Anthropology A level and whether we can continue to find a place for Anthropology in the wider curriculum after the closure of the qualification. It is split into four sections: firstly, it explores the personal experiences of students and staff; secondly, it looks at how we could potentially incorporate anthropology into other elements of the curriculum beyond 2017; thirdly, it examines the progression routes of students who have chosen anthropology at college and more generally the connections it created with Higher Education institutions; and finally, it assesses the evidence that the A level was beneficial for the students.

It is worth explaining how anthropology worked at Godalming College. We ran the course as an additional subject, meaning that it was a subject students picked up in Year 13 as an AS qualification (equivalent to half a full A level) and that it was taught in less time (three hours a week instead of the four-and-a-half hours available to most A levels at Godalming).ⁱ Students had the opportunity to choose this subject to supplement their A level programme and, in the case of some, to pick up an additional AS qualification because they had failed another. We have had two sets in each year, of approximately forty students in total, and have been running the course for three years now; next year will be our last. We always had the intention of introducing the course as a full A level, but unfortunately that became infeasible due to AQA's decision to discontinue the course. Our primary reason for establishing the course was intrinsic subject interest, but we also felt it would be a useful differentiation tool for the Sociology department in providing a stimulating and complementary course for students.

Student feedback from the course has been overwhelmingly positive. Given students chose this as an additional subject (with a much heavier time commitment than the other additional studies available to them), their interest was apparent from the beginning. Topics that particularly captured their attention included the Body (particularly in how it is used to shape and express identities), Rituals, Cyborgs, Polygamy and Power (particularly when looking at gender relations). Numerous students enquired about where they could undertake the A2 year in order to complete the full A level. Anonymous feedback from the students was always sincerely passionate about the course. Many students went on to study anthropology or related courses in higher education. For some students the choice to continue with the discipline changed late on in the year, challenging their own ideas about what they wanted to do with their futures.

Furthermore, as staff we really enjoyed teaching it. With a mix of academic backgrounds (only myself having studied anthropology before) we decided to launch it in the Sociology department, which worked exceptionally well. We had, with the help of another college in our consortium 'S7', created an excellent bank of resources and were improving the course year on year. It was incredibly rewarding to teach and has stimulated some of the best discussion I have experienced as a teacher. This has included: debates on whether or not polyandry is empowering for women; to what extent we should be tolerant of other cultures, especially when considering practices like female genital mutilation; whether witchcraft can be seen as a rational belief system; whether art or language came first; and whether thought shapes language or vice versa. These debates involved most of the class expressing strong opinions from different standpoints and more often than not the students noticed their own perspectives and perceptions changing and evolving. Moreover, our results were improving year on year. When AQA released its decision to discontinue the A level there was a college-wide disappointment with many

members of staff from various subjects expressing to me that they would have liked to have taught on this course.

There were however some challenges in teaching anthropology, many of which we were aware of in advance. For instance we knew there would be a significant issue with the restriction on teaching time, given the content heavy nature of the course. There was also a question mark over whether the uptake by students would be sufficient for the course to come to fruition, and pressure in terms of creating exciting resources on top of our other subject commitments. However, none of these were insurmountable and predominantly were the result of the course being taught as an additional subject. Had this been a full A level I think it would have had wide appeal given the amount of interest already shown in the Anthropology AS level.

Future initiatives to include anthropological elements in the curriculum.

The success of the course made us want to hold on to the student interest and engagement with the subject matter in the wake of AQA's decision. There are a number of ways that we can do this at Godalming College, as although these fall short of promoting Anthropology as a stand-alone sixth-form subject. At Godalming College we teach a number of complementary subjects to Anthropology such as Geography, Biology, Psychology, Government and Politics, Philosophy and Sociology. One course available to us with some overlap of content matter was 'World Development'. There were many times when we discussed some of the development issues associated with not understanding cultures fully; we looked at various ethnic groups, including those within the UK, with a significant case study on Travellers. Many students with an interest in bottom-up initiatives, in particular, were keen to combine their anthropological and development skills in their future careers. The very debate 'What is development?' also drew heavily on anthropological ideas. I had intended to call on some of the key anthropological ideas more and more as I taught World Development, but alas, AQA has also elected to remove this course, with the last full A level cohort starting this September. We are hoping to offer the Cambridge Pre-U 'Global Perspectives' as an alternative to World Development and indeed, to some extent, Anthropology.ⁱⁱ This will introduce students to some of the key topics and research approaches associated with Anthropology, but it will not provide the depth required to identify anthropology as a discipline in its own right.

There could be more initiatives in college to raise the profile of anthropology and identify its proximity to more familiar disciplines, thereby perhaps creating an interest in the possibilities of Anthropology as a choice of degree. The college offers AQA's 'Extended Project Qualification', which requires students to undertake independent research in areas beyond the constraint of the A level syllabus. There is potential scope here for students to apply an anthropological focus to their research projects, perhaps also to adopt an ethnographic methodology.ⁱⁱⁱ They would, however, miss out on the taught aspects of anthropological theory and research but there would be more room for them to explore this for themselves in this instance. Perhaps there is also scope for anthropology as an extra-curricular activity, by establishing a society, or incorporating it into the 'Aim High' programme offered to potential Oxbridge candidates.

Student progression into Higher Education.

Through running the anthropology course we forged some excellent connections with Higher Education institutions and we had numerous guest speakers, more so than in other A level subjects. An ongoing relationship with Roehampton University provided speakers whose lectures were integrated with the course. We built our lessons around these talks, linking their content to the syllabus, which gave students an excellent taste of university-style lectures and seminars. This approach meant we could not only cover the syllabus but had time to work on some independent study skills that are invaluable to the students at this stage, such as note taking. Had the course continued I think we would have developed further some really valuable relationships with Higher Education. For example, an annual visit from Professor Joy Hendry had become a particular highlight.

As teachers we felt that the AS course prepared students for Higher Education by helping to develop the analytical skills and independent study skills they would need. It was evident that from doing the course they had acquired some basic anthropological insight. Indeed some of the comments from our students were about how the course made them more reflective on their own culture and how the discipline offered them something unique and interesting. A number of students who have gone on to do Anthropology at university or have studied it as part of a wider degree have told me that the AS Anthropology was really useful as an introduction to key concepts. One student who had not undertaken the AS course told me recently about her peers in a Development degree who had and were therefore able to take its anthropological elements in their stride.

Evidence of the benefits of the A level.

To conclude, there is clear evidence that the course really helped the students to develop their study skills in preparation for when they get to university. My analysis of the course is not narrowly confined to academic performance (which is clearly important), but addresses what the students have gained from the course more broadly. I really believe the course was successful in doing more than just teaching what anthropology is, but in helping students become anthropologists. They identified as anthropologists and they thought like anthropologists. Another factor that made the course successful was that the students enjoyed the interdisciplinary aspect, again something which aided them in their other subjects and will be valuable at university (in whatever degree they go on to do). Furthermore, the students developed a cultural awareness, including being reflective of their own cultural practices. Many students recognised how pertinent this is to issues such as bottom-up development initiatives or global politics. Ultimately, the evidence, to us as teachers, that this was a successful course was that it was captivating. The students were engaged and attentive, especially considering this was a significant additional commitment, and they learnt a considerable amount from it.

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- i A full A level qualification, typically obtained after two years of study, consisting of an initial 'AS' course – also available as a stand-alone qualification – followed by an equally weighted but more advanced 'A2' course – Eds.
 - ii The Cambridge Pre-U representing an alternative matriculation qualification for university entrance, equivalent to A level. Assessment is based on a 'traditional' end-of-course examination – Eds.
 - iii The Extended Project Qualification equivalent to half an A level for university matriculation purposes. The student is encouraged to research a topic that develops and extends from one or more of their A level study areas *or from an area of personal interest outside their main programme of study*. A taught component covers basic research skills prior to undertaking the supervised investigation and write-up – Eds.

Dave Latham
Birmingham Metropolitan College

"The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences."

Ruth Benedict

In June 2018 I will turn off the light in my anthropology class for the final time. As the door clicks to a close I am sure that I will feel a plethora of emotions, representing the challenges and rewards of teaching this subject. I work at Birmingham Metropolitan College, a very large FE centre that enrolls around 30,000 students per year on a huge range of full time and part time courses across around a dozen sites across Birmingham and the Midlands. The A level programme is only a part of that, with around 800 students. The college is enthusiastic about new courses and was incredibly supportive in setting up the course and how we chose to deliver it. The initial decision to get involved in the A level was due to my wife, who is the philosophy lecturer at the college, hearing that the exam board were starting the subject up. Having a degree in the subject, she could see the benefits to the students from the very start.

At the beginning, for me, there was bewilderment. As a non-anthropologist with a background rooted in psychology, there were key parts that were familiar to me. I believed that I would be on a strong footing from the off. I was, however, wrong. Although I knew some of the topics, the sheer magnitude of the content, as well as the depth of research and understanding that A level Anthropology demands, was a shock.

After the initial panic and bewilderment wore off, a determination to develop resources and lessons followed and, after a couple of years of long, coffee fuelled nights (and days), determination was replaced by satisfaction and a realisation that the subject was completely changing the way the students thought about their studies and the world itself. When the exam board announced that they would not redevelop the subject for the new A level structure, it was gut wrenching and there was a strong feeling of anger. Anger at the dismissal of all the work that had been put in up until that point but, perhaps more than that, it was the loss of a subject so inclusive, so human and so needed that created the high emotion from so many that met the decision.

Many students, teachers and experts gave their time and effort to do all they could to 'save' the A level. It is that feeling of community and togetherness that will stay with me a lot longer than the anger and has long since overridden the disappointment of the announcement. Now I prefer to remember the great success that the subject was as an A level.

In the 8 years since its inception, over 250 anthropology students will have come through the door at this college alone, each one unique in their own way. The diversity of students that have enrolled has mirrored the diversity of the subject and the vast array of human characteristics that it seeks to understand. Students with so much variety in ethnicity, background, gender, sexuality, religion and nationality have taken a subject that endeavours to find the meaning behind what groups of people do and think across so many boundaries.

It was immensely satisfying to see students watch a clip, ethnographic film or read an article about something very alien to them and then learn to analyse and understand the practice so clearly that they were able to accept it as 'normal'. A level students were, often for the first time, challenged to really critique their own culture and way of life. They were encouraged to question what they see as 'normal' and to see their own boundaries, rituals, concepts of gender and belief systems for what they are; simply their culture's version of universal ideas and themes. There was, at times, a tendency to exoticise the subject and the cultures studied. I may be as guilty as anyone for this as I would often show clips of tribes with strange and unusual rituals or practices during open days and taster sessions to enthuse. Students were keen to learn about cultures very different to theirs and perhaps this is an unavoidable part of our human nature. The one thing that I used to quell much of this exoticism of others and their culture was Horace Miner's 'Body ritual among the *Nacirema*'. I ask students to read and analyse the description of the *Nacirema* and then answer questions on them. I followed that with a debate about what was unusual about that culture, whether they saw any similarities to their own and whether it was something that they might expect other cultures to do. Only once did a student work out what the *Nacirema* really was and that was only after a lengthy debate. When I told the students to read it backwards or gave them a mirror to use, they were typically amazed. This then set the critical way of thinking for the rest of the course. Students were able to then focus on the reasons behind beliefs, rituals and practices rather than the unusual nature of them and see how it was a variation on a theme of what they themselves experienced throughout their own lives. The individual research project conducted in the second year allowed them to embrace an aspect of their own lives and study it in real depth. This allowed them a clarity that would have been difficult to gain otherwise and helped them see their own culture in a new light whilst showing the similarities between other cultures and their own. Both of these led students to understand that culture is culture and judging other peoples' by your own values can be dangerous and misdirecting.

Students were able to engage in lively debates on some intensely sensitive topics such as gender, race and migration. I can only recall a couple of times when this may have led to conflict between students. Even then, the conflict was resolved through respectful discussion and for all the rest of the occasions I saw students develop a maturity beyond what I would expect for their age and develop well-balanced, respectful debates across the course. These debates helped shape the inclusive nature of the subject and the lessons. To be able to hear views different to your own and learn that it is ok not to agree and to have different beliefs is something that helped students really grasp anthropology and would clearly be priceless for us all beyond the classroom. There was a visible change in the students as they advanced through the course, developing an understanding of other cultures and building an acceptance of other ways of life. To melt away stereotypes and misconceptions that students may have held about gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and race, among so many others, was phenomenal to see and be a part of. Over the past few years the increased refugee crisis in the world gave a real time example of how boundaries can be created or changed, and how groups may feel inclusion or exclusion depending on the stand taken by those involved. Hearing students explain to their non-anthropology friends about how boundaries are drawn, how the Rwandan genocide occurred and the reality of life as a refugee over coffee really brought home the true value of this subject. It can make the world a better place.

One of the biggest successes for me throughout the 8 years is the number of students that have fell in love with the discipline to the extent that they wanted to continue studying it in higher education. In fact nearly 1 in 5 students went on to an anthropology degree. This is even more exceptional when you consider that the majority of these students had never heard the word 'anthropology' before applying for A levels. This love for the subject was not exclusive to the students. With so many teachers picking up anthropology in addition to their main subject specialism, there was as much discovering by those standing at the front of the classroom as those who were sat listening. Meeting with teachers from across the country it became clear that the subject had gripped

everyone who was teaching it and I was reassured to find that my own experience of becoming engulfed in the subject was not a one off. Teachers, like their students, bought into the A level, the topics and the anthropological focus of understanding how the world and its people work with enthusiasm and passion. The fundamental approach of anthropology to attempt to understand cultures and people appealed on so many levels. For teachers, it offered a subject so wide spanning that it went beyond what was already taught. At the same time, it offered a freedom and flexibility that I certainly hadn't experienced before. The opportunity to teach the topics and concepts using whichever examples would fit, allowed personal preferences over what was covered in the classroom. It also meant there were more options for short film clips to really drive home the points.

Students found a subject fresh from the prescriptive nature that they were often used to. Although there were key themes to learn, they weren't being asked to memorise studies, theories, names, dates and so on. They were being asked to understand. Understand how religion works, whether that differs from one place to another, one belief to another and even one person to another. If they forgot a particular name or date, example or theory, it didn't matter as long as they could show that they knew how and why gender was constructed for example. Perhaps they forgot the name of Alessandro Zeka's 'Harsh Beauty' but could describe the life of the Eunuchs that were shown. Perhaps Eunuchs slipped their mind completely but could still remember the Alyha from the Mohave Desert or the fluidity of gender within the Hua. For us all, I believe that seeing students rewarded for true understanding and being able to critique rather than simply remember some evaluation was one of the key reasons for anthropology being so consuming.

It changed the way my students viewed the world, other cultures and key debates of our time including human rights, climate change, treatment of indigenous groups and migration. It gave them the tools to be able to challenge the beliefs they previously held and to build balanced, knowledgeable arguments with evidence from ethnographies they had studied. Students' empathy for others grew and I am proud that those 250 or so students will continue to think like that, treat others in that manner and hopefully pass that understanding on to those around them. All of that is as applicable to me as it is to any of my students.

So, when that door clicks shut in 2018, I will not be able to bring myself to lock it. I believe that there is such a need for understanding other peoples and cultures that I am sure that in the future the subject will return to pre-university education and will be given the chance to develop and build.

This is not Gutbai, it is simply Lukim yu bihain.

Tomislav Maric
Bentley Wood High School

I am an A level anthropology teacher in a comprehensive school in northwest London. My current AS level Anthropology class is made up of students whose parents are from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Ghana, India, Kenya, Algeria: there is not a single purely English student. I am Croatian and a refugee from the Balkans conflict who came here in 1992. So, the whole classroom is, or was, immigrant. All of my students are second- or third-generation immigrants or refugees. However, they are British kids who listen to all of the popular music, follow the fashion of teenagers and have the same issues as any other British teenager. Here in London, where over 300 languages are currently spoken in London schools, 69% of the students at our school have a first language that is not English.

We, as teachers, are responsible for creating an environment with no judgments. Yes, all of us in my anthropology class have hybrid identities. My students and I eat food at home with spices from our original countries, or watch satellite soap programmes in our native languages, but when we are in my classroom we have something in common that allows us to communicate. This is what makes it beautiful for me to teach A level anthropology. Anthropology is a fundamental way of knowing the world and appreciating its shared humanity. Teaching anthropology is easier with all of these different cultures in my classroom. We reflect upon and question the beliefs, values and norms that we are brought up with. Soon we realise there are shared values that apply, whatever cultural background you come from. They are respect, love and compassion. Perhaps the best benefit of the A level is the transformation of students at the end of their course into less judgmental humans with more respect for other cultures.

The AQA decision to withdraw the qualification was met by shock and disbelief by anthropology teachers as well as our students. Just as we started to establish ourselves as an A level subject, for reasons beyond our control we are losing a subject which is invaluable for understanding the challenges of a 21st Century globalised world.

I am lucky and grateful to my head teacher that I am allowed to continue teaching A level anthropology until 2018. I have a new class of 24 AS students and we are just starting a journey of two years of cross cultural discovery and self-reflection. Where we go from 2018 is uncertain. There are still many pre-university avenues into Anthropology, including the International Baccalaureate and access courses. The RAI Education committee is actively working on sustaining anthropology at pre-university settings. As for my school I have to say that my head teacher is open minded and appreciative of social science subjects so if any form of new anthropology qualification emerges I am sure we will be first to teach it.

It will be sad to see this beautiful subject disappear from pre-university settings. A level anthropology offers an understanding both of shared human origins and the rich diversity of contemporary cultures, globally and in the UK. It provides an unbeatable way to teach young generations about human universality and human differences.

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