



2016, Vol. 6, pp. 26-27

Studying Anthropology

Rebecca Spruce
University of Manchester

I was trying to decide between studying an A-level in Sociology or in Psychology. When I saw the Anthropology A-level in my college prospectus it sounded different and interesting. The first task I was given was to read Kate Fox's book 'Watching the English'. It uncovered the English rituals, traditions and ways of life that I had unconsciously taken part in and experienced without noting their specificity to one culture. Immediately this task made the course stand out as one that I knew I would enjoy. It made me question my own ways and understandings as well as behaviours in other cultures.

The international and cross-cultural aspect of the discipline drew me to the A-level. It complemented my study of Spanish and my interest in other cultures and ways of life. Although similar to Sociology, I found that anthropology had more to offer through its comparative coverage of cultures and societies worldwide. Within the A-level the A2 unit 'Global and Local' included developmental and environmental elements and introduced aspects of economics, history and human geography. This demonstrated the diversity of anthropology and its perspectives on themes usually identified with other disciplines. As students consider their options for higher education it provides them with the opportunity to realise which disciplines really interest them.

The personal project within the A2 unit 'Practising Anthropology' gave us to choose a topic that drew on particular areas of the discipline of particular interest. This provided me with the opportunity to embark on a small-scale, local task similar to a piece of fieldwork.ⁱⁱ I discussed the link between the purchase of Fair Trade and 'organic' products and the identities, including those of social class, of their consumers. This allowed me to go out and search for evidence to support or reject my hypothesis. In doing so, I became more involved with my community and realised that the A-level was not restricted to the classroom, which can be extremely beneficial for students. The first hand experiences I had led me to understand some of the issues faced by anthropologists doing interviews or in public environments. The project was also useful as a form of revision and a method of understanding anthropological approaches to fieldwork. This part of the course will have prepared many students for fieldwork across several undergraduate disciplines, further demonstrating its relevance and benefit.

Although there were many positive aspects of the A-level, I also encountered a few issues of concern. In my opinion, my write-up of the personal project should have been put forward as a piece of accredited coursework that counted towards the final overall grade. At university all social science degrees involve a large amount of coursework and few exams in comparison to A-level. This write-up would have also have allowed students to experience completing a piece of coursework with a deadline. Many students put a lot of work into their project and it would help to differentiate between those students who worked hard on their personal project and those who did not but were possibly able to 'wing it' in the exam.

Another difficulty I found with the A-level was the lack of a revision guide or general revision tools. Luckily my teacher made their own revision guide and I managed to find everything I needed either online or directly through my teacher. I understood that it was a relatively new A-level, yet this did make revision a lot more difficult than my other A-levels. If the Anthropology A-level had continued I believe the structure of the course would become clearer and the requirements of the exams would be better understood. As more students and teachers embarked on the A-level they would have developed a better understanding of what is desired from each individual and what they can take from the course.

My other courses included A-levels in Spanish, Biology and Drama, and AS-levels in Theatre Studies and World Development. The Anthropology A-level fitted in more with my second year subjects as I picked up AS World Development. Having completed Anthropology to AS-level the previous year, I was able to transfer my learned

skills to structure the World Development essays well and use case studies appropriately. Moving on to study the development module in the A2 Anthropology course meant I could use those case studies in my World Development essays and visa versa, as they often corresponded or had several dimensions to them. The Anthropology A-level introduced me to a diverse range of cultures and societies. Studying A-level Spanish led to my interest in Latin American societies and the Anthropology A-level allowed me to expand from just learning the language to having a better understanding of the various cultures. Linguistics is also a major part of Anthropology, again allowing this to complement my language A-level. The inclusion of evolution and the origin of humans as topics within the anthropology course provided a link to A-level Biology. In short, the diversity of anthropology is extremely useful at A-level as it links to a range of other subjects, demonstrating how easily it can fit into a student's studies.

Having completed the A-level I was able to pick out the topics I liked and disliked, which made it easy for me to choose the right Anthropology degree course. I am currently studying the BSocSc in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. If it were not for the Anthropology A-level, I am unsure whether I would have chosen to follow this academic path and I would not be so interested and captivated by my discipline. Before choosing Manchester I looked at courses at other universities such as Bristol and Exeter. The focus on other fields of study such as Archaeology at Bristol and Exeter helped me make my decision, as I knew the topics I wanted to study and those that I did not. Initially, I was worried I would be repeating my A-level studies once at university, as the topics covered were similar to many of those in the A-level and students were not normally able to take the A-level before starting the degree. However, I found that the A-level gave me a grounding in the subject and even helped me feel ahead for parts of my first year.. I found that the Anthropology A-level gave me a taste of the discipline and my current degree course has allowed me to fully immerse myself in the subject.

The diversity of the A-level and the fact that it was new gave it a sense of freedom when taught in the class. Although I previously mentioned that a revision guide would have been a great help, I enjoyed the fact that our lessons were not solely based around one textbook. The lessons included videos, ethnographic films, current newspaper articles and many other alternative means of learning and expanding our knowledge and mindset on topical issues. My memories of the Anthropology A-level seem to be of the enjoyment everyone had in the lessons and how they often led to open discussions with several people involved. As I have continued Anthropology to degree level I have noticed how the sense of freedom and the power to discuss, analyse and debate experienced in the A-level have continued and increased. This has been one of the main reasons why I have enjoyed both the A-level and the degree so much.

To conclude, Anthropology A-level was a beneficial experience even if I had not continued with the subject to higher education. It widened my perspective on so many current issues and worked well alongside my other A-level choices. The course taught me skills that were applicable across all of my studies and prepared me well for my studies in higher education. I realise how fortunate I was to be in an area with a college that provided the course, as so many other students on my degree did not have the same opportunity.

More often than not, people I speak to do not even know what anthropology is. I now understand that an increased awareness of the discipline is key. I am forever grateful that I was given the opportunity to study the Anthropology A-level and I hope that in the future other students may also be able to experience it and gain the knowledge and skills obtainable from its study.

ⁱ Editorial note: The A-level course required the study of two units at 'AS' (Advanced Subsidiary) level, a freestanding qualification that could be converted to a full A-level by the additional study of two 'A2' units. These more advanced units were 'Global and Local: Societies, Environments and Globalisation' and 'Practising Anthropology: Methods and Investigations'. The latter required students to undertake a small 'ethnographic' project

ⁱⁱ Editorial note: When constructing the A-level course, members of the RAI's Education Committee initially envisaged that the fourth unit would be examined as a project write-up or mini-dissertation. However, this ran counter to Ofqual's directive to reduce the availability of assessed coursework at A-level in favour of more traditional examination paper-based assessment. In response, the Committee decided to retain project work – given the importance of ethnographic research to the identity of anthropology – but to substitute for direct assessment of the end project an examination paper that would question candidates on the **process** of their research. Aside from the written course specification, there remained a responsibility for teachers and students to **interpret** the course in a way that satisfies the expectations of the examiners: over time, these interactions would have given the course a clearer definition to the course.