# Teaching Rites of Passage?

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## Introduction

Anthropological fieldwork has long been discussed as a key rite of passage for scholars of the discipline. Is one's first experience of university teaching a similarly momentous transition? Or does this mystify what can be an exploitative or alienating experience for postgraduate teachers – little training, less pay, and no status. The papers in this special issue of Anthropologymatters explore the images and experiences of teaching, how we might think anthropologically about our own training, and in turn learn to teach ethnographically.

The papers in this issue were first presented at a workshop in St Andrews in January 2003, hosted by St Andrews Department of Anthropology and C-SAP, the Centre for learning and teaching – Sociology, Anthropology and Politics. The workshop brought together more than 25 postgraduate tutors and junior lecturers under the rubric of 'Teaching Rites of Passage'. Whilst capturing the experience of becoming of an academic anthropologist (for those who make it!), the 'rite of passage' metaphor was less helpful in conveying the demands on those teaching on a part-time or temporary basis whilst finishing PhDs.

Papers for the workshop were invited on three interconnected themes: professional balancing acts, classroom survival techniques, and learning cultures. The first sought to explore how lecturing staff, especially those on short-term or hourly contracts, are under contradictory pressures from teaching, research and administrative commitments. In a 'research-led' university was a dedication to teaching and student learning part of an ethic of disciplinary professionalism? Several papers described the experience of juggling the demands of finishing a doctoral thesis, getting published and gaining teaching experience.

The second theme explored how postgraduates and new lecturers were being prepared for their first teaching experience, or being supported during it? What were the implications of growing student numbers, quality enhancement agendas and the promotion of online resources? Several papers pointed to the very different issues and expectations facing postgraduate teachers, temporary staff and full-time faculty.

The final theme explored how institutional cultures of anthropology departments varied, with very different levels of support for junior teachers. The economics and politics of institutions making use of this reserve pool of teaching labour troubled several presenters, as did the likely introduction of 'teaching-only' contracts within universities.

As well as the papers themselves, the workshop discussions were wide-ranging and invaluable, an aspect of an event that is difficult to convey in writing. We have prepared a full summary of the presentations, discussions and outcomes for those interested in how the debates unfolded.

**Anthropological apprenticeships or academic alienation?**

How useful was the metaphor of teaching as a 'rite of passage'? Some felt that the image exoticised and obfuscated real conditions of employment within a growing institutional hierarchy. Does the metaphor not distract from the consequences of new flexible academic contracts and growing corporate governance within universities. Is the very idea of transition not based on the idea of there being some ultimate goal and end-point?

Others felt that academia was a place of permanent transition, a life of constant nomadism (in terms of both career and place), and the postgraduate and temporary lecturer stage is replicated over the whole of a academic's life in juggling opposing demands. If the system in fact depends on the transience of its most junior members for its reproduction, should we tolerate this mobility? What would happen if we refused to move around on short term, badly paid, teaching intensive contracts?

No matter one's level of attachment to one's disciplinary identity or not, how does a knowledge of anthropology (having been trained in it) inform the teaching of the subject? As anthropologists we learn from others and we then pass on this learning to colleagues and students. Teaching and learning are inseparable in this re-scaling of knowledge, as one person so aptly put it. At the same time, as teachers we also work ethnographically in the sense that we are forced to engage with what students know and the best way of engaging them in new ideas and practices in the classroom. How else can we find out about what students know, and the non-verbal ways in which they learn? The classroom becomes another kind of fieldsite where ethnographic skills are used. Furthermore as we teach we also learn from students in a continual negotiation between knowledge and innocence.

How can we teach ethnography to people who do not have first hand knowledge of the field? Is it possible to bridge this experiential divide? One suggestion that seems useful is the notion that we should teach ethnographically. This calls into question the utility of generic institutional training courses in preparing new teachers: are they worthwhile? Can they help us learn to teach anthropology in a way suitable to the knowledges we seek to convey and explore? Judging from the experiences of training courses recounted by many, this was not the case.

The workshop challenged the different structuring hierarchies of academic life. The first was the ranking of the different aspects of being an academic: such as research, service and teaching. The implicit hierarchy (as university promotion committees would have it) has research at top, service in the middle and teaching at the bottom. People repeatedly insisted that research and teaching are fully integrated. But this truism masks the difficulties in bringing them together in daily academic life. It represents an ideal that one strives towards but falls short of most of the time. A number of people said they write their PhDs in the holiday periods, outside of term when heavy teaching schedules prevent intense writing time. Thus there is a hierarchy of jobs, some of which are more flexible than others. The inflexible ones, such as preparing lectures and marking essays push out the flexible ones: reading new work, writing, thinking. It is perhaps this dissociation of tasks and diversity of work that makes academic work simultaneously rewarding and frustrating. As the collection of papers and summary of discussions illustrate, one of the main challenges facing new academic selves is learning to both juggle and pole-climb at the same time.