

## **The Junior, the Transient and the Real: Challenges of pre and post-appointment teaching.**

Caroline Oliver, Lecturer in Anthropology, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology. University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

### **Summary**

This paper considers the diversity of experiences that confront first time lecturers over a number of years. Comparing the author's experiences as a postgraduate/lecturer and lecturer at two different universities, it stresses the need for an awareness of the wealth of different scenarios or stages facing new lecturers. The paper compares the author's experience of temporary, insecure, short-notice but invaluable 'in-house' experiences with experiences at her first proper appointment achieved through the rite of passage of the successful interview. The paper analyses how overlapping but nonetheless distinct pressures and relative comforts and discomforts govern each stage. It documents from an ethnographic perspective how casualisation of employment prolongs the initiation process. In particular, casualisation renders difficult the ability to meet the conflicting and contradictory expectations of the institution, both on a day-to-day level and in the long-term.

### **Introduction**

'Teaching rites of passage' struck me as a very apt title for the experience of new lecturers. For although, unlike the Nuer neophytes, we do not experience anything quite as dramatic as having six parallel stripes carved from ear to ear, there have been times when the experience has nonetheless felt as painful. The aim of this paper however is to draw attention to the protracted and ongoing nature of this initiation process, and to stress the diversity of experiences throughout. In particular, I focus on a comparison between pre-appointment teaching, and post-appointment teaching, revealing how the expectations, pressures and associated comforts and discomforts vary significantly according to contract, status and the institutional culture in which one works. By necessity, the paper is anecdotal, but in highlighting these issues, I document the dangers posed for quality teaching and research in anthropology by the growing casualisation of employment within higher education. With current researching confirming that 'more and more undergraduate teaching is done by part-timers and postgraduates' (McNay quoted in Jenkins 2003:20), these discussions are particularly timely.

To begin, I summarise my shifting experiences from which I draw my analysis. I began my PhD at Hull University in 1998 as a Graduate Teaching Assistant,

gaining experience teaching in small-group seminars. In order to fund my supply of midnight oil once the three years research studentship came to an end, I began lecturing there on a series of three separate, temporary and short-term contracts over a period of fifteen months. When the next contract did not materialise as a result of cuts higher up in the higher echelons of the university, and with the PhD all but done, I applied and was selected through interview for my current two-year post, lecturing in anthropology at Newcastle University in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology. Currently, I am the sole anthropologist (replacing the other who is on study leave) teaching anthropology modules in a department primarily geared towards sociology and social policy. In the paper, I will give a brief summary of the different experiences in teaching, expectations and challenges before moving on to an analysis charting the differences and contrasts between pre and post-appointment teaching.

### **The apprentice-teacher:**

I was a finishing postgraduate when I began lecturing at Hull, initially in a part-time lecturing contract. I was given the freedom to develop and teach my own course, whilst continuing helping out with seminars. A short time before the contract expired, I was given a full- time contract for 3 months, beginning some months later, before, again after a break securing another 5 months part-time. Despite the relative insecurity, short-notice and temporary nature of the job, these formative experiences of lecturing were valuable in terms of experience and simultaneously bolstered my CV. I see them akin to 'practice' teaching, due to their 'in-house' nature.

First-time teaching in one's PhD 'home' has its advantages and disadvantages. I was amongst colleagues who had seen my development over a number of years from the time when I was an undergraduate student there. This was a warm nest from which I could venture into the teaching world. If I needed to ask advice, I knew exactly where to go, I knew who dealt with each function, and who was the most approachable and appropriate to give me advice. It did not even feel like I was constantly asking questions, particularly as many were raised under the welcoming and familiar timbers of the local pub. Numbers of students on each course were relatively low too, enabling a comfortable dialogue with students with whom I had some familiarity with that eased both the learning and the teaching. On the other hand, students knew this was my first real lecturing experience. Thus it was difficult to follow the advice received from established lecturing staff of, 'don't let them see your fear; they'll eat you alive if they do.'

There were, however drawbacks. The observation from another paper-giver is that one never learns one's material so well as when one has to teach it. This sentiment is paralleled by the observation that one never knows one's institution quite so well as when one has to teach *in it*. All of a sudden, my familiar 'home' became a mass of institutional rules, languages and demands I was unfamiliar with and did not know how to negotiate. This was made worse I suspect by the

fact that my presence at Hull was almost as part of the furniture, yet my role was temporary and transient. Everyone had previously seen me as a junior, a postgraduate student helping out with seminar teaching, and some before that, as an undergraduate. In many ways, this perception failed to shift as I took the ultimately more difficult task of designing, teaching and convening a new module for the first time, whilst simultaneously completing my PhD. On the one hand, I had the feeling that I was being given an opportunity to prove myself, to gain valuable practice and experience for the time when my proper post would necessitate it. On the other hand, I was given less attention than a new lecturer as it was assumed that, 'I knew it.' This was not true.

Institutional problems of their own were raised through the temporary nature of my contracts. For instance, I began work in Semester 2 and found the module that mine was replacing had a different form of assessment from that which I preferred. I was told that should I wish to change it, I should have done so some six months before, a practical impossibility as I was not contracted then. This was where I discovered the slippery gap between the formal, institutional culture of rules and the informal culture as I was told conflicting advice along the lines of 'it doesn't matter, you can change it to what you want.' For temporary staff, following informal precedent, rather than the rules was a tricky negotiation, particularly when I was not particular fluent in either.

The current drive to meet audits is a problem for most academics (see Shore and Wright 2001 and Jary 2003). Yet for temporary staff entering midway through the latest strategic plan that everyone else is (supposed to be) thoroughly up to date on, the latest audit requirements are a baffling maze of words and expectations. I remember being asked for my 'learning outcomes,' with not one idea of what they were. I remember thinking that learning outcomes were a particularly interesting requirement considering that due to the short-term and temporary nature of my contract, I was hoping that the learning outcomes would make themselves clear *to me* as I went along. Certainly, one feels incompetent for not immediately responding, 'oh, yes, I'll just go and get them....' I was not to know (although it may have been helpful to know) that there had been many ongoing meetings about the phasing in of these aims and objectives over a long period, so that most staff were if not familiar, certainly aware of this 'imposed vocabulary' (Jary 10).

Whilst one wants to show devotion and commitment to one's department, there is the added pressure of division of time by the need to secure future employment. There is thus a tension between performing current good teaching work, active scouting and preparation for jobs as well as producing the necessary publications in a stage when work is in progress. In regard to the former issue, knowing that one is unlikely to teach a course more than once or twice does little to inspire months of preparatory work. Yet, in my experience, the desire to do a good job means that the teaching work, despite the knowledge that it should be (according to mercenary principles of economic value) part-time, is not in reality. Yet this

lead for me to a feeling of perpetually treading water, knowing that whilst teaching is good experience, too long to complete one's thesis is not attractive. This said, although my PhD progress suffered in terms of work completed, it shifted a level in terms of understanding, facilitated by the need to explain some of the concepts to many students.

Professionally, however, and, as a result of 'slotting in' to an existing system, I was disappointed that few people even asked how my new course was going, and felt frustrated that the system fosters an ethic of sink (if one fails) or swim (and nobody notices). I was naive in the expectation that there would be a check on my work and someone to tell me whether I was sinking or swimming; during those first few months of teaching it was difficult to tell even which side of the equation would best describe my state. The students, as always, dreaded the assessment, but I think I, the lecturer was dreading them even more, for here, some evidence of my aptitude for swimming would be revealed. Luckily for me, it all turned out for the best, but it could have been different.

In summary, the shadowy position of student/lecturer is one plagued by problems of time division, sliding in apparently seamlessly yet failing to slot in with ongoing departmental developments. This is compounded by one's own negotiations of identity in one's home environment. For example, I still acted the role of student in expecting some form of commentary on my teaching. The experience, although a baptism by fire, did bring about a transformation. In particular, I began to challenge the feelings of inadequacy that had plagued me. When observing my second marker saying incredulously about an anthropological observation, 'who says *this*?', being able to point out who exactly did say that, and where and when they did it, proves one's own competence. Although teaching was not always a comfortable experience, I do think it was a necessary one.

### **The new professional:**

Moving on to summarise my experience of teaching in a full-time appointment teaching, I identify a number of different challenges. My move to Newcastle has been fairly recent, beginning only in September '02. Yet, it has been long enough to notice a vast difference in terms of the impact of contract, status and institutional culture on the experience of teaching. A first noticeable difference was that through having an interview, there felt a sort of initiation that served as a one-way introduction to the other members of staff. When I began, I was a 'new' lecturer in the formal sense of having come from somewhere else, rather than simply changing capacity. I was staff (rather than student-staff) right from the beginning. Being the only anthropologist teaching in the department gave me a distinctive status and identity within the department as 'the anthropologist.'

I moved to Newcastle during a time of considerable upheaval; the department is being incorporated into a new school, and the majority of the senior staff are on research leave. This left a small band of lecturers, themselves trying to come to

grips with a new administrative organisation, and two new members of staff blinding fumbling through the mass of regulations. I remember one lecturer commenting, 'You're lucky...the system has been thrown up in the air and it hasn't quite reorganised itself yet. You're probably as knowledgeable as us; it's a case of making it up as you go along!' Here was my first experience of being a 'proper' lecturer - if one undergoes a teaching rite of passage, one wonders where the rites are. I was amazed how quickly I just became part of the furniture. For short-term rather than permanent contracts, I realise that one is judged on one's ability to 'get on with the job,' and the expectation for which I was to meet was to get on with as little fuss as possible.

Such an ethos however raises problems. For one, I was teaching the first-year anthropology course on a weekly basis, and students came to see me as the representative of the staff. This was a slightly uncomfortable position, given that I was the front-line representative of a group of lecturers that I barely knew, let alone knew their ethos well enough to communicate. Ian Harper talks about 'towing the party-line' but in this context of transition, a party-line was unidentifiable. When one knows none of the insider information, the alliances and conflicts in a department, it is difficult to know whose words are more valid. Institutional transition hits hard short-term staff; for instance, I ironically attended my 'welcome meeting' with the head of school on the last day of the term.

There is the common expectation that things cannot differ much from one's previous institution, although this is a mistake. Yet when explanations were often rushed, it is easy to feel an incompetent nuisance having to ask the same thing twice. Although I was reassured that 'I was probably doing as well as anyone else,' this does not ease the anxiety of new staff that one is constantly running behind oneself correcting the mistakes.

That said, I came to expect that feeling a little incompetent is part of the steep learning curve (some would call it ritual humiliation) accompanying the transition to established lecturer. If I thought the language was barely discernible in my 'home' department, then little would prepare me for the barrage of acronyms that I was shortly introduced to at Newcastle! To give an example, I was aware early on that I should run the Staff-Student Committee meeting, a simple task that I had done for many years in Hull and one that I thought would be the least of the problems. To set it up however, our DPD told me, involved many negotiations. To establish the SSC, I apparently needed to 'see the RDP for MA reps'. The timing of meetings had to be 'before the STLC and BOS', and I needed 'two reps from CH, JHPol and JHEc' in order to fulfil the rules set out at the Programme Board. I had few people to ask about this new acronymic language, and even when I did, the answer to many questions were what I would call 'hangers', those that gave me enough information to give the impression that a question had been answered, but amounting to little in concrete substance. Although some of the acronyms were similar to those I had been vaguely aware of in Hull in my part-time capacity, my contact with these bodies had been little more than in passing.

All of a sudden, it was expected that I knew the precise functions of each body and board, a hard task considering that to work out even where WC was seemed a trial.

After my appointment, some members of staff told me in passing that it had been my ability to teach that had secured my appointment. Yet, teaching itself is not something one does, regardless of students, but is dependent on the students' reception and engagement with your teaching. In this respect, the culture of students I found enormously different, another factor I had to quickly adjust to. There was a deference and distance that I had not been accorded in Hull. In Hull, being a postgraduate student, I was treated as almost 'one of them,' whilst in Newcastle I was a proper *bona fide* lecturer. I found this distance disconcerting, as much of my teaching to that date had relied on this shared consensus, a fact I only noticed when it had gone.

The necessity and freedom to shape one's own courses in post-appointment teaching however, I found to be strongly shaped by the institutional constraints in which one has to comply. Centrally, in Newcastle, there is only a small contribution of anthropology to the degree programme. Whilst in Hull, I had been worried about the pitching of lectures, this proved doubly problematic in Newcastle as the students have very little prior anthropological knowledge. Therefore, whilst in principle, the idea of a mobile lecturer, transplanting courses from university to university is feasible, in reality it is not. A great deal of tinkering with course outlines and lectures must take place if one's course is not going to be pitched too high or low. Moving to a multidisciplinary department brought its share of misunderstandings, and these were not limited to the students. One conversation went something along the lines of, 'It's always amazed me why anthropologists have to go off and study the exotic. I mean, why have they rarely considered the different cultural traditions within Europe; how we're different from the French, the Spanish, the Welsh?' Knowing my ignorance of the wranglings of the commentator's subject, I just had to choke on my words, 'but they *are*', before sloping down to my room to indulge in exotic readings about the Newcastle police force. As Peter Phillimore, the other anthropologist in Newcastle points out, other sociologists may not agree how 'seamlessly joined' the two disciplines are. He states, 'anthropology for most is definitely 'other' (Phillimore 2001:45).

This sort of professional pigeon-holing has benefits however, in that one can develop the sort of anthropology one likes, without interference from others. One finds oneself as the only proponent of anthropology becoming somewhat evangelical, confirming Ahmed and Shore's observation that anthropology is a 'quasi religious movement' (1995:xx). This has meant in practice taking responsibility for overturning some of the exoticising that is often naturally assumed to be the domain of anthropology. What great delight I had when a student discussing his possible dissertation research laughingly said, 'You couldn't go off to Spain for your summer and do research then?' and I pointed

out, 'well, *I* did!' Having a security of professional identity was something that was tacit before; now it is something that I have been forced to confront.

### **Analysis of both experiences**

In advancing an understanding of the experience of new lecturers, I wish to draw out some of the more generalisable similarities and differences that have confronted each stage. This is particularly with regard to some of the specific features of higher education in the marketplace.

In short-term, short-notice and temporary teaching 'in-house', the central tension is one of a vicious circle of teaching to finish one's PhD, but having little time to finish it. There are a number of associated problems, however, that of motivation and keeping one's self-esteem up when even one's students join in the all-too-familiar chorus, 'Have you *still* not finished your thesis?' eliciting a suppressed temptation to say through gritted teeth, 'Well, it's partly because of *you*!' Working in-house however, has less administrative pressures, because one is familiar with the organisational culture and more aware of informal or formal procedures (although as I have highlighted, there may be a tendency to overestimate quite how much these are known amongst postgraduate students when they shift to lecturing).

If one thinks that by moving on to a *more* permanent contract brings about the same sorts of pressures, they would not be wrong. For surely the central protest of current academics is the problem of balancing research-led teaching with maintaining research output in the current climate of administrative overload. Yet, when one's contract is short-term this dilemma is even more acute. I suggest that this is precisely because one receives conflicting messages from the institution. As I pointed out, I was appointed on the basis of my ability to teach; to 'fill in' with little fuss. No doubt my research background was also an important factor, but not the overriding one. However, to secure a more permanent contract, I have been advised by the Head of School that I should set about making myself invaluable. The problem with such advice is how to make oneself invaluable and indeed to whom? On the one hand, on a day-to-day level, one is expected, and indeed desires to make oneself invaluable amongst the staff, students and subject area. This means taking seriously one's teaching, administrative and pastoral roles, to produce exciting and stimulating courses and to not buck one's responsibilities. Yet, ultimately, teaching staff and students do not decide prolongations, and my invaluableness at the ground level means little when I, as a 'unit of resource' (Shore and Wright 2001:16) am analysed on the basis of my research output at the desk of the dean demanding resource allocation.

The insight from our subject area that individuals are social beings therefore seems at odds with the ultimate demands of the institution. The level of judgement is shifted away from the everyday environment in which one works and functions as a new lecturer. The ultimate level of judgement perpetuates a

message that one should ideally, for future career prospects, lock oneself away, turn one's thesis into a book or series of articles, this necessitating a drawing back from or limiting of teaching and administrative tasks<sup>1</sup>. But this conflicts with the day-to-day reality of needing to do a good job and feel a valued part of an institution. One is more easily swayed by this very real and tangible pull, than the abstract pull of the future judgement upon one's research output. To give an ethnographic anecdote, I was positively compared on a social occasion with the other new member of staff, who 'was hardly ever there.' It was commented upon that I pulled my weight, turned up and helped out students. This social and ground-level validation is of course at the expense of spending time on research output.

In both cases, whether in Hull or Newcastle, the casualised and short-term nature of such work accentuates difficulties. When teaching as a postgraduate, I was working in a familiar environment; colleagues would understand if one wanted to keep oneself to oneself. Yet, if one adopts a similar career-preservationist strategy on starting a new appointment, this message is surely not desirable, presenting oneself as aloof and not willing to engage with 'the team'. This is particularly acute when moving to a new city, where one is keen to make social links and create a familiar environment for good work. Yet sadly, although the image of the academic sitting in his ivory-tower as an isolated and mass-producing machine seems undesirable, it is more likely that this is the ideal model for making a job permanent, especially as appointments are generally made on RAEability.

This leads me to suggest how anthropology can add to existing debates on casualisation of employment. For, amongst all scholars, anthropologists are probably more adept than most at moving into a new environment and becoming quickly *au fait* with new different surroundings. After all, 'going away to fieldwork' is seen as the key definitive feature of one's professional life (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Clifford 1992) and considerable stock is set by it. Moving to a new department for a new, but temporary appointment, and quickly coming to terms with a new culture and way of doing things is not totally dissimilar. Yet a looming difference is apparent which makes this situation more difficult than even the trials of fieldwork. Crucially, following fieldwork, one goes back somewhere, to one's home. In the case of the condition of sequential temporary appointments, which seems to be the worrying trend, there is no 'back' to go to. In this condition of perpetual liminality, one is constantly driven by the need to look for more, for other things, for the 'somewhere'. Which leads me to a concluding point, if this is a rite of passage, how long is it going to go on for? How many new everyday social and professional cultural systems does one have to manage before one is '*properly* proper'? And, if it is an ongoing one, how does one ride the conflicting messages of the institution, which both stress a

---

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, already this appears to be a common strategy as Jenkins comments, 'As the RAE is, in effect, the only game in town, a common institutional strategy is to concentrate on research, neglect teaching and pay lip-service to the teaching-research nexus' (2003:20).

proficiency in departmental level demands (which are essential for our social well-being) whilst demanding the achievement of less immediate goals and targets. To satisfy the latter necessitates a limiting of the former.

In conclusion then to the paper, I argue that an anthropological account of the transitions of first time lecturers shows how skewed the audit requirements prove for newer staff. Crucially, it downplays the social realities. Instead one finds the social and personal successes in adapting to a new workplace go against the grain and logic by which one is assessed for future employment. Yet, to be a truly efficient system, policy-makers should realise that whilst research output is necessarily important, it is not produced in a social vacuum. Indeed for temporary lecturers, it is produced in situations of transience and acclimatisation which mean that other, equally valuable outputs are produced, which are vital for the stable and effective functioning of departments. Yet, can these ever possibly appear in the audits? Rather than merely criticising the new managerialism, I urge that as anthropologists, we draw attention to its inefficiency. If audit is to be 'an 'efficient' (i.e. relatively cost effective) means of public accountability' (Jary 2003:10), it should recognise the costs of transience for liminal and temporary staff, and that these are an impediment to consistent research planning. New lecturers are not being 'research inactive' but struggling with the immediate demands thrust upon them in negotiating new professional environments in times of transition. Professional transitions are always social transitions too, and it is in this perspective that an anthropological outlook can provide valuable insights.

### **References:**

Ahmed, A. S. and Shore, C. N. (eds.) 1995. *The Future of Anthropology. Its relevance to the Contemporary World*. London: Athlone.

Clifford, J. 1992. 'Travelling Cultures' in (eds.) Grossberg, L., Nelson, C. and Treichler, P. *Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.

Jary, 2003 'Subject Benchmarking in the 'Audit Society' – Towards an Evaluation of Subject Benchmarking' CSAP Monograph 1; C-SAP, Birmingham

Jenkins, A. 2003. 'Intellect thrives on diet rich in research,' in *the Times Higher Education Supplement*. (January 3). 20.

Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (eds.) 1997. *Anthropological Locations. Boundaries of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shore, C. and Wright, S. 2001. 'Challenging institutional contexts: New managerialism and the rise of UK Higher Education plc.' *Anthropology in Action. Journal for Applied Anthropology in Policy and Practice*. 8 (1). 14-21.

Phillimore, P. 2001. 'Doing anthropology in a sociology department: Thoughts on anthropology's identity,' in *Anthropology in Action. Journal for Applied Anthropology in Policy and Practice*. 8 (1). 35-48.

Caroline Oliver is a lecturer in anthropology in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Her research interests are in the area of migration and ageing, reflected in her PhD thesis, an ethnographic study of the community of older leisure migrants in the South of Spain. Whilst completing her PhD thesis at Hull University (1997-2002), she also taught there as a Graduate Teacher Assistant, and later, as a lecturer.