Culture, Identity, Difference: Developing a Museum-based Anthropology Education Resource for Pre-university Students

Paul Basu and Simon Coleman

ABSTRACT: In its 2002–3 Strategic Review, the Royal Anthropological Institute reasserted the importance of the public communication of anthropology for the future of the discipline. Two significant venues for public engagement activity were identified: museums and pre-university education contexts. We present an account of the development and piloting of an anthropology teaching and learning resource that bridges these two arenas. Complementing efforts to introduce an anthropology A-Level, the Culture, Identity, Difference resource uses museum collections as a way of introducing anthropological perspectives on topics such as belief, ethnicity, gender and power to enhance students’ studies across a range of different A-Level subjects. We reflect on some of the lessons learnt during the process, including the value of developing resources that can be used flexibly and creatively by teachers and students, and the need to approach the museum as a space of encounter, exploration and experimentation rather than as a didactic educational venue.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, education, learning resource, material culture, museums

In its 2002–3 Strategic Review, the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) reflected on the current state of anthropology as a discipline in the United Kingdom, as well as on its own role as a ‘learned society’ in the twenty-first century. Reaffirming its confidence in the importance of anthropology as an inclusive field of study, able to take ‘a broad and comparative view over time and space’, the Review also identified vulnerabilities in the discipline: notably a continuing lack of public awareness and a failure to contribute more visibly in the public sphere (RAI 2003). The RAI concluded that ‘the public communication of anthropology needs to be a “red thread” running consciously through the planning of RAI activities wherever appropriate’ (ibid.).

Two important spheres for such public engagement highlighted within the Review were promoting anthropology within museums, and also within pre-university education contexts. Callan and Street take up the story of the RAI’s engagement with pre-university anthropology education in the UK in their contribution to this special issue; here, we focus on an initiative that embraces both museum and education constituencies, and we argue that it is not only the responsibility of the RAI and other such associations to find ways of bringing anthropology more prominently into the public
sphere. Rather, this is an activity to which all professional anthropologists should be committed in their various institutional settings. It is no coincidence, then, that the initiative we discuss here – the development of a museum-based anthropology education resource targeted at pre-university students – has been funded by a consortium made up of an anthropology department (that of Sussex University), a Higher Education academy that promotes teaching and learning development in the social sciences (C-SAP), a local authority-run public museum with ethnographic collections (Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove) and, indeed, the RAI, through its Economic and Social Research Council-funded Education Programme.

In contrast to the RAI’s main pre-university educational focus on the development of an anthropology A-level, the objective of our Culture, Identity, Difference learning resource and the ‘Discovering Anthropology through Museum Collections’ research project, which gave rise to it, has been to use museum collections as a way of making explicit the ‘implicit anthropology’ that exists within other more established A-level curricula (Basu, Coleman and Posey 2006). Thus we have conceptualized the learning resource as a means of enabling secondary school and further education students (along with their teachers) to discover anthropology for themselves, whilst enhancing their experience of whatever subjects they are formally studying. The research on which the resource is founded thus ranged widely across related issues such as better understanding how anthropology students currently happen upon their chosen undergraduate discipline; identifying existing A-level topics that share broad concerns with anthropology; working with teachers and curriculum specifications to inform our decisions about the most effective approach to designing the resource; conducting original collections-based research; piloting early versions of the resource, and so forth.

These are some of the issues and activities that we shall report upon in this article before going on to discuss the finished resource itself.¹

### Chance Discoveries

Although the educational landscape for 14–19-year-olds has been undergoing a period of considerable reform in the UK, so-called GCSE and GCE A-level qualifications continue to be the ‘traditional route’ that most young people use to gain entry to university in Britain. According to the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (Ofqual), over 780,000 A-levels are awarded every year in more than 80 subjects (www.ofqual.gov.uk/71.aspx). As noted above and elsewhere in this special issue, however, until its launch in September 2010, there was no A-level in anthropology, and, at the time of writing, the success of this new qualification has yet to be established. Similarly, whilst anthropology is included as an option in the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum (see Balzani this issue), in practice this is not widely available. In East and West Sussex, for example, only two Further Education (FE) colleges offer the IB, and neither offers courses in anthropology.²

As part of our preliminary research for the Culture, Identity, Difference learning resource we were therefore keen to know whether students were being introduced to anthropology at school in some other way – for example, through their A-level studies in an allied field such as sociology. A survey was thus conducted among first-year anthropology undergraduates at Sussex University in October 2006 as part of their induction.

All but ten of the 74 survey respondents arrived in the Department of Anthropology at Sussex University via a conventional A-level route. The majority could not recall having heard anthropology being mentioned at school or college, and, with the exception of four of the seven students who had come via an IB route, those who had been introduced to an-
anthropology at school or college noted that this was due to the personal enthusiasms of a particular teacher rather than the incorporation of anthropology into a more formal educational curriculum. Most respondents reported that no specific A-level subject had orientated them towards anthropology, although ethnographic research methods are included in some sociology A-level units.

A large number of respondents admitted that the first time that they had encountered the word ‘anthropology’ was when looking through university prospectuses or researching what degree subject to study (for instance, using the ‘Stamford Test’ on the UCAS website, which aligns personal interest keywords with degree subject recommendations). A significant number of students reported that they had first encountered anthropology when talking with relatives or friends who were already acquainted with the discipline. Others explained how they had discovered it for themselves during their travels or gap year experiences overseas, or through their reading, watching of ‘ethnographic’ television documentaries, or whilst pursuing an interest in world music, for example.

The following small sample of responses to a question concerning how students first encountered anthropology attests to the haphazard nature of this ‘discovery’, and it also confirms that many of these students come from relatively privileged socio-economic milieux in which interest in other cultures is more likely to be fostered, and the opportunity for travel and exposure to other cultures greater (Mills 2003).

Members of my extended family have been (and still are) engaged in social research overseas and I remember being fascinated by their stories of foreign lands and cultures.

Travelling. My parents would take me to very different countries whilst growing up to see new things. They would teach me about religion, language, traditions and politics. I then discovered that this fell under the anthropology umbrella.

While travelling in the rainforest of Ecuador I met the son of a shaman who is an anthropologist. I had known about issues addressed by the subject but did not have a name for it until then.

I sort of realized that things I’m interested in had a technical name and that they were all linked and it was anthropology.

The latter three comments are particularly interesting since they also demonstrate that prospective students are often familiar with and actively engaged in issues addressed by anthropology, without necessarily knowing that such a discipline exists. For these students, the crucial discovery is in finding a name for something already known. This was an important observation for our conceptualization of the learning resource. One of its tasks, therefore, was simply to introduce a new word into the vocabularies of its users. This lack of public recognition of anthropology and its contribution to contemporary issues is, of course, a much broader concern for the discipline and one of the underlying motivations for promoting anthropology education in pre-university contexts.

Investigating the A-level Profile of Anthropology Undergraduates

Despite the increasing popularity of alternative pathways into Higher Education (HE), A-levels remain by far the most popular entry qualifications to universities in the UK. In 2005, for example, UCAS data show that there were 1,583 applicants to anthropology degrees in the UK, 1,129 or 71 percent of whom had A-level qualifications. For this reason, our initial research was focused on A-level education, although, as will be discussed later, the focus of the Culture, Identity, Difference learning resource itself became less specific as a result of our consultation with teachers and our other findings.

Having established in our preliminary survey of Sussex undergraduates that few students are explicitly introduced to anthropology
at school, we wanted to identify the implicit anthropology content in a range of A-levels and to devise ways of making this content explicit in a manner that enhanced the teaching and learning experience of the existing curricula. Our starting point was to gain a better sense of which A-level subjects applicants to anthropology undergraduate degree programmes typically take, believing that such choices both reflect the broader educational interests of the prospective students and indicate those A-levels most likely to include (implicit) anthropological content. A statistical report was commissioned from UCAS detailing applicants’ qualifications for the ‘JACS’ subject classification codes for anthropology (L6) and sociology (L3) respectively.5 Table 1 shows the ‘top 10’ most common AS- and A-level qualifications held by applicants to UK anthropology and sociology undergraduate degrees in 2005.

The fact that the majority of applicants to undergraduate sociology programmes possess a sociology A-level demonstrates that there is a clear association between A-level profile and undergraduate degree choice. (We found an even stronger correlation in data collected at Sussex University, with 70 percent of sociology applicants possessing a sociology A-level, and no less than 93 percent of geography applicants possessing a geography A-level.) In this respect, it is also significant to note that the UCAS statistics demonstrate that there were six-and-a-half times as many applicants to sociology degrees in 2005 as there were to anthropology degrees. This point reinforces the potential importance of the new A-level in anthropology as a significant means of popularising the discipline.

Whereas we had expected sociology, religious studies and general studies A-levels to feature prominently at the top of the anthropology applicants’ entry qualifications, we were surprised to find a much more general profile, with, for example, only 24 percent of applicants to anthropology programmes having a sociology A-level. Indeed, aside from strong associations between sociology and geography A-levels and their respective degree programmes, we found a remarkable similarity in the A-level profiles of applicants to the sociology, geography and anthropology programmes that we investigated. English literature figures highly as a very popular choice, for example, whereas the prominence of history in the anthropology applicants’ profiles, compared to psychology in the sociology profiles, suggests a stronger orientation to the humanities rather than science. That said, the presence of biology high in the anthropology profiles reflects the fact that some anthropology programmes teach courses in both social and biological anthropology, and a biology A-level is often an entrance requirement to these programmes.

Table 1: ‘Top 10’ most common AS-/A-level qualifications held by applicants to anthropology and sociology degree programmes in the UK, 2005 (UCAS statistics)

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Literature</td>
<td>685  43%</td>
<td>7016  68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>584  37%</td>
<td>3893  38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>446  28%</td>
<td>3252  31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>415  26%</td>
<td>3138  30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Studies</td>
<td>404  26%</td>
<td>2879  28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>394  25%</td>
<td>1909  18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>381  24%</td>
<td>1776  17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>329  21%</td>
<td>1677  16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Studies</td>
<td>280  18%</td>
<td>1377  13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>213  13%</td>
<td>1320  13%</td>
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</table>
The somewhat general character of the anthropology applicants’ A-level profiles informed our decision not to associate the *Culture, Identity, Difference* resource too closely with any particular A-level subject(s). This strategy ran contrary to our original plans and the initial advice of museum education staff, who recommended providing explicit and very specific curriculum links in the resource. We felt that it would be better to produce a more flexible resource that could be used creatively by teachers and students across a range of subjects. Such an approach was encouraged by the teachers with whom we consulted, and was further justified when confronted by the fact that the exact specification of A-level programmes is liable to change. Indeed, our project coincided with a period of wide-reaching revision and reaccreditation of A-level programme specifications in response to the government’s 2005 white paper concerning education reform for 14–19-year-olds (DfES 2005). With continued uncertainty regarding the future of A-levels, this seems a prudent decision if the learning resource is to have a reasonably long ‘shelf life’.

**Working with A-level Curriculum Specifications**

Despite the desire to avoid linking the resource too specifically with particular A-level modules, it was nevertheless important for us to examine the curriculum specifications of a number of key A-level subjects in order for us to identify examples of implicit anthropology content and to ensure that our educational resource was compatible with the teaching and learning approach determined by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and A-level awarding bodies. In choosing which A-level specifications to analyse, we retained our initial inclination towards sociology, general studies and religious studies, but we also explored other subjects such as media studies, psychology and archaeology that we had not anticipated including.

Our research focused on the three major awarding bodies in England and Wales: the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA); Edexcel; and Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR). General studies and religious studies A-levels are offered by all three, whereas sociology is offered only by AQA and OCR. Each of the awarding bodies has its own A-level specifications that accord with the criteria established by QCA, which also has the responsibility of approving each programme. Thus, for each subject researched, it was necessary to examine the QCA subject criteria and assessment objective documents alongside the different awarding bodies’ programme specifications, examiners’ reports, and teacher support handbooks where available.

A detailed analysis was carried out for each of the key A-levels, such that we gained a good working knowledge of the aims and objectives, structure, teaching and assessment methods, and topics covered in each of the qualifications. This familiarity was especially helpful when it came to discussing the practice of teaching these A-levels with teachers. Owing to limitations of space, comment is here restricted to four particularly germane issues:

1. **Assessment methods and teaching approach.** The teaching approach determined by A-level programme specifications and assessment methods was much more rigid and prescribed than we had anticipated. We had originally imagined that our learning resource would be most effectively employed in student-directed coursework modules. Whereas coursework seems to be a common assessment component in Key Stage 4 (GCSE, 14–16 years) education, the majority of A-levels are assessed exclusively by examination. The reduction of coursework and increasing use of exams as the standard assessment mode in A-levels was fur-
ther reinforced as part of the curriculum reforms introduced in the wake of the abovementioned 2005 government white paper.

2. Examiners’ comments. We noted examiners’ evident frustration at the narrow range of case examples that candidates use to illustrate their answers to particular exam questions. This lack of variety may be caused by teachers in different schools drawing from the same limited pool of published teaching resources, or else reflect current events covered prominently in the media. Examiners reported that examples were usually UK-focused rather than drawing on cross-cultural or historical examples from other societies. This provides a major incentive for teachers to adopt a learning resource that enables students to draw upon a wide variety of ‘ethnographic’ case examples relating to a given topic.

3. Introduction of ‘Stretch and Challenge’. In response to government directives to ‘encourage teaching that challenges students and promotes independent thought and learning’, optional questions have been introduced into A-level examinations that require extended answers. These are designed ‘to give students the opportunity to demonstrate the full breadth and depth of their knowledge and understanding’ and also to make assessment ‘less formulaic and predictable’ (www.ofqual.gov.uk). This development may increase the demand for learning resources such as ours, which seek to provide complementary material relating to the existing curriculum and encourage students to develop more independent research and study skills.

4. Identification of ‘implicit anthropology’ and ‘bridging concepts’. Our analysis of the A-level programme specifications was largely concerned with identifying topics in each subject curricula which had an implicit anthropology content. A database of ‘anthropological’ topics addressed in the various A-levels was compiled and, as we suspected, there was in fact a great deal of anthropological content implicit within these programmes. To illustrate this point, a summary of anthropological themes in the revised AQA specifications for sociology, general studies and religious studies A-levels is provided in Table 2.

It was, of course, necessary to look beyond the broad topic headings summarized in Table 2 to unpack the thematic content. Thus, the ‘culture and identity’ unit in the sociology A-level involves exploring issues such as socialization; conceptualizations of self, identity and difference; and the relationship of identity to age, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and social class. In the ‘families and households’ unit, issues such as gender roles, domestic labour and power relationships are addressed, as well as investigations into the diversity of contemporary family and household structures, and the nature of childhood.

Similar content was found in the revised OCR and Edexcel A-level specifications. In each of these A-level subjects, and in others (certainly in English Literature, for example), there is clearly much potential for identifying ‘bridging concepts’ that link their implicit anthropology content with explicit anthropological themes and case examples, and to do so through the medium of ethnographic museum collections.

Consulting with Teachers

At the beginning of our project we had hoped to enlist a large number of A-level teachers in
the Brighton and Hove local authority area as participants in the development of the learning resource. This proved to be much more difficult than anticipated, partly for reasons discussed in the next paragraph. Nevertheless, we did attract a small group of enthusiastic teachers from four different institutions (all state-supported). These were interviewed first by telephone and later in person in an attempt to gain an understanding of their teaching methods, their use of the awarding bodies’ curriculum specifications and teaching plans, their openness to including museum visits as part of their teaching practice, and, more generally, their existing awareness of anthropology.

Discussions with teachers confirmed our impression that very little flexibility is possible within the existing A-level curricula: the subject specifications and teaching materials are often very precisely defined and can limit

Table 2: Summary of ‘implicit anthropological’ content in revised AQA A-Level specifications.

**AQA AS-/A-Level Sociology**

**Unit 1**  
Culture and identity
Families and households
Wealth, poverty and welfare

**Unit 3**  
Critical awareness of contemporary social processes
Beliefs in society
Global development

**Unit 4**  
Power and politics
Stratification and differentiation
The nature of social ‘facts’

**AQA AS-/A-Level General Studies A**

**Unit 1**  
The similarities and differences between cultures, nature and use of language
The role of artists and art in society
The role of religious and value systems; beliefs and values; tolerance and moral issues
 Freedoms, rights and responsibilities

**Unit 2**  
Human and social behaviour and approaches to social studies and policy
The impact of political and economic issues on science, society and the environment

**Unit 3**  
Research methods in science and social science
The dilemmas and complexity of multi-faith and pluralist society
The power of language and images to transmit, persuade and distort

**Unit 4**  
Social interaction at personal, local, national and international levels
The approach of different social sciences to our understanding of people and problems
Solving world problems; co-operation and intervention
The contribution of science and technology to lifestyles in different societies

**AQA AS-/A-Level Religious Studies**

**Units 1–3**  
Philosophy of religion
Religion, art and the media
Religion and contemporary society
Major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism)

**Unit 4**  
Life, death and beyond
Religious authority
Ways of moral decision making
more creative approaches. The inclination of teachers to invest in making their lessons more engaging seemed to reflect both their personal motivation and the culture of the institution at which they taught (our impression was that in the better-resourced institutions, the teachers were more inclined to invest imaginatively in their teaching approach). This was also reflected in teachers’ inclinations to include museum visits as part of their teaching practice. Some were very keen to explore the possibilities; others felt that they were already over-committed and did not welcome the prospect of what they perceived as additional workload and responsibility. Whilst schools have generally cut back on extra-mural activities, it is interesting to note that, during the period of our research, the Department for Education and Skills published a manifesto concerned with promoting Learning Outside the Classroom (DfES 2006). The Culture, Identity, Difference resource encourages the use of museums as learning environments and will, it is hoped, appeal to teachers inclined to follow this government directive. However, it became clear to us that the resource should not rely on the organization of class visits to museums in school hours for its effectiveness, but rather be designed to be used in a variety of ways, including wholly classroom-based activities, museum visits by individual students in their own time, and indeed supporting a more formal class visit.

Perhaps the key message that emerged from our initial period of consultation with teachers was that it is crucial that the resource should, as a facilitator of learning, make teaching easier and not more burdensome. Teachers were not necessarily interested in teaching a new subject, for which they would not feel qualified, to their students, but they were interested in anthropological resources that could enhance their current teaching. For these teachers, both the anthropological perspectives introduced in the resource and its use of museum collections as educational media were particularly appealing.

Examining Existing Museum-based Educational Resources

Our main museum partner in the project was Brighton Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG, part of the Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove), and since BMAG’s own educational staff were closely involved in the project, we were able to learn from their experience of working with schools and colleges in the Brighton and Hove region, and their expertise in developing teaching and learning resources based on the museum’s collections. In common with many museums, however, BMAG’s existing educational initiatives tend to be targeted at younger students, with Key Stages 3 and 4 particularly well served (i.e. 11–14 and 14–16 age groups). The more advanced level of the Culture, Identity, Difference resource therefore fills a significant gap and this was one of the motivations for BMAG to participate in the research and fund the production of the resource.

As well as reviewing the more general academic literature on object-based learning and museum education (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Roberts 1997; Hein 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1999), we also surveyed teaching and learning resources produced by the British Museum (BM), the Museum of London (MoL), the Horniman Museum (HM), the Natural History Museum (NHM), and the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM). The majority of these were ‘school visit’ orientated, with advice for teachers on group management in galleries, ideal group size, timing and supervision, as well as suggested activities for use by student groups while visiting (e.g. trails, quizzes, worksheets). A few of the museums also provided suggestions for activities to be done before and/or after visits, though this was not particularly common. Many resources are strongly linked
to national curriculum requirements, although, as noted above, the majority are targeted at younger learners.

Those resources we did find for A-level teachers and/or students at the above museums included bookable study days and gallery visiting guides with extensive bibliographic references for subjects such as archaeology (MoL), art and design (BM), classical civilizations (BM, MoL), English literature (MoL), geography (MoL), history (MoL) and music (PRM). We did not find any A-level resources relating to our primary target subjects (sociology, general studies and religious studies); nor did any of the museums with ethnographic collections (BM, HM, PRM) offer resources that were explicitly aimed at introducing anthropology to educational users from other disciplines.

Developing the *Culture, Identity, Difference* Learning Resource

We turn now to a discussion of how our research with anthropology students, UCAS statistics, A-level specifications, teachers and museum education resources translated into the development of the *Culture, Identity, Difference* learning resource itself. A number of phases were involved in this process:

1. **Development of the resource concept.** As noted above, we were conscious that teachers were not necessarily interested in introducing anthropology in itself to their lessons, but they were interested in using an anthropological resource to enhance their teaching of other subjects. To maximize flexibility in how the resource could be used, we agreed that it should include components that could be disaggregated from one another and reconfigured as desired, rather than be bound in book or booklet form. Based on the key themes that emerged from our study of A-level specifications, we settled on *Culture, Identity, Difference* as a generic title for the resource, with a more discreet subtitle referring to the discipline of anthropology (*Discovering Anthropology through Museum Collections*). We wanted the cover of the resource folder to include keywords that teachers could immediately relate to their own teaching interests, and for its design to reflect an ‘anthropological perspective’. This, we felt, could be summed up in the idea of looking at possibly familiar things in a different way, as well as seeing things in a global, cross-cultural way (‘comparison’ thus combined with ‘context’). Our choice was therefore to incorporate an ‘upside-down’ world map image on the cover onto which keywords from a range of A-level subjects would be ‘mapped’.

2. **Identification of key ‘bridging concepts’.** From our analysis of A-level specifications, we compiled a long-list of bridging concepts that linked the A-level curricula with anthropological topics. From this list, and conscious of needing to identify objects that would ‘speak’ to these topics in the displays of BMAG and comparable museums, we then selected six concepts that would be incorporated into the learning resource as follows:
   - Belief
   - Ethnicity
   - Family
   - Gender
   - Identity
   - Power

3. **Identification of key objects on display at BMAG.** For each of the six bridging concepts, we identified four objects in the BMAG collections. Each object would speak to the bridging concept theme, and provide a way of introducing the different cultures and societies from which the
objects came. We decided to restrict ourselves to objects currently on display in the museum’s galleries, and those which would stay on display for the foreseeable future. As well as typical ‘ethnographic’ objects from the museum’s ‘World Art’, ‘Performance’ and ‘Body’ galleries, we also wanted to include one object for each bridging concept that teachers and students would already be more familiar with (hence the inclusion of Barbie dolls and a judge’s wig, for instance). We wanted to include objects from diverse geographical regions and to include contemporary as well as historical material. After much deliberation, the 24 objects listed in Table 3 were chosen for inclusion in the resource.

Whilst we associated each of these objects with a particular bridging concept, we wanted to design the resource in such a way as to make it clear that this was a somewhat arbitrary choice, and that any of the objects could, in principle, be used in conjunction with any of the bridging concepts. We also hoped that, by including more familiar ‘Western’ objects, teachers and students might think about how everyday objects around them also ‘speak’ to the issues addressed in the resource.

### Table 3: Brighton Museum and Art Gallery objects chosen to articulate with the bridging concepts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Sinhalese disease mask, Sri Lanka</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guanyin, Chinese goddess of mercy</td>
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<td>Mande amulet necklace, West Africa</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hindu shrine, Gujarati community, Brighton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Fire Dreaming painting, Western Desert, Australia</td>
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<td>Hairdresser’s signboard, Kenya</td>
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<td></td>
<td>George and the Dragon carnival costume, Brighton</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rawang headman’s dress, Burma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Gogodala headdress, Papua New Guinea</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wedgwood ceramic wedding group, England</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Malagan fish sculpture, New Ireland</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Karamojong headdress, Uganda</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Abelam clan spirit figure, Papua New Guinea</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Igbo maiden mask and costume, Nigeria</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sande society mask and costume, Sierra Leone</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Barbie for President 2000 dolls, USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Akha headdresses, Burma, Thailand, China</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chinese shoes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maori ancestor figure, New Zealand</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Neo-classical European bust, England</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Asante state swords, Ghana</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Abeokuta sculpture, Nigeria</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tlingit raven rattle, Canada</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Full-bottomed legal wig, England</td>
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4. **Object research, photography and creation of ‘object lessons’**. Having identified which objects would feature in the learning resource, it was necessary to conduct original research on each of the objects. This included collating what information was already available about the objects at BMAG, but also using the resources of the British Museum’s Centre for Anthropology and conducting other library- and internet-based research. The objective was to produce a series of short ‘object lesson’ texts for each of the objects. Over two sides of A4, these each follow the same template, and, under the subheadings ‘What is this object?’, ‘Where does it come from?’, ‘What does it tell us about belief (or whichever bridging concept it is being associated with)?’, and ‘How did it get to Brighton Museum?’, information is provided about the object, its original context, its relationship with a particular bridging concept, and its new context as part of a museum collection. Each object
Figure 1: Two sample object lesson sets: a Sri Lankan ‘demon mask’, associated with the ‘Belief’ theme, and three ‘Barbie for President’ dolls, associated with the ‘Gender’ theme.
lesson sheet also includes a regional map showing where the object had originated, as well as contextual images showing similar objects in use or further illustrating the text. New photographs were also taken of each object, including close-up shots of details mentioned in the object lesson texts: these images are arranged on a separate A4 sheet, without text, as a purely visual resource for each object, encouraging students to develop their observational skills. Two sample object lesson sets are shown in Figure 1.

5. Organization of the resource. The resource was designed in a loose-leaf A4 format and collated in a ring binder. It is divided into two parts: a short ‘Orientation’ part, which includes an introduction to the resource, notes on how to use the resource (encouraging experimentation), a short introduction to the discipline of anthropology (with recommendations for further reading), practical notes on the museum as a learning environment, and a museum-based activity sheet entitled ‘Learning to look’. The second part of the resource is entitled ‘Object lessons’ and comprises six tabbed sections corresponding to each of the bridging concepts (i.e. ‘Belief’, ‘Ethnicity’, ‘Family’, ‘Gender’, ‘Identity’ and ‘Power’) (Figure 2). Page numbering has been kept to a bare minimum, since we did not want to suggest that there is only one way of ordering or arranging the materials, and whilst each section is colour-coded so that they can be easily reassembled, we wanted to ensure that the design allowed teachers to take the pack apart and use it in creative ways.

Piloting the Resource

Throughout the development process outlined above, we continued to liaise with our group of teacher-consultants, and before finalizing the design and getting the resource printed, we created a high-quality draft version with which to pilot it. Collecting and collating feedback from this piloting process was funded by the RAI’s Education Programme, with most trialling of the resource taking place in the Summer Term of 2008.

The draft resource was distributed to 18 A-level teachers drawn from our initial focus group and supplemented by members of the teacher reference group that has been working with the RAI’s Education Committee at different stages of developing the anthropology A-level. The resource was trialled across a number of different A-level subjects, including: sociology, psychology, religious studies, travel and tourism, archaeology and media studies.

All but one of the teachers who piloted the resource were supportive of the decision not to include specific curriculum links and appreciated the opportunity to be creative with a learning resource that did not curtail their own teaching skills. This also meant that the teachers used the resource in relation to subjects and modules that we had not necessarily anticipated in our planning; thus, as well as sociology modules on ‘the individual and society’, which we had anticipated, it was also used to support teaching on the socio-cultural impact of tourism, or to help psychology students think about cultural biases in psychology methodologies, for example. Some teachers valued the inclusion of activity sheets, while others preferred to use the resource to get students to think and talk more freely.

Teachers reported using the resource for group work, with numbers ranging from small discussion groups of two or three students to groups of over 25. The time devoted to the resource ranged from a single one-hour session to five full-length afternoon sessions and a day trip to a museum. Despite these different teaching contexts, various trends emerged in the piloting. For example, a number of respon-
Figure 2: The ‘object lesson’ part of the resource, with ‘tabbed’ bridging concept sections. Pictured is the ‘index page’ for the ‘Power’ section, with images of the Asante state swords, Abeokuta sculpture, Tlingit raven rattle, and a full-bottomed legal wig.
Students explained how they had started a session by distributing the image sheets and asking the students to extract as much information as possible from these purely visual media before distributing the object lesson information sheets. Thus, a psychology teacher from Hove explained how she distributed image sheets from the ‘Power’ and ‘Family’ themes, got the students to discuss them, and then used the information sheets to explain what the objects were and where they had come from. She then got the students to discuss how each object related to the concepts of power and family. The teacher described how a free-flowing debate then ensued, covering topics such as knives acting as symbols of power for young adults today (relating to the Asante state swords); the power represented by a judge’s wig as opposed to a crown, leading to a discussion of the power of the law court versus the power of monarchy in contemporary Britain; the continued validity of the ideal nuclear family in British society; and interpretations of the depiction of a European figure in an African sculpture (the Abeokuta sculpture), leading to a discussion of European representations of and attitudes towards African societies in general. Other teachers remarked on how the resource’s focus on material culture enabled students to engage more easily with abstract concepts, and how looking and learning about artefacts from other cultures helped students think about their own culture and society, and their place within it.

Whereas we had been careful to design an anthropological resource that would support a range of different A-levels, some teachers preferred to use the resource to introduce students to the discipline of anthropology more specifically. Thus a sociology teacher at a further education college in Norwich created an optional series of five three-hour sessions around the resource, expecting perhaps five or six students to attend. Considering that the sessions were held in the students’ own time and in addition to their regular college commitments, she was pleasantly surprised that 35 students attended the first session, with 26 or 27 regularly attending the subsequent sessions. Each session was based on a different theme covered by the resource, with all concepts except ‘Belief’ utilized. This teacher explained how students particularly liked being ‘let loose’ on the images of the artefacts and being encouraged to think and talk freely in identifying what they were and where they came from. It is a tribute to the skills of this teacher and the commitment from students that she was able to engender around the resource that a day-trip to Cambridge University’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) was organized and enthusiastically attended. (As preparation for the visit, this teacher got students to identify and download images of MAA objects comparable to the BMAG objects that featured in the resource, demonstrating how the resource can indeed be imaginatively ‘localized’ and its effectiveness not limited to those within reach of Brighton.)

Indeed, whilst many of the teachers piloting the resource utilized it exclusively in the classroom, others also built in museum visits to support classroom exercises. Where teachers preferred ‘self-motivated’ rather than ‘organized’ visits, this was not simply because organized trips place greater demands on teachers, but also because it reflected their pedagogical approach. Thus one Brighton-based teacher found the resource effective in helping students to acquire and develop independent learning skills and to realize that there are learning opportunities beyond their classrooms and textbooks.

Teachers were asked how their students responded to the material and whether they felt it had enhanced students’ learning ability. In general teachers reported that it often made textbook learning about concepts and other cultures seem ‘more real’. A travel and tourism A-level teacher from Peterborough commented that students showed improvements in recording and retrieving information after
their work on the ‘Identity’ section of the resource. In particular, he noted that it was helpful in sharpening students’ critical analysis ability, their ability to retain information, and their skills at analysing visual information. A colleague from the same school teaching religious studies commented that the quality and presentation of the photographs was a significant aid in getting students to engage with the resource. One sociology teacher from London trialled the ‘Family’ section with his students and was struck by how it challenged their assumptions about the ‘absence of culture’ in British society:

It was interesting to see how many students did not have a sense of how much symbolism is included in British marriage (comparing it to today’s version of partnership, and whether it is lost), although most of them are from a South Asian background and knew and compared it to their own ceremonies and symbolism.

One interesting point was raised by a teacher about the use of printed image sheets, as opposed to images projected in a PowerPoint presentation for instance. Being able to hold the images enabled some of her less intellectually or verbally confident students to take part in discussions from which they might otherwise have been excluded:

Students could simply point and say ‘Look at this thing on the top’ or ‘Why’s he doing that?’ without embarrassing themselves by their lack of precise vocabulary.

There was a more general sense in which being able to hold the images, look at them closely and identify things of interest made the artefacts much more approachable and accessible. There was also a welcome and liberating sense for some students of a ‘levelling of the playing field’, as the artefacts and information about them were, for the most part, new to everybody.

Some of these latter points speak to the wider rationale of our project: that is, to help unlock the value of material culture (and hence museums as particular repositories of material culture) as pedagogic tools. Our aim was to show how thinking about things allows us to think beyond things and to engage with abstract concepts (Pearce 1990; Paris 2002). This rationale is nothing new, of course, and it motivated the assembling of many public museum collections in the first place, but object-based learning has become increasingly marginalized in mainstream education, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels. The museum visit has thus become seen as a peripheral activity rather than an essential part of the curriculum, and as a result a valuable alternative to text-based learning has become neglected. More generally, however, our hope has been that ‘object lessons’ can encourage closer observation of the material environment within but also outside the marked context of the museum.

**Revisiting Anthropology, Museums and the A-level Curriculum**

Piloting the draft version of the *Culture, Identity, Difference* resource resulted in some suggestions for minor modifications that we were able to incorporate into the final version, which was published by the Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove in January 2009. On the whole, however, the piloting process confirmed the potential value of the resource to teachers and students across a range of A-level subjects in the social sciences and humanities. At the time of writing we are conducting further evaluation work with teachers using the finished resource, and we are also collecting feedback from museum educators and museum ethnographers in different museums in the UK.

One of our current objectives is to consider whether a version of the resource could be developed specifically in support of the new anthropology A-level. It would, of course, be
somewhat ironic if *Culture, Identity, Difference* were to be adopted as a teaching resource for the A-level given that it was designed to introduce anthropology to those who were not already studying or teaching it. However, this would also further demonstrate the value of designing a resource that facilitates such flexibility of use and function.

Many museum professionals with whom we have discussed the issue have been impressed by the quality of research and the production values that have gone into making *Culture, Identity, Difference* and doubt that similar resources could be mobilized to create a version that substitutes their own ethnographic collections for those of BMAG, which feature in the current version. This is to miss the point in a way, since the objective would be to create a version of the resource that was not site- or collection-specific, but one that would work at a more general level. There is, however, a greater doubt in the minds of many museum professionals that we have encountered, and this is a belief that secondary school teachers cannot be enticed to bring their students into the museum.

In the light of our experiences developing the *Culture, Identity, Difference* resource, we have to wonder whether museums are as much to blame as teachers or the current assessment-orientated ethos of secondary education promoted by qualification authorities. The problem seems to lie in a continuing adherence to outmoded notions of what a museum is, or at least what its pedagogical function is. This is the notion of the museum as a didactic educational arena: a dry space of facts and esoteric specialisms that can intimidate the generalist. In our research, we have been confronted by the perhaps understandable concern of educators (whether teachers or museum personnel) that they will not be able to meet students’ expectations and provide the necessary expert curatorial knowledge to explain a particular object or context. In terms of safeguarding their own professional authority and identity, it is much safer for such educators to regard museums as an educational environment for younger learners who can be sent out to make drawings of exhibits or answer simple questionnaires.

Rather than regarding museums as didactic educational spaces, what we have attempted to engage with in the *Culture, Identity, Difference* resource is an alternative conceptualization of the museum as a space of encounter, exploration and experimentation (Basu and Macdonald 2007), where the meaning or significance of an object emerges dialogically with differently situated audience members and with their existing interests and knowledges (Hooper-Greenhill 1999). Seen in this way, it is the questions that we pose to ‘things’ (and the questions that they pose to us) that are most important. To question the point of a blunted sword or the purpose of wearing an archaic style of a wig carries its own lessons that do not require expert knowledges, only a willingness to approach familiar issues – about power and its symbols, for instance – in creative ways. The skills that such a reconceptualization demands are eminently transferable ones – observation, critical analysis, lateral thinking – rather than narrower fields of enquiry that might justifiably be regarded as the domain of the curator or collector.

Indeed, those exceptional museums that have invested energy and resources into developing senior secondary (and higher) education use have recognized that, as well as providing routes into subject-specific knowledges, one of the primary roles of education staff is to teach teachers about museums and material culture more generally, including exploring the nature of knowledge in museums and the kinds of transferable observational and analytic skills mentioned above. As education staff at the Manchester Museum explained to us, much time is spent explaining to both students and teachers how much museum staff do not know about the things they work with. Freed from expectations that they should be the font of
all knowledge, teachers are able to experiment more confidently with the museum and its collections as inspirational learning resources.

Such an approach might be described as an ‘ethnographic’ one. It is an approach that places observation, experience and inductive reasoning above the mere replication of pre-formulated knowledges. And, of course, observational and analytical skills honed in the precincts of the museum may be extended to the ‘real world’ beyond, such that students are encouraged to look about themselves and reflect on and analyse their own social and cultural environments.

The association between anthropology, museums and ethnographic collecting has a long and, indeed, ambivalent history (Stocking 1985; Shelton 2006). A legacy of this association is the remarkable diaspora of ethnographic artefacts that can be found in museums great and small throughout Europe and North America, the contemporary relevance of which is sometimes brought into question (Shelton 1992). At the same time, the relevance of anthropological perspectives on contemporary issues – for example, those relating to issues of culture, identity and difference – is beyond doubt. In the Culture, Identity, Difference learning resource, we have sought to reconcile these anthropological applications, demonstrating that there is indeed an important contemporary use for historical ethnographic collections in formal as well as informal education, not least in supporting senior secondary-level teaching and learning on themes such as belief, ethnicity, family, gender, identity and power that feature in a wide array of A-level curricula. In so doing, our objective has been to raise the profile of anthropology among sixth-form teachers and students in the belief that this will raise public consciousness of the discipline and of the value of its contribution to public debates more generally.

Beyond these objectives, however, what our resource seeks to promote is an ‘anthropological consciousness’ among learners. It is not concerned with the communication of ethnographic facts and figures, but with helping students and educators discover for themselves a new way of looking at, thinking about and engaging with the world – an ethnographic way.

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Notes

1. In addition to ourselves, the project team included Katherine Prior, Sarah Posey and Nicole Blum, and we were assisted at different stages by Su Hepburn, Helen Mears, Harriet Hughes and Derek Lee. Michael O’Hanlon kindly acted as an external evaluator of the project. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our colleagues in this project, as well as our funders (C-SAP, the RAI, the Department of Anthropology at Sussex

2. In the UK, only three IB schools/colleges presented candidates in anthropology in 2007: Truro College, Cirencester College and Deacon’s School, Peterborough (Marzia Balzani pers. comm.).

3. <www.ucas.com/students/beforeyouapply/whattostudy/stamfordtest>. UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) is the organization responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK.

4. An A-level qualification consists of advanced subsidiary (AS) and A2 units typically taken over two years. The AS can be taken as a standalone qualification or as the first half of a full A-level qualification. Applicants to undergraduate anthropology programmes at UK universities typically need a minimum of three full A-level qualifications.

5. The Joint Academic Classification of Subjects (JACS) system is used by UCAS and other agencies to classify academic subjects, especially at undergraduate level.

6. The Department of Education and Skills was subsequently reorganized and its remit is currently split between the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (the latter being currently responsible for Higher Education in England).

References


