Home or Away? Widening Participation and the Challenge for Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on recent ethnographic research with ‘non-traditional’ humanities and social science students at a ‘new’ university in the North West of England, this paper explores their contradictory experiences of alienation and engagement, and their attitudes to institutional ‘Widening Participation’ initiatives. It argues that these students’ institutional survival depends on negotiating the conflicting expectations of their academic relationships and their day-to-day social responsibilities beyond the university.

What might these findings mean for anthropology’s own pedagogic strategies? The paper ends by suggesting that a subject that asks its students fundamentally to question their established senses of self and ‘home’ may pose a further challenge for students for whom strained personal and domestic relationships, ambivalence and self-doubt are dominant motifs of their whole university experience.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, retention, subjectivity, Widening Participation

Introduction

During the last decade, British university admission policies have become a key tool of government social reform. ‘Widening Participation’ has been the buzzword for a government eager to break the strong links between social inequality and educational privilege in British society. Just a little over thirty years ago only 13.5 percent of the 18–22 age-range was enrolled in some form of higher education (McConnell 1973: 5). In the 1970s, universities were virtually inaccessible to those who had not been to a grammar school and had obtained high grades at ‘A-Level’. Today, the participation rate for this age-range has reached a little over 40 percent, and the trend in many countries is towards universal access to higher education (HE).

Contemporary U.K. policy has now shifted from numerical expansion – such as the relabelling of ‘polytechnics’ as universities by the Thatcher government – to attempts to reshape the social composition of the student body. A new discourse has emerged around ‘non-traditional students’, such as those coming with vocational qualifications, after completing ‘Access’ courses, or ‘mature’ students returning to education after bringing up a family.

University attainment continues to favour the middle classes differentially (Macdonald and Stratta 2001). It is this group for whom access to higher education has, historically, been much easier to secure (Devine 2004). Access is also differentially experienced by institutions, and there is a growing gap in status and resources between the ‘elite’ old universities (including institutions such as Durham, UCL,
Bristol, Edinburgh, etc.) and the new ‘post-1992’ universities. These inequities in access to higher education by social class have persisted despite a plethora of public and private policy initiatives and changes in the admissions policies of many higher education establishments (Williams 1997).

These policies have been underpinned by substantial financial investment (Office of Public Sector Information 2004; HEFCE 2005). Targeted activities include the HEFCE-funded ‘Aimhigher’ strategy (Kendall et al. 2005) and the privately-funded Sutton Trust, which works with gifted young people who are either economically disadvantaged or who have no family or kin experience of higher education – what some call a lack of ‘higher education heritage’.

Despite sociological critiques (e.g. Ball 2008), these initiatives are beginning to have some success, and are also raising awareness of such inequities (Feinstein and Peck 2008). Summer schools, open days, school-university partnerships and extended educational provision for Gifted and Talented young people are examples of how educational strategies have been embedded in the social justice policies of New Labour (Powell 2000: 39–60).

Publicly funded institutions now have a statutory obligation to monitor equal opportunities across a wide range of categories such as disability (Holloway 2001), sexuality, and religious orientation. The government’s fair access watchdog, OFFA, the Office for Fair Access, sets each university targets for the number of state school pupils it takes. Nonetheless, achieving ‘fairer’ access has in practice been limited to a disproportionately small percentage of the population (Machin and Vignoles 2004; Ertl and Hayward 2007; Gibbons and Vignoles 2009), and led to ‘perverse access’, with working-class students more likely to apply to, and be accepted at, universities with the least prestige and fewest employment opportunities. Research on the impact of the government’s Widening Participation agenda has highlighted the relationship between identity, socioeconomic background and success in higher education (Devine 2004; Elias and Purcell 2004; Gorard 2006, Reay 2001, Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010). Developing the social capacity to feel intellectually ‘at home’ in a university environment is a crucial aspect of engaging purposefully and productively with higher education.

Nor have all institutions and subjects welcomed the target setting that has accompanied these policies. ‘Captured’ by the middle-classes, Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol and some of the other ‘old’ universities continue to recruit stubbornly high numbers of private school pupils. More than 60 percent of Oxford’s students are from private schools, even though only 8 percent of students nationally are educated in such institutions. Anthropology’s profile has also changed little, mainly because the subject is taught primarily within the ‘old’ universities. Anthropology undergraduates tend to be more middle class than the ‘average’ student, and in 2002 almost two-thirds of students were from the top two socio-economic groups. In 2008, more than 80 percent of Anthropology places were offered to students aged 18 and 19, and less than 10 percent were aged over 25 (UCAS 2008). The numbers of mature students continues to decline. Anthropology also tends to attract disproportionately few students from U.K. ethnic minorities, though many of its graduate students are from a non-EU background. There have always been more women than men studying at the undergraduate level, and in recent years they have outnumbered men on a ratio of greater than 2:1. Anthropology continues to struggle with its exotic mystique, though initiatives such as the London Anthropology Day, the RAI’s education programme and numerous departmental outreach initiatives are all seeking to dispel this mystique.

Most research on university participation draws on statistical analyses to demonstrate the extent of these social inequalities. However, qualitative studies reveal the more subtly
nuanced dimensions of the problems that students from ‘under-represented’ groups face. In particular, small-scale ethnographic studies situate the problem of inequality both theoretically and empirically (Schuetze and Slowey 2000). They allow an analytical focus on the lived experiences of those whose lives have been directly influenced by such social and political transformations. Although the students with whom we conducted fieldwork were not anthropology students, they were pursuing social sciences courses that shared commensurate epistemological assumptions with social anthropology, such as a theoretical interest in analysing identity, belonging and selfhood. Spindledom University, because of its commitment to widening participation and its relatively low position within a highly differentiated higher education sector, was a perfect context in which to explore the problems of student identity.

We argue that feeling ‘at home’ within the university is the first step for non-traditional students in negotiating and developing a new disposition and habitus. This sense of belonging is crucial to the formation of student subjectivities. But what if a university ‘education’ in the social sciences is partly about questioning and disturbing taken-for-granted conceptions of ‘home’, affiliation and identification? This paper is about how one group of students experience these different educational and social subjectivities and expectations, and what this might tell us about the pedagogic challenges and opportunities facing anthropology.

**Theorizing Student ‘Belonging’**

Sociologists have begun to rethink the relationship between social class and education. The challenge of theorizing class and educational success is the tautological nature of the problem. Prestige, social status and economic advantage are, and always have been, partly defined in terms of educational success. To be ‘educated’ and ‘working class’ thus remains an oxymoron unless we rethink our understandings of social class, education and the relationship between the two.

Rather than relying on the crude and, to some extent, arbitrary categories of ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ as signifiers of socio-economic position, we call for a more nuanced and anthropologically-informed understanding of identity and personhood. We are particularly interested in the shaping of an academic persona, and the way in which students have to negotiate the discourse of liberal education for its own sake and a career-focused pragmatic instrumentalism.

Negotiating this tenuous balance is a feature of much of the work on working class students’ self-identities in the context of a supposedly liberal, and liberating, education. Research into students from the lowest socio-economic groups appears to suggest that they are forced to redefine their relationships with those whose claims on their identity are strongest, namely kin, friends and colleagues from similar social strata (Jackson and Marsden 1986). Drawing on a distinction Lawler (2000) makes between ‘escape’ and ‘holding on’, Reay argues that they are ‘trying to negotiate a difficult balance between investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before’ (Reay 2002: 403). Evans’ work (2006) similarly charts the social conventions and identities that caused the young white working class males in her study to reproduce the social constraints of their immediate families – constraints that were grounded in intergenerational expectations. Sometimes this led them to an outright rejection of the possibilities offered by formal education (see also Heath and Johnston 2007).

By exploring how students configure their own educational subjectivity, one gains a deeper understanding of personhood and its relationship to formal learning experiences. Drawing on Strathern (1991, 1992), we explore...
how students’ choices reflect both partial, ‘not-quite’ replications of their familial identities, and at the same time how these familial loyalties are being reconfigured by this engagement with formal education.

Evans’ (2006) work on how white working class children fail in school demonstrates the robustness of the subjectivities that they construct through their familial relationships. One of her main motivations in studying these problems was to understand how her own subjectivity, constructed through a middle class familial upbringing, can be transformed through ethnographically engaging with their day-to-day routines and getting to know them. By participating in their daily lives she experienced a degree of slippage in her own subjectivity and found that it was not too difficult for her to see the world as they saw it.

Our research suggests that these anthropological insights have particular resonance for students from ‘traditionally non-participating groups’ engaging in higher education. They seek to derive meaning from their life-choices as they construct this new educational persona. This negotiation of competing claims on personhood results in a degree of epistemological slippage. Invoking the idea of how identity is configured in relation to ‘slippage’ (Hawkins 2006), the preliminary ethnographic data shows how the students with whom we worked sought to reconcile these different aspects of their identities. An ethnographic approach allows a fuller insight into the unpredictable effects of Widening Participation policies.

Not all universities are the same. For all the rhetoric around the equality in degree standards, most students are aware that there is a wide range in reputation and status. It also becomes part of these students’ identities and their associated life-choices. How these identities get configured, reproducing deeply embedded social divisions – despite a plethora of ‘fair access’ and ‘social justice’ policies (Ball 2008) – is addressed in the next section, in which we describe findings from research at a new university in the North of England which we give the pseudonym ‘Spindledom’. We focus on how a group of ‘non-traditional’ students negotiate the ambiguities and slippages in their emergent student identities whilst studying on a range of humanities courses at the university.

**Negotiating Studenthood at Spindledom**

Spindledom is one of the U.K.’s youngest and least research-intensive recruitment universities. Since the university was granted a university title it has wholeheartedly embraced the government’s Widening Participation agenda, as a way of responding to the increasingly competitive and specialized market for HE provision. The University endeavours to present itself as an institution that seeks to provide excellence in education whilst meeting the needs of a local population. Admission is relatively non-competitive, and this identity is reflected in the socioeconomic constitution of its student population and the geographical region from which they are drawn.

Spindledom defines the majority of its students as ‘non-traditional’ and identifies some of them as being ‘under-prepared for academic rigour’. Around 50 percent of its undergraduates are classified as ‘mature’, compared with a sector average of around 20 percent. More than 40 percent are from socio-economic groups 4–7. By contrast, a university like Bristol has only 14 percent from the lowest socio-economic groupings. At Spindledom 20 percent are from what are called ‘low participation neighbourhoods’ (HESA 2008), compared with a national average of around 20 percent. More than 40 percent are from socio-economic groups 4–7. By contrast, a university like Bristol has only 14 percent from the lowest socio-economic groupings. At Spindledom 20 percent are from what are called ‘low participation neighbourhoods’ (HESA 2008), compared with a national average of less than 8 percent from such neighbourhoods (and only 3 percent at Bristol).

A typical Spindledom student is returning to education either mid-career, after a career break, or having spent a number of years at home bringing up children. Very few enter the
university after having completed A-Levels. Most are drawn from the immediate locality, and rather than seeking mobility and an attempt to ‘break away’ from home, students have to reconcile the demands of home and university. A small but increasing number are being recruited from the Middle East.

A significant number of local schools and colleges have participated in Aimhigher and Widening Participation initiatives. Some £5.3 million of public sector funding was allocated in 2008/2009, making it the region with the largest slice of the government’s Aimhigher budget. Spindledom’s success, however, has not been without its problems. A more diverse student population has resulted in a demanding and complex programme of provision. Although this may cater well for its non-traditional students, it has also weakened the university’s position within an increasingly competitive and ‘rankings-driven’ university marketplace.

Widening Participation brings its challenges: keeping students enrolled and ensuring their academic success. Spindledom has a student drop-out rate of 32 percent, the highest in the country. This is attributed in large part to the fact that the majority of the students there are defined as ‘non-traditional’. Poor student retention rates have become a major issue for the university’s managers and stakeholders.

Managers at the university were so concerned about the poor retention rate that they asked one of their senior academics to conduct a major investigation. Submitted in June 2008 it raised significant concerns about lecturers’ attitudes to students’ developmental needs. The report noted that as a result of ‘weak inductions’ students were ‘unaware of the role of their personal tutor’, and there was ‘impatience towards students due to lack of awareness of specific individual development needs’. It also noted that students were ‘under-prepared for academic rigour’, and suggested a range of ways of strengthening student support.

The report also raised broad issues about the ‘university climate’, noting that ‘the lack of some facilities results in some students feeling that Spindledom is not a ‘real’ university’. It went on to make a number of further criticisms: ‘cramped room space, non-traditional students feeling intimidated by large-scale lectures, essay feedback can be overly negative and demoralizing, administrative inaccuracies can lead to student confusion, insufficient tutorial provision, lack of clarity regarding assignments’.

It was in this environment that one of us (Hawkins) undertook a brief period of ethnographic research at Spindledom during 2008. A chance encounter with a senior Spindledom professor offered the opportunity of research access. Professor John Whiteacre (a pseudonym) is an educationalist with a passion for redressing inequality. Supportive of the idea of doing ethnographic research into student identities, he readily agreed to help and put us in touch with key gatekeepers. Professor Whiteacre facilitated initial negotiations between ourselves as researchers and those with whom we hoped to conduct research. Having him on our side, as it were, fully informed about our aims and our methodology, enabled us to deal with any misunderstandings and tensions that arose. Aware of the challenges of developing student support to counter the ‘worst drop-out rate in the entire university sector’, they readily supported the aims of the research.

Based in the Department of Education at Oxford, we were anxious to avoid being seen as ‘toffy-nosed’ academics enquiring patronisingly into the lives of the ‘poor cousins up north’ (which was how one participant put it jokingly as she tried to get a sense of what the research was about). Being born and brought up in Manchester gave the main researcher (Hawkins) the advantage of being able to communicate with the ‘right accent’. Kinship of place seemed to figure highly in the student’s perceptions of who might, and who might not, be on their side. John had acquired an ability to be able to smooth things over with irate and disgruntled students whenever they had
problems. He had been working with a group of around a dozen students who had, at some time during their first year of university career, come very close to quitting their studies and leaving higher education altogether. ‘I’ll organize a meeting. We can put on lunch and we can explain what we are trying to do and they’ll be fine’, he told us reassuringly. He did and they were.

The generosity offered by participants was, at times, overwhelming. We were inundated with offers of help and opportunities for informal interviews, and regularly received texts, emails and phone calls from various people to say that they were going to be around the campus and would be happy to meet up for a chat. The participatory ethnography involved informally spending time in their company; and what follows offers a flavour of their views. Rather than have a pre-determined set of questions, we used themes as prompts during conversations about student life as a ‘non-trad’ student at Spindledom. We made extensive notes and tried to keep some of the records of their contributions as verbatim as possible.

The research involved spending time with them sitting in the refectory, the pub, the common room or strolling around the campus talking. What the students shared throughout that time was both illuminating and disconcerting. It made us realize just how thin the dividing line is between the side that reaffirms the self as scholar and the side that constructs the self as imposter and interloper. This was the divide across which an emergent academic subjectivity was being constructed, with sometimes positive and sometimes negative effects.

Despite the potentially divisive and patronising framing of the ‘traditional/non-traditional’ student dichotomy, all of the nine participants who had volunteered to be interviewed (out of the initial group of twenty or so) aligned themselves with this category. Six were female and three male, and the age distribution ranged from mid-twenties to late fifties. ‘Non-traditional and proud of it’, said Jane (one of the most vociferous members of the group), adding that traditional meant ‘wet behind the ears’.

All of the non-traditional students who participated in the research were enrolled in courses in the Arts, Media and Education department: most were doing degrees in areas relating to Education. One was doing a History degree, one was doing a Creative Arts and Design course, and two were studying Cultural and Creative Studies. Their experiences and life histories differed markedly. Most had families and therefore had to balance child-care with study. Their commitment to their studies meant having to surmount numerous logistical challenges. Two had older children, and were now able to study without feeling that they were depriving their families of their attention. Others described the dilemma of prioritising their course work or their families. But no matter what position in their life course, the stories and anecdotes they volunteered were revealingly similar, highlighting the challenges and benefits of academic identities.

The youngest member of the group, Debbie, had returned to higher education after having previously given up a place at another university because of what she described as a sort of nervous breakdown. The source of this nervous breakdown had been a series of highly humiliating experiences in which her academic potential had ‘just been trashed’, she said, by one of the lecturers whose assessments of her work had been less than complimentary. Many of the participants recounted similarly damaging experiences. The heightened self-esteem they each had gained through becoming a university student was always vulnerable to being squashed through what one participant described tentatively as ‘insensitive’ criticism.

One of the students, Jane, had invested a considerable amount of time and money in her own education. Yet she often claimed that it was a ‘waste of time’, referring to herself as a ‘know-nowt’ – a colloquialism through which she implied a certain worthlessness to
the knowledge that she had acquired through formal education. Such a claim appears to be at odds with Jane’s actions, for she would not otherwise be continuing with her degree. Her comments thus articulate the contradictory student subjectivity that she constructs.

Jane has five children. The eldest did well at school and had recently completed a degree at a Russell Group (a group of 20 prestigious research-intensive U.K. universities) institution that Jane referred to as a ‘proper university’. Phillip had also said that he often felt as though he was not at a proper university and this had been reinforced by a visit to a nearby older and more established civic university that he described as ‘buzzing with energy’. Although he was much older than most university students by as much as a generation, Phillip felt that one of the most important aspects of a university education was the social dimension. ‘Living with other like-minded people for three years and learning to stand on your own two feet is just as important as the academic side,’ he said. ‘There are days’, he added, ‘when I feel good about the fact that I’m at university. I feel I’ve made it. But then there are days when I think … well I’m at university but I’m still here … at Spindledom … I’ve not really moved on at all. I often wish I had done it earlier. Doing it at my time of life isn’t really the same thing … and everybody just assumes that you have reached retirement and have just started doing it as a hobby or something … I mean … it’s not as if your future career is hanging on it is it?’

All the participants, to a greater or lesser extent, described feeling like a cheat; a feeling that by being at university they were somehow engaging in a kind of deception. The corollary of this was that there was also a feeling that the deception would, sooner or later, be discovered and that this would be the greatest humiliation imaginable. This kind of vulnerability was at the core of Debbie’s bad experience. One of her lecturers had told her dismissively that her essay was rubbish, adding that he could not believe that she had been admitted to the university in the first place.

The reactions of family and friends, especially colleagues at work, helped to sustain this kind of imaginary. When Sue announced to her family that she was thinking of going to university to do a degree they all thought that she had gone ‘barking mad’. The reactions of colleagues at work suggested that she was seen as someone who had pretensions and she had heard through the grapevine that one of her workmates had described her as becoming all ‘la-di-dah’, by which she meant posh or snooty. One of her workmates started calling her Rita – an allusion to Rita in the film adaptation of Willy Russell’s play, *Educating Rita*, in which a working-class woman aspires to become both educated and middle-class by reinventing herself with her more sophisticated (as she sees them) fellow students as the model.

Sue recounted how she had spent a great deal of time and effort on an essay and was feeling particularly pleased with herself. On hearing that the essays had been marked she went to see the lecturer to find out how she had done. At first the lecturer could not locate the essay and so told her to come back at an appointed time. This she did but found that the lecturer was not there. She emailed him and he eventually replied with an apology and an alternative time for them to meet. When they did meet the feedback came as a bombshell. Her essay had been scribbled all over and he ‘just pulled it apart’, she said. As the voice of the lecturer faded and as the feeling of humiliation increased Sue described being transported right back to her school days. The voice of the lecturer became the voice of the teacher that Sue had been scared of all the time she was at primary school. Unintentionally, the lecturer had destroyed Sue’s confidence. She went away thinking that she would not return; the idea that she might get a degree was ‘insane’ and somebody should have told her before it got to this. However, she did not give it up. She concluded that she just needed
to be able to ‘take criticism without taking it personally’. All the participants could relate to this to some extent as they had all had a similar experience at some point in their lives. All had experienced being in a lecture or a tutorial where they had not the faintest idea what the lecturer was talking about and believing that they alone felt like that.

 Whilst several commented that lecturers ‘went out of their way to make sure you understood’, others noted that ‘there were one or two who tried to make it all deep and meaningful but it was all just “bollocks” that nobody could understand’. What all the participants had in common was a sense of feeling ‘out of sync’ with the world of the university. They all said that at some time or another they never really felt like they fully belonged in the university – that they could not quite close the gap between how they imagined a university student to be and how they imagined themselves. But at the same time they all stated their belief that they had become ‘better’ people as a result of their educational experiences at university, with Jane adding that the label ‘university’ was both an advantage and a hindrance to reconciling the various fragments of the self – a sentiment with which most, if not all, concurred.

 Not all experiences were negative. A more positive thread that emerged throughout the discussions was seeing education as the means of ‘getting your life back together’. A series of bad experiences, in two cases nervous breakdowns, had been dealt with by returning to education. On good days this was thought to have worked. On bad days it had reaffirmed the destructive feelings that stemmed from these experiences. Mary had spent most of her life believing that she could better herself. She had left school in the 1970s with no qualifications and had done a series of ‘menial jobs’ throughout the time spent bringing up her children. Now that they were grown up and she had more time to herself she had decided to have a go at education. She completed an Access Course prior to coming to Spindledom and had been diagnosed as being dyslexic. Suddenly she began to receive significant amounts of support and assistance and felt that she could achieve great things. This served to boost her confidence. However, and for no apparent reason, there were some days when she just ‘lost all the confidence’ and felt like giving it all up. Occasionally she was able to identify something that triggered this loss of confidence, recounting experiences that were akin to Debbie’s.

 The ethnographic evidence demonstrates the tensions played out in the experiences of students at Spindledom. The issues they raised seemed not to be discipline-specific, but rather the consequence of more general experiences of supervision, feedback and academic practice. All the students had to negotiate this ambiguity as they struggled to acquire the kind of subjectivity that would allow them to feel comfortable and confident with their identities as university students. As Jane said on a number of occasions, ‘the process of acquiring an education is discombobulating’, by which she meant deeply unsettling. Education has a tendency to ‘tip you upside down’, explained another participant. Perhaps this is a recognition of the potential for slippage in the subjectivities that they each construct. They acknowledge the desire to ‘better’ themselves through education and yet feel that they are engaging in some kind of deceit because they never ‘really feel any different’. Throughout the research we encountered a sensitivity about highlighting the difference between themselves as ‘educated’ and their family members who often are not, and repeated talk of the difficulties of shifting between the ‘two worlds’ of the university and home.

**Anthropology and Pedagogy**

Few anthropologists have researched the experience of learning anthropology, let alone
the challenges and rewards faced by ‘non-traditional’ students of the discipline. The work of Coleman and Simpson (1999, 2004) is an important exception. Drawing on their experience of teaching a new human sciences degree established at the Stockton campus of the University of Durham over 15 years ago, they ask a number of important and unsettling questions about disciplinary pedagogy. They point to how little is known about the implications of the discipline’s own pedagogic culture, with its sets of rites and expectations and beliefs. Their focus on student agendas and identities is particularly valuable. They acknowledge the variety of motivations students had for studying the discipline. Some were highly instrumental, focused on gaining a degree and its associated career opportunities, doing little more than ‘regurgitating’ the right answers. Another group were engaged in what Coleman and Simpson called ‘spiritual bricolage’, drawing on iconoclastic and subversive ideas but not fundamentally challenging their existing social identities. A third group, and perhaps the one given most attention, saw their anthropology degree as a form of personal development, and as ‘helping them find new perspectives on the world and themselves’ (1999: 4). They describe how students found that it helped them come to terms with divorce, tragedy, or with experiences of racial and cultural ‘othering’. Whilst the students at Spindledom were not studying anthropology, they evoked parallel experiences, with one important difference. The identities and insights that resulted remained fragile and vulnerable.

Enthusiastic about the possibilities for a reflective anthropological pedagogy, Coleman and Simpson dwell less on the identity challenges faced by these non-traditional students, though they do recognize that anthropology’s liberatory self-image may not always chime with students. They note that some students at Stockton become ‘distanced from their former lifestyles in ways that are quite disturbing for them’ (1999: 9), and one student, who subsequently dropped out, described how these new ideas became a ‘prison’, and resented being forced into a ‘middle-class strait-jacket’ of languages and attitudes. This work highlights the importance of conducting fieldwork with students both within and beyond the confines of the university’s academic spaces.

Anthropology’s pedagogical strategies have been less controversial. However, there is also a growing number of practical ‘Widening Participation’ initiatives, such as the annual London Anthropology Day initiated by Sara Randall (see Basu 2008), the outreach work of departmental ‘admissions officers’ and the activities of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) education committee. This RAI committee has revived the idea of an Anthropology A-Level, first proposed in the 1980s, and the new curriculum’s approval by the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) is imminent. If adopted widely by schools, it will open up anthropology to many more potential students, and will also offer a new career track for anthropology graduates in teaching. However, given the A-Level’s continuing role as an imagined ‘gold standard’ within the British educational hierarchy, it is less likely to actually recruit ‘non-traditional’ students than initiatives such as access courses and outreach programmes.

**Conclusion**

The Widening Participation agenda may be coming to an end. It was predicated on a fundamental shift in pedagogy to meet the demands of a newly diverse student body. However, the sector’s new focus on standards and quality assurance within higher education has limited the degree of pedagogic diversity and flexibility that is possible. University management have sought to deal with the pedagogic implications of ‘engaging students’ through focusing on the student learning experience (Ramsden 2003) and creating supportive and
inclusive pedagogies. Universities now seek to make classrooms happier and ‘emotionally safer’ places to be. As Cohen (1994) points out, people tend to be happiest when their identities are intact, when they feel ‘at home’. Yet this too has its problems. Its focus on making academics more attentive to students’ ‘academic literacies’ has been accused of promoting a ‘therapeutic education’ (Hayes and Eccleston 2008) that patronizes and lowers the expectations made of students. But that may not be a recipe for good social anthropology, or indeed for any formative intellectual training in the social sciences.

There are many practical things that can be done to help students to feel ‘at home’ in universities, as the report on Spindledom’s retention problems demonstrates. But what are the implications of this for anthropology? To what extent do anthropology students also need to learn to problematize the very meanings and valences of ‘home’? Notions of ‘home’ and ‘heimat’ (homeland) are fundamental and powerful tropes of belonging, and become all the more important in a deterritorialized world of movement and flux (Dawson and Rapport 1998). When should tropes of belonging and identity be challenged, and when affirmed? Does being ‘at home’ in education necessarily imply a distancing from other senses and experiences of home, either as a domestic space or a set of social relations? The trick may be to ‘tip people upside down’, as Jane put it, without completely disorientating them.

If this is the case, Spindledom students’ evocation of the gap between the ‘two worlds’ of ‘university’ and ‘home’ can be read in different ways. On the one hand, this evocation is an important social fact, an acknowledgement of their ambivalence about the new spaces and subjectivities opening up to them. On the other, it can be used as a useful pedagogical tool for beginning to question such a clear-cut spatial and epistemological dichotomy. It is up to the teacher to know when to begin exploring the meanings we attach to basic assumptions about ‘home’, self and identity, and when to create safe spaces from which such questioning can eventually begin. There are no right answers, but these are important questions for every anthropology teacher.

What of the future? Perhaps the best way forward is to recognize that different sorts of epistemological and intellectual moves are possible within one discipline and even one classroom. For some, the many meanings and valences of ‘home’ can quickly begin to be unpacked and questioned. Potentially challenging theoretical ideas about the contingent and transitory nature of social relationships and identities may be easy to assimilate and debate. For many 18-year-olds, university may involve leaving ‘home’ behind, confident in the knowledge that parents and relations will continue to sustain such spaces and familial relationships. For ‘non-traditional’ students with less social and domestic capital, less confidence about the future, and less robust academic subjectivities, the critique may need to be developed more slowly. There may be much more at stake in deconstructing already fragile student identities. Either way, the ambivalence of belonging is both a challenge for universities and a gift to the anthropological imagination.

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As well as carrying out anthropological research in schools and universities in Uganda, David Mills has written about the history of the discipline, publishing Difficult Folk? A Political His-
tory of Social Anthropology (Berghahn, 2008). He holds a University Lectureship in Pedagogy and the Social Sciences at the Department of Education in Oxford. His current research is an ethnography of changing forms of doctoral education in the interdisciplinary life sciences.

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