Grassroots Dedication and Opportunism: The Pre-university Anthropology Education Movement in the United States

Colleen Popson and Guven Witteveen

ABSTRACT: To anyone who has taught anthropology to middle and high-school students in the United States, the discipline’s value to intellectual and social development is undeniable. These educators are the engine of a small, long-lived movement to make anthropology a core part of the curriculum that students are exposed to during middle and high school, before they enter college or university. Despite valiant efforts and because of some very difficult challenges – (public misperception of the field, lack of institutional support, and the nature of the U.S. public education system) – the movement has not caught the momentum it needs to induce major changes. Nonetheless, new opportunities and some limited pockets of success offer good reasons to be cautiously optimistic. Rather than trying to compel entire school districts or education departments to adopt anthropology courses and standards, advocates are now focused on leveraging such opportunities to introduce as many educators and students as possible to anthropology.

KEYWORDS: American Anthropological Association, anthropology education, high school, North America, Smithsonian Institution

Introduction

To anyone who has ever taught anthropology to middle and high-school students in the United States, the discipline’s value to intellectual and social development is undeniable. Often educators are so impressed by the impact anthropology has on their students’ motivation and increased understanding of the modern world that they decide to dedicate themselves to attracting wider interest in pre-university anthropology education. These educators are the engine of a small, long-lived movement to make anthropology (including archaeology, socio-cultural, biological, linguistic and applied anthropology) a core of the middle and high school curriculum before students enter college or university.

Despite valiant efforts and because of difficult challenges, the movement to bring anthropology to a United States pre-university audience has not caught the momentum it needs to make changes within the broader education system. Nonetheless, new opportunities and some pockets of success offer reasons to be cautiously optimistic. This article presents the history, current status and potential future of anthropology in U.S. schools, while also arguing for individuals and professional organizations to continue their efforts on behalf of
anthropology’s presence in the pre-university curriculum.

The Current Landscape

For most of the 35-year history of dedicated efforts to expose pre-university students to anthropology, the primary strategy has consisted of encouraging anthropology teaching as an elective class in high schools as well as assisting teachers to gain adequate training in the discipline.

In 1997, Eric Haanstad compiled a state-by-state assessment of high school social studies curriculum (Haanstad 1997; Selig 2000). Haanstad found that 15 states approved the offering of anthropology electives or had stated anthropology goals or requirements. South Dakota and Wisconsin, for example, included anthropology in their instructional goals or requirements throughout their Kindergarten to 12th-grade curriculum. Many states had requirements for global studies, multicultural studies, or world cultures courses, with content and concepts borrowed from anthropology, but with no formal recognition of anthropology as a discipline in course descriptions. It appeared that anthropology was increasingly integrated into other courses, but rarely taught as a separate subject.

These data provide more insight when compared to those from other social sciences, such as sociology and psychology, which are common state-recommended electives (Haanstad 1997; Selig 2001). The American Psychological Association (APA, 152,000 members) and the American Sociological Association (ASA, 14,000 members) have had a long involvement with K-12 education. In the case of the APA, there has been a tremendous push over many years to put psychology electives into high schools. Approximately 31 percent of graduating high-school students (about 800,000) took a psychology course according to the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Transcript Study (2005); over 133,000 students took the Psychology Advanced Placement (AP) examination in 2009, compared to 4,000 in 1992 when first offered. The sustained effort by the American Sociological Association to have Sociology formally recognized with an AP exam continues today.

The American Anthropological Association’s (AAA, 11,000 members) Task Force on pre-college education, under the leadership of anthropologist Paul Erickson, undertook a 1990 survey to assess the presence of anthropology in the pre-college curriculum, in teacher training, and in teacher certification (Erickson 1992; Selig 1997). The survey revealed that 19 of the 50 U.S. schools of education which responded had a required course in anthropology for teachers in training, although seven of these required it only for those training to teach anthropology. In 20 schools of education, anthropology could be taken as an elective. Of these, five schools trained some teachers specially to teach anthropology. Of the 30 U.S. state certification agencies responding to the survey, 13 said anthropology was required for some types of teacher certification. Thus, in 1990, there were clear indications of anthropology’s inclusion in teacher education and in state certification of teachers (Higgins 1993).

A follow-up survey by the AAA’s Anthropology Education Committee (AEC) is planned for 2010 to see if and how the numbers have changed, though anecdotal evidence suggests the AEC will not find drastically different results. Since 2000, most schools where anthropology exists as a named course subject appear to be private or independent schools, charter/magnet schools, public schools in wealthy school districts, and a few ordinary schools blessed with an avid and prepared teacher able to create the lessons. It is less clear—and difficult to assess—how much anthropology infuses other course subjects, though one can assume this is widespread given school systems’ concerns with cultural diversity and the
widespread teaching of world geography and world cultures classes.

**Challenges**

**Misperceptions**

Public perception is a primary obstacle for anthropology to overcome. Most people, including public school teachers, do not have a good sense of what anthropology is, or how it might complement their courses or enlighten their students. Many of those with a limited knowledge of anthropology think of it solely as a research discipline for museum curators and university professors. In truth, from its beginnings, anthropology has been primarily a research profession taught almost exclusively at the college and university level. Anthropology as a subject has a public relations problem. The field requires greater exposure to the general public to overcome these misperceptions and to demonstrate its subject matter relevance to current issues facing the world today.

**Lack of Institutional Support**

Help from within the field of anthropology has not been forthcoming. Most anthropologists still do not recognize the need for teaching anthropology at pre-university grade levels. Despite the arguments that high-school anthropology might motivate students to enrol in university anthropology courses, and that unless anthropology’s relevance is made clearer to a broader public, the field and the jobs associated with it may not survive, most anthropologists do not see the broader connections between pre-university anthropology and their discipline’s health.

The failure to broaden anthropology’s reach to pre-university students is reflected in the weak support available from professional associations – for teacher training, curriculum development, advocacy or outreach. As part of its mandate, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) aims ‘to widen the field’s impact’. Yet there is today only one standing committee of six volunteers responsible for guiding the AAA’s efforts in this area. This group – the Anthropology Education Committee (AEC) – is comprised of appointed AAA members serving three-year terms. The AEC (of which the authors are current members) receives only enough money to support their meeting but no funding for programming or promotional efforts.

Professional archaeologists in the U.S. have much stronger institutional support for public education, primarily because of historical mandates related to combating looting and increasing public awareness of issues surrounding the repatriation of human remains in the United States. The Society for American Archaeology, for example, has had an active group of almost fifty individuals working on behalf of archaeology education over the past four decades (Smith 1998).

**The Nature of Public Education**

Public education in the United States is, for the most part, locally administered and funded. States and the federal government also provide some additional funding. This system has led to extremely variable curricula and quality of education both within states and between states. Students move between several sorts of schools. The private or independent schools are funded by tuition and individual contributions. The majority of students attend public schools normally funded by area property tax revenues. The religious or parochial schools are funded by both tuition and the religious organization involved. For home-schooling the parents pay for their children’s education and take personal responsibility for meeting their state’s content requirements. Most recent are the charter schools, which are supported by public funds and often incorporate a theme-based or ‘magnet’ curriculum, such as in the arts, or science and math. In the past few de-
decades, the concern with creating more uniformity in school district conditions and outcomes has resulted in many of the state governments dictating ever more required courses, leaving fewer hours for elective courses.

Yet, many high schools do have electives among which students can choose, including psychology, economics and even rarely anthropology. But unless a particular teacher feels equipped to teach anthropology and can gather his/her own materials, there is little motivation nor practical ways to establish this offering. Nonetheless, over the past five decades, there have been schools in which anthropology has been offered as a semester elective or even as a full-year course.

National and Local Standards

The National Council for the Social Studies (ncss.org) and each state-by-state counterpart is concerned with the four disciplines of history, geography, economics and civics (citizen participation in government). National and local state standards have been published with some involvement by the corresponding scholarly associations. Social studies is a required subject for all pre-university students for the first eight or nine years, so there is both motive and opportunity for the standards to be fully implemented. Some of these social studies standards do reflect anthropological content (see www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands).

In contrast, none of the five fields of anthropology is required by any state or social studies requirements. Thus there is no sustained interest on the part of teachers, school districts, parents or students, teacher training programmes or the relevant professional associations to produce a list of uniformly shared standards for anthropology. Nor is there adequate demonstrated demand to compel textbook publishers to produce comprehensive anthropology instructional materials.

American school districts are concerned with national and international standards and improving rankings on international examination comparisons. For example, in the most recent rankings of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s 30 free-market countries, 15-year-olds in the U.S. came in 21st in science and 25th in math. Only 71 per cent of our students graduate from high school in four years. There is much discussion in the United States – and even among President Obama and his advisors – about the ‘crisis in education’. Educational leaders are increasingly focused on reform and innovation to help address perceived problems.

Opportunities and Progress

For those interested in continuing to promote pre-university anthropology education, one outcome of the decades of working against these odds has been to shift the focus to more attainable goals or so-called incremental wins. Rather than trying to encourage entire school districts or education departments to adopt new courses and standards in anthropology, advocates have tried to leverage existing opportunities with a view to introduce as many educators and students as possible to anthropological concepts and methods. This approach has taken two paths, – the formal and the informal.

The formal path has involved supporting efforts of individuals who teach anthropology as an elective or as a component of required social studies courses because of their personal interest in the subject. Such support has been in the form of teacher training, curriculum support for teachers, and the development and dissemination of teaching materials. The informal path, which has received less organized attention, has involved development of programmes, exhibits and online learning experiences that teach anthropology to a general audience. Although anthropology is rarely offered as an elective in schools, if more teachers were exposed to the subject, they might fight
to have anthropology included in their schools and districts.

While there are many examples of both formal and informal efforts to promote anthropology in schools, we have chosen several examples of the best known, most representative, or most current to highlight.

Efforts at the Smithsonian Institution

In the early 1980s the Smithsonian Institution’s Department of Anthropology undertook a major initiative in anthropology teacher training in cooperation with the Department of Anthropology at the George Washington University. With four years of funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF), the George Washington University/Smithsonian Institution Anthropology for Teachers Program with its publication AnthroNotes provides one case study of how anthropologists can become involved with teachers, schools and anthropology teacher training (Selig 1997). The Anthropology for Teachers Program included a university course specifically designed for teachers; the AnthroNotes publication for teachers, a resource centre of anthropology teaching materials based at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History; and a series of evening public lectures by distinguished anthropologists, also held at the Museum. Most importantly, the course was organized around monthly topics since each class included teachers representing a wide variety of grade levels and subject matter teaching (Selig and Lanouette 1983).

Because all NSF funding for pre-university teacher training programmes in the behavioural sciences ceased in the mid-1980s, the programme was short-lived. A second Smithsonian programme with similar goals and structures, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/Wyoming Council for the Humanities, ran from 1984 to 1985 in cooperation with the University of Wyoming. The teacher training efforts ceased, but AnthroNotes has continued. Today AnthroNotes is mailed to over 8,000 readers in the U.S. and 50 countries abroad, although increasingly it is accessed electronically. A collection of the best AnthroNotes articles was published in a single volume – designed for classroom use – entitled Anthropology Explored: The Best of Smithsonian AnthroNotes (Selig, London and Kaupp 2004). The book is divided into three sections devoted to Human Origins, Archaeology, and Culture and hence serves as an introductory reader or text for the pre-university as well as college classroom.

Efforts by the American Anthropological Association (AAA)

The story of pre-university anthropology and the AAA has been one of intermittent involvement with a few exemplary efforts by the Association as well as heroic efforts by a few dozen AAA members. In the 1960s and 1970s professional anthropologists and the AAA first became involved in anthropology curriculum development and teacher training programmes for schools (Rice 1986). This occurred in the wake of the successful launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik by U.S. Cold War rivals, social ferment, and the increased concern over science and social science teaching that led to federal funding for education through the NSF. The AAA took advantage of this opportunity and produced an anthropology-based high-school curriculum, Patterns in Human History. Many elementary schools also taught the anthropology-based Man: A Course of Study and the University of Georgia’s Anthropology Curriculum Project (Higgins 1993; Rice 1993; Dow 1991).

These early initiatives apparently had some impact, reflected in three surveys of pre-university anthropology courses conducted by Thomas Dynneson in 1971, 1978 and 1985. These surveys revealed a small but increasing presence of anthropology in schools (Dynneson and Coleman 1986). During these years the National Science Foundation funded anthropology-
focused pre-college teacher development programmes such as the George Washington University/Smithsonian Institution Anthropology for Teachers Program described above. In a 1986 review of 17 anthropology teacher-training programmes, Patricia J. Higgins, who ran one such programme at SUNY-Plattsburgh, documented the increased emphasis on anthropology in pre-college classrooms that resulted from this federal funding (Higgins 1986).

In 1988 several members of the AAA created a Task Force on Teaching Anthropology that was sponsored by the AAA, with the official mandate ‘to promote the teaching of anthropology from elementary school through college’ (Higgins 1993; Erickson 2000; Selig 2001). The Task Force organized symposia to help define the core concepts of anthropology and to identify effective ways of teaching them. This effort led to a major publication focusing on teaching anthropology at all levels, including pre-university students, and emphasized the importance of reaching a wider audience (Kottak et al. 1997). In 1999 the AAA created a three-year Commission on Anthropology in Schools to help carry out their long-range vision, which stated that by 2026 ‘most students will have been exposed to anthropology in the K-12 curriculum’. The President of the AAA appointed seven members to the Commission, which undertook several initiatives to encourage anthropology teaching and assess the status of anthropology in comparison to that of pre-university sociology and psychology. A new AAA Internet initiative to share teaching resources and an awards programme were begun.

The Anthropology Education Committee (AEC)

When the Commission completed its work in 2002, the AAA Board voted to establish an official Anthropology Education Committee (AEC) within the AAA and this group currently carries on the work begun decades ago. The AEC, for example, documents many fine examples of curriculum programmes developed by individual teachers and shares these models at AAA annual meetings, through online discussions, and by an awards programme recognizing innovative models. At the 2007 AAA annual meeting, the AEC sponsored a forum featuring pre-university teachers of anthropology, along with an accompanying poster session that encouraged attendees’ engagement with teachers exhibiting their experiences of teaching anthropology. (A simple documentary of these events has been published online at http://anthroview.googlepages.com/2007k12aaa.)

One of the initiatives recognized by the AEC in the second year of its awards programme (2002) was a pilot project at Ball State called PALS, Putting Anthropologists in Local Schools (see www.aaanet.org/committees/commissions/aec/exeprogs.htm). Dustin Cantrell initiated PALS as part of his participation in Professor Luke Eric Lassiter’s Senior Seminar at Ball State University. Twenty-four Ball State anthropology majors worked with ten participating teachers from seven different local high schools in Muncie, Indiana, to add anthropological content to their classrooms. The teachers had requested help from Ball State’s anthropology department in teaching far-ranging topics such as evolution, cross-cultural understanding, multiculturalism, human geography, material culture, and race and ethnicity. Lassiter’s Senior Seminar was recognized by an AAA award for innovation. The individual college students met with individual teachers and developed projects geared to each teacher’s individual needs. Finally, the university students documented their presentations for public display on a website and in Ball State’s anthropology museum. As part of this documentation, each participating high-school teacher responded to a short survey that demonstrated that the teachers involved in this project came to value the broad perspective and critical thinking offered by anthropology (Cantrell 2003).

In another project, building on the AAA travelling exhibit, Understanding Race: Are We So Different? (see www.understandingrace.org),
the AEC in 2008 worked to coordinate ancillary guides to promote this subject as a gateway to outreach among teachers where the exhibit was on view. The ‘Race’ exhibit was developed with funding from the Ford Foundation under the guidance of the AAA and is travelling throughout the country for several years. In 2009 the project funding was extended to create a smaller version of the exhibition suitable for travel to smaller museums.

In May 2010 the Executive Board of the AAA concluded its five-year review of the AEC and decided against renewing the committee's mandate. The board determined that the group's resources and scope of mission did not align effectively. A set of separate Task Forces will divide the AEC functions into projects that have clear timelines and supporting resources to advance anthropology education.

The Special Case of Archaeology

Archaeology stands at the forefront of the effort to bring anthropology to schools and the general public (Smith 1993, 1998). In particular, it has been the public education efforts of the Society for Historical Archeology (SHA), and the Public Education Committee (PEC) of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) that have produced the most visible results in teacher programmes, conference presentations and classrooms visibility (Smith and MacManamon 1991). These organizations have conducted numerous teacher workshops, hired paid staff, and coordinated the work of active volunteer subcommittees. They also have completed an extensive website makeover and sustain a presence at some of the professional meetings of pre-university teachers (Smardz and Smith 2000).

Beyond these two influential programmes (SHA and SAA), training and materials have been made available through other archaeology associations. Of all anthropology's subfields, it appears that archaeology has the most popular recognition. Students relate most easily to archaeology, and it fits more squarely with existing social studies classes, such as American history, world history and geography. A flourishing programme of teacher training, begun under the auspices of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management – ‘Project Archaeology’ – has long been bringing archaeology to teachers. Based at the University of Montana, Project Archaeology continues to offer innovative teacher workshops throughout the country. These workshops, now offered online for a fee, bring teachers excellent materials as well as training in how to use them.

Looking Ahead

The education landscape is changing nationally. In this era of technology-fuelled globalization, many within the U.S. education system recognize that students will need different skills from those traditionally taught in the pre-university classroom. Global Awareness is a key theme seen to be critical to weave into core subjects. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, an advocacy organization working closely with the U.S. Department of Education, as well as departments of education at the state and local level, achieving Global Awareness implies:

- Using 21st century skills to understand and address global issues
- Learning from and working collaboratively with individuals representing diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue in personal, work and community contexts
- Understanding other nations and cultures, including the use of non-English languages (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2009)

To those involved in the push to make anthropology a more visible part of K-12 education in
the U.S., this statement is a potentially course-changing opportunity. It provides a convenient shorthand and structure within which to justify teaching anthropological content, methods and concepts.

One of this paper’s authors, Popson, is working to develop AnthroQuest, a multimedia web experience that aims to make anthropology more relevant and visible to both pre-university teachers and students. A proposal has been presented to the NSF, and if funded, AnthroQuest will draw from research and collections of leading anthropology institutions – including the Smithsonian Institution – to tell the story of the human experience through space and time in ways that are compelling to students and teachers as well as a general audience.

In addition, recent data from the administrative offices of the worldwide International Baccalaureate Organization suggest that, at least in some of the IB schools located in the U.S., interest in anthropology has grown in recent years. Since the IBO developed a Social and Cultural Anthropology curriculum, 189 of 945 schools in the U.S. with the IB curriculum have offered this subject. Some 583 capstone essays in the subject were submitted to the IBO in 2008. These data are encouraging. As has been seen for psychology and sociology, the development of IB and Advanced Placement (AP) courses often helps lay a foundation for the creation and spread of elective classes in high-school subjects (Selig 2001). Wherever the IB course is offered, one can assume that teachers are trained in the subject and that curriculum and teaching materials must be available (Wilson 2009).

In 2009 the AEC resolved to proceed on two tracks as pragmatic responses to its limited resources. One track is to use the AAA annual meetings to speak directly to the classroom uses of anthropology, discussing case studies and practical methods to introduce anthropological perspectives and exercises into a pre-university setting. The other track is to take full advantage of the Internet to solicit colleagues’ reference material and collaboration on selected topics – presented on a wiki platform. Such a platform allows for multiple contributors, gives ample storage at negligible financial expense, and can galvanize what we have learned in a widely dispersed, yet highly motivated, community of educators. The Smithsonian Institution’s Anthropology Outreach Office also continues to be an important source of teaching material, much available online.

Conclusions

The story of U.S. pre-university anthropology has mostly been a story of earnest but sporadic efforts, low visibility and few resources expended by national anthropological associations for staff or programme support. This record points to the low value that professional anthropology places on pre-university anthropology education. Some might argue that anthropology needs a high visibility public advocate such as Margaret Mead provided in her lifetime. If more people recognized the value of anthropology in the larger public’s understanding of the world today, then more support for anthropology may follow.

Human diversity, whether physical, cultural or political, may be one of the world’s most pressing issues. Unlike other social scientists, such as psychologists or sociologists, anthropologists use a broad, holistic and comprehensive framework to shed light on human physical and cultural diversity, its origins, manifestations and implications. Anthropology provides an important lens for examining the dynamic complexity, diverse cultures and global changes in our world today. It is a subject that should take centre stage in the pre-university curriculum.

The story of pre-university anthropology in the United States provides a cautionary tale, particularly when compared to the much more
successful story of teaching psychology in U.S. high schools. In the case of psychology, a national organization focused large manpower and funding on making psychology a substantial presence in American High Schools. The American Psychological Association is much larger than the American Anthropological Association (152,000 members compared to the AAA’s 11,000). Hence the resources available to allocate to education are a different magnitude. Nonetheless, the example of psychology being widely adopted throughout the country stands in sharp contrast to the near absence of anthropology as a regular part of the pre-university curriculum. The American Sociological Association provides another useful example since that national organization is about the same size as the American Anthropological Association. Sociology has a much greater presence in the pre-university curriculum than anthropology, albeit not as strong as psychology (Selig 2001).

Regardless of the small efforts by anthropology’s national organizations, pre-university anthropology educators and their advocates’ most important asset is a deep well of good intention, strong commitment to the anthropological approach, a storehouse of well-developed curriculum materials, and a clear interest in advancing the infusion of anthropological questions and answers into school classrooms and, indeed, to dinner tables in homes worldwide.

As an archaeologist, journalist and digital communications specialist, Colleen Popson is committed to using digital technology to incorporate anthropology into pre-college education. Popson has helped produce award-winning websites and digital learning solutions. She was appointed to the American Anthropological Association Anthropology Education Committee in 2007 and currently serves as research collaborator in the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History Anthropology Outreach Office, helping to bolster the office’s outreach and education offerings online. She has conducted archaeological fieldwork in Belize, Ireland and the U.S. and has written and edited many articles about archaeology for the public and for children.

Guven Witteveen is an anthropologist of Japan most interested in the science of outreach from university to teens and the wider public. From 2001 to 2007 he directed outreach education for National Resource Centers, beginning with Asian Studies (Michigan State University), then Japanese Studies (University of Michigan). There he promoted intercultural knowledge and experiences among teachers, students and the public. Now as outreach consultant he most recently worked for Hokkaido University Museum in Sapporo, Japan to produce multimedia that visitors can use before arriving, on-site and after leaving the museum.

Email: anthroview@gmail.com

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