

Learnt it? – think again

LSE has a strategic alliance with Columbia University, enabling us to work together on a range of exciting projects. One such initiative is DART, a collaboration between academics and learning technologists from Columbia and LSE, which focuses on the use of digital resources in undergraduate anthropology teaching. **Luke Freeman** and **Jerome Lewis** reflect on their involvement in this innovative research project.

Our aim in the DART project was to use digital media to get students to engage creatively with ethnographic material, to challenge them to rethink information rather than just absorb it. With the support of the LSE Centre for Learning Technology we set about devising digital tools that had an element of research or discovery built in. Rather than presenting easily accessible and consumable nuggets of information, such as online course packs provide, our tools are aiming to puzzle and disconcert students, forcing them to think differently, challenging their assumptions and obliging them to assess information before accepting it.

What's going on?

One tool, 'What's Going On?', consists of an online video of a Pygmy hunter standing beside a dead gorilla describing the hunt that led to its death. The students watch the video once and write an online report on what they think is happening. But the speech has only minimal subtitles and there is very little background information given. Lost in the ethnographic darkness, they often struggle to make sense of the situation, just like newly arrived fieldworkers.

Over the next two times they watch the video the subtitles and information are increased. Students therefore revise their theories about what they think is going on, to include the possibility that the hunter did not want to kill the gorilla at all. They learn what it is like to live with an incomplete set of data. There is no right answer, just an ongoing refining of hypotheses.

One student wrote in her evaluation of the tool: 'I have learnt not to make assumptions, but to try and think of many possibilities, not just the obvious one.'

Betsileo rice challenge

Having taken our students into the mind of an ethnographer we devised a tool to get them inside the mindset of an unfamiliar culture. This is something anthropologists try to do all the time. The 'Betsileo Rice Challenge' is an online simulation in which the students adopt the role of a Malagasy farmer, deciding which cultivation methods to pursue in each of their fields, as well as making decisions about the education of their children and the holding of costly traditional ceremonies. The model calculates the



results of their cultivation, operating within a Betsileo world view in which adherence to traditional methods and the importance of honouring one's ancestors can have as much effect on rice yields as the use of the latest farming techniques. Rather than being lectured on how the Betsileo see their world, the students learn it from within.

Promoting thinking

We hope that in leading students towards these key elements of the anthropological perspective we have also taught them some transferable thinking skills to use in any walk of life, such as to question assumptions and to modify hypotheses. We designed our digital tools not to store information but to promote thinking. That, in our view, is what a university education is about – and what LSE is famous for throughout the world. So we were delighted when one of our first year students lamented to us: 'Dr Lewis, Dr Freeman, why do you make us think so much?' ■



Dr Luke Freeman and **Dr Jerome Lewis**

are fieldworking anthropologists and teachers. They were postdoctoral research fellows at LSE during the first three years of the DART project. Luke Freeman has conducted extensive fieldwork in Madagascar, as has Jerome Lewis in the Republic of Congo. They have now taken up teaching posts at University College, London.

For more information on DART, see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/anthropology/dart.htm



LSE and Columbia University, New York



alone, and promotes knowledge transfer and collaborative research.

Research

In addition to the DART project, in 2003, the two institutions invested \$200k jointly to seed-fund research with faculty from both LSE and Columbia at the pre-major proposal stage. So far, the partners have awarded ten seed grants (capped at \$15k/grant to date) involving over 30 academics in total from a range of departments, schools and centres.

Teaching

The LSE-Columbia University double degree in International History will be launched later in the 2007-08 session. This degree grew out of the successful 'transatlantic dialogues' between the two departments and Columbia has created a new master's degree to facilitate this link. The double degree is expected to create a strong platform for PhD exchange and faculty collaboration. The international history double degree will add to the existing portfolio of double

degrees with Columbia: the MPA (Master in Public Administration), the JD/LLM programme and the MPA/MSc in Environmental Policy.

Global Public Policy Network

The Columbia-LSE relationship has been fruitful in other ways too. In 2005 with their French partner, Sciences Po, LSE and Columbia launched the Global Public Policy Network (GPPN). Through GPPN, and working with Peking University, the alliance has established the Global Public Policy Dialogues in Beijing – a regular series of workshops on a range of public policy topics, with speakers from the four institutions plus guests. It has also developed the Executive Public Policy Training Programme, which offers an eight week training course for mid to senior career level Chinese civil servants on public policy. Following two successful cycles of the programme, the next course is planned for 2008 in Beijing.

For more information on LSE's partner institutions see: www.lse.ac.uk/collections/academicPartnerships



Above: Video tool for 'What's going on?'

Right and facing page: Malagasy rice fields by Luke Freeman. Students adopt the role of a Malagasy farmer, making decisions on cultivation methods, children's education and costly ceremonies

'Lost in the ethnographic darkness, they struggle to make sense of the situation, just like newly arrived fieldworkers'