A DELPHI SURVEY OF PRACTITIONERS: ROUND TWO

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Introduction

One of the ways that the Career Readiness Commission sought to learn from practitioners was through the Delphi survey technique. Round One, which is outlined in our 2021 report, focused on perceived gaps in practitioners' academic training. In Round One, we surveyed 34 practitioners and received over 500 responses. In Round One, we asked respondents two questions:

- *What was missing from your program which would have helped you find your job?*
- *-- and do your job?*

This report outlines the major findings from Round Two of our Delphi Survey of practitioners. In Round Two, we focused in on two of the responses from Round One, concerning methods and how practitioners explained anthropology to others. We chose these two topics because, in our Round One survey, they were the two most frequently cited responses to our question about what practitioners needed to do their jobs effectively. We were naturally interested in learning more about these two things.

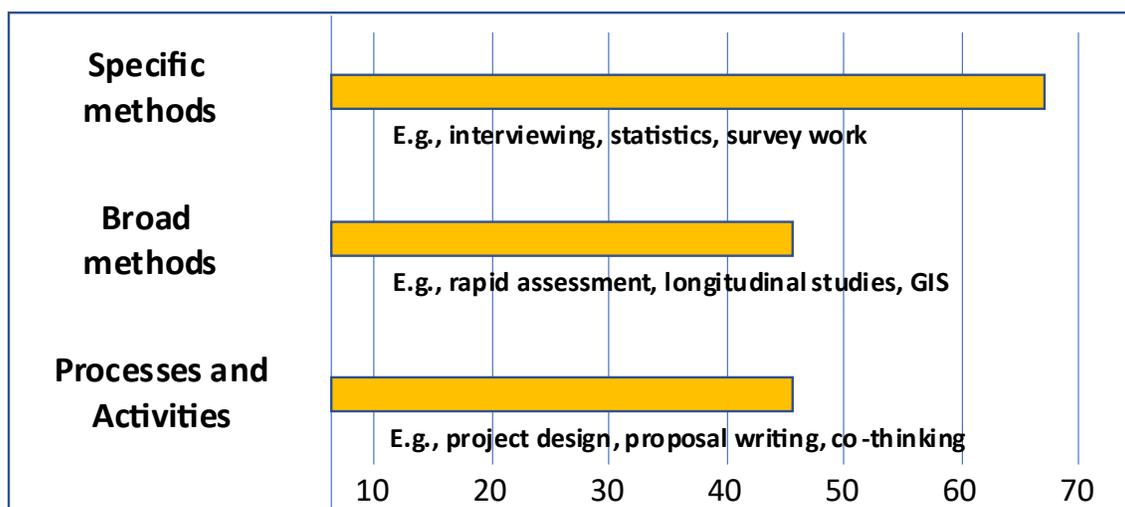For Round Two, we surveyed 24 practitioners and received 316 responses.

Methods

Once again, we asked two questions. Here was how we posed the first of our two questions to practitioners in Round Two:

> *In Round One, many of you indicated a need for more training in **methods**, particularly those methods not (yet) part of the "traditional" ethnographic research portfolio. Below, we'd like you to list up to **ten different methods** that you use or have used in your work, which were not necessarily part of your academic training. You can be as specific as you want here. Use key words or short phrases where possible.*

Methods Practitioners Use

We received a total of 159 responses from 34 people. The responses fell into three fairly distinct categories (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Methods Practitioners Use

Specific methods	E.g., interviewing, statistics, survey work
Broad methods	E.g., rapid assessment, longitudinal studies, GIS
Processes and Activities	E.g., project design, proposal writing, co-thinking

(Horizontal axis: 10 20 30 40 50 60 70)

Practitioners mentioned a wide variety of different methods they felt were important for their work. Although some of them were the traditional data collection methods commonly employed by anthropologists in the past (e.g., interviewing, participant observation), others were techniques not commonly taught in our programs. Many of these less common methods could be characterized as emphasizing the visual, the online, and the digital. And in contrast to the more traditional methods, many of them also emphasized speed.

Fairly specific methods: (67 responses)

This group of methods included techniques that most older, more traditional anthropologists would be aware of, such as interviewing, statistics, and survey work. They suggested a number of newer techniques, however, such as sketching and wireframing, digital ethnography, and video analysis.

More general methods: (46 responses)

More general methods included techniques which could be done (and are done) in different ways. "Rapid assessment" was a typical example here. Longitudinal studies, usability studies, GIS and web-scraping are others.

Processes or activities: (46 responses)

The fairly specific methods and the more general methods are almost exclusively centered on "finding things out," such as through focus groups and market research. However, Although this category of processes or activities may include a component of data collection, it is really focused on something different: "getting things done." Most of the responses concerned project design and management, workshops, co-thinking and co-creation, and crafting pitches or proposals to clients.

Thus, the responses sorted themselves into two basic types of methods: methods designed to find things out, and methods designed to get things done. This last category might not be considered "methods" at all in anthropology programs, but rather processes that involve collections of methods. But these were the responses we got, which emphasizes once again that practitioners by and large are engaged in activities related to change. We have two observations:

1. Many of the methods mentioned by our respondents are not taught in most programs

2. Many of the processes or activities—for which the methods are seen as useful—are also not taught.

Judging from the responses we got, there is still a need for what we might term more "traditional methods" – particularly interviewing, participant observation and survey work – but there are quite a few newer approaches which many respondents said they used or needed. These newer methods were overwhelmingly visual, digital, and rapid, often involving online operations as well as face-to-face contact. Given the wide range of different methods, and their rapid evolution in the workplace, it probably makes sense, in an academic program, to cover the basics and then to teach students how to evaluate, choose and learn new methods themselves, once they are on the job.

Explaining Anthropology to Others

With respect to communicating anthropology to others, we were interested in knowing what sorts of questions practitioners got about their discipline from others. Here is how we asked the second of our two questions:

> *Many of you also indicated a need for more training in __communication__. For getting a job, the issue seemed to be finding better ways to articulate the nature and value of anthropology to prospective employers. For practitioners already on the job, there was an expressed need to communicate what anthropology is and how it works to colleagues, clients and the general public.*

> *Group 7 of the Commission is planning to look in depth at the problem of communicating anthropology to others, but to begin with, we would like to understand the general context within which these conversations occur, to inform and facilitate Group 7's work.*

> *Could we therefore ask you to tell us what some of the specific __questions are that you have been asked about anthropology__? On the next page, we'd like you to write down up to ten different questions that have been asked by prospective employers about anthropology; and then once on the job, up to ten different questions that have come from colleagues, team-mates, clients and/or the public.*

The responses (n=141) to this question, which appear in Figure 2, sorted themselves into three main categories: basic questions of the "what's that?" type (30 responses); more focused questions about the approaches and methods used by anthropologists (27 responses); and – most significantly – questions about how anthropology was going to help people solve a particular problem or accomplish a specific task (68 responses).

Figure 2: Questions Practitioners Answer
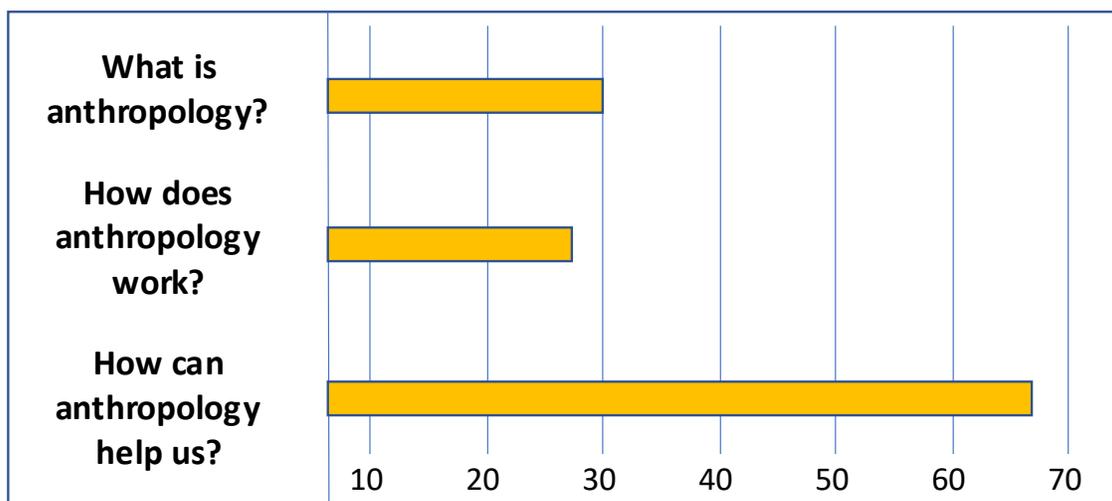
Another 12 responses concerned personal questions (e.g., "Why did you choose to study anthropology?" "Have you enjoyed your career?"). Finally, respondents indicated in four responses that no-one at work cared about anthropology, only about whether the person could do the job well.

Two obvious patterns emerge here:

1. Many people don't know much about anthropology.

2. Most basically want to know how anthropology is going to help them with workplace tasks and problems.

Two takeaways emerge from these insights. First, students need to articulate clearly and concisely the nature and value of their discipline. Second, they need to be able to offer clear and specific examples of how anthropology has made a difference. Employers and clients do not want generalities; they need specifics on how anthropology can help with their work.

Discussion

Methods

Regarding methods, the responses we gathered indicate that practitioners use methods for specific purposes, most of which involve change, improvement, and problem-solving. This orientation to change may seem obvious, but equally obvious is the fact that many of our programs that teach methods – and not all anthropology programs do – make little effort to link methods to action. Although research is an important and necessary part of a practitioner's skillset, the ability to use the data gathered is equally important for many of them, and this fact ought to be acknowledged by those who teach methods.

Our responses also indicate that although "traditional" methods are still seen as important, a host of newer approaches to data collection have emerged, many of which are digital and/or computer-based and emphasize speed and visualization. Many of these techniques are not taught in our programs.

The problem for instructors is twofold. In terms of traditional methods, instruction might need to move away from teaching methods solely as a way to produce a master's thesis or dissertation. As regards newer, emerging methods, more investigation is probably needed to learn more about the types of

methods now being used in the workplace. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that these newer methods are not necessarily uniform in nature, and that they are developing in many cases far faster than they can be folded into an academic curriculum. It would seem sensible, therefore, to do two things: encourage a regular information pipeline from practice into the academy so that instructors can keep up with recent developments, and at the same time, develop ways to teach students to be self-directed learners, so that they can acquire new skills on their own, once they are in the workplace.

The Anthropology Narrative

The need for practitioners to explain their discipline to other people goes well beyond the "elevator pitch." Practitioners need to know their discipline and its characteristics, understand its advantages, and know what it can be used for.

One of the Commission's work groups is conducting a series of focus group sessions with practitioners to understand more about how people actually talk about anthropology to others in the workplace, but our survey indicates some of the important contours of this discussion. People in the workplace, to judge from our responses, care less about anthropology per se than they do about whether an anthropological approach is helpful in their work. Training students to understand how and why anthropology can contribute to problem-solving – in specific, not general or theoretical ways – would enable them to operate more effectively in the workplace.

It would be good, therefore, to ensure that students in a program understand the nature of their discipline and are able to articulate what anthropology is in a clear and professional manner to other people. They should also be able to explain how anthropology does its work – its approaches, methods, and perspectives – and what kinds of data, insights and understandings it can generate. Perhaps most importantly, students should be able to provide others with specific examples of how anthropology has contributed to problem-solving.

Most of the questions coming from the workplace about anthropology relate, in one way or another, to aspects of "getting things done." And this focus, unfortunately, is not something that most of our academic programs train students to do.

Next Steps

Three or four patterns have emerged from the results of our Second Round Delphi. One, of course, is that more investigation would be helpful in certain areas to round out our understanding of the practice context. This would be particularly important for methods: What sorts of methods are being used? How are those methods being used? And how can we incorporate this information into academic training?

The Commission could work with instructors and others to develop case studies and other training materials relating to the teaching and use of methods in connection with work processes such as project design, product design, policymaking, or change management. The Commission also could begin producing short case studies detailing how anthropology has been used to solve specific problems in the workplace. This emphasis would help students get a better picture of how their discipline is actually used. At the same time, such cases studies could be used by practitioners as examples, in their discussions with employers, clients and colleagues, to increase their understanding of anthropology and its potential.