

## BOOK REVIEW

### **My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student**

Rebekah Nathan, 2005

Cornell University Press, Ithaca

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186 pp.

Rebekah Nathan (not her real name), a professor of anthropology at a US university, relates in the Introduction that the impetus for this book was that she had increasingly come to feel her undergraduate students came from some strange “tribe” whose culture she did not understand. So, like any good anthropologist would, she decided to go and “live with the natives” for a year in order to learn about their culture. In other words, she enrolled as a mature-age, first-year undergraduate student (at her own university) and went and lived in a dorm for an academic year. This book tells of her experiences and what she learned as a result.

Although Nathan’s study is situated at a US university, I believe the book would be of interest to academic language and learning (ALL) staff working in other western countries as well for a number of reasons. First, although some of what is reported seems distinctly American (such as mention of sororities and fraternities), much is probably more widely applicable, such as students’ views on cheating (Ch. 6), the factors which go into deciding whether or not to do an assigned reading or take a particular course (Chs. 6 and 7), and students’ time management strategies (Chs. 6 and 7). In addition, Nathan’s research position as a “participant-observer” and her choice to write up her results as a monograph, allow her to “flesh out” and put a “human face” on the results of large scale surveys of students (to which she relates her observations throughout the book). And most importantly, as exemplified by the stark contrast between student views on time management and the “academy’s” view on how students should think about managing their time as explored in Chapters 6 and 7, the *student* perspectives on student behaviour that Nathan’s research reveals provides a complementary perspective to that provided in much of the literature on university students (such as is exemplified by the vast majority of papers presented at the *First Year in Higher Education* conference series: [http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past\\_papers.html](http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers.html)).

As to Nathan’s findings, throughout her book Nathan largely paints a sympathetic view of the reasons why the “natives” behave as they do – something which can be absent from impersonal survey data. For example, when students failed to attend film nights aimed at building community spirit in the dorm, rather than seeing this as another example of “student apathy” or “program irrelevance”, Nathan found rather, that it represented students’ attempts to limit the demands upon their already overextended time schedules, and also a result of the countertensions between on the one hand wanting to belong, and on the other wanting to maintain some independence and individuality. Nathan also found other attempts to build community didn’t succeed because they failed to take into account that with many student rooms boasting their own home entertainment systems, students weren’t reliant on community resources for their entertainment, and in any event with so many different class and work schedules to choose from, many students in the dorm hardly ever crossed paths and as such, social groups did not form around the dorm but around “shared circumstances and shared demographics” (p. 59). These examples illustrate the key message which I took away from this book, namely that attempts to influence student culture are likely to fail if they don’t take into account the nature

of that culture and the other forces which are driving it, and so provides another reason why I would recommend this book as one worth reading by ALL staff.

Another topic covered in the book that is of considerable current interest is the world wide growing concern being raised about the ever increasing number of hours university students are working and the impact this must be having on their studies. Regarding this issue, Nathan makes a very interesting observation. *In general*, this work time seems to be coming out of students' leisure time much more so than their study time, as large scale surveys related by Nathan showed little difference in student study habits between the 1970s and 2003 (pp. 32-34). This is possible because many students find that they can get good grades (or at least pass) by doing only a fraction of the recommended number of hours of study in their own time, and so only do put in this fraction of the expected amount of time (p. 121). This gels with my own (unpublished) surveys of first-year undergraduate mathematics students at an Australian university in the late-1990s, which revealed that typically around half the class were doing less than half the expected amount of study in their own time each week and then cramming come exam time. The question we maths lecturers continually wrestled with in relation to this observation was, "If students can pass that way, what motivation is there for them to do the work necessary to gain a deep understanding of the material?"

As mentioned above, some aspects of the book seemed distinctly American and so may not generalise to other countries. However, it is important to not too quickly dismiss something as being typically American and hence to not apply to other contexts, as it might apply but in a different way. For example, one way students were observed by Nathan to "manage their workload" (Ch. 6) was to balance courses reported to be tough with those reported to be "easy As". While I'm not sure if such "grapevine" information is available at Australian universities to guide student subject choices (when they have choices such as in a Bachelor of Arts), there may be a similar process at work. For example, at the last university I was employed at, I heard once of considerable concern about how few third level courses many students were taking to complete their degrees in the Bachelor of Science program (in some degree programs, the rules about what is needed for a major/sub-major mean that students do not need to take a full load of third year courses in their third year of studies to get their degree). It was presumed these students were doing as few third level courses as possible because they were deemed to be harder than second and first level courses. To counterbalance the poor view such a strategy might give one of students, Nathan also pointed out that students typically didn't respect the "easy As" courses or the professors who took them, and did respond well to courses that they saw as both relevant and challenging. (That a course on sexuality was the one that students pursued the most enthusiastically both in class and out of class was very revealing about what are the dominant concerns of students who are recent school leavers, and this theme is explored in Chapter 5 in particular.)

Apart from the interesting results, Nathan's study involves a number of interesting methodological issues. One example is that in undertaking this study, Nathan decided to go "undercover", not revealing to most that she was actually a professor doing research, with the idea being that students would be more honest with a fellow student than they would with an authority figure. There is no easy path to "the truth" though, as Nathan found that the dominant first-year culture demanded students adopt a public facade which Moffat (1989, as cited in Nathan, 2005, p. 143) termed, "Undergraduate Cynical", which meant that even what students said to each other wasn't necessarily a "privileged form of truth" (Moffat, 1989, as cited in Nathan, 2005, p. 143). Nevertheless, Nathan appears to have catered for this and it is useful to be able to cross check information gained in other ways about student life with what Nathan found using the participant-observer approach.

Another methodological issue has to do with the ethics of her approach, which Nathan addresses at length in an afterword. While she obtained informed consent from the participants in her focus groups and formal interviews, only in rare instances did she reveal that she was a professor doing research for her observational studies. I don't wish to go into a debate about the ethics

of this in this review, but those who want to consider this issue further might consider both Chapter 2.3 of the NHMRC's *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* which discusses under what conditions covert research might be acceptable (<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/files/e72.pdf>), and *The University of Queensland's* guidelines on ethical research involving humans ([http://www.uq.edu.au/research/orps/downloads/human/uq\\_interpretations\\_national\\_statement.rtf](http://www.uq.edu.au/research/orps/downloads/human/uq_interpretations_national_statement.rtf), p. 4) which notes that observations made in a public domain do not pose ethical issues provided they don't violate privacy provisions or lead to the possibility of negative stereotyping etc. I also observe that as recognised by Nathan herself, the main ethical risk of this study was that despite Nathan's efforts to keep observations anonymous, some students would nevertheless recognise themselves in the stories and so feel betrayed. This did in fact happen and it led to a storm of controversy in the media in the US.

On the positive side, Nathan does more than just describe her personal experiences and observations, reporting results obtained from interviews, focus groups and novel survey methods such as collecting responses to a provocative question written on a lavatory door (well that's one way of achieving respondent anonymity!). In addition, she relates what she found from her small scale studies with large-scale surveys of US tertiary students, showing that what she observed is consistent with those studies, and hence at least partially overcoming questions as to the generalisability of her results based on her small sample sizes.

Nathan's research approach also has (at least) one advantage over large scale surveys in that through multiple data collection methods taken over an academic year, when apparent inconsistencies became apparent these could then be investigated. One example of this comes from Chapter 3, where Nathan reports that while on the one hand national surveys and her own early questioning of US students seemed to suggest that locals were making friends with international students, on the other hand interviewed international students reported that while superficially friendly, it was very hard to make friends with local US students and that when it came to choosing groups for group assignments, the international students in a class generally ended up together rather than mixed in with local students. Observations of eating groups in the cafeteria also painted a picture of a lack of diversity in student relationships. Consequently, while Nathan found that the majority of respondents answered positively when asked whether they "had close friends from other ethnic groups", when asked to first name their closest friends and *then* name the ethnicity of those friends, she found that "most students, but white students predominantly, ended up becoming close friends with people of their own ethnicity" (p. 59), thus painting a very different picture about the impact of diversity on student life, and reinforcing the importance of obtaining corroborating evidence when doing cultural research.

In closing, while Nathan's book does have the strengths noted above, it does also have some limitations. For example, while we learn a lot about how typical recent school leavers from the dominant ethnic culture experience and approach university, we don't learn much about the experiences and views of a variety of other student sub-cultures, such as mature-age students, international students, and students who have an intrinsic passion for learning, all of whom only get a passing mention. Nevertheless, at a time when addressing first-year attrition and enhancing the first-year experience is so high on universities' policy agendas, I believe that a book like Nathan's which gives an insider's view into first-year undergraduate student culture is a useful resource for staff who work with such students.

David R. Rowland

*Student Services, The University of Queensland, Brisbane Qld 4072.*

Email: [d.rowland@uq.edu.au](mailto:d.rowland@uq.edu.au)