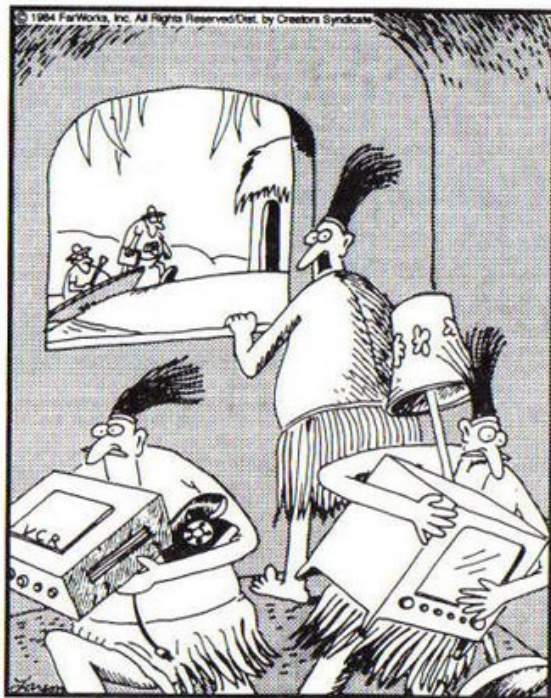


Professional Freshman: A Case for Cohort Researchers

Either by the ethical questions it raises or the fact that many college graduates feel like subject-matter experts, My Freshman Year produces some strong reactions. The more philosophically inclined are drawn to Nathan's description of liminal states, or are altogether disappointed by her lack of summarizing terms. Those with international sensitivities question her conclusions about cross-cultural friendships or her ability to distinguish nationality. Those focused on pedagogy wonder about the ability of her work to influence university policy, or if she has neglected meta-learning. It may be the core strength of Nathan's book that it inspires so many questions across fields. With the focus of HCDE 502 on empirical methods though, I will have to, for now, suspend judgment on whether her particular observations fit with my own experience. Instead I would rather raise a more central question: Is Nathan's experience as a 50-year-old freshman really valid?



"Anthropologists! Anthropologists!"

First, a quick refresher on My Freshman Year. Rebecca Nathan, a 50-year-old professor of anthropology spends her sabbatical year becoming a freshman at her own university. She goes to the welcome week events, moves into the dorms, attends classes, studies with classmates, and takes copious notes along the way. She supplements these experiences with mini-studies of topics such as community and cross-cultural friendships. The chapters of My Freshman Year cover a broad range of topics: welcome week rites, dorm life, community and diversity, the international student experience, time management, and, of course, academics. Her methods include, among other things, participant observation (movie night in the dorms), artifact analysis (reading the content of dorm door displays), distanced observation (studying cross-cultural lunch-mate choices), and interviews.

At the end of the book's first chapter, Nathan spends a few pages legitimizing her study at AnyU as representative of the American college experience because AnyU, she claims, is a typical American college. In the last sentence of her argument she notes "But the ultimate test of my analysis will be undergraduate students, who can decide for themselves if they recognize their lives and their world in this book." If undergraduate students are the real test, why were they not the ones conducting the study?

My recent group evaluation of the Journal of International Technologies and International Development found that studies in which the researchers and subjects were from the same country had much larger datasets than studies where researchers and subjects were from different countries. I believe it is also safe to assume that these in-country researchers generally had less contextualizing work to do, fewer qualifications to make about how their own biases differed from those of their subjects. Since Nathan says her study of the college freshman was as cross cultural as her time studying overseas, I believe the same access to robust data and bias similarity exists for in-dorm researchers. Additionally, there is the potential for response bias in Nathan's study. UW's own Nicola Dell is presenting a paper at CHI this year about how subjects in India would say they preferred an obviously inferior technology if they believed the researcher developed it. While Nathan was not testing a new technology, students may have predicted what a 50-year-old writer wished to hear about college life and answered accordingly.

I do not wish to downplay Nathan's experience as an anthropologist or say that it is irrelevant to the quality of her observations. Expertise is important, especially in qualitative research where the methods of evaluation are not always procedural. Nor is having a cohort researcher the answer to all problems; in fact it may increase response bias. Yet, I wonder if Nathan's expertise is countered by her inability to become a true freshman. Might Nathan's time have been better spent training a prospective freshman or two to conduct ethnographies? More broadly, as HCI practitioners seek to introduce technologies across cultures is their time better spent training local researchers rather than conducting research themselves?

Questions

1. What is the tradeoff between having expert researchers and having cohort researchers?
2. How do these tradeoffs differ between sociology and HCI?
3. Should Nathan have spent her time training freshman researchers rather than becoming one?

Bibliography

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Nathan, Rebecca. (2005). My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student. *Cornell University Press: Ithaca*.

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