

Excerpts from  
My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student  
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Preface:

The idea for doing this research really gelled after I audited a couple of courses for my own continuing interest and education. In two different semesters I sat in on a course offered in other departments, so naturally I went to class regularly, did course readings, and occasionally raised my hand to ask questions like everyone else in class. I discovered that in doing so I inherited a sort of transactional student identity. That is, because I related to the teacher as if I were a student, and behaved as students do, my default identity became that of a student. I found out quite unwittingly that if I walked like a duck and quacked like a duck...then people thought I was a duck. My fellow students began sharing opinions and gossip with me that I would never hear as a professor.

That was the beginning of my realization that, even after my fiftieth birthday, I could still be a student, and be treated by other students as, more or less, a peer. This new identity by seemed essential to my budding research idea. While others had successfully studied campus life as professors, I wanted to see the campus through student eyes to the extent that was possible. I certainly did not want to relate to my classmates or residence hall mates or professors under a professorial identity. It was dramatically apparent to me that I heard a *very* different set of conversations when I audited classes than when I taught them, and I didn't want my research to digress into the often scripted dialogues that characterize professor-student discourse. I felt that the world I wanted to penetrate would be precluded if I were simply an interested professor "doing research" on students. I decided then to become a student by formally applying to the university, by registering for and taking courses, and by moving into a dorm---hence setting the stage to view undergraduate life as both an observer-interviewer and a participant.

Chapter 1: (pg. 1-4)

Ten years ago, I would never have expected to be writing a book about college like at AnyU. I am a cultural anthropologist, and have spend most of my professional life living overseas in a remote village location, learning the language and customs of another culture. As a traditional cultural anthropologist, I participated in and observed village life over a period of many years, joining village organizations, interviewing locals, and establishing long-term personal relationships.

Anyone who has spent much time overseas knows that this experience makes you reconsider your own culture.

On your return from another world, things once unnoticed....seem glaring.

After more than fifteen years of university teaching, I found that students had become increasingly confusing ot me. Why don't undergraduates ever drop by for my office hours unless they are in dire trouble in a course? Why don't they respond to my (generous) invitations to do out-of-class research under my guidance? How could some of my students never take a note during my big lecture class? And what about those students who bring whole means and eat and drink during class? Or those other students who seem to feel absolutely no embarrassment in putting their head or feet on their desk and taking a nap during class

I began to notice my own and colleagues discourse as we continually tried to make sense of what seemed bizarre behavior. Were we like that? Are students today different? ...more steeped in their own sense of entitlement? Why is the experience of leading class discussions sometimes like pulling teeth? Why won't my students read the assigned readings so we can have a decent class discussion? The list goes on, despite the fact that we had other stories, too, of students hungry to learn, of "aha!" experiences, and letters of thanks that arrived two years after a course ended.

A final impetus for this research came when I sat in on a couple of colleagues' courses that I had long wanted to audit informally. With the permission of the instructors, I attended a computer programming class and a class in Buddhism, courses obviously quite different in their content and in the students attracted to them. I came to class regularly, took notes, and did the readings, although I skipped the papers, tests and other evaluative measures. I suppose that behaviors such as writing in a spiral notebook, raising my hand to ask a question, and sitting in class waiting for the instructor to arrive marked me as a student, even if I was an old one. To my surprise, I began to hear a new discourse as I was engaged by other students.

"Psst...psst..., excuse me,,were you in class on Friday? Listen, I cut out and went skiing. Can I borrow your notes?"

"Hey, do you know what he said was going to be on the test? I was zoned out while he was telling us."

"Do you think it's fair that we have both the essay and the test in one week?"

It dawned on me soon enough that I had gone through the looking glass, so to speak, and I was not privy to a world that my students typically didn't share with me. I heard about weekend parties, and how someone wrote the paper drunk between 3 and 4:30 in the morning, and how unfair the grading was, and why did we have to take so many liberal studies courses anyway? The discourse I began to hear happened naturally in my shared status as student, and the different in the content, formality, and tone of the dialogues struck me. I found myself writing down little snippets in my course notebook to remind myself after class of the conversation topics. "I mean, when are you ever going to use Nietzsche at a cocktail party?" was one of my first notations from someone who obviously didn't feel that a philosophy course was worth the time.

## Chapter 7: pg 132-135

Entering "the field" (anthropologists' term for the setting in which they do their observations) and leaving the field are special moments, because these transitions often breed significant insights about the place called the field, the place called home, and the relationship between them. In my case, crossing the imaginary line from teacher to student and then back again was accompanied by commentary from both other teachers and other students that is worth reflecting on.

In the last weeks of spring semester, as I was preparing to attend summer Previews as an incoming freshman, colleagues asked what I would be doing for my sabbatical. I didn't always mention which university, but I told them that I was getting ready to begin fieldwork for an ethnography of undergraduate life, and would be going back to school and living in a dormitory as a freshman. "you're doing what???" was the inevitable response, accompanied by a bimodal reaction---either horrified or tickled. "Are you out of your mind?" one colleague asked me. "You're not seriously intending to move in with eighteen year-olds?" queried another. The idea of becoming a student in residence was such a stretch for most colleagues that three individuals (two professors and an

administrator), in different conversations, responded with the same extraordinary comment that my project sounded just like *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin's classic 1960 book about a white man who, but injecting himself with pigment-altering dyes and changing his appearance, lived as a "Negro" in the deep South. Lining my projected freshman experience to changing one's racial identity in the 1950s American South said volumes about the psychological distance educators perceive between their world and that of their students.

I could sense a similar process, in reverse, when I left the field and let it known that I was leaving school to resume my teaching job, and in the four instances during the year when I had thought it necessary to tell follow students that I was a professor. Despite my professorial age and demeanor, the reaction was usually one of shock and amazement, followed occasionally by mistrust (was I spying?) but more usually by an appreciation of my willingness to cross over a great divide and "see how it really is as a student."

Perceptions of both difference and hierarchy played a role in these teacher and student reactions, and spoke to the bounded domain we believe the other to inhabit and the mystery and social distance we attribute to that world. Going back and forth between worlds as I did was a bit like extended cross-cultural travel: it was easier to see the incomplete picture each set of natives had about the other's world after finding a "home" in each. Most professors have no idea what a dorm room looks like, or about the routes of the campus bus system, or the cost of books, tuition, and housing. Most students have no understanding of faculty rank, how the university actually functions, or how professors advance in their careers. They have little appreciation for the after-hours work that goes into staging the courses they are taking, and no inkling of what teachers are required to do besides teach.

As I made my transition out of my student role, I tried to hold on to the way in which I had come to know students, even as I donned the mantle of a professor. In the dorms I had developed an affection and respect for students as a class that I had once reserved only for specific individuals. I had observed students managing their identities, placating their parents, positioning their future, and finding their place in peer circles. I can vividly remember overhearing the authentic excitement in one student's voice when she exclaimed into her cell phone, "Mom, the professor told me my essay was really good!" I keep that image of what is at the other end of a professor's encouragement.

I also had my own trials and tribulations as a student. It surprised my colleagues to learn that I was a decent by not a superlative student, and though I did "A" work in a couple of courses, in another I was easily the worst student in the class. Despite my going to AnyU's tutoring center, and wasting too many lost hours on homework problems in that course, the material remained over my head. As I found myself dropping further and further behind, it became a struggle for me to class. I came to understand what it means to be on the fence between giving up and making more of an effort. Sometimes nothing more than a teacher's outreach pushes the balance. All these memories now temper the way I interpret new experiences in my professorial role. If there is one lesson that I found most supported by my freshman experience, it is the lesson of comparison.