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Developing Media Literacy for Feminist Advocacy in Asian American Communities

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Asian Americans are often referred to as a "model minority," a label that distorts the rich diversity, complex realities, and critical challenges facing many segments of the population. As a result of rapid demographic changes in the United States during the last century, Asian Americans now include recent immigrants and refugees of more than forty different ethnicities, together with those who have lived in the United States for generations. Asian American communities occupy both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum: while some rank among the country's most highly educated and highest income wage earners, others are among its most poorly educated and impoverished. Limited methods of data collection and

interpretation, however, have often resulted in the portrayal of Asian Americans as a homogeneous group, marginalizing important voices and perspectives—such as those of women who are low-income and speak little English. Such limitations perpetuate misconceptions among policymakers, educators, researchers, and the general public. Furthermore, the lack of disaggregated data has obscured specific profiles of Asian American communities, which, in turn, has deprived those communities of funding and services in areas ranging from education to housing to health (Tang 2008).

As educators, how can we draw on innovative models, resources, and frameworks in teaching and learning—including, for example, activist and feminist scholarship, civic engagement, service learning, university–community collaboration, and community-based curriculum development—to engage students of all backgrounds in meaningful and relevant dialogues while also strengthening the community capacity of this rapidly growing but often-misrepresented population? As an Asian American Studies and American Studies scholar and teacher at the University of Massachusetts–Boston (UMB)—an urban, public, nonresidential, research-intensive institution characterized by its ethnically diverse, working-class student population—I and my colleagues can help students navigate an increasingly multicultural environment and make positive contributions in their communities. Because of their deep grounding in local and transnational community realities, our Asian American and Asian immigrant students in particular have much to contribute to research and practice. Although their voices and experiences are often unrecognized and undervalued, their diverse perspectives and critical insights reflect the ethnic-, gender-, class-, and citizenship status-specific experiences that are typically missing from aggregate profiles of Asian Americans.

Asian American Studies courses at UMB are designed to intervene educationally by enabling all students to develop critical thinking and research capacities. In addition, students gain advocacy skills and sensibilities for community building, community service, and social responsibility, particularly in relation to local Asian American populations. We ground our curriculum, teaching, and applied research in the realities of local communities and respect the indigenous knowledge and bilingual, bicultural skills that many of our students bring to the classroom. We thus strive to create powerful learning environments that address our students' social and academic needs and assets while reflecting the fast-changing landscape of urban Massachusetts and the nation (Kiang, Suyemoto, and Tang 2008).

Service and the Urban University

Over the last eight years, I have developed and taught a curriculum that intentionally integrates student-centered, interdisciplinary, and practical approaches. My courses actively contribute to service-learning and community engagement initiatives on campus, such as the U56 Dana Farber Health Education Service Learning Project, a university–community partnership coordinated by Joan Becker and Jain Ruvich-Higgins to integrate service learning and cancer-related public health education projects into the undergraduate curriculum. Support from this

funded collaboration has, in turn, strengthened the public health content of my upper-level American Studies course, *The Immigrant Experience*. I have also drawn on my research on urban health and HIV/AIDS to support plans led by Gonzalo Bacigalupe, my colleague in Counseling and School Psychology, for a new undergraduate course focusing on local and global public health issues and Boston's immigrant communities.

Such a synthesis of interdisciplinary and traditional approaches to teaching and learning is in harmony with our university's mission. As J. Keith Motley, chancellor of UMB, recently noted when discussing "the urban" within the broader context of social justice, democratic participation, and inclusion, "while Stanford, Harvard, Yale, or Oxford might seek and gain their standing as 'great universities' by how many students they exclude, the urban takes its measure from the many it includes." He further suggests that "urban isn't just a measure of population, noise, or diversity. Urban is also a state of mind. Understanding that, there is for our urban mission no single approach to teaching and learning, no single approach to inquiry and discovery, no single approach to the production of ideas and knowledge" (2009). Over the last several years, my work in media literacy, civic engagement, ethnic studies, and feminist pedagogies has evolved to reflect this conception of the urban university.

Storytelling for Social Justice

In 2005, I began to redesign a course that has become a vehicle for students to acquire and exercise leadership skills, a place for multicultural community building, and a catalyst for personal narrative connected to historical and contemporary issues that affect students' and community members' lives. *Asian American Media Literacy (AsAmSt 370)* was originally conceived in the 1990s as a space where students would gain the intellectual tools to examine the political and economic structures of mass media and to confront the impact of dominant representations on individual psyches and group identities. While I strongly believe that a scholarly analysis of mainstream, publicly consumed images is valuable, I feel even more compelled to analyze with students how one's self-image can be (re)constructed through (re)claiming power, despite pervasive economic, racial, and gender injustices and inequalities.

In redefining the scope of the course, I introduced new pedagogies that encourage students to explore images, words, and music from a wide range of sources that speak to their learned and lived experiences as well as their goals and wishes. I hoped to enable students to move from their own social locations into a shared space of deep connection and creativity. Some students share snapshots of experiences that shaped their identities, while others depict what they want to achieve or attain in the future. Still others translate scholarly research and theoretical insights into visual and audio products that address issues of social justice and dynamics of gender, racial, and class inequity. From these selections, the students compose individual digital narratives, which we later present to diverse university and community audiences.

The result of each labor-intensive, semester-long process is a collective expression of both pain and aspiration that honors the stories and voices of diverse peoples. These cohorts of daring, self-reflective, individual storytellers share a collective narrative purpose, and each year they reveal new dimensions of public engagement and dialogue to the campus and community. More than simply promoting inclusive multicultural awareness, they participate in a powerful paradigm shift—using digital storytelling, research, and analysis to counter dominant media caricatures and mainstream clichés. In the process, consumers become producers.

The Personal is Political

At the core of this curriculum and pedagogy is a focus on personal epistemology (Hofer and Pintrich 2002). My students develop personal narratives through a series of deep meaning-making experiences related to specific social issues and critical themes. The shift in my teaching and research, which was influenced by Gloria Anzaldúa, marked my own deepened awareness of the many different forms of knowledge that coexist—and of the power of personal stories in transforming one's relationship to her or his inner well-being, others, and the world. This is a different way—and, for me, a liberated way—of thinking about "knowledge" and "knowing."

Second Wave feminists popularized the notion that "the personal is political," affirming that developing an understanding of individuals as part of larger systemic structures is an important step toward inspiring women to become politically active. "The personal is political" underscores how students' private lives—including experiences of trauma, violence, and loss—are inherently part of a political system. With access to structured opportunities and intentional mentorship to help them tap their capacities and creative potential, students begin to reveal more authentic, multifaceted imageries from their personal political lives. Students work closely with peer mentors and artists-in-residence Gee Quach and Molly Lamb to develop their stories. They also communicate with and listen to one another, engaging in empathetic and responsible dialogues about socioeconomic realities, racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Furthermore, the freedom to combine visual, oral, audio, and written histories and multilingual capacities rather than being restricted to written or verbal English-only sources feels liberating for everyone, including many English-as-another-language students who otherwise feel that their stories are not as important or respectable (Zamel and Spack 2004).

Asian American Media Literacy prepares students to become effective, socially responsible storytellers and media-makers. In this way, it differs from typical media training that emphasizes mastery of technical skills. Through the course and related initiatives, students access and apply media tools to represent their families' and communities' experiences and advocate for their needs. In prioritizing first-person narratives and visual and literary expressions of people's lives and environments, students learn how to draw on living memory, family records, and academic sources to create accessible, usable, and powerful products. Students have produced a collection of digital stories on family migration, war, health, gentrification, intergenerational issues, body and self-image, homeland ties, social justice, and race, class, and gender inequity. Like students' perspectives, these products are intensely personal, political, and positional.

Enduring Capacity for Advocacy

After completing Asian American Media Literacy, many students and alumni continue to apply their skills in video documentation and digital storytelling for other classes and campus and community efforts. Students have created a range of important projects to raise awareness, including a teaching video about feminist Muslim identities for UMB faculty (www.asamst.umb.edu), documentaries about local Chinese American history for the Chinese Historical Society of New England (www.chsne.org), and a portrait of local advocacy against deportation for Deported Diaspora (www.deporteddiaspora.org). Current and former students have used these media products to facilitate educational workshops in venues ranging from campus diversity conferences to statewide public health symposia, from Boston's annual Asian American Film Festival to the national Asian American Studies Association's annual meetings. By proactively using these digital stories to produce video documentation projects in collaboration with community partners, students extend their commitments and contributions to ethnic studies and feminist activism beyond traditional semester-bound courses.

Editor's note: Shirley Tang is a member of the Campus Women Lead Project on Inclusive Excellence. Campus Women Lead believes that women can advance inclusive leadership in higher education institutions by building multicultural alliances. If you want to raise questions on your campus about how to increase engaged education using diversity as a key vehicle for expanding intellectual and practical choices, consider bringing a Campus Women Lead workshop to your campus. For more information, visit our Web site at www.aacu.org/campuswomenlead.

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