

### 1. A model: the course on “Asian American Experience” (and “Religion and Society”)

I teach “Asian American Experience” courses for both undergraduate and graduate students. While I encourage all students to conduct community-based projects, what I experience in the graduate courses maybe more relevant to participants of this consultation. Here is a brief description of the course:

The last graduate course of “Asian American Experience” was comprised of 12 students: one Japanese, one second-generation Korean American, one Korean adoptee, two African Americans, one first-generation Afro-Caribbean American, and six European Americans (and myself). Out of 15 weekly classes, 8 lessons took place outside classroom. The class went out to Asian American community centers, participated in the TEA (Together, Empowering Asians) Walk and the Town-home meeting as a class. Except for the very first class meeting at the Pan-Asian Community Center, all 7 classes were opened to -- actually designed in such a way that -- various ethnic, age-cohort, and “leaders” of the communities to “eves drop” on class discussions, participate in the topical debates, watch a few documentary films and discuss them together with the class, share their stories and community needs, and (at times) enjoy dinning (ethnic) food together.

For example, when the class was learning the different history of “immigrants” and “refugees” in Asian America, an Asian refugee youth group was invited to share their own experiences and the process of re-settling in various geographical locations, including in the U.S. In turn, Asian refuge youth were able to address their own anxieties and expectations of getting into universities with students. And because these Asian youth have been to the community center regularly and knew more about their community-based struggles, they felt more at home in this familiar place and were able to freely share their stories with the class. Since graduate students had to read ahead articles and books about the relevant issues, they were also able to make some connections between the literature (i.e., academic knowledge) and people’s daily experiences of the problem (i.e., local knowledge).

The class also experienced “fish bowl” types of dialogical processes of intentionally listening in on certain conversations of a group (e.g., Vietnamese elderly) by another group (e.g., graduate students), and came together later to address the issues together. Utilizing a few documentary films to create a “neutral” space for both students and community people to generate conversations also worked well.

I’ve been teaching (and learning) for longer than fifteen years at the same university. And I’ve been working with Asian American communities through their community centers for even longer than that. As a slow learner who often does not have much time or space to intentionally reflect, I am now just beginning to articulate what I appreciate or troubled by certain attempts to integrate community learning with academic learning. To be sure, by providing and exposing students to these “immersion,” “missionary,” and “cross-cultural” experiences, we are attempting to make some connections with various communities outside the academy. And to the extend that these experiences of (re)connecting students and the community to think more critically about social justice and motive them to actively engage in the process of social transformation, I think the intention of these attempts are noteworthy. What I have been concerned about, however, is the asymmetric and non-mutually reciprocal nature of human relationships in such connections. Without making long-term commitments, and without working together on mutually engaging tasks/projects, connecting the academy to the community cannot result in lasting solidarity. Hence, more often than not, experiences and stories of the

people have been treated as “data” to be analyzed by scholars, and that people in the community are rarely given the opportunity to make claims of their own experiences as “knowledge.”

I also am concerned about some academics’ tendency to readily dismiss educative moments for people in the community. Based on my own observation, such tendency seems to stem from two causal factors: a) by drawing rigid boundaries between the classroom in the academy and the class in the community context; and b) by hiding behind the so-called scholarly modesty. Just as people in the community’s “first-hand experiences” are valuable to students in the academy, academic tools and ways of critically assessing life situations are necessary for people in the community. If we are committed to train students to learn from the community, we can also work together to provide more opportunities for people in the community to learn from the academy. As teachers (and learners), we are called to share our knowledge wherever students may be. It is not our job to discern for students the usefulness of our knowledge. The people (both in- and out-side of the academy) will decide for themselves after they achieve better access to education.

### 2. A model: teaching either part-time or opting for a non-tenure-track

It is now public information (or at least for some participants of this consultation) how I personally struggled with this issue. I went through on and off the tenure-track system four times all in the first six years of full-time teaching experience. The university where I still teach did not have other models of professor-tracks: you are either on or off the tenure-track system. For people like myself who believe that some people are called to fully teach and fully work with grassroots communities, I just want to make it clear that it can be done.

It may take longer to write and publish; it may take conscious tactical and strategic plans to switch from one priority to the next, all depending on various community issues and personal life circumstances; it may never result to a job security of some sort. But as much as the academy and the community need to be connected, we need to encourage “organic intellectuals” to trailblazing new and different models for combining community- and academic-work.

### 3. A model: creating projects that help students integrate issues of social justice

As a way to encourage students to think more critically and to intentionally integrate social problems with what they are learning in the classroom, I encourage students to volunteer to either initiate or write an issue of the newsletter for Asian American community centers. In order to work on a newsletter, students not only have to conduct some interviews but also conduct participant observations, read on histories and community issues. While these projects are explicitly educational for students, they are also quite useful for several Asian American community centers. For they often lack monetary and/or personnel resources to produce their own newsletters. As a result of this type of student project, two students are currently working part-time at the Pan-Asian Community Center to institute regular quarterly newsletter.