Civic Engagement Through Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies: Cultivating Capacity for Social Justice Through Critical Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic case study analyzes how "ASAM 230 – Civic Engagement Through Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Studies," an ethnic studies course created at a public, comprehensive university in partnership with a community-based organization, cultivates capacity for social justice through critical service learning. ASAM 230 purposefully manifests social justice principles, conscious equitable distribution of individual and structural power, and a focus on authentic, sustainable relationships, with conceptual, practical implications for social change agents and educators.

Keywords: community engagement, curriculum development, ethnic studies, partnership development, sustainability, anti-racist feminist, transformative pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

For the past three years, I have been working with a team of six alumni and students on a scholarly project documenting the impact of an ethnic studies service-learning course on their development as evolving leaders and activists (Yee, Tong, Villanueva, Doan, Le, Le, & Tao, 2017). They have engaged in autoethnographic reflection to consider how the experience of the course, Asian American Studies (ASAM) 230 – Civic Engagement Through Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies, has caused them to develop critically aware, social-justice-oriented ways of knowing, feeling, being, and doing, i.e., their epistemology (Yee 2009). Now in the analysis and writing phase, they find that a recurrent theme is my role as the service-learning course's creator and instructor. They want to know how I teach the class in the way that I do and intentionally designed the course in the way that I did.

In this autoethnographic case study, I respond to my students' request, and for a broader audience in higher education and community organizing, ask: how did an Asian American feminist, social justice educator and organizer partner with a community-based organization to create an ethnic studies service-learning course that purposefully embodies the values of the field of Asian American Studies and feminist, liberatory pedagogy? By extension how does this course cultivate capacity for social justice and manifest the elements of critical service learning?

To answer these questions, I introduce critical service learning as the conceptual framework, then briefly discuss autoethnography and case study methodology. Utilizing elements of critical service learning as an organizing scaffold, I explain what ASAM 230 is and situate its social change orientation and emphasis on authentic relationships as a manifestation of my feminist, social justice epistemology and the liberatory education goals of Asian American Studies. I share details of our community-university partnership formation, curriculum development, and capacity-building to illuminate the process of

distributing power equitably and sustaining authentic relationships. My hope is to make the praxis—the intersection of theory and "action and reflection upon the world in order to change it" (hooks, 1994, p. 14)—of creating a critical service-learning course transparent for social change agents and educators interested in similar community-university endeavors.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Elements of Critical Service Learning

The concept of "critical service learning" offers a framework for understanding that conducting service learning with an intentional social justice purpose leads to social awareness and community change (Cipolle, 2010; Clark & Nugent, 2011; Mitchell, 2008; Rhoads, 1997), while traditional service learning may reinforce hierarchies of power that create the problems service learning attempts to address (Stoecker, 2016). Traditional service learning has been critiqued for constructing service as activities to meet individual needs without attending to the foundational causes of social problems, as well as prioritizing university goals over community impact (Mitchell, 2008). In contrast, critical service learning fundamentally seeks to address the roots of social, political, and economic inequality by dismantling systems of power and privilege and balancing service to benefit both community and university equitably (Cipolle, 2010; Clark & Nugent, 2011; Rhoads, 1997; Stoecker, 2016). Examining the literature, Mitchell (2008) describes "critical service learning" as "academic service-learning experiences with a social justice orientation" (p. 51).

The differentiation between traditional and critical service learning raises the question: What makes a service-learning course critical? To frame this article I refer to three key elements that Mitchell (2008) and other scholars have identified from the literature to distinguish critical service learning: 1) the purposeful enactment of social justice principles, 2) the conscious redistribution of individual and structural power both with the community and in the classroom, and 3) a focus on developing authentic, sustainable relationships, including community-university partnerships and faculty-student relations. A social justice orientation involves not only creating opportunities to provide services to and resources for people, but also seeking to raise consciousness about and changing social and political structures that create and maintain oppressive inequities. Working to redistribute power requires becoming aware of how under-resourced and historically oppressed communities may be constructed as "problems" needing "fixing," and mindfully structuring partnerships, learning environments and service activities to make privileged positions transparent to avoid reinforcing hierarchical power relations. Finally, developing authentic relationships involves a commitment to being genuine, honest, and respectful of the ways in which all involved in the service-learning endeavor are both similar and different, acknowledging diverse perspectives and asymmetrical positions of power (Cipolle, 2010; Clark & Nugent, 2011; Mitchell, 2008; Rhoads, 1997).

An Autoethnographic Case Study of Critical Service Learning

This inquiry employs a single case study method and autoethnography to analyze ASAM 230 as an example of critical service learning. Case study research allows for "understand[ing] a real-life phenomenon in depth" in addition to "understanding… important contextual conditions—because they are highly pertinent to [the] phenomenon of study" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Analyzing ASAM 230's origins and development through the lens of the elements described above explains how and why ASAM 230 illustrates critical service learning. Case study methodology calls for closely exploring the particulars of one case, with implications for wider scholarly and practical application (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2009). In

addition, autoethnography contributes to existing research by using "personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience" (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 22). This reflexivity illuminates my epistemology and explains how the desire for social justice motivated ASAM 230's creation.

What is ASAM 230?

ASAM 230-Civic Engagement Through AAPI Studies is a course that calls for students to reflect on their life purpose relative to the mission of Asian American Studies while serving with an affiliated community-based organization (CBO)[1]. It satisfies our department's community engagement requirement, and it is the first service-learning course (designed, not adapted) to be approved for General Education (GE Lifelong Learning and Diversity categories) in the history of California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), a public, comprehensive university in the southwestern United States.

Currently, students attend class for a 15-week semester. During weeks 1-4 and 15, they attend class twice per week, 75 minutes per class. Prior to serving at the CBO, students complete a Who Am I? paper, short reading responses on communication and aspects of Asian American Studies history, engage in experiential activities and orientations with CBO staff preparing them for service, and write reflections on paper. During weeks 5-14, they attend class once per week and serve four hours per week while also reflecting and responding in online forums. Service is conducted within a structured curriculum created by the CBO in consultation with the faculty member. Class time after week 5 focuses on exploring students' histories, hopes, and dreams, and composing a final paper on what matters to them and why. The semester culminates in final presentations on lessons learned with our community partners at a celebratory potluck.

From 2008–Spring 2018, staff at the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA) and I collaborated to conceive, pilot, design, and implement the course (Yee, Cheri, Tong, & Villanueva, 2018; Yee & Cheri, 2018-19). In 2014, students' formative assessment feedback asked for a more formal 10-week service curriculum. Two former ASAM 230 students hired as OCAPICA staff created and piloted our first structured 10-week service curriculum, which vastly improved both the CBO's and students' interactions and experiences (Yee et al., 2018). Due to changes in organizational capacity, OCAPICA staff and I mutually decided to pause our partnership following Spring 2018.

After learning that a structured service curriculum improves experiences for all involved, I met multiple times with new community partners for 2018-19: Korean Resource Center (KRC), The Cambodian Family (TCF), and Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Orange County (AAAJ-OC) to collaborate on and pilot their 10-week service curricula for 2018-19. As a result, our service-learners' opportunities expanded to include voter outreach, education, and registration, mentoring at a K-12 after-school program, facilitating senior grocery and "Breakfast with Santa" programs, and translating in Vietnamese to complete applications during pro bono legal citizenship clinics. With intramural funding to support my instructional and partner development, ASAM 230 continues to evolve with this curricular format and new partner expansion.

CULTIVATING CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH ASAM 230: CONTEXT AND ELEMENTS

Our efforts to cultivate capacity for social justice through our partnership and curriculum development constitute critical service-learning praxis. This section provides context and insight for the course's evolution.

Dual Commitment to Social Justice and Authentic Relationships – ASAM 230's Context

Welcoming students on the first day of class, I tell them ASAM 230 is my dream course to teach. After contributing to a study on service learning's impact on students (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000), I imagined developing a service-learning course on civic engagement at a faculty retreat in 2008. This desire emerged from my personal and professional narrative.

Situating ASAM 230 in my narrative. The youngest of seven children of Chinese immigrants, I grew up in Compton, California, when it was primarily an African American community. My father earned the equivalent of a high school diploma and worked three jobs, mostly as a machinist. My mother earned her bachelor's degree and teaching credential and taught kindergarten and first grade in Watts and Huntington Park, communities with primarily African American and Latinx families. We never lacked for food and necessities, but we did not have much. Growing up in a working-class community, home to people of color, then moving to a predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood, I observed that racism, economic inequity, and oppression occurred in all of my social spaces. I learned to enter new spaces carefully and not to presume that everyone's experiences were like my own (Nicol & Yee, 2012).

As I followed my dreams to pursue higher and graduate education, I struggled to make sense of the disconnect between my communities of origin and my academic communities. While in my master's program, I learned in-depth about Asian American issues through a fellowship program encouraging students of color to pursue careers in higher education administration. My mentors generously taught me ways to build relationships as the foundations for communities of inclusion, grace, humor, and dignity. During my doctoral coursework in higher education and organizational change, I felt so disconnected from the relevancy of community work that I applied for and was selected to be a community fellow for an Asian American professional organization. For my dissertation, I studied how Asian Pacific American community activists, mentors, and protégés committed to democracy, community, and social justice could inform civic engagement efforts in higher education (Yee, 2001). Initially on a career trajectory in higher education administration, I turned to teaching in Education and Asian American Studies to continue working directly with students in order to make a difference in our world (Nicol & Yee, 2017).

As my career progressed, I came to terms with the dissonance of solitary scholarly development by deciding that my professional mission would include creating and fostering communities of learning and support that reflect and actualize the values of democracy, social justice, feminism, and care. Particularly when I observed in graduate school that the "disadvantaged communities" that universities aim to serve include communities like the one in which I grew up, I became ever more mindful of the privilege of my successive positions and the responsibility of striving for dignity, humanity, and reciprocity in my interactions with students, colleagues, and community partners. As a result, I actively collaborate with university and community colleagues to organize and build partnerships that seek peace and social justice.

I share my story here and with our community partners as the basis for developing authentic relationships. Part of the work of anti-racist feminist and decolonizing ethnic studies pedagogy is to make plain the power and privilege of one's position within intersecting systems of domination and to construct knowledge in ways that critically question who and what is assumed to be the authority and norm (Bunch, 2005; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Freire, 1998; hooks, 1994; Nicol & Yee, 2012; Valle, 2002; Van Deventer Iverson & Hauver James, 2014). Equally necessary is

the opportunity for community partners to situate themselves and their stories. A strong foundation for authentic, mutually beneficial community-university partnership development lies in mindfully developing personal and professional relationships while engaging in more visible partnership work and tasks (Yee & Cheri, 2018-19). Knowing partners' stories translates into understanding one another's lives and characteristics as assets. We come to view each other's individual and organizational needs as potential issues and challenges to address together, not deficits that one partner "fixes" for the other. While this article does not focus on community partners' narratives, other joint projects do.[2]

Situating ASAM 230 in the Asian American Movement. My path would not have crossed with OCAPICA's if not for a larger social and political movement whose founders envisioned revolutionary structural change for liberation and social justice in education and society. The origins of our shared commitment to serving the community and the common good may be found in the movement to create Asian American Studies. The Asian American Movement of the 1960s paralleled the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, El Movimiento/Chican@ Movement, and Women's Liberation Movement (Hirabayashi & Alquizola, 1994; Hune, 1989; Ishizuka, 2016; Liu, Geron, & Lai, 2008; Louie & Omatsu, 2014; Wei, 1993; Zhou & Ocampo, 2016). Student activists and community organizers demanded ethnic studies and open admissions through the coalition-led Third World Strike of 1968-69 at San Francisco State College and similar efforts by the Students for a Democratic Society at University of California, Berkeley. The ensuing student-led establishment of Asian American Studies found both student and community activists in charge of hiring, teaching, and creating the curriculum (Chan, 2005; Ishizuka, 2016; Liu, Geron & Lai, 2008; Louie & Omatsu, 2014; Wei, 1993). In addition to opening the curriculum to be more equitable and inclusive, Hune (1989) states:

> …Asian American Studies looks to both a restructuring of education and an expansion of knowledge. Asian American scholars envision that their teaching and research will play a role in countering the cultural domination of the existing Euro-American knowledge base taught in American colleges; they hope to produce the kind of scholarship and students capable of resolving injustices and creating a more equitable society. In short, Asian American Studies seeks to democratize higher education. (p. 59)

At the same time, the Asian American Movement stimulated community activists to create numerous community-based organizations as institutions to address poverty and violence and to provide direct social, health, and legal services, job training, educational opportunities, and self-empowerment programs while also advocating for structural change (Ishizuka, 2016; Liu, Geron, & Lai, 2008; Louie & Omatsu, 2014; Wei, 1993). The federal War on Poverty funding in the 1960s supported initial efforts. Out of this movement emerged CBOs, including OCAPICA, that serve communities through direct service, policy-making, and advocacy.

In concept and origin, the Asian American Movement intended for Asian American Studies to transform university curricula and hierarchies and intertwine with community by hiring community-based activists to teach, raise students' consciousness, and prepare them to become future community leaders and organizers (Ishizuka, 2016; Liu, Geron, & Lai, 2008; Louie & Omatsu, 2014; Wei, 1993). While present-day community-engaged scholarship and community-university partnerships may still be considered counter-normative practice in higher education (Dostilio, Janke, Miller, Post, & Ward, 2016), they have been normative in Asian American Studies since the 1960s because Asian American

Studies was designed to be counter-normative in higher education. Of the nascent Asian American Studies program at UC Berkeley in the 1970s, Chan (2005) states that community work was one of its original, central values:

> The mutually supportive relationship between the community and the campus is a two-way affair. While students, staff, and faculty members are committed to contribute what they can to community growth, persons in the community also play important roles in campus developments. (pp. 14-15)

She further explains that part of the role of Asian American Studies is to build community capacity by educating and preparing students to work in and advocate for communities.

The historical legacy of the Asian American Movement envisioned the formation of reciprocal partnerships between community-based organizations and Asian American Studies units in universities. Fifty years later, ASAM 230 returns to this original vision of institutional collaboration to empower community in the spirit of social justice.

Equitable Distribution of Power - Partnership Formation, Curriculum Development, and Capacity-Building

Partnership formation. While the origins of the Asian American Movement called for equitable two-way relationships, the reality is that university partners may often presume that their institutional and student learning goals often supersede the communities' priorities (Butin, 2010; Cipolle, 2010; Keith, 2015; Mitchell, 2008; Moore, 2014; Stoecker, 2016; Van Deventer Iverson & Hauver James, 2014; Williams & McKenna, 2002). Mindful of this potential for reinforcing unspoken hierarchies of power, we opened our meetings by situating ourselves, practicing vulnerability to establish trust, and transparently embracing an equitable distribution of power. As colleagues, we acknowledged each other's considerable job responsibilities and shared roles as co-instructors and mentors of our students (Yee & Cheri, 2018-19). This consciousness translated into establishing a partnership culture of honesty, open dialogue, humor, and compassion. We designed both classroom and field activities so that students could come to know themselves as change agents and leaders in their personal and community spheres.

For example, one course assignment requires students to respond to book chapters on the intersection between Asian American Studies and community-based organizations by connecting their service with the intent of the Asian American Movement. Most, if not all, students experience an "aha" moment when they realize their roles as service-learners emerged from a larger historical movement to address structural inequity in our communities and Euro-American-centric curricula in our universities. While 15 weeks is not enough time for all students to develop critical consciousness, the course often empowers and encourages long-term social justice-oriented vocational directions.[3] At the CBO, our community partners/former ASAM 230 students designed a 10-week service curriculum that moved service-learners from traditional tutors/mentors during their first two weeks to change agents as they created a health-related workshop that they facilitated during their final week of service (Yee et al., 2018).

Curriculum development. Building capacity for a sustainable service-learning course required persistent collaboration, an understanding of curriculum approval policies, and a willingness to negotiate multi-year application, review, and approval processes. In the early stage of our partnership in 2008-09, we met bi-monthly to get to know each other, brainstorm, and decide if we wanted to work together. Fundamental to ASAM 230's evolution as a critical service-learning course was developing the curriculum in partnership to address a mutually identified need: to build and strengthen the community capacity and

infrastructure to lead, govern, and advocate for community members. At issue was increasing the numbers of students aspiring to and accessing higher education. In order to foster a college-going culture in local high schools with historically lower college application, acceptance, and matriculation rates, OCAPICA had established high-school-based after-school mentoring programs. Each semester, OCAPICA staff spent many hours recruiting volunteer tutors/mentors from local colleges. When I proposed developing a course through which college student mentors could serve with OCAPICA, we decided to collaborate on course development to address the community's structural issues, while altering our respective organizational infrastructures.

At universities with enrollment-driven budgets, course longevity relies on consistent, sufficient enrollment. ASAM 230's sustainability depended on its inclusion in CSUF's General Education (GE) program, which required multiple levels of approval. At CSUF, new courses may first be approved as "special" (temporary) courses by the department and college dean's office and taught up to three times as a special. For courses to become "permanent," they are approved by the department, the college curriculum committee, the college dean's office, the university curriculum committee, and the Academic Senate. For GE, a course must be approved by all levels mentioned above, plus the university's General Education committee.

ASAM 230 was first approved as a special course in Spring 2010, then taught as a special from Fall 2010-Fall 2011. It was approved as a permanent course in Fall 2011 and taught as a permanent course in Spring 2012, Fall 2014, Fall 2015, and Spring 2016. CSUF lifted its years-long moratorium on GE applications in 2015. ASAM 230 was approved for GE status in Spring 2016, and was taught for the first time as a GE course in Spring 2018. As the faculty creator of the course, I composed the syllabus, created the reading list, assignments, and schedule, developed the community-university partnership, and nurtured intra-institutional partnerships with my department colleagues, our College of Humanities & Social Sciences Dean's office, and our Center for Internships and Community Engagement (CICE). My collaborators provided invaluable guidance as I shepherded ASAM 230's applications through each level of review. Building capacity for social justice through critical service learning called for painstakingly negotiating this complex process.

Resource development for capacity building. In a parallel fashion, OCAPICA aimed to transform its structure and sought funding to support our budding partnership to build organizational capacity for their Youth Programs. OCAPICA initiated a series of community-university grant proposals, beginning with $25,000 seed grants from Southern California Edison in 2011 and 2012. Based on the success of our community-university partnership model, OCAPICA and CSUF applied for and were awarded a $1.3 million federal grant from 2012-17 for their Healthy Asian Pacific Islander-Youth Empowerment Program.[4] This program supported a cohort of students from 8th through 12th grades in local high schools, culminating in 100% of the students applying to college during the final year of the program.

Through our partnership formation, curriculum development, and capacity-building, we actively shared the power to create the infrastructure to support our community-university partnership.

Sustainable Critical Service-Learning — Developing Authentic Relationships

The foundation for sustaining ASAM 230 is the conscious effort to humanize and democratize our learning environments. We respect one another's expertise and practice openness to all ideas, regardless of source, title, or position.

When one of OCAPICA's staff suggested that we pilot the course design with interns during Fall 2009 prior to offering

the course formally in Fall 2010, I asked four ASAM students to intern with OCAPICA under my supervision for this formative assessment purpose. Students provided input on OCAPICA's management and organization, my proposed course texts, and the quality of their service experiences and interactions with the high school students. From their feedback, OCAPICA sought resources to fund a half-time volunteer coordinator to orient and supervise the service-learners and create an infrastructure to manage larger numbers of volunteers to avoid overburdening their staff. I changed my syllabus to incorporate students' suggestions regarding the readings and assignments and the number of weeks students served. This attempt to distribute power equitably among community partners, faculty, and students created an authentic, dynamic service-learning culture which disrupted traditional hierarchical norms. While all were aware of our respective responsibilities and power, we actively sought to position ourselves as both learners and teachers to develop the course. This practice of eliciting student input as formative assessment is ongoing, as students continually reflect on "What's working well? What could be better?" throughout the semester. Their insights help both community partners and me to reshape the course and service curricula.

Purposeful investment in partnership development has resulted in a reciprocity and trust to engage in dialogue that improves the curriculum and the partnership. Each semester, as we reflected on what worked well and what could be better, we modified the course structure and partnership culture to improve all of our experiences. For example, when OCAPICA partners stated that students needed more preparation prior to serving, I altered the semester schedule so that OCAPICA staff could come into the classroom as co-instructors to introduce, orient, and facilitate discussions with the students during the first four weeks. When I shared the students' suggestion for a more structured service schedule, they designed a 10-week curriculum. After students begin service, we then turn to engaging in activities and discussion on life narratives and stories with all of us as co-instructors modeling vulnerability by sharing our stories first.

Over time, we have found that our collaboration addresses the structural issue of preparing community-minded leaders and advocates as our service-learning partnership has transitioned into a multi-generational pathway for leadership and community-organizing development. Because many students commute from local communities, we have learned painful lessons that we cannot assume that our service -learners are more privileged than the community members we serve. We have also observed multiple ASAM 230 students continue serving at their CBOs beyond the semester, take intern and paid positions, serve as CBO professionals, and pursue graduate study to continue the work they found so meaningful through the class.

A self-study conducted from 2014-17 resulted in our theorizing a Sustainable-Holistic-Interconnected-Partnership development model to explain our service-learning community-university partnership's longevity. This model conveys that trust, shared decision-making, and reciprocity form the core of a long-term partnership (Yee & Cheri, 2018-19).

CONCLUSION

This autoethnographic case study of the service-learning course, ASAM 230-Civic Engagement Through AAPI Studies, reveals that its purposeful creation to enact the values and principles of Asian American Studies and feminist, liberatory pedagogy is the reason why it cultivates the capacity for social justice through critical service learning. ASAM 230's emergence from the epistemological context of its faculty and community creators and its academic discipline reflect its social justice orientation. The partnership formation and curricular development processes manifest

the conscious effort to distribute power equitably. The pedagogical approach and partnership longevity find their origins in a commitment to developing authentic relationships among all involved. This analysis presents ASAM 230 as an exemplar of critical service learning with the hope that social change agents and educators will gain insights to pursue similar service-learning and community-university partnerships.

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ENDNOTES

1. ASAM 230's syllabus description: "Students in this service-learning course will examine and deconstruct: 1) how the historical context and purpose of AAPI Studies inherently involves serving local, national and international AAPI communities, 2) the purpose of service/civic engagement courses, 3) the need to serve specific populations with cultural competency, and 4) their evolving sense of life purpose and mission. The intent of the course is to provide an intellectual and visceral experience that allows students to develop a critical ability to understand, approach and alter theory, policy, and practice of studying and serving AAPI communities. This course is specifically designed to use enrolled students' identities and personal experiences as springboards/ lenses for examining issues. It will benefit those interested in raising their consciousness about AAPI communities and needs."
2. A multi-year self-study resulted in our theorizing a Sustainable-Holistic-Interconnected-Partnership development model (2018-19) to contribute to the scholarship on authentic, mutually beneficial partnerships.
3. A group of six alumni and I are currently authoring an autoethnography on how taking ASAM 230 taught with an ethos of radical care has impacted their development as leaders and activists.
4. I was on medical leave from 2011-14. My colleague, Dr. Tu-Uyen Nguyen, served as principal investigator for this grant.

AUTHOR NOTE

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