

Practitioner's Essay

Content is Not Enough: What High School Teachers Taught Us About Developing Asian American Activism Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This practitioner essay documents challenges the authors faced as they co-authored high school curriculum on Asian American activism for a forthcoming textbook about Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies. It exposes how collaborative projects between university professors and high school instructors can unintentionally reproduce power inequities by privileging researchers' content knowledge over the pedagogical expertise of high school instructors. The authors consider how university instructors can collaborate more effectively with high school instructors and contribute to Asian American Studies curriculum development in ways that actually engage high school instructors' curricular and pedagogical expertise.

INTRODUCTION

The recent passages of Assembly Bill 1460 (AB 1460) and Assembly Bill 101 (AB 101), which mandate Ethnic Studies as graduation requirements for students in the California State University (CSU) system and California high schools, respectively, open important opportunities for Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies teachers, scholars, and community activists to collaborate and co-develop Ethnic Studies curriculum for high school and university students. While

these efforts are often framed as pedagogical initiatives that will lay the curricular foundation needed to implement AB 1460 and AB 101, they are in fact a continuation of the long legacy of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) student- and community-led activism in the fight for Ethnic Studies and liberation. Exciting projects like the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (LESMCC) and the Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies (CLES), for instance, emerged in response to conservative attacks against Ethnic Studies and liberal attempts to undermine the community-centered and racial justice mandates at the core of Ethnic Studies (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2022). These activist movements recognize that Ethnic Studies classes not only play a crucial role in developing students' academic skills, but also help build the critical analysis and practical tools they need to work towards societal transformation. The contexts from which these educational projects emerge are critical reminders that the fight for Ethnic Studies has always been an interdisciplinary, activist, and community-based political project tied to a larger movement for social justice and collective liberation.

As Asian American educators, we face pedagogical and curricular questions about how to teach Asian American Studies within a classroom setting. For those of us who teach Asian American social movements, we recognize that our curriculum invites students to see Asian Americans—and themselves—as part of a lineage of political actors with the capacity to organize their communities and create social change. Given the vicious attacks against Ethnic Studies and Black Studies, how might we effectively engage students in the study and practice of Asian American activism? Given that the project of Asian American Studies is not simply the delivery of historical content but also a larger struggle to eliminate systemic oppression and build grassroots power in Asian American and BIPOC communities, how do we develop dynamic curricula and pedagogies that reflect the field's radical commitment to serve the people (Omatsu, 2003; Sacramento et al., 2023)? How do we draw on the unique and varied expertise and experiences of Asian American Studies educators across K-12 and higher education systems as we design praxis-based Asian American activist curricula?

We, the authors of this article, grappled with these questions while co-authoring a chapter on Asian American activism for a textbook designed to introduce high school and college students to Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies. As university educators, we

assumed that the tasks would be fairly straightforward. Katherine Lee previously worked in UC Berkeley's Summer Bridge Program, which provides academic support to students preparing to begin their freshman year in college; taught first-year writing courses for college students; and co-taught high school students enrolled in dual enrollment community college classes. May Fu has taught courses and published research about Asian American movements for over fifteen years; directed academic programs specifically designed for first-year college students; and closely mentored and advised first-year students.

Yet, we immediately encountered challenges while developing curriculum and applying Ethnic Studies pedagogies to our work. The practitioner reflections that follow document the difficulties we faced, our realizations, and the self-reflexive analysis that we hope will be of use to Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies university educators who are similarly developing activist curricula for high school and college students. In the wake of legislation such as AB 101 in California; recent laws in Illinois, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Rhode Island that now mandate that Asian American history be taught in public schools; and movements across the nation to institute Ethnic Studies requirements in public schools, we believe that collaborations between K-12 and university educators will become increasingly common as university Ethnic Studies and education programs create Ethnic Studies certificates and teacher training programs (Logan, 2020).¹ We hope our reflections and recommendations will inspire intentional and sustained collaborations as Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies are institutionalized in K-12 schools and universities.

CENTERING COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT CURRICULUM

Our curriculum focuses on two vibrant and important sites of Asian American grassroots organizing: the International Hotel (I-Hotel) anti-eviction struggle in San Francisco, California, and the community safety campaign led by the Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM) in Providence, Rhode Island. These case studies feature past and present organizing led by Filipino and Southeast Asian communities; immigrants, refugees, and U.S. born citizens; multi-generational and multi-racial mobilizations; and queer and trans organizers. They also address an intersectional range of social issues such as housing, labor, policing, and educational equity. Already existing curriculum about Asian American social movements often addresses historical

figures, adults, and campaigns located on the West Coast, so we deliberately included a contemporary example that centers high school student organizing outside of California in hopes that the high school students utilizing the textbook might see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

As students and scholars of Asian American social movements, we wanted to develop high school curricula that emphasized the dynamics of grassroots organizing over its more common and popular depictions. Social movement historian Charles Payne reminds us that social movements are informed by two distinct and interactive traditions: the community mobilizing and community organizing traditions. The community mobilizing tradition is characterized by large-scale, public events meant to ignite mass awareness and consciousness, such as large marches, impressive demonstrations, and grand speeches delivered by movement leaders. The community organizing tradition, on the other hand, is defined by the everyday work of ordinary people to engage in political education, develop organizing skills, and build community self-determination (Payne, 1995). Rather than focusing on movement wins and gains, we wanted to portray the ongoing, processual nature of Asian American movement work from the perspective of those who are most impacted. Doing so allows students to understand that community organizing and activism require more than simply attending a mass rally or march. Building grassroots power means centering the experience and expertise of community members themselves and committing to a long-term, collective process that builds the skills, relationships, and trust needed to create lasting social change (Dong, 2014). Students would learn how Asian American organizers engaged in the practical work of addressing local problems and how those everyday processes of working and learning together transformed our communities and sustained Asian American movements over the long term.

We focused on the community organizing tradition by centering the perspectives of the manongs in the I-Hotel anti-eviction movement and high school students in PrSYM's community safety campaign, respectively. Rather than offering a linear, dramatic narration of each movement, our curriculum emphasized the oft-unrecognized labor of ordinary people, their personal and political paths to activism, their reflections about the movement, and its significance to their lives. In all accounts, the manongs and student organizers described the impact of the struggle as stretching far beyond the campaign—as an experience that deeply transformed their sense of self, community, and vision

for the future. The curriculum conveyed these insights by focusing as much on organizers' experiences as the campaigns themselves, balancing descriptions of political campaigns with organizers' reflections on the relationships and coalitions that they forged with one another.

DECONSTRUCTING PRIVILEGE: STUDENT-CENTERED PEDAGOGY IN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

As we began writing the curriculum, we were immediately confronted with our privilege as university instructors. We initially attempted to develop curricula by "scaffolding up and scaling down"—a process by which we could transform our typical university curricula into simplified lessons for high school students (i.e., scaling down) that would be sequenced and taught over multiple days so students would have ample time to learn concepts, analyze content, and apply their knowledge in stages (i.e., scaffolding up). However, we did not realize how disparate university and high school learning conditions were. University faculty are able to use qualitatively different pedagogies because we teach under different conditions, work with different student populations, and have access to resources that are not necessarily available to high school teachers. Critical pedagogical practices and methods that are typically effective for college students prove ineffective, even illegible, for high school students. In other words, university pedagogies cannot simply be broken down into simplified steps for high school student classrooms. Innovative and grade-appropriate curricula require far more curricular and pedagogical intention.

For example, our initial curriculum draft about the I-Hotel anti-eviction movement was structured as three fifty-minute lesson plans. Instead of using university curriculum that explored the complex web of political actors in the movement to save the I-Hotel—including city politicians, revolutionary organizations, community organizers, college students, artists, and hotel residents—we "scaled down" the material by focusing on the activism of I-Hotel residents and the intergenerational organizing that carried the nine-year struggle. Fu designed a guiding framework that sequenced and "scaffolded up" the curriculum so students would learn about Manilatown history, gentrification, and grassroots organizing in small segments over several days. Each lesson plan included small and large group activities, writing prompts, discussion questions, and a praxis-based assignment where students had multiple opportunities to apply the principles they learned from the residents to their own lives. The students would thus be introduced

to rich content and critical concepts related to a landmark struggle in Asian American movement history (Choy, 1983; Habal, 2008).

This scaffolded approach is common in college and university settings where we privilege problem-posing pedagogy, structural analysis, text-based analysis and discussions, and application of concepts. University lesson plans and teaching practices typically reflect the assumption that learning is a linear process where students first engage with basic content, then use various critical frameworks to deepen their analysis, and finally develop the skills and confidence to apply those frameworks in different contexts. Our early curriculum drafts integrated this scaffolded learning trajectory by “scaling down” the amount of information in the module, sequencing concepts over multiple days to “scaffold up” the learning process, and providing various activities through which students could engage with the material.

In Summer 2022, Lee workshopped in-progress segments of the lesson plans with middle and high school instructors through regional summer professional development institutes offered through the California Writing Project (California Writing Project, 2021); their feedback was telling.² The educators were excited to have curricula about Asian American activism and valued the pedagogical intent behind the sequencing, scaffolding, and use of analytical and reflective frameworks in the lesson plans. However, they pointed out that the curriculum did not consistently engage the everyday experiences and knowledge that students brought to the classroom. Instructors challenged our assumptions about students’ starting points, academic preparation, and support:

- How did the newspaper articles, pamphlets, poetry, and other printed texts in the I-Hotel case study attend to the needs of multilingual students who comprised the majority of students in their classes?
- How did the lesson plans account for the wide range of student engagement, skills, and levels of preparedness that high school teachers regularly encountered in their classrooms?
- Could we provide better tools to help students more confidently track and analyze their evolving reflections about the Asian American movement?

The teachers also explained that effective curricula require far more than compelling content, carefully crafted questions, and engaging frameworks. Successful student learning requires socially relevant, culturally competent pedagogies that enrich the learning experiences

of students—especially first-generation, immigrant, refugee, working-class, and multilingual students who are traditionally marginalized in academic institutions. While it is impossible for any one curriculum to address the social contexts and learning styles of all students, this feedback illustrates the need for curricula to incorporate appropriately designed, student-centered pedagogies that speak to the students' actual learning realities and institutional resources. Despite our best intentions, our lack of experience teaching in high schools and our rudimentary understanding of high school pedagogies meant that the materials we developed were repackaged using the university pedagogies with which we were most familiar. We unwittingly overlooked or, even worse, dismissed fundamental contexts and pedagogies that high school instructors routinely consider when developing lesson plans.

We sought much-needed guidance from our colleague Jon Salunga, an Ethnic Studies-trained English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at Morse High School in San Diego, California. Salunga patiently explained how we had fundamentally misunderstood and underestimated the pedagogical purpose of basic classroom activities. For example, our curriculum features opening activities, or cultural energizers, that are designed to frame the goals of the lesson. We assumed that cultural energizers were loosely based on the obligatory, ten-minute “ice breakers” commonly used in college settings to introduce students to course topics in an engaging way. Salunga explained that cultural energizers are, in fact, one of the most important activities in the lesson, because they introduce major themes, invite students to personally connect to key concepts, and set the tone for the entire unit. More importantly, they establish a shared entry point and trajectory that continue to guide student engagement with the material, particularly as students grapple with complex concepts and apply new skills throughout the unit.

Salunga's insights reframed scaffolding as recursive rather than linear, as a process of student engagement and connection rather than the mere development of skills. Although we believed that we were developing student-centered activities and curricula, we were prioritizing content over dynamic student learning. Instead of building a relationship between the students and Asian American activism, our activities trained students to see social movements as case studies to be analyzed from afar. Salunga dispelled the belief that Asian American and Ethnic Studies content inherently utilize Ethnic Studies pedagogy, reminding us of the deeper pedagogical and epistemological commitments of the field.

LISTENING TO LEARN: UNDERSTANDING HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER PEDAGOGY AND PROCESS

As scholars of Asian American social movements, we assumed that writing the essay portion of the module would be the easiest part of the chapter development. We believed that simplifying sentences and streamlining content would adequately adapt university-level curriculum for high school students. As we consulted with Salunga and other high school Ethnic Studies instructors, we learned that content expertise was not enough. Preparing effective high school texts requires an experienced understanding of students' everyday realities, how they engage with texts, and which learning needs to anticipate and address. Curriculum improvements did not merely refer to simplifying sentences or implementing academic tenets of "clear" writing (e.g., shorter sentences, active voice sentence construction, and accessible vocabulary). It meant attending to the *pacing* of how students process, engage and work with material. It meant proactively identifying and addressing potential "bumps" or challenges to student learning. For example, the original curriculum about PrYSM examined its student-led campaign to establish community safety for Southeast Asian communities in Rhode Island. It examined PrYSM's community organizing strategies and the events that led to the organization's eventual transformation into an abolitionist organization. Salunga explained that students would be unable to fully digest the complex concepts introduced in the essay which included criminalization, racial profiling, community safety, grassroots organizing, and the difference between reform and abolition. The students would require more than three fifty-minute sessions as well as prior content knowledge and the ability to grasp and apply complicated materials quickly and independently.

As academics, we often cram too much information into a small amount of class time and expect university students to not only keep up but excel. These demands can function as obstacles, or what Salunga calls "bumps," that unnecessarily burden the learning process and often disconnect students from the material to such an extent that lessons become inaccessible and ineffective, especially for high school students. High school and university students would benefit from curricula that offer multiple ways to understand critical concepts and have more realistic pacing so students can fully grasp the material. For instance, students would gain more from a unit where they have the time to learn about PrYSM's youth organizers and critically analyze

the concept of community safety instead of being pressured to comprehend—in only two to three days—how community safety connects with reform, abolition, civic engagement, and movement building. Calibrating the text's pacing facilitates more effective student learning and positions students to engage more meaningfully with PrYSM's grassroots youth movement.

Our collaboration with Salunga brought to light another oversight that unintentionally foreclosed pedagogical possibilities. We incorrectly assumed that our case studies would be utilized by Ethnic Studies social science teachers, not ELA teachers like Salunga. Ethnic Studies courses, we quickly realized, are offered by social science as well as ELA instructors as determined by individual California school districts and high schools. As a result, our curriculum needed to account for specific disciplinary engagements with texts and lesson plans. Because social science lesson plans cannot be transposed into an ELA class, our curriculum needed to be both discipline-specific and expansive enough for instructors to tailor the material to their classrooms. We realized that we could not just write a standardized narrative about Asian American social movements. Our writing itself needed to be flexible enough for instructors like Salunga to use their pedagogical expertise, knowledge of their students, and Ethnic Studies pedagogies to create thoughtfully scaffolded learning experiences that produced discipline-specific learning outcomes. Salunga, for instance, explained how certain argumentative claims, descriptions, and examples in the text elicited a range of creative possibilities for assignment prompts, discussion questions, and activities in his ELA classroom. He also demonstrated how his pedagogical priorities shaped his selection of texts and activities which in turn produced innovative learning outcomes in his classroom.

Like most academic writing, the early draft of our I-Hotel case study privileged content, utilized academic jargon, and relied on the reader to do significant interpretive work. Teachers would need to spend significant time making the materials more accessible, relevant, and relatable to students while also situating the lesson within a specific disciplinary framework. To address these concerns, we added a central theme that became a throughline in the revised essay: the I-Hotel as a home and community. By centering the essay around this theme, instructors are no longer limited to teaching historical facts about the hotel residents and the anti-eviction movement. ELA instructors can now integrate poetry and literature about home and

community, providing new mediums through which students can analyze the significance of the anti-eviction struggle and connect it to their own lived understanding of home and community. This approach further highlights the life stories and leadership of the manongs whose love for their community and chosen home sustained the movement. Our decision to center the manongs' testimonies and stories also reflects a closer engagement with the community-centered principles of Asian American Studies. In making these changes, the case study opens more space for high school Ethnic Studies instructors as well as ELA and social science instructors with Ethnic Studies training to use Ethnic Studies pedagogies and their discipline-specific and classroom expertise to teach Asian American social movements.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A RELEVANT EDUCATION

As university instructors, we learned that authoring compelling, content-rich learning modules about Asian American activism does not automatically engage the curricular and pedagogical expertise of high school instructors who will inevitably adapt the material to best meet their students' needs. High school teachers and curriculum experts like Salunga patiently modeled ways for us to rethink our unspoken assumptions about high school and university education and ask better questions about how students learn and how teachers teach. Through trial, effort, and error, we worked and reworked our understanding of content, student-centered pedagogy, and effective collaboration. We learned to spend as much time writing lesson plans that were flexible enough for Ethnic Studies instructors to adapt to their classrooms as we did generating accessible and compelling case studies. Curricular collaboration with high school teachers, we learned, was not merely dividing or sharing tasks, but a deeper exchange about the politics and power of teaching, pedagogy, and a relevant education.

As more states adopt Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies requirements in K-12, collaborations between university faculty and K-12 instructors will become increasingly common, thus necessitating more deliberate and thoughtful strategies for building equitable partnerships. Here, we offer several recommendations for university instructors to consider when developing Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies K-12 curriculum:

1. Recognize that Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies content expertise is not the same as Ethnic Studies pedagogy, especially in K-12 contexts. While the analyses that Ethnic Studies and Asian

American Studies scholars produce about race, power, and resistance are essential to the field, the content that we produce is distinct from the teaching methods and principles that Ethnic Studies instructors use with their students. Ethnic Studies pedagogy recognizes that students bring valuable experiences and knowledge to the classroom that can be leveraged as they develop the critical consciousness, knowledge, tools, and skills they need to transform their communities and society (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015).

We encourage university Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies instructors to consider the following questions as they co-create curriculum with K-12 instructors: What are the limitations of my own knowledge about Ethnic Studies pedagogy? Which principles of Ethnic Studies pedagogy are most relevant for teaching this content in K-12 contexts? Is the curriculum content malleable enough for K-12 instructors to incorporate Ethnic Studies and radical Asian American Studies pedagogies in their teaching (Sacramento et al., 2023)?

2. Collaborate with K-12 instructors at all stages of the curriculum development process and center their pedagogical expertise and recommendations. K-12 instructors are experts on the reading, writing, literacy, and learning pedagogies that most effectively engage their students, and they offer invaluable insight into how best to design and pace texts and lesson plans in order to support their students' learning. Their expert pedagogical knowledge can therefore guide every stage of the curriculum development process, from conceptualizing the scope, purpose, and focus of the curricula to co-creating the content-based texts that their students will read. Close collaboration will help to ensure that the curriculum is relevant, usable, and effective for both teachers and students.

We invite Asian American Studies colleagues to recognize that our own pedagogical expertise, while useful in university and college settings, will not be effective in most K-12 learning contexts. K-12 Ethnic Studies instructors and K-12 instructors with Ethnic Studies training and backgrounds bring a particularly valuable wealth of knowledge and experience, and any form of collaborative curriculum development would benefit from centering their recommendations and expertise (Curammeng, Lopez & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium, 2023; Tolteka Cuauhtin et al., 2019).

We encourage colleagues to learn more about the initiatives that K-12 Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies instructors are already

leading or have already launched in their local communities. What are their priorities and plans? What forms of collaboration would K-12 instructors like to engage in with university and college instructors? What pedagogical approaches do K-12 Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies instructors use in their classrooms, and how might their expert knowledge guide the co-construction of additional curriculum?

3. Understand the pedagogical and curricular priorities and methods that K-12 instructors use to develop lesson plans and materials for students. Published sample K-12 lesson plans allow researchers and professors to see a fixed version of the type and sequencing of classroom activities, but without a clear understanding of the factors that shape instructors' pedagogical decision-making and curricular choices, university instructors have little insight into what makes these lesson plans effective in K-12 classrooms.

We encourage Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies professors to take note of the many pedagogical, curricular, and discipline-specific considerations that K-12 instructors account for as they design lesson plans, write texts and prompts, and develop guiding frameworks for their units. What kinds of learning opportunities do teachers try to create for their students as they write lesson plans, and what principles and priorities guide them as they select, design, and revise activities? As teachers read through their colleagues' lesson plans and unit texts, what kind of feedback do they offer to their colleagues and what types of questions do they ask? How does their feedback impact lesson design? By taking the time to see firsthand how K-12 instructors construct effective curriculum, university instructors can better appreciate the thoughtful and complex decision-making processes that go into K-12 curriculum development.

4. Build a reciprocal, respectful relationship with high school instructors that includes compensation and self-reflexive efforts to transform university classroom pedagogies. It is vital that K-12 instructors be compensated for their time and expertise for any collaborative curriculum development project or consultations. At the same time, reciprocity and respect extend beyond monetary compensation and include a sustained commitment to take pause, critically self-reflect, and transform our own university-based pedagogies: what do K-12 Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies educators show us about Ethnic Studies pedagogies and student learning that we can take back to our own students and classrooms?

NOTES

1. Faculty from Ethnic Studies departments, Department of Feminist Studies, and the School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for instance, recently developed the Educational eXcellence and Inclusion Training Opportunities (ÉXITO) program in order to train future Ethnic Studies K-12 teachers. Designed as a “4+1” program, ÉXITO creates a pathway for students to earn a bachelor’s degree in Ethnic Studies or Feminist Studies before earning a master’s degree and teaching credential. This program draws on the expertise of university Ethnic Studies and Feminist Studies educators, K-12 instructors, and university faculty in the School of Education.
2. The California Writing Project’s regional writing project summer invitational institutes are designed to bring K-16 instructors together for four-week professional development training institutes on reading, writing, and literacy instruction. Recognizing that all educators have something valuable to learn from each other no matter what grade level they teach, the regional writing projects emphasize collaborative investigation, workshopping, and collaborative development of best pedagogical practices for writing and literacy instruction across K-16. The regional writing projects’ models of practice-based learning, self-reflection about instructors’ own literacy processes, and collaborative curriculum development across grade levels made these professional development institutes appropriate sites at which to workshop in-progress segments of the Asian American activism lesson plans.

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