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# Teaching for Social Change: Learning How to Afflict the Comfortable and Comfort the Afflicted

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## TEACHING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: LEARNING HOW TO AFFLICT THE COMFORTABLE AND COMFORT THE AFFLICTED

*Glenn Omatsu\**

I grew up at a time when good teaching was defined as good lecturing. I was taught that the best teachers were skilled orators who could organize complex material and in the space of fifty minutes pour knowledge into students' heads.

Fortunately, I also grew up during a time of American social movements, which demanded changes in all societal institutions, including the education system. I became part of these movements, and they have shaped the way I see learning and teaching.

Thirty years ago, I took part in the movement to fight for ethnic studies and the associated movements in communities for social justice. Today, I have the privilege of actually teaching classes that I fought for as a student, and my experience in these movements is the foundation for the way I teach these classes.

Today, I teach at three different institutions of higher education in California: the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); California State University, Northridge (CSUN); and Pasadena City College. I teach introductory classes in Asian American studies, sociology, and developmental reading and writing, as well as other classes on social movements, investigative journalism, and most recently, service learning.

Until four years ago, all I knew about teaching was what I gained from my participation in social movements, including the

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struggle for ethnic studies. For me, this is a valuable legacy for pedagogy, which can be summarized in five points. First, learning in the classroom must be linked to community movements. Students learn best by doing, particularly through involvement in grassroots struggles. Second, knowledge is something to be shared, and any student taking a class in ethnic studies has a responsibility to find ways to share that knowledge with others. Knowledge is too important to keep within the classroom. Third, every student is a teacher and every teacher is a student. Viewed in this way, the teacher is not so much an authority as a facilitator, or more accurately, a coordinator or organizer in the learning process. Fourth, knowledge must be used to confront those with power in society. As students and teachers in ethnic studies we have a responsibility not only to study our communities but also to change them. To adapt one slogan from early journalism: the role of students and teachers in ethnic studies is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Fifth, students armed with knowledge from ethnic studies can become agents of social change when they join with community movements. In other words, knowledge and ideas can become material forces when large numbers of people grasp them.

Over the past decades—from my earliest classes to my current ones—these five principles have served as the foundation for my teaching philosophy. The first class I taught was in the mid-1970s, at San Francisco State University. It focused on the urban redevelopment that occurred in San Francisco's Japantown and the grassroots movement against the destruction of low-cost housing and small businesses. I involved students in this movement by having them organize educational forums and participate in rallies and demonstrations.

My more recent classes have also addressed grassroots movements, from labor organizing to the struggles to protect immigrant rights. In 1995, for example, I taught a class at UCLA on Asian American social movements, which centered on a union-organizing campaign in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo and the community support committee that backed it. The class focused on the struggle of Latino immigrant workers to organize a union at the New Otani Hotel, the neighborhood's largest employer. The Japan-based Kajima Corporation—the world's second largest construction company—owns

the hotel building and much of the surrounding block, and the Japan-based New Otani Corporation manages the hotel.<sup>1</sup> The struggle of immigrant workers to unionize the New Otani is connected to the earlier struggle of Japanese American activists against these same corporations.<sup>2</sup> I involved students in the immigrant worker campaign to unionize the hotel.

The class examined four main themes: the significance of immigrant workers' struggles in Los Angeles, the role of corporate dominance in Asian American enclaves, the importance of interethnic unity in Los Angeles today, and the key role that students armed with Asian American studies can play in educating others about these issues. For the midterm and final exams, students organized two educational forums: one at UCLA and the second in Little Tokyo. To help students deal with the group dynamics involved in undertaking these projects, I set up a series of classroom workshops on leadership development, democratic group processes, publicity and mobilization, and community education.<sup>3</sup>

I have also emphasized this learning-by-doing approach in my other classes. For the past two years, in Investigative Journalism and Communities of Color, UCLA students have created a simple class magazine and posted it on the internet to share their essays with others.<sup>4</sup> This class is the only class at UCLA cross-listed between Asian American studies and African American studies. The listing reflects

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1. See Glenn Omatsu, *Filling the Hole in the Soul: The New Otani Hotel Campaign and Ethnic Studies*, RACE FILE, Jan.-Mar. 1998, at 33-37; Mike Davis, *Kajima's Throne of Blood*, THE NATION, Feb. 12, 1996, at 18; Kim Geron, *Reconfiguring Power: Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, SOC. JUST., June 22, 1997, at 84.

2. In the mid-1970s, activists led a grassroots movement against construction of this hotel and the destruction of low-rent housing and small businesses under corporate-driven redevelopment. See Little Tokyo Anti-Eviction Task Force, *Los Angeles' Little Tokyo in Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, UCLA Asian American Studies Center (Emma Gee ed., 1976); Davis, *supra* note 1, at 18; Geron, *supra* note 1, at 84.

3. Samples of workshops on leadership training and on democracy in small groups are on file with Professor Omatsu. They can be requested by email at gomatsu@ucla.edu.

4. The current magazine is available online at: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/aasc/classweb/fall98/M163/webmag.html>.

the earlier history of collaboration and cross-fertilization of ideas between the two fields.

Similarly, for a class I teach at CSUN on contemporary issues in Asian American communities, the midterm and final papers require students to develop an educational strategy to share knowledge with others, such as family members, friends, or other students. Since many of the students taking this class are teachers enrolled in CSUN's teacher credential program, the assignments provide them with the opportunity to share their new knowledge with students in their own classes.

While my participation in social movements and the founding vision of ethnic studies has largely shaped my teaching philosophy, three additional experiences over the past four years have taught me how to become a better teacher. The first experience was discovering educational research about service learning and brain-based learning. The second was teaching an evening class each semester at a community college. The third was working with so-called "at risk" youth in a special summer admissions program at a state college. These three experiences have enabled me to raise my intuitive notions about good teaching to a higher level of understanding.

Intuitively, I have always felt that people learn best by doing. I also believe that teachers can promote the greatest learning by stressing students' responsibility to share knowledge with others. This pedagogical approach is the foundation of ethnic studies. In recent years, I have found that educational researchers also emphasize this approach. According to the Learning and Teaching Pyramid, students learn best when they practice by doing and when they teach others.<sup>5</sup>

Educational researchers have also highlighted other good teaching practices that ethnic studies emphasize. These include: cooperative learning, the inquiry method of learning, the discovery method of learning, and the concept of service learning, which links

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5. The Learning and Teaching Pyramid ranks the methods of teaching that promote the most learning among students with lecturing corresponding to 5%, reading 10%, audiovisual 20%, demonstration 30%, discussion groups 50%, practice by doing 75%, and teaching others 90%. *See* Learning and Teaching Pyramid from the Nat'l Training Labs., Bethel, Maine (on file with the author).

community service with reflection to achieve a higher level of learning.

In recent years, I have also discovered the exciting field of brain-based learning. Researchers have found that people learn best in situations of social interaction, or cooperative learning, and that students learn the most when situations are structured to promote both sensory and emotional stimulation—which leads to the discovery of new knowledge—rather than through memorization and repetition.<sup>6</sup> In fact, brain researchers now conclude that repetitive drilling—a method long emphasized in the traditional elementary school classroom—destroys student interest in learning.<sup>7</sup>

My quest to learn about good teaching practices has also led me to several helpful books. I will mention two in particular: *Helping Health Workers Learn: A Book of Methods, Aids, and Ideas for Instructors at the Village Level*,<sup>8</sup> by David Werner and Bill Bower; and *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development*.<sup>9</sup> These books provide practical examples of good teaching practices and take into account the political context in which controversies in education arise today.

Understanding this political context is essential as we near the end of the twentieth century. Like earlier periods in United States history, education today—including the very concept of public

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6. See Janet Eyler et al., *The Impact of Service-Learning on College Students*, 4 MICH. J. COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING, 1997; David W. Johnson et al., *Cooperative Learning Returns to College*, CHANGE, July 1, 1998, at 26; Andrew T. Lumpe et al., *Science Teacher Beliefs and Intentions Regarding the Use of Cooperative Learning*, SCH. SCI. & MATHEMATICS, Mar. 1, 1998, at 123; Lesley Mandel Morrow et al., *Characteristics of Exemplary First-Grade Literacy Instruction*, READING TCHR., Feb. 2, 1999, at 462; Lori E. Varlotta, *Service-Learning: A Catalyst for Constituting Democratic Progressive Communities*, 3 MICH. J. COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING, 1996.

7. See R. N. Caine, & G. Caine, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA (1991).

8. DAVID WERNER & BILL BOWER, *HELPING HEALTH WORKERS LEARN: A BOOK OF METHODS, AIDS, AND IDEAS FOR INSTRUCTORS AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL* (1982).

9. *BEYOND HEROES AND HOLIDAYS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO K-12 ANTI-RACIST, MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT* (Enid Lee et al. eds., 1998).

education—has become a political battlefield. In California, right wing activists have launched attacks on the right to education for immigrants, communities of color, and the working poor.<sup>10</sup> They have dismantled affirmative action and bilingual education and have recently begun targeting ethnic studies.<sup>11</sup> They are also resurrecting the notion of vouchers, the ultimate symbol of the capitalist vision of education.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the right wing is calling for a return to traditional methods of teaching, with an emphasis on memorization, mastery of facts, and the gearing of curriculum to standardized testing.<sup>13</sup>

Viewed in this context, our struggle to develop a critical pedagogy takes on special significance. Today, our struggle is neither one of simply expanding the content of education to include progressive perspectives, nor one of merely seeking innovative techniques to

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10. See generally Proposition 187, in CALIFORNIA BALLOT PAMPHLET, GENERAL ELECTION 30-33 (Nov. 8, 1994) (codified at CAL. PEN. CODE §§ 113, 114, 834(b) (West Supp. 1999); CAL. WELF. & INST. CODE § 10001.5 (West Supp. 1999); CAL. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE §§ 130 et seq. (West Supp. 1999); CAL. EDUC. CODE §§ 48215, 66010.8 (West Supp. 1999); CAL. GOV'T CODE § 53069.65 (West Supp. 1999)) (initiative intended to curtail illegal immigration by making undocumented immigrants ineligible for public education, public social services, and public health care services).

11. See *Affirmative Action Controversy in California: Asian Americans Join African Americans, Latino Americans, and Women in Opposing Proposition 209, but the Ballot Measure Ending Affirmative Action Passes, 45% to 46%*, 19 CROSS CURRENTS No. 2, Fall/Winter 1996 (newsmagazine of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center); *The Real Deal on Bilingual Education*, RACE FILE, Jan.-Mar. 1998, at 23-26; see generally Proposition 209, in CALIFORNIA BALLOT PAMPHLET, GENERAL ELECTION 30-33 (Nov. 5, 1996) (enacted as CAL. CONST. art. I, § 31) (initiative eliminating affirmative action in public employment, education, and public contracting); Proposition 227, in CALIFORNIA BALLOT PAMPHLET, PRIMARY ELECTION 30-33 (June 2, 1998) (codified at CAL. EDUC. CODE § 300 (West Supp. 1999)) (initiative requiring all public school instruction be in English, unless parents request otherwise and show certain circumstances).

12. See *False Choices: Vouchers, Public Schools, and Our Children's Future*, 13 RETHINKING SCHOOLS, No. 1 (supplement), Fall 1998; Gary Phillips & Victor Narro, *Point of View: Blacks Need to Support Bilingual Education*, L.A. SENTINEL, Mar. 4, 1998, at A7; see generally Proposition 174, in CALIFORNIA BALLOT PAMPHLET, GENERAL ELECTION 30-33 (Nov. 2, 1993) (initiative proposing conversion of public schools to independent voucher redeeming schools).

13. See MAIL ON SUNDAY, Feb. 7, 1999.

aid learning. Rather, our struggle speaks to the very heart of the mission of education: to provide all people with the tools to fight for justice and expand democracy. Thirty years ago the grassroots movements that led to the formation of ethnic studies recognized this critical mission. The central demands of that struggle—for the right to education and for relevant education—captured the imagination of thousands, turning ideas into a material force that transformed not only what we teach but also how we teach.

Today, we need to reassert these basic demands. We need to re-establish the connection between pedagogy and justice.

