

“For What You See as Just”: Paulo Freire and Asian American Studies in Community-Based Learning

Kathleen Yep*
Pitzer College

Upon completing Nonviolent Social Change, you will not only fulfill Pitzer’s Social Responsibility requirement to graduate, you will also have learned about who you are and what you stand for. ...You will also form a basis on which you may construct your beliefs about certain social issues, and how you will go about addressing problems you come across. (Cunningham, 2008)

At a liberal arts college, I began teaching an Asian American Studies class on nonviolent social change in order to strengthen students' political engagement.ⁱ Asian American Studies as a discipline emerged from the 1968 mass mobilization at San Francisco State University, the longest student strike in United States’ history. Some of the original organizing principles in Asian American Studies were “to serve the people” and to employ democratic pedagogies. In addition, radical educator, Paulo Freire, influenced many of the first community-based Asian American Studies classes (Hirabayashi and Hull, 2000). This article analyzes my experience teaching an interdisciplinary course where I integrated dialogical pedagogies influenced by Paulo Freire's educational philosophies (2000). The literature explores how teaching service learning with social justice frameworks impacts political engagement (Butin, 2007;

*Department of Asian American Studies, Pitzer College, 1050 North Mills Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711.
Email: Kathleen_yep@pitzer.edu

This article was supported in part by Award No. 06LHHCA001, granted by the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America Higher Education through California Campus Compact. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Corporation for National and Community Service, California Campus Compact, or the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Mitchell, 2007). Other scholarship discusses the philosophies of radical educator, Paulo Freire (Giroux, 2001; Glass, 2001). Bridging both strands of literature, this article explores how Asian American Studies interprets radical educator Paulo Freire's pedagogies. With a discussion of one Freirian assignment, the article shows how dialogical pedagogies correlated to increased political engagement. In doing so, I argue that dialogue is both a pedagogy and an essential political skill and framework for civic engagement (James 2004). The article includes quantitative data measuring the students' political engagement and qualitative data from student assignments and course evaluations. ⁱⁱ Both sets of data illuminate how the dialogical pedagogies achieved what Freire described as the process and goal of education: *concienciacion*. For Freire, this means raising critical consciousness to identify social contradictions, to analyze the historical causes, and to generate possible actions to address the social contradictions (Freire, 2000) .

The course learning objectives were to develop students' knowledge of nonviolent social movements, philosophies, and tactics and to teach expository and argumentative writing skills. This article is based on teaching the class two times. The thirty students consisted mostly of women and seniors. The students were socio-economically diverse and spread across a continuum of first-generation college students from marginalized communities to students from wealthy backgrounds. Cross-listed in sociology and Asian American Studies, the lower-division course included a community placement component and fulfills the college's social responsibility graduation requirement. For almost a decade, the college's community-based learning center, Center for California Cultural and Social Issues (CCCSI), has cultivated a partnership with a high school located in a local juvenile detention center. Managed by the County Probation Department, the detention center houses approximately 225 young men convicted of crimes and who range in age from 13 to 17. At the high school, CCCSI collaborates with the high school staff to facilitate writing and self-expression workshops using spoken word, poetry and hip-hop. ("Core Partners," 2009) My integration of community-based learning in my classroom is only possible because of CCCSI.

The class was organized around the ideas of Paulo Freire, who suggested that liberatory pedagogies could be a form of political organizing. Based on his adult literacy classes with rural peasants in Brazil, Freire (1998) argued that teaching and classrooms are not neutral endeavors. Rather, how classes are taught is embedded with politics and power relations. Freire highlighted the role of dialogue, rather than debate or discussion, in the learning process (Pacific School of Religion, 2009). The Freirian classroom fosters horizontal relationships between students and teachers, who work together as co-learners. A dialogical approach to learning contrasts with vertical relationships in which the teacher is all-knowing and the students are merely passive consumers of education. In the traditional "banking" form of pedagogy, hierarchies are reinforced in which students are not actively part of the learning process. In banking pedagogy, the focus is on debate and discussion where people compete and try to assert their analysis of society on to others (Freire, 1998: 70). In contrast, the dialogical approach hinges on respect for each other and cultivating the relationship as much as the set of ideas to be discussed. For Freire, dialogical pedagogies create a collaborative

and interdependent element to the learning. Freire's approach emphasizes dialogue and community-building as not only a way of teaching but also a way of practicing democracy. In this way, dialogue is a political act of practicing social responsibility and is tied to political engagement. This article will discuss one Freireian pedagogy used in this class: teaching a Freirian-based workshop on nonviolence at the community placement. Crafting and implementing a dialogical workshop was geared towards strengthening the college students' sense of political efficacy.

In the beginning of the course, we learned about nonviolent social change philosophies and tactics. This included readings by political figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Gandhi, and Gene Sharp and readings about social movements such as the International Hotel in San Francisco's Chinatown, the 1968 Third World Strike, and the 1982 hate murder of Vincent Chin (Yep, 1994). As students were analyzing different tactics and social movements, we practiced Freirian pedagogies in the college classroom. In each class, everyone spoke using a variety of formats ranging from small groups to freewrites. For example, the class sometimes began with students writing about a favorite quote from the reading. Then, as a large group, each person briefly talks about the main points in her/his reflection. In other instances, at the beginning of class, I pair up students and ask each pair to co-generate a question based on their tutoring and then write the question on the chalkboard. Then, as a large group we would look for patterns from all of the questions on the board. Finally, we would discuss these patterns through either small group discussions or rotating freewrites. The dialogue in class about the readings coincided with prepping my college students to work beside and learn from the high school students. My college students participated in an ethics training with CCCSI staff, analyzed readings about the prison industrial complex, discussed articles about the nuances of service-learning with incarcerated populations, and reflected on a poetry publication by the high school students.

After my college students tutored the high school students for a few weeks, the college students began crafting workshops on nonviolent social change for the high school students. The workshops on nonviolent social change were required to integrate the Freirian dialogical pedagogies used in our college class. As such, the workshops were required to draw from the participants' lives and to use problem-posing prompts. The college students wrote objectives for the workshops, materials needed, and a time-based outline for a 60-minute workshop. In the college classroom, students practiced teaching their workshops and received feedback from their classmates. After the students facilitated their workshops, they wrote a memo that combined reflection and analysis of their teaching experiences. Two college students in the course, Ron and Cynthia, created a workshop for the high school students called "Nonviolence and Conflict Resolution." The goals of the workshop were to engage in discourse regarding nonviolence and methods of conflict resolution. Other objectives included educating students about alternatives to violent conflicts and exploring the possibility of integrating nonviolent praxis into an everyday reality to create positive change. With twelve participants, Ron and Cynthia's workshop at the juvenile detention center lasted 90 minutes. Divided into the three parts, the workshop opened with an excerpt of Dr. Martin Luther King's "Principles of Nonviolence" and participants rewriting the main points of the reading in their own words. Then, the workshop moved to three scenarios

involving a conflict. Working in small groups, the high school students were asked to discuss how they would respond to these scenarios. The facilitators allotted time for the high school students to each respond to the prompt. Next, the different ways of handling conflicts were outlined and participants discussed which ones they use and why. Lastly, participants were asked to think of the most recent conflict they encountered and then they analyzed how they handled it and what were the outcomes. This created the intellectual space for the high school students to draw from their own lives and experiences and link it with the material. Encouraging discussion, the facilitators asked the incarcerated students to link the reading to their most recent conflict previously discussed. They posed questions such as: "How do you think Dr. King would have reacted?; How would it have impacted the conflict?" and "How would the ideas in the reading actually work in your life?" (Katagawa 2007b). Transitioning to different parts of the workshop proved to be challenging to the facilitators. In addition, the reading component posed some problems. Ron writes:

While a few of the students were actively engaged with the reading in the big group, most of the students did not want to or could not follow along with the reading. This led to a challenge when we tried to do an exercise based on the reading, and most of the students had not actually understood or participated in the reading (Katagawa 2007b).

Creating a flexible partnership, Ron and Cynthia had a structure but also improvised within the structure to address some of the teaching hiccups. They adjusted by breaking into small groups and doing the reading again. However, the second-time around they directly followed the reading with interpretation. Ron reflects on the outcomes of the workshop:

The workshop opened up a lot of interesting conversations that moved away from the original subject but still stayed very connected thematically (especially regarding violence). We had not scheduled any large group sharing, but the students read their reflections in front of the big group, which actually worked out very nicely...Standout moments included students sharing their work with the whole class and taking ownership of the concepts and their writing (Katagawa 2007b).

Ron notes how the participants moved from being disengaged in the classroom to claiming a space. During the workshop, the high school students shifted from feeling silenced in the classroom to "taking ownership of the concepts and their writing.

Teaching the high school students using dialogical pedagogies impacted the college students' sense of political efficacy. Witnessing the momentary empowerment of the high school students moved Cynthia. In the beginning of the semester, Cynthia was interested in the course material but was pessimistic about the possibility of social justice. Moreover, Cynthia felt discouraged about her own political efficacy after tutoring the high school students and seeing the systemic constraints facing the incarcerated students. However, after the workshop, Cynthia shifts from her initial

skepticism about social change:

I have to say, even though it scared the heck out of me, the workshop I ran with Ron was perhaps the best session I've had at the juvenile detention center. I was pleasantly surprised and pleased by some of the answers and rewritings that the boys had in response to our prompts, and I was especially delighted at the depth of some of the responses they showed. ... They actually took in the Martin Luther King writings we gave them, processed it, and gave back some work with good, deep thoughts behind it. ...This workshop visit gave me much more hope in the work of the (high school) (Kamahele 2007b).

Ron and Cynthia's use of Freirian pedagogies developed the critical thinking skills of the students at the detention center. The Freirian workshop focused on the high school students using their own experiences as the basis to explore nonviolent philosophies and conflict resolution. Ron explains:

This project hopefully had an impact on the lives of the young men who participated in the workshop in that it presented the theory behind nonviolent conflict resolution. The workshop gave the wards space to explore their own conflict resolution styles and alternatives that could perhaps have more positive outcomes for them. In a more extended version, a workshop such as this could have tremendous positive effects on society. These effects could include reduced recidivism for juvenile offenders, and perhaps reduce youth violence in general if these workshops were implemented in settings such as school and after school programs (Katagawa 2007b).

The Freirian pedagogies influenced my college students' understanding and application of social change through collective, cooperative work. Quantitative data shows that the college students increased their overall internal political efficacy. In an anonymous survey at the beginning and at the end of the classes, questions measured political engagement such as political efficacy, skills, and activities. Questions from a political engagement survey by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning were used. Each item was evaluated on a five-point Likert scale indicating students' level of agreement with "5" as "strongly agree" and "1" as "strongly disagree." Out of the thirty students enrolled in the two classes, 77% of the students responded to both the pre and post surveys. In response to "I Consider Myself Well-Qualified to Participate in Social Change and Political Processes" the mean response increased from 4.38 to 4.81. Moreover, the most common response of "strongly agree" increased from 52% to 87%. The quantitative data shows the college students moved from high political efficacy to higher political efficacy.

College students learned to practice democracy through the dialogical pedagogies. According to Freire (1998), dialogues involve co-creation of learning. One college student in the class, Jon, reflects on the cooperative learning environment:

I had a better sense of my fellow nonviolent students than those in my other classes, and as a result of these activities, I experienced a level of personal connection in this class that I have not experienced in other classes. ...with a strong emphasis on student dialogue and queries...I learned to listen more than I talk because it usually teaches me something that I would not have learned if I had been speaking. I think the most valuable realization and lesson that I am walking away from this class with is that there are people in addition to me in this world who are looking to use their future to improve human experience on Earth (Colon, 2008).

Through this collective act of constructing knowledge, students became aware of the power of interconnectedness. This sense of community through dialogical pedagogies laid the foundation for exercising their agency in the classroom and alongside the high school students. Creating dialogue about nonviolence at the juvenile detention center helped the college students learn skills essential for participating in politics in broader society. In the pre and post surveys, students were asked to assess how well they possessed different political skills. Each item was evaluated on a five-point Likert scale indicating students' level of agreement with how well they could do each. "5" was "strongly agree" and "1" was "strongly disagree." In response to "Assume the Leadership of a Group" the mean response increased from 3.95 to 4.34. Moreover, the most common response increased from "agree" to "strongly agree." In response to "Help Diverse Groups to Work Together" the mean response increased from 3.8 to 4.06. The most common response increased from "agree" to "strongly agree." In response to "Deal With Conflict When It Comes Up" the mean response increased from 3.98 to 4.2 and the most common response increased from "agree" to "strongly agree." The specific skill of creating mutually respectful discussion strengthened the college students' ability to engage in democratic life. Ron reflects on what he gained from the class with respect to his civic engagement:

This class will give you the starting point for many skills that you will continue to cultivate and develop throughout your life. In addition to enhancing your understanding of the political and theoretical ramifications of nonviolent social change movements across the world, the class will help you develop and define your own nonviolent social change praxis (Katagawa 2007b).

Lastly, the Freirian pedagogies, such as dialogue, illuminated the college students' agency and role in society. Leading the dialogue with the high school students on violence and non-violence showed the college students they had the political capacity as leaders. In a final written assignment, students were asked to write to an imaginary future student about what to expect in the class.ⁱⁱⁱ One college student writes:

As a member of numerous communities and society, you will gain confidence as a leader and supporter for what you see as just (Cunningham 2008).

Whereas many felt skeptical about social change at the beginning of the semester, the college students walked away from the class with a sense of collectivity and hope for social justice. Leading the workshops and the process of collective discernment helped clarify their own positionalities as social change agents.

Working beside a community is an important component to facilitating civic engagement. Yet, how students participate in community-based learning is also essential. At the beginning of the semester, the college students were committed to social justice but felt overwhelmed on how to enact social change. Creating and facilitating the Freirian workshops at the high school helped ground the college students by engaging them in the political and intellectual act of dialogue. This compelled them to link learning about nonviolent social change theories with practicing them through dialogue. In this way, the college students did not just study the material but enacted it, questioned it, and applied it again. Moreover, the dialogical frame helped mediating reproducing social inequalities with the high school students. When dialogical pedagogies are linked with community-based learning, the goal of empowering students to define themselves in the world as active, engaged participants in society is strengthened. Dialogical pedagogies teach cooperation, enhance political skills, and fosters political motivation through a sense of empowerment. According to Asian American Studies' interpretation of Freire, dialogue provides a means to question, define, envision, and enact (Pacific School of Religion 2007). Colby and Ehrlich describe political engagement as skills, knowledge, and motivation (Colby and Ehrlich, 2007). This article asserts that creating dialogue is not only a teaching method but also a vital political skill and conceptual framework for participating in a democratic life (James 2004). Since its founding, Asian American Studies has foregrounded community-based learning and empowering education. This emerged from a social movement that questioned the neutrality of higher education and the institution's relationship to broader society (Kiang, 2001). Asian American Studies' interpretation of Freire provides both the theory and pedagogical practices for community-based learning. Moreover, with its analysis of education as contested terrain, it has several implications for service learning and the relationship between higher education and communities. One, Asian American Studies' approach to community-learning provides a frame and a practice for mutually respectfully interactions between the college students and the community partners instead of treating community members as objects to be studied or fixed. Two, Freire's pedagogies highlight the links between practicing dialogue in the college classroom and in the community engagement rather than separating the two. Three, this teaching praxis fosters empowerment of the college students and the communities rather than using the larger community as means to educate the college students alone. After the class, Ron decided to earn his Master's in Social Work and work at a public interest law firm and advocacy group specializing in kids involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. He is developing and adapting a number of training curricula for judges, lawyers and caseworkers, as well as running workshops about community violence and nonviolent conflict resolution for youth at a number of community centers. He writes:

I feel very well prepared for this work by my training,, especially in (Nonviolent Social Change)... I appreciate the knowledge and skills (the class has) passed on to me and my classmates-- I feel more prepared to make the positive changes I

feel necessary, and more able to accomplish the work that will lead to those changes (2009).

References

- Butin, D. W. (2007). Justice-Learning: service-learning as justice-oriented education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40(20), 177-183.
- Center for California Cultural and Social Issues (CCCSI). *Core partners*. Retrieved January 5, 2009 from <http://www.pitzer.edu/offices/cccsi/>.
- Colby, A., Beaumont, E., and Ehrlich, T. (2007) *Educating for democracy: preparing undergraduates for responsible political engagement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Colon, J. (2008) Final exam.
- Cunningham, S. (2008) Final exam.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and education*. New York: Free Press.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
(2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- Giroux, H. A. (2001). *Theory and resistance in education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.
- Glass, R. (2001). Paulo Freire's philosophy of praxis and the foundations of liberation education. *Educational Researcher*. 30(2):15-25.
- Hirabayashi, L.R. and L. Hull. (2000) "Pedagogy and practice: an interview with professor Glenn Omatsu," *Asian American Policy Review* 9:105-123.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- James, M. Interview with author. August 8, 2004.
- Katagawa, R. (2007a). Dialogical exam.
(2007b). Workshop materials.
(2007c). Final exam.
(2009) Email.
- Kamahele, C. (2007a). Dialogical exam.
(2007b). Community placement reflections.
- Kiang, P.N. (2001) "Teaching, tenure, and institutional transformation: reflections on race, culture, and resilience at an urban university," in E. Kingston-Mann and T. Sieber, *Achieving Against the Odds*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Meisel, J.S. (2008). The ethics of observing: confronting the harm of experiential learning," *Teaching Sociology* 36, 196-210.
- Mitchell, T.D. (2007). "Critical service-learning as social justice education: a study of the citizen scholars program," *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40(2),101-112.
- Pacific School of Religion (2007) "Roof raised, house rocked, lives changed: R2W draws to a close." Retrieved January 5, 2009 from <http://archive.psr.edu/page.cfm?t=41&id=3242>.
- Pompa, L. (2002). "Service learning as crucible: reflections on immersion, context, power, and transformation," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 9(1), 67-76.
- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Yep, K. (1994). "The power of collective voice: community mobilization campaigns around anti-Asian violence," *Asian American Policy Review* 4: 33 - 63.

ⁱ I wish to thank Walt Lamp, Neil Rosen, the staff and students at the high school, the staff at Pitzer's Center for California Cultural and Social Issues (CCCSI), Thomas Ehrlich and Anne Colby of the Carnegie Foundation; Elaine Ikeda and Piper McGinley of California Campus Compact; the Bonner Foundation, Project Pericles, Raymond Young, Christine Cress, David Donahue, Marcia Hernandez, Laura Nichols, Katja Guenther, AJ Doty, David Yoo, Ethel Jorge, Jose Calderon, and the students in Nonviolent Social Change.

ⁱⁱ Pseudonyms are used to preserve confidentiality.

ⁱⁱⁱ This assignment was influenced by Tom Trice and Peter Nardi.