

Crossing Boundaries, Building Community

By Peter N. Kiang

I want to go on.

Trang's words broke a long silence. A few moments earlier, standing alone at the front of the room, she'd faltered in her presentation on the Vietnamese Amerasian experience and begun to cry quietly.

Usually, Trang¹ sat unobtrusively in the back of the room with one or two other Vietnamese friends. Had the pressure of speaking her second language in front of the class overwhelmed her? Perhaps she flashed back to her life in Vietnam. Maybe she recalled how hard it was to arrive here five years ago in the land of the father she never knew.

Are you sure? I asked her.

"Yes, I want to go on," she said.

Trang completed her presentation, filled with emotion, in accented English, teaching the class about struggle and survival.

On the last day of the semester, I reminded the class of those words,

I want to go on. There are strengths to be shared and lessons to be learned from Southeast Asian refugees.

Inspired by students like Trang and her classmates, I have resisted the compartmentalized categories of scholarship, teaching, and service that traditionally define faculty roles and responsibilities, and used the integrative themes of sharing voices, crossing boundaries, and building communities as more accurate, authentic ways to define my contributions at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, an urban, public, doctoral-granting university.

Much of my work centers on creating contexts in which immigrant voices, student voices, women's voices, Asian American voices can speak and be heard.

These are the voices of those who are traditionally silent or silenced—like the Vietnamese refugee high school student who said, "We don't feel like our voice the authority would ever think of."² By

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My work emphasizes the importance of community as a survival strategy for students.

sharing voices in the classroom, students consistently “speak up” and “feel heard.”

This is particularly significant in my undergraduate Asian-American studies classes, where immigrant students of color are the majority. In my graduate education courses, the act of sharing voices models a student-centered pedagogy and reinforces the importance of drawing from primary sources for content. These are crucial principles in our teacher education program.

My own community organizing experience, biracial background, and connections to the various worlds of K-12, undergraduate, and graduate education enable me to move comfortably across boundaries of race, culture, gender, and class to facilitate collaboration and forge coalitions.

Nearly every aspect of my research, teaching, and service relate to community building. My studies in Boston Chinatown or with Cambodians and Latinos in Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, examine the dynamics of immigrant community development. My work within educational institutions emphasizes the importance of community as a survival strategy for students and an anchor for curriculum transformation.

I consciously strive to create community in the classroom. This

process has special meaning at an urban commuter school because the day-to-day realities of life facing our students, combined with the institution’s resource constraints, limit opportunities to develop a cohesive sense of identity and make connections on campus

In using the themes of community building, crossing boundaries, and sharing voices to frame my tenure statement in 1994, I challenged the “scholarship-teaching-service” design of the tenure review process. In its place, I modeled an alternative approach to make the review more valid and conceptually meaningful, both for me and for colleagues who might follow.

Admittedly, I was careful to provide adequate documentation of my teaching, service, and scholarship, the categories that are traditionally evaluated. But I explicitly argued that the compartmentalized structure of the traditional evaluation didn’t accurately assess or interpret the intent and impact of my work. By defining my own review process in these terms, I tried to offer a vision to transform tenure review institutionally.

My critique of the tenure process developed many years earlier because of a situation I witnessed at an Ivy League school where students were actively demanding

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Asian American Studies in the curriculum.

The school at that time offered no such courses, but did have one Asian American in a tenure-track position in international politics who had been an outspoken activist for Asian American Studies as a graduate student.

Students repeatedly asked him to offer a special topics course or, at the very least, publicly support their demands for courses in Asian American Studies. But he'd become increasingly distant and defensive. Once, when I visited the campus to meet with the students, I found him alone in his office.

He said: "Can you tell the students to stop coming to me? I just can't deal with them till I get tenure. After that, maybe I can do something, but not now."

Like sociologist Felix Padilla,³ who has critiqued this same dynamic among some Latino faculty, I could not have disagreed more with my colleague's priorities. Not only was there nobody else for the students to approach, but, even from pure self-interest, I told him this was a fundamental error in political judgment: He was "protecting" himself from the population that would potentially care most about his being there.

But he insisted on his distance and was denied tenure two years later anyway. Sadly, but not sur-

prisingly, no one rallied in his defense.

At the time, I felt quite self-conscious for criticizing his stance, as if I were his elder, when he was actually half a generation older than me. But I could not accept leaving the students without support. That moment in his office crystallized my own view that I should not sacrifice my own core commitments for the sake of professional status.

This situation reminded me of the story about how crabs struggle in a pot—each one crawling over the next, trying to save itself without regard for those it passes over or pushes out of the way. The crabs-in-the-pot metaphor is a warning for us to examine the impact of our individual ambitions and actions in relation to our collective groups and to question more fundamentally the nature of this pot and the reason we are all here in the first place.

Another crystallizing moment for me came in 1993 at a conference in Los Angeles on diversifying the university curriculum. I listened to a panel of non-tenured faculty of color from local institutions vent deep frustration in the wake of the previous year's riot/rebellion.

After responding to relentless demands from communities, government agencies, and the media to provide analysis of the complex

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racial, cultural, economic, and political dynamics of the Los Angeles crisis, these scholars discovered that their efforts in this area counted for little in their annual reviews.

Penalized by the traditional reward systems of their institutions, they each privately concluded that universities were not serious about responding to Rodney King's question of the decade: can we all get along?

This panel concluded that, as a result of this disillusionment by the scholars, the communities were left without access to crucial resources and follow-up, while a cadre of energetic junior faculty found themselves increasingly cynical about their own roles in the university and society.

If those faculty of color, regardless of their own disciplines, had been part of a community—that valued their involvements with their schools' Ethnic Studies programs, for instance—they might have found greater individual support as well as more productive models of community-university collaboration.

Still another crystallizing moment in came in a conversation about curriculum and pedagogy several years ago with Vivian Zamel, the director of the ESL program at UMass Boston. Over the years, Vivian and I have had many

students in common and have collaborated frequently on student and faculty development projects.

At the time, Vivian was wrestling with the question of how much to focus on issues of oppression and inequality as subjects for reading, writing, and class discussion in her ESL English composition course.

Based on my own experience with similar students in Asian American Studies courses, I urged her to go ahead and confront those issues, even if dynamics became emotionally intense and pedagogically risky. She could trust her students—predominantly non-white, working class immigrants—to draw on the realities of their daily lives as rich resources for meaningful teaching and learning.

Much to her credit, she took the risk. By the end of that semester of shared learning and inspired writing, the students in Vivian's class crafted a collective poem, titled, *Mis Palabras* (My Words), that depicted how they resisted oppression in their lives.

Many found connections with each other's name stories—those experiences in which their names and, by extension, their identities, had been ignored, disrespected, or changed because of the dominant culture's hegemony.

In the process, they touched a hidden dimension of Vivian's own

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identity. Vivian's given name, she revealed, is Aviva, which, in Hebrew, means spring. But, like so many of her students, she had adopted a more acceptable name, Vivian, at an early age.

Mis Palabras helped me recall the story of my own name as well:

*Aviva shares secrets
returning me to second grade.
Writing our names,
practicing penmanship.*

*At least no one has to say it,
always sounding so funny.
I fill a page quickly.*

*Use your middle name, too,
Mrs. Shapiro commands.
My pencil slows, my hand reluctant.*

N i e n - c h u

*In the next row,
Gordon Clay steals a glance at my desk
and explodes in laughter.*

*I hate Gordon Clay. I hate Mrs. Shapiro.
I hate everyone looking at me.*

*Humiliation lasts forever in a child's
heart.*

*I use my full name in publications now,
Knowing Nien-chu means
Honor your ancestors.*

*I think of Aviva.
Mis palabras come to life
as the cold of winter turns to Spring.*

— Boston, 1993

Two years earlier, I'd begun a full-time, "target-of-opportunity"⁶

appointment in the Graduate College of Education at UMass Boston. There, I started teaching graduate courses in multicultural education and social studies curriculum design, while continuing to teach undergraduate Asian American Studies courses.

I was the only tenure-track faculty member of color in the entire College of Education at that time. But my appointment signaled the beginning of a dramatic intellectual and cultural shift to realign the mission and activities of the college with the realities of urban schools.

For many years prior, the college had been out of touch with the students, families, and communities of color that comprised the majority in Boston's public schools.

One student gave this revealing example of instruction from the Elementary Education program in 1991:

The art [curriculum design] teacher left a lasting impression on me. She discussed various art supplies and told the class that she takes all the little black and brown water color paints out of the sets because they were not very nice colors ... When I think of this woman, my stomach turns and I feel guilty because I did and said nothing to make her

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realize how damaging and ignorant her words were.

Another student from that time noted:

Why would anyone of any background other than white middle class want to attend the current program when they are excluded from nearly every discussion in nearly every class?

Driving the institutional change process at the College of Education was the acting dean, a courageous and resilient African American man of faith, steeped in principles of respectful collaboration and urban educational practice.

Through a deliberative strategic planning process, reinforced by the dean's calm but steadfast insistence, all aspects of policy and culture in the college were on the table—from the outdated design, sequence, and assessment of courses to the lack of diversity in the faculty and student body to the haphazard arrangements with practitioners and school sites. We wanted to transform not only the crabs but the entire crab pot.

Perhaps with good reason, some senior faculty viewed our presence as threatening. Feeling the chill from several senior colleagues and trying to read the power dynamics in my first few department meetings, I remained relatively silent

until we reviewed a formal proposal for a new course on teaching children's literature.

The syllabus presented “multicultural children's literature” as a one-session topic at the end of the semester, following different literary genres such as poetry, historical novels, and readers' theater. Pushing aggressively for course approval was a full professor who also happened to be director of the Teacher Education program in which I was based.

Calculating that her retirement would precede my tenure review and remembering my vow about not sacrificing core commitments, I said at the meeting—and later in a long memo to the department—that we should not approve the course as proposed because the multicultural reality of children's literature needed to be infused throughout the entire course across every genre, rather than being mistakenly and tokenly treated as one of several topics to cover.

As teachers of future teachers, I asked, what practices and principles are we choosing to model in our own teaching and curriculum design?

Not surprisingly, the room grew even chillier. But that moment created an opportunity for another junior faculty member to speak up as well—a white male colleague

Graduate students in my social studies curriculum design course openly rebelled after the first class meeting.

committed to anti-racist pedagogy who became my closest ally in trying to implement educational practices we believed in, while also surviving the tenure process in our increasingly contentious department.

Students at this time also acted out the tensions and contradictions in our shifting institutional culture.

During my first semester in the College of Education, for example, graduate students in my weekly social studies curriculum design course openly rebelled after the first class meeting in which I described my broad commitment to anti-racist, multicultural education and my specific intent to use the Japanese American internment experience as the focus for a major course assignment to design curriculum units for fifth graders.

A core of students actually circulated a petition to have me removed as the instructor, although I later discovered they had come to the first class with that intention, encouraged by the Teacher Education program director.

One student outside of that core explained:

On the first day, I sat in the rear corner of the class and was surrounded by three women

who had come in together. According to them, our teacher for the course was not the person we were supposed to have. Maybe, if the class was quickly identified as a disaster, we could get rid of him and have him replaced in time to salvage our education and our futures. That was how my first five minutes of school went.

As a teacher committed to student empowerment, and considering my own background as a student activist, the irony of being the object of student protest challenged me on many levels. I tried not to take the criticisms personally. And I tried not to respond by unfairly punishing those who disagreed with my ideas.

Instead, I remained committed to the principle of having high expectations for all students, mindful of realities in urban schools where low teacher expectations, especially for students of color, are daily self-fulfilling prophecies. And, as a teacher of color, I tried not to view the problematic classroom dynamics simply as racist resistance by white students who could not accept my position or perspective.

I did not discuss these dilemmas with my colleagues. Instead, I turned deeply inward to search for strategies and inspiration. Reflect-

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ing on many past transformative teaching experiences with white students, I knew I had to reach the class emotionally by directly connecting with their own lives.

This realization reaffirmed my decision to use the Japanese American internment experience as a case study—having experienced its impact with undergraduates of all backgrounds in Asian American Studies courses year after year.

Nevertheless, because of the campaign being waged against me, I was unsure if emotional content and a caring pedagogy would be enough to shift the hostile dynamic in the classroom, since this dynamic also reflected larger issues of race, power, and culture in the college.

Instinctively, I responded to the situation politically. I recalled Mao Tse Tung's basic organizing principle in the Chinese revolution: Unite with the advanced to win over the middle and isolate the backwards.

From that guiding slogan, I re-grounded myself in my own political training and my skills as a community organizer. Rather than use arbitrary faculty grading power to crush the core of students challenging my presence, I chose to out-organize them.

The students I wanted to reach emotionally were those in the middle. Indeed, most students were in

the middle—heavily influenced by the prevailing climate in the college and the strong views of the backwards core, but hardly consolidated or actively resistant themselves.

Winning over these middle-ground students meant showing, during the second week, that I'd listened to their sincere concerns that the Japanese American internment was too narrow a focus, taking time in the course, perhaps at the expense of other important social studies topics that they might need for their preparation as teachers.

In the third week, using the interment as a case study, I raised core questions about race, war, loyalty, ethnicity, family, immigration, the Constitution, and the media. I made curricular connections from these topics to economics, politics, geography, history, and psychology as well as to art, literature, music, health science, and mathematics.

I wanted students to see that exploring this one case in depth offered far more powerful learning than skimming the surface of several topics.

Furthermore, by using oral histories, poems, video excerpts, role plays, and reflective writing activities within our own class, I used teaching methods designed to have emotional impact. This approach helped many students realize how little they themselves had been taught about the causes and conse-

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quences of the internment.

As a result, they began to reflect more critically and concretely about their own responsibilities to become effective teachers. The internment example challenged and inspired those in the middle to engage with me and the course. Like Trang, these students wanted to go on.

Meanwhile, to isolate the backwards core of students, I created small group activities and discussions that, on the surface, modeled effective collaborative learning/teaching practices, but also served to split up the core group. When not separated, these students were always sitting together, talking among themselves during class, and asserting themselves as a collective force. I also used some of their statements and questions as reference points for class reflection as the semester progressed.

For example, during the second week, one of the resistant students directly challenged my plans with the question:

“Maybe you can teach some of this stuff in high school, but not in elementary school. Children don’t know anything about war or racism. Why do you have to ruin their innocence?”

At the time, I swallowed my own immediate response of “Excuse

me, whose children are you talking about?” and simply replied, “Well, that’s a really important question that we’re going to examine much more in this course.”

I returned to that question during the fourth week, after the students had internalized some of the lessons from the internment case. By this time, I found several students from the middle group who could respond thoughtfully to the antagonistic question.

This shift in the balance of classroom dynamics also contributed to isolating the resistant core. I referenced the same question again at the end of the course to serve as a reminder of where we had started and how far we had come.

My political organizing methods opened up the learning environment so that the pedagogy and emotional content built into the course design could reach most in the class. But I didn’t realize until reading students’ final reflection papers that I had failed to implement the essential first step in Chairman Mao’s framework—to unite with the advanced.

With tremendous guilt, I learned I had taken for granted the academic and social needs of the two or three students who were initially thrilled to have an instructor finally use a multicultural approach in the course.

The commitment to urban education is explicit and generally shared by most faculty, staff, and students.

The lone African American student from the class wrote:

“I am not surprised that you as an instructor were greeted with such hostility. I found the atmosphere in this class to be quite uncomfortable, but, then again, this is how most of my classes have been.”

She and a white student with longstanding commitments to cultural democracy each wrote about feeling uncomfortable and silenced by their peers throughout the semester. I had mistakenly assumed that they saw themselves included in both the content and process of my organizing and teaching.

But I had not talked directly to either of them about what I was doing or why. I was so concerned with reaching the middle, and neutralizing the resistant core, that I failed to invest in those students who could most benefit from working together with me. The course had not empowered them. Their frustration and disappointment still move me today, nearly a decade later.

Thankfully, the College of Education is a completely different environment now, due to retirements, new hiring, and the impact of our transformative visions taking root.

The graduate program directors

of teacher education, special education, and family counseling are all faculty of color, as are the department chairs for educational leadership and for counseling and school psychology. More importantly, the commitment to urban education is explicit and generally shared by most faculty, staff, and students.

At the same time, the students in our M.Ed. teacher education program are still predominantly white—in sharp contrast to the large majority of Black, Latino, and Asian students in Boston’s schools.

We are now able to recruit and support more students of color, but the urgent reality remains that most of our graduate students need deep and sustained immersion in anti-racist, multicultural learning environments if they are to become effective and relevant teachers.

Teaching graduate education courses side by side with my undergraduate Asian American Studies courses, however, I constantly confront choices about what to affirm and whom to support. Who are the advanced that I must not take for granted? Where can I have the most meaningful impact for both the short-term and long-term?

I have no easy ways to resolve these daily questions, but my gut feelings and political sensibilities often converge in choosing to invest in working class, immigrant students like Trang whose simple but

profound assertion, I want to go on, echoes in these pages.

Those are the students who move me most and whose lives and futures I affect most directly and deeply.

I have advocated elsewhere that Asian American Studies courses represent powerful curricular interventions that are a lifeline for students who are often otherwise marginalized within both the academic and social domains of the university.⁷

Because students' social and academic integration within the university is so closely associated with their persistence and re-

attention⁸, the role played by Asian American Studies courses—and other programs with comparable commitments—has profound implications for urban, commuter campuses that wish to retain their students.

Those curricular interventions often represent not only important institutional contributions but also crucial survival strategies for faculty of color to deal productively with issues of race, culture, and power in the processes of teaching, gaining tenure, and driving institutional change.

We need to go on. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ All names of students in this essay are pseudonyms.
- ² Kiang and Kaplan, 1994.
- ³ Padilla, 1997.
- ⁴ Arches, Darlington-Hope, Gerson, Gibson, Habana-Hafner, and Kiang, 1997.
- ⁵ Glassick, C.E., Taylor Huber, M., and G.I. Maeroff, 1997; Boyer, 1990; Lynton, 1995.
- ⁶ A specific affirmative action strategy which I strongly support and acknowledge with appreciation.
- ⁷ Kiang, 1997; 1996; 1995; 1993.
- ⁸ Tinto, 1987.

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