

Expanding the Ways That We Can Learn and Teach Asian American Studies: A Self-Exploration

By Glenn Omatsu

For the past thirty years, I've been fascinated by questions relating to learning and teaching and ways that we can all become more effective learners and teachers. Although most define these questions in terms of schools, I feel they are best explored in a larger framework that goes beyond classrooms. For example, learning and teaching are at the heart of community organizing, labor organizing, and building movements for social change. Thus, my explorations into learning and teaching have caused me to draw from my own experiences in activism and to study educational strategies developed from grassroots community organizing. I have also explored anti-colonial approaches to education, such as those developed by Gandhi, Fanon, Cabral, and Freire and the philosophies of indigenous peoples around the world. My search has also led me to the exciting fields of brain-based learning and cognitive science.

I believe that exploring these different approaches can help to expand the ways that Asian American Studies today is taught and learned. Embedded in the founding mission of Asian American Studies is a liberatory and celebratory vision that is rooted in anti-colonial ideas, but for various reasons the field has moved away from these roots. However, while the field of Asian American Studies has grown greatly in the past thirty years, it has also narrowed in scope. It has narrowed in terms of its approach to learning and teaching, largely adopting the standards of western universities, which themselves are influenced by the legacy of colonialism. Thus, today, most probably conceptualize the learning and teaching of Asian American Studies from the context of a college classroom and the creation of a course curriculum. From this perspective, Asian American Studies is taught and learned through books, lectures, discussions, and tests and papers based on books and lectures — all of which occur within a strict timeframe of fifty minutes to two or three hours. From this perspective that narrows learning and teaching to classrooms, only college students (and mainly those in elite institutions) are able to learn about Asian American Studies, and only college faculty can teach Asian American Studies. This conceptualization of education, I feel, represents a western colonial perspective.

What happens, though, if we begin to conceptualize the learning and teaching of Asian American Studies as not dependent on a college classroom? What happens if we think about ways to learn and teach Asian American Studies everyday and everywhere by using "common" things around us as our curriculum — such as our own lives, the lives of others, and the needs facing our communities? What happens if we begin to see events and activities not normally associated with education — such as community arts projects, picket lines and demonstrations as well as magic, fortune-telling, and carnivals — as ways to learn and teach Asian American Studies? What happens if we begin to define students of Asian American Studies more broadly to include new immigrant parents and grandparents, immigrant workers, single mothers, youth in K-12 classrooms, drop-outs, and youth in probation halls and prisons? And since learning and teaching are interactive processes, what happens if we also begin to define teachers of Asian American Studies more broadly to include all of these new categories of students? If we begin to ask and answer these kinds of questions, can we create a vision of education that is holistic and community-based?

Over the past thirty years, my approach to teaching and learning has developed by asking these kinds of questions and experimenting with answers. I now realize that my thinking about teaching and learning has been shaped by the many kinds of schools I have attended — traditional schools like colleges — but also non-traditional schools such as participation in grassroots community struggles for justice, international solidarity movements, and workers’ struggles for rights, respect, and dignity. Thus, the teachers in my life have included immigrant workers and low-income community residents. They have taught me (and continue to teach me) valuable ideas about the human quest for justice as well as strategies for grassroots organizing and education. But most of all, they have enlarged my consciousness to understand every interaction between teachers and learners as one involving mutual sharing. Thus, whenever I am called upon to serve as a teacher — whether in a formal classroom or an informal setting — I see my role as giving back insights I have gained from others and, in turn, receiving new insights from those who learn from me.

If the field of Asian American Studies is to overcome its current narrow approach to learning and teaching, we must ask questions that are not now being asked. One simple way to begin is to encourage all in the field — whether students, professors, researchers, or community-based practitioners — to examine their current ideas about learning and teaching, to study where these ideas came from, and to envision how these ideas can be expanded. Asking and answering four questions can help this process of self-examination for past, present, and future: 1) Where do people learn Asian American Studies, 2) Who learns about Asian American Studies, 3) Who is not able to learn about Asian American Studies, and 4) How is Asian American Studies learned and taught?

To serve as an example of the value of this self-examination, let me trace my own ideas about learning and teaching over the past forty years. By tracing the development of my ideas, I have become more conscious of strengths and limitations in my work. I have also become more receptive to new approaches that help me overcome the legacy of colonialism that continues to influence how I see the world.

Forty years ago, when I was in high school, I had a relatively simple view of how people learned: teachers taught and students learned; teachers provided information and students gained knowledge.



Analyzing this diagram now, I realize that I had assimilated a largely western colonial approach to learning and teaching: i.e., a hierarchical approach placing the teacher above the student, a rigid approach that saw teaching and learning as only a one-way process, and a system of binary thinking that isolated learning and teaching to only the dyadic transmission of information from a single teacher to a single student. This framework also is based on the assumption that teaching and learning is mainly about content; thus, teachers working from this approach focus on preparing and delivering information. Although my thinking has moved beyond this approach, I

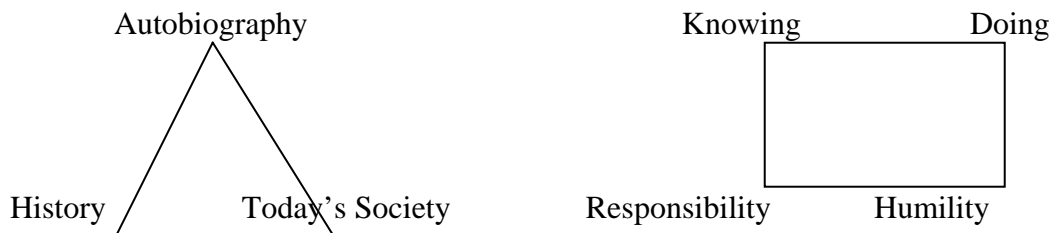
think that many others educated in U.S. schools are influenced by this approach to learning and teaching. Certainly, this approach is promoted by those in power in oppressive institutions who define the main goal of schools as perpetrating existing power relationships. Thus, I always find it helpful go back to these old ideas to better understand the destructive impact that colonialism has had on shaping the educational ideas of millions, even today. Understanding how many people today have been conditioned to see learning and teaching from only a western colonial framework can help us move them beyond this framework.

As a college student, I grew up at a time of mass political movements worldwide. Everywhere ordinary people were joining together to collectively transform ideas about justice and equality into powerful material forces to change society. When I began to participate in these movements, my ideas about learning and teaching changed. I began to see learning and teaching as not two separate things but as part of the same process. I began to see teaching and learning not as a vertical relationship but horizontally. I began to see learning and teaching as a dynamic process involving interaction between teachers and learners, who often shifted positions. I began to see awareness as integrally linked to action.

Teacher ↔ Student

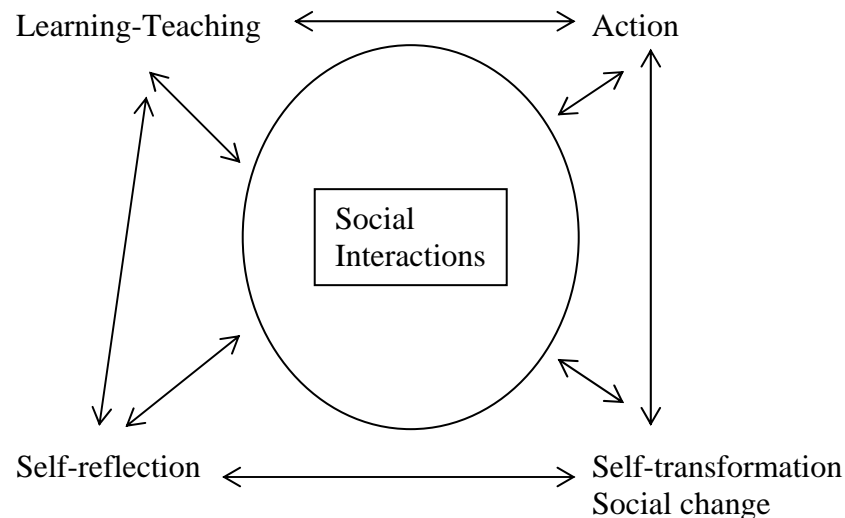
Information → Knowledge → Action

My participation in the grassroots movement to create Asian American Studies also enabled me to conceptualize learning and teaching in new ways. Although most now regard Asian American Studies as a body of knowledge, I have always appreciated it as a different approach to knowledge that radically opposes western colonialism. Thus, Asian American Studies serves as an alternative framework for seeing and changing the world. Embedded in the founding vision are valuable insights linking the understanding of history to appreciation of autobiography, highlighting the ways that students and teachers can not only study society but also change it, emphasizing the responsibility to share knowledge and to use knowledge to respond to needs of one's community, and stressing the quality of humility related to teaching and learning.



My involvement in community organizing and labor organizing over two decades pushed me to further develop my ideas about learning and teaching by moving beyond a dyadic relationship between an individual teacher and individual learner to embrace a community-centered approach emphasizing social and personal transformation. I also began to see that the relationship between awareness and action was not simply a one-way process (education first and then action) but that engaging people in activities could promote greater understanding of complex issues; in other words, action can promote awareness. Thus, I began to conceptualize learning and teaching in terms of a circle — with learning and teaching occurring in a community that integrally connected social change with self-transformation. From this perspective, learning and

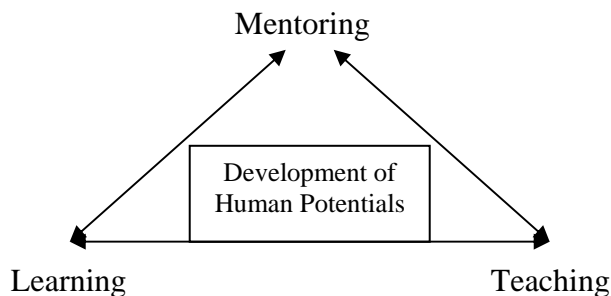
teaching are rooted in social interaction. I began to see teaching more holistically, requiring preparation not only around content and delivery but attention to fostering positive social interactions. Thus, one way to promote better learning and teaching is to improve social interactions between teachers and students and among students themselves. In other words, one of the main responsibilities of teachers is to facilitate community building.



In more recent years, I have further advanced my understanding of learning and teaching through my work with so-called "high-risk" freshmen in CSUN EOP's Bridge Program; through my explorations of brain-based learning, cognitive science and other educational research; through my study of the principles of anti-colonial education and the philosophical thought systems of indigenous peoples; and through the paradigm of Freedom Schools and the writings of Lev Vygotsky.

My work for the past decade at CSUN in the Educational Opportunity Program's (EOP) Bridge Program with low-income, "high-risk" freshmen has enabled me to recognize the critical role of mentoring in the process of learning and teaching and to see learning as a developmental process of bringing out the potential within people. I serve as the teacher for these freshmen for one full year — for two classes in a six-week summer session after they graduate high school, then for one more class in fall semester at CSUN, and then for one additional class in spring semester. The creation of these long-term learning communities enables me to emphasize community-building as integral to the learning and teaching process. It also allows me to take a developmental and rigorous approach to learning. And it also enables me to incorporate mentoring into the learning process. Infusion of mentoring into teaching enables "high-risk" students to become "high-potential" students. By mentoring, I refer to not only formal mentoring, which is usually defined in terms of the creation of long-term one-to-one relationships through formal programs, but also informal mentoring. Informal mentoring essentially involves a shift in consciousness, so that a teacher is able to define each interaction with a student — no matter how brief — as a mentoring opportunity. For students, these seemingly insignificant little moments of mentoring may have a more powerful impact on their

lives than participation in formal mentor programs. My growing understanding of the power of mentoring has caused me to experiment with a number of ideas. At CSUN, I have begun to regularly incorporate peer mentors into my classrooms to help Bridge students. I have also defined the work of peer mentors and my own work in the context of the creation of a "community of mentors." I have also discovered the importance of promoting a "culture of mentoring" in my classrooms. And I have discovered — perhaps unintentionally — that mentoring is indeed a reciprocal relationship. I have certainly learned (and gained) as much from my students as they have learned from me. I feel that one of the main weaknesses of many teacher preparation programs is that prospective teachers are trained how to give but not how to receive from their students. As a result, teachers burn out. If, instead, we begin with the insights that teaching and learning are integrally related to mentoring and that mentoring must be a reciprocal process, then teachers would enter classrooms each day with the consciousness of both giving and receiving. In other words, the infusion of mentoring into the teaching and learning process enables both students and teachers to develop the potentials within themselves.



My work with EOP Bridge students has pushed me to re-examine educational research and theories of learning from the perspective of understanding how people develop the potentials within themselves. I re-examined the insights of Freire, especially his strategies for teaching peasants how to read and write. In many ways, the students I worked with were similar to Freire's; for example, my students regarded reading and writing not as "tools for their liberation" but as "weapons used against them." Certainly, this was due to their twelve years of negative experience in the U.S. school system. But how could I change their perspective? Freire emphasized the need for a change in consciousness — to be able to see the world in a new way — and to be able to act from this new awareness. For students, where would this new consciousness come from? And how could teachers and mentors help in this process of discovery?

Reading and Writing as Weapons Used Against Them



Change in Consciousness



Reading and Writing as Tools for Liberation

From my explorations of brain-based learning and educational research, I found three helpful ideas. First, all people are constantly learning because all of us are constantly constructing meaning about our experiences. Thus, it is important to conceptualize learning as the construction of meaning and for teachers and mentors to help students in their construction of meaning. Second, learning something new is actually not learning something new. All new learning is either hindered or facilitated by the existing knowledge that a student possesses. Thus, it is important for teachers and mentors to understand the prior knowledge that students bring to new learning situations and to develop strategies to help students either overcome inaccurate interpretations or to further develop incomplete interpretations. Finally, student self-reflection is an essential part of the learning process; students need the opportunity to think about what they are learning. Teachers and mentors play an important role in guiding this reflection in the initial stages. Eventually, through the guidance and modeling of teachers and mentors, students will be able to internalize self-reflection as part of their own learning process. Self-reflection also enables students to discover and tap into the potentials within themselves. Moreover, since learning for students never proceeds in a straight line but rather through twists and turns, guided self-reflection is especially important for "high-potential" students who sometimes lose sight of their potential when they confront difficulties. We have all had the experience of being dragged back by old bad habits, which although we know no longer are effective for new challenges facing us still exert the weight of years and years of experience. In my work with so-called "high-risk" students, I have learned that their bad habits are especially hard to discard because for many years these habits helped them to partially succeed (i.e., to pass some classes with low C's and D's). In other words, students probably can graduate from high school by not doing homework and simply copying the work of others as long as they are not disruptive in class. When these students come into EOP's Bridge Program, they come in with the motivation to discard bad habits and create new habits. But often, they fall back into old habits since these old habits "helped" them for many years. Usually, teacher-mentors recognize when students fall back into old habits much faster than the students. In fact, by the time that students recognize what is happening to them in the new college environment, it is often too late. Thus, teacher-mentors can play a valuable role by serving as guides for students, helping them to discover and then to continue to re-discover the potentials within themselves.

My application of these insights to the process of learning-teaching has been enhanced by ideas drawn from the philosophical systems of indigenous peoples and systems of anti-colonial education. These ideas are important because we continue to live under the legacy of 500 years of western colonialism. In the United States, many social institutions — including the educational system — are influenced by the ongoing clash between colonial and anti-colonial thinking. Thus, it is important to examine how the legacy of colonialism has influenced the ways we see learning and teaching. Ideas drawn from anti-colonial movements and indigenous peoples' philosophical systems can help us do this. For example, Hawaiian educator and philosopher Manulani Aluli Meyer enables us to understand how western colonialism fragmented learning and teaching into two separate things while also separating knowing from doing. She contrasts the ways that learning and teaching are conceptualized under western colonialism and in the philosophical systems of indigenous peoples. Her ideas help us to

reconceptualize the process of learning and teaching from a holistic and community-based framework.

Western colonialism

Teaching
(information)
↓
Learning
(knowledge)

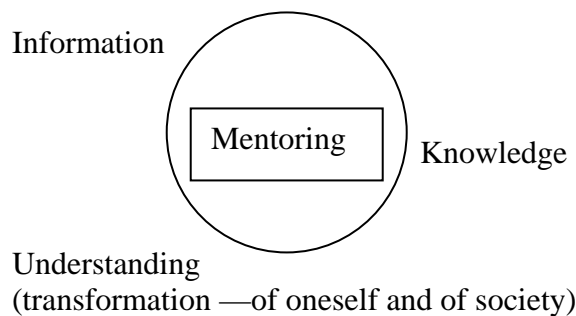
Indigenous peoples

Understanding
↑
Knowledge
↑
Information

Significantly, Manulani Aluli Meyer’s observations are similar to recent insights of brain-based researchers about the learning and teaching process. Brain-based researchers emphasize the ways that our brains are changed by learning. From this perspective, learning is an active process, and we are literally transformed by new ideas through integration and assimilation of these new ideas into our existing frameworks of knowledge.

Perception → Cognition → Transformation
Integration of new ideas
Assimilation of new ideas

Moreover, philosophical systems developed by indigenous people emphasize the role of mentoring in the learning and teaching process. They refer to an expanded definition of mentoring that goes beyond the western definition involving a long-term, one-to-one relationship. The expanded definition (found also in anti-colonial movements) emphasizes both formal and informal mentoring moments occurring within a community of mentors (usually referred to as elders) that enable young people to reflect on and act upon the world and in the process discover the potential within themselves. Of course, this expanded definition also sees mentoring as reciprocal — the giving and receiving of wisdom. Using these insights, we can conceptualize the teaching-learning process as a circular relationship with mentoring in the center:



My study of the ways that grassroots anti-colonial movements (including current-day movements such as the Zapatistas) approach community education has further enhanced my thinking about learning and teaching. As an example, let me focus on the ideas of Gandhi. Gandhi developed his ideas about education from indigenous thinking in India (i.e., system of thinking that existed before the onslaught of British colonialism) and from the worldwide struggles of people against colonialism. Gandhi recognized that the pernicious effects of colonialism do not end with the driving out of occupying oppressors. Colonialism is a powerful force that imprisons people not only physically but also mentally and spiritually. Thus, he sought to create a new educational system in India that would help root out the destructive legacy of colonialism in the minds, hearts, and souls of former colonial subjects. Gandhi analyzed systems of western education as focusing only on minds. Thus, within colonies, systems of western education in colonies were designed to educate only an elite and to promote acceptance and perpetuation of institutions of oppression. Moreover, these oppressive systems of education separated thinking from doing and feeling — thus creating alienated human beings. Gandhi drew from his insights about indigenous philosophy and movements opposing colonialism to propose an approach to learning and teaching based on the unity of the head, hand, and heart. In other words, Gandhi not only linked thinking to doing; he also linked thinking and doing to feeling. From Gandhi, I have realized the importance of incorporating compassion into learning and teaching — both as an outcome and as part of the process. By emphasizing compassion, we can help root out the legacy of colonialism from our minds and souls.

Western colonialism model

Gandhi's anti-colonial model

Education focusing on the head

Education of head, hand, and heart

Thinking

Thinking, doing, and feeling

Information and knowledge

Awareness, action, and compassion

Mind

Mind, body, and spirit

Alienated individuals; exploitation of others

Community-building

What, then, are my current ideas about teaching and learning? And, probably more important, what have I done with these ideas? In other words, how have these various ways to conceptualize learning and teaching influenced the ways that I learn and teach? To answer the last set of questions first, in recent years I have experimented with a range of strategies: service-learning projects, peer mentoring, student leadership development, and student activism training. I have also experimented with a range of teaching activities: creation of web magazines for classes, compilation of student essays into booklets that can be used for other classes, incorporation of magic tricks and fortune-telling into my curriculum, and experimentation with poetry-writing and "five-minute" classroom essays.

Today, two sets of ideas — the paradigm of Freedom Schooling and the writings of Lev Vygotsky — help provide a framework for me to incorporate these experiments with the rich legacy drawn from my explorations of brain-based learning and other educational research, anti-

colonial education, and indigenous peoples' philosophical systems. Freedom Schooling is a paradigm that not only critiques the current colonial-influenced educational system but also provides the vision for its transformation. The vision of Freedom Schooling draws from the experiences of early Civil Rights activists who, confronted by segregation in the South, created their own schools to educate youth. The curriculum in these first Freedom Schools included basic subject matter, such as math, reading, and writing, but also — by necessity — enabled students to understand and overcome racism. Through Freedom Schools, students used knowledge gained from their classrooms to deal with needs facing their neighborhoods. The first Freedom Schools were also inter-generational schools, with several generations from a community learning and teaching each other. By the late 1960s, the concept of Freedom Schooling led to the formation of Ethnic Studies in colleges and universities. And since the 1990s, educational activists around the country — inspired and nurtured by Grace Lee Boggs and others associated with Detroit's Boggs Center — have expanded the vision. The paradigm of Freedom Schooling enables me to link my current work in both teaching and activism to the founding vision of Asian American Studies, which itself drew from the legacy of early Civil Rights activists. Moreover, the paradigm of Freedom Schooling provides educational activists with a strategy for transforming our classrooms — and eventually entire schools — by redefining our neighborhoods and the needs facing our communities as our curriculum. In short, the paradigm of Freedom Schooling emphasizes the relationship between knowing and doing and the responsibility between learning and serving as fundamental to education.

Lev Vygotsky's ideas about learning and teaching are yet to be recognized, especially by educational activists. I provide here a very, very brief description of Vygotsky's insights, focusing on how they relate to learning, teaching, and mentoring. Vygotsky's ideas are valuable for understanding the dynamic nature of learning and teaching. Learning and teaching seldom proceed incrementally in a straight line. Instead, the process is marked by ongoing movements forward and backward — like a rocking wheel. Vygotsky also helps us to understand the dialectical nature of learning and teaching — i.e., the process can be defined as combining both small and imperceptible movements with giant leaps — much like a wheel traveling slowly forward and backward but then suddenly jumping off a well-worn road to create a new pathway. Although what I write here is a drastic simplification of Vygotsky's theory of learning and teaching, I emphasize two of his ideas: first, that learning occurs through social interactions; and second, that teachers need to focus on students' "zone of proximal development" in order to facilitate learning. Vygotsky's emphasis on learning as occurring through social interaction points to the importance of classroom dynamics (i.e., community building) and the cultural-historical context of students as critical for learning outcomes. These are ideas that I have intuitively developed over the years, but Vygotsky has helped me to conceptualize them as essential for my work as a teacher. Vygotsky's ideas also point to the critical role each teacher plays in developing the social culture of the classroom to enhance learning. The second idea of Vygotsky that I emphasize here — the "zone of proximal development" — relates to the new knowledge that is possible and that is potentially within the student and can be developed through social interactions, especially with the guidance of a teacher. Good teaching, in other words, is always "cutting edge" because it is always enabling students to develop that which is possible within themselves (I'm reminded here of the seemingly paradoxical quote of Nobel scientist Prigogine: "The possible is richer than the real"). Significantly, both of Vygotsky's concepts that I emphasize here — i.e., learning as occurring through social interactions and the

need for teachers to focus on students' "zone of proximal development" — relate teaching to mentoring; in fact, we can say that good teaching must incorporate mentoring. Thus, Vygotsky's ideas provide a framework for me to further understand the key role of mentoring, especially in enabling students to develop the potentials and possibilities within themselves.

How, then, do Vygotsky's ideas and the paradigm of Freedom Schooling serve as frameworks to help me integrate all the concepts that I identify as critical for learning and teaching? Obviously, my current approach emphasizes principles such as social interactions, community-building, community involvement, self-reflection, social and personal transformation, mentoring, and the values of responsibility and humility. At this time, I don't think I can draw or diagram my thinking, although I can give a rough visualization. I now conceptualize learning and teaching as like a multitude of rolling wheels rather than a single wheel. In contrast to most western theories of learning that focus on the individual learner, I draw from the insights of Vygotsky, Freire, brain-based research, and indigenous peoples' philosophical systems to conceptualize learning in terms of social interactions. Thus, in the center of all the rolling wheels would be the concepts of social interactions, community-building, mentoring, and the development of human potentials. Surrounding the wheel — or perhaps, serving as spokes within it — would be concepts such as the relationship between personal and social transformation, the relationship between knowing and doing, and the values of responsibility and humility. Moreover, all the wheels would also have to be depicted in three dimensions to illustrate the dynamic process of learning for each person — past, present, and future — and their constant interactions with other learners. Depicting the future — Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" — is especially important because it highlights the possibilities (potentialities) within all learners that can be brought forward through mentoring and further developed through self-reflection and acting upon self-reflection.

In the future, I hope to want to continue expanding my understanding. Through my ongoing work with so-called "high-risk" students, I want to explore the ways that motivation relates to learning and how emotions can both facilitate and hinder learning. Through participation in projects involving community education and mobilization, I want to further experiment with older forms of public education — forms that existed in all societies before the onslaught of colonialism — such as carnivals. Through my continuing work involving mentoring, I want to further examine indigenous peoples' approaches as well as "western" thinkers such as Nel Noddings and her concept of caring. Through my focus on learning from grassroots anti-colonial movements, I want to continue to find ways to link education of the head with that of the hand and the heart. Through my study of brain-based learning and other educational research, I want to learn more about the ways that values such as compassion, empathy, and gratitude can be incorporated into learning and teaching. These are the issues that will shape my future conceptions of education.

I am glad I established the habit of periodically analyzing how I conceptualize learning and teaching. I believe that others in the field of Asian American Studies — whether they are students, faculty, researchers, or community-based practitioners — can also gain valuable insights from doing this type of self-exploration regularly. Being able to conceptualize how we see learning and teaching enables us to see the often hidden assumptions guiding what we think and what we do. It also allows us to understand how our ideas today are related to our thinking

from the past. And, most important of all, it provides us the opportunity to envision where we need to go in the future.