

# Reimagining Diversity Work: Multigenerational Learning, Adult Immigrants, and Dialogical Community-Based Learning

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## Abstract

*Interactions between universities and surrounding communities have the potential to create empowering education through community engagement. Innovative “town/gown” relationships such as multigenerational learning communities with immigrant communities may foster positive student learning outcomes while at the same time strengthen local communities. Drawing on the experience of a partnership between a college and a public library, this article explores the strengths of integrating intergenerational, community-based learning and adult immigrants to foster dialogical “town/gown” relationships.*

Interactions between metropolitan universities and surrounding communities have great potential to create empowering education through community engagement. Community engagement involves collaborations between higher education institutions and larger communities. Community-based learning includes a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources. Innovative “town/gown” relationships may foster positive student learning outcomes while at the same time empower local communities.

This article explores combining intergenerational learning and adult immigrants with community engagement. Universities and colleges have fostered pathways for transferring knowledge from one generation to another. In a variety of formats, mature adults have supported younger adults in their learning such as guest lectures, mentoring programs, and oral histories. Specifically, Eckerd College and Temple University have created centers to facilitate intergenerational learning. Scholarship has documented the benefits of intergenerational learning communities for young and mature learners. In particular, intergenerational service learning, civic engagement, and community engagement have been fruitful (Ayers and Narduzzi 2009; Gallagher and Hogan 2000; Sanchez and Kaplan 2014, 473–485).

This article examines multigenerational and community-based learning with immigrant adults. Immigrants are an important piece to the future of the United States. Immigrants currently compose 12 percent of the total population in the United States. The Pew Research Center predicts that the number of immigrants in the United States will rise substantially by 2050 to almost 19 percent of the total population. The nation’s population will increase from 296 million in 2005 to 438 million in 2050. From 2005 to 2050, this dramatic population growth will be largely due to immigrants

and their descendants arriving, estimated at 82 percent of the total population growth. Of the 117 million people added to the population during this period due to the effect of new immigration, sixty-seven million will be the immigrants themselves, forty-seven million will be their children and three million will be their grandchildren (Passel and Cohn 2008).

Drawing on the experience of a partnership between the Claremont Colleges and a public library in Southern California, this article discusses a combined class with elderly Asian immigrants from the community and college students. This article explores this case study to look at how an intergenerational classroom developed an understanding of intragenerational and intergenerational knowledge through dialogical pedagogies. The discussion illustrates the importance of dialogue and interaction in intergenerational community-based learning.

## **Background on Community Partners**

This case study emerged from a collaboration between Pitzer College and an organization, Literacy for All of Monterey Park (LAMP), in Southern California. Pitzer College is a residential liberal arts college with an undergraduate student body of just over one thousand and more than forty fields of study leading to the bachelor of arts degree. Located thirty miles east of Los Angeles in Southern California, Pitzer College's core values include intercultural understanding, social responsibility, interdisciplinarity, student engagement, and environmental sustainability. The 2018 class is 41 percent students of color, 55 percent female, and 14 percent first-generation college students (Pitzer College 2018). As a member of the Claremont University Consortium, Pitzer College is part of five campuses that provide students access to approximately 2,500 courses per semester and 200 clubs and organizations.

With the support of the Community Engagement Center at Pitzer College and the Weingart Foundation, I started a partnership between Pitzer College and LAMP in the fall of 2009. LAMP is an adult and family literacy program that furnishes free English classes, computer classes, citizenship classes, and individual services. Founded in 1984 with funding by the California State Library, LAMP is a volunteer-driven program with three paid staff. Sixty-eight percent of LAMP's client base self-identify as Asian and second-language learners. Due to the economic downturn and severe budget cuts, the shortage of adult-education classes has hindered immigrants' ability to learn English, find better jobs, and secure adequate housing. This scarcity of resources amplified the need for LAMP's programs and its partnership with the college.

LAMP is located in Monterey Park, which is a small suburban community in the heart of San Gabriel Valley just east of Los Angeles. People of color are 81 percent of Monterey Park's population with 54 percent of the city's population born outside the United States. Monterey Park emerged as one of the first majority Asian suburban enclaves in the United States. After the 1965 National Origins Act, Chinese immigration transformed Monterey Park. Referred to by many as "Little Taipei," new Asian immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s dramatically changed the region's residential

and business cityscape (Li 2011). Asians in Monterey Park grew from less than 5 percent of the total population in 1960 to almost two-thirds of the population in 2010. The sharp changes in majority population resulted in volatile backlash toward the increasingly visible Chinese community, as discussed by Horton and Calderon (1995). For example, hate violence and divisive municipal politics around English-only as the official language of the city manifested in the 1980s. Currently, one out of three Monterey Park citizens are Asian and 76 percent of the city's population speaks a language other than English at home (United States Census Bureau 2013).

This article draws from participant observations and semi-structured key informant interviews. This article uses twelve semi-structured interviews conducted over the span of five years: four with immigrant/refugee LAMP students, four with Claremont College students, and four with LAMP paid or volunteer staff. The interviewees who were LAMP learners included Chinese immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. The LAMP student key informants were four women whose ages ranged from mid-thirties to early seventies. Lasting approximately thirty minutes to one hour at the library, the interviews with the LAMP students focused on the naturalization process and adaptation to the United States. LAMP student interviewees were recruited based on the snowball method of referral by the LAMP staff. The four Claremont College student interviewees were all Asian American women and occurred at the public library. These questions emphasized learning outcomes from the combined class. The interview questions for the LAMP staff emphasized social barriers impacting LAMP students and generating ideas for classes. The staff interviews included three women and one man and were conducted in English at the library.

Lastly, this article utilized field notes from participant observation at LAMP during the combined class over the fifteen weeks of a semester. The LAMP participants in the combined class came from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds in the United States from working class to upper middle-class. Some had limited educational background in their home countries while others had graduate level education in their home countries. The amount of time in the United States among the LAMP students in the combined class varied wildly from several months to more than fifteen years. The English levels ranged from limited to advanced English-speaking proficiency and/or English writing skills.

## **Asian American Studies: Dialogical and Liberatory Pedagogies**

Emerging from social movements in the late 1960s, Asian American studies shifted the goals of higher education from civic engagement to encompass political and intellectual efficacy, human agency, and social transformation in the context of contested power dynamics. The longest student strikes in the history of the United States occurred in 1968 and 1969 during the Third World Strike at San Francisco State University (SFSU) and in 1969 at the University of California, Berkeley. Lasting five months, striking SFSU students gathered for daily rallies between noon and three

o'clock in the afternoon starting in the fall of 1968. SFSU students protested the college's practice of pipelining students to the Selective Service Office and the suspension of English instructor (and Black Panther Minister of Education) George Mason Murray. Murray was a graduate student in English at SFSU and had been hired to teach introductory English classes for minority students admitted to the college under a special program. Students of color and working-class white students from SFSU and UC Berkeley participated in a broad multiracial coalition, self-designated as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), to demand greater access to education for working-class and underrepresented groups. In addition to the creation of ethnic studies, the TWLF called for educational relevance, third-world solidarity, self-determination, social justice, and connecting the campus and communities (Dong 2009; Fujino 2012; Louie and Omatsu 2001).

These social movement origins shaped the discipline's approach to civic engagement, political engagement, and service learning. Immediately after the Third World strike, ethnic studies offered some of the first courses with political engagement and multigenerational components. Ethnic studies in the 1960s and 1970s made the colonizing aspects of education visible and argued that higher education should be empowering and work toward social justice. It spoke to how students and communities were alienated from education. Organizing under the umbrella of "to serve the people," the first wave of ethnic studies classes sought to strengthen students' capacity to empower their communities. This interpretation of community engagement meant destabilizing Euro-centric curriculum and hierarchical classroom structures (Osajima 2007; Revilla and Mark 2001). This pedagogical approach translated into marginalized students reclaiming their voices in the classroom and in society. Initially, ethnic studies classes were student-centered and democratically run. In addition, community members were also facilitators, and community language courses were co-taught by students (Aoude 1999; Chinatown Education Project 1979; Kim 2000).

Since its origins in the late 1960s, many ethnic studies programs and departments have been committed to community studies and education as a tool of social justice (Kiang 2008; Kirkpatrick and Hasager 2013; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009). For many educators in ethnic studies, the purpose of higher education was to empower students to be social change agents through democratic pedagogies and participatory action research. Professor Lane Hirabayashi noted, "When one is actually engaged in doing things, the learning process is qualitatively different than what occurs in a purely 'cognitively-oriented' classroom" (Cruz 2013; Hirabayashi and Hull 2000).

Community engagement from an ethnic studies approach involved fostering critical consciousness and social action. This shifted the focus from doing service learning or "good works" in communities. An ethnic studies approach to community engagement involved praxis that combines reflection and action that cycles between the two. Influenced by radical educator Paulo Freire, community-engagement-in-ethnic-studies courses related to students' communities and worked toward social justice outside of the classroom. Freire (2000) worked beside and learned from rural peasants in Brazil in the 1960s. His analysis of education in the global south, "Pedagogy of the

Oppressed,” problematized the “banking concept of education” in which students were objectified as “empty vessels to be filled with information” (Darder 2014). In contrast, Freire envisioned an empowering education as a “critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change” where students learn to “relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change” (Shor 1992, 15). According to Freire, dialogical or “problem-posing” pedagogies combined individual and collective learning in order to examine and engage with social inequalities. In the foreword to “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” Richard Shaull wrote:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

In addition to Freire, Augusto Boal (1993) radicalized education as a social movement in Brazil in the 1960s. With the concept of *concienciacion* (critical consciousness and social action), Freire and Boal shifted the learning goal of education to the ability to name social contradictions in one’s life in order to transform it. Freire and Boal’s theories and practices influenced global social movements to use popular education in organizing campaigns (Delp et al. 2002) and scholars to theorize about critical pedagogies and education (Giroux 2011; McLaren 2005).

With dialogical pedagogies, the purpose of education was to facilitate social change through developing students’ critical consciousness and social action. From an ethnic studies standpoint, an empowering education meant that the curriculum should also draw from multigenerational community knowledge and apply knowledge to society through community-based initiatives. These concrete experiences of collective action enhanced their learning new content and new ways of seeing. The purpose of community engagement was not only to act in solidarity with the community. It also included developing a vision for an alternate, more just society and fostering the skills to transform this vision into reality.

Through dialogue, students learned to situate lives in a broader historical context in order to transform society. Critical pedagogies encouraged students to identify inequalities in society and redefine their role in changing society. The community-based learning supports that students understand that they are not merely passive witnesses to social processes but active agents to create a more just society. Political empowerment, as the goal of community engagement in ethnic studies, is broadly defined beyond politics only in the relation to the state. With an expansive definition of “political,” community engagement includes cultural politics and radical archives such as zines, poetry, and murals.

From an ethnic studies standpoint, the purpose of community-based learning and democratic pedagogies was to inspire students and faculty to name contradictions they

see in the world, identify causes, come up with alternatives, and transform society. The purpose was not only to have students just participate in society and link experience with education. The goal was for students to create an alternative vision for society and to manifest this vision into reality. Gregory Yee Mark (2001), a professor of ethnic studies at California State University, Sacramento, taught some of the first community classes in Asian American studies in the early 1970s. Mark explained, “I always try to do a bigger picture, a broader context, and I do that with my students – see how it fits into society, to history, and their lives, and their future.”

Teaching as social change stems from identifying how power, privileges, and social locations are codified in what is being taught, how curriculum is being taught, and the dynamics among the teachers and learners. With this premise of social reproduction in classrooms, it explores ways in which learning may be an empowering space based on creating culturally-responsive, dialogical, and learning environments. In recent decades, more scholarship looks at the praxis of education for critical consciousness rather than solely for social movements (popular education) or only for theorizing about education (critical pedagogies). Similar to Julio Cammarota (2008), David M. Donahue (2011), Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2010), Tania D. Mitchell (2014), and Eve Tuck (2013), this article explores the theory and practice of empowering education through dialogical and liberatory pedagogies.

## **Asians Immigrants in the United States**

Asian immigrants are a central piece of the immigration picture in the United States. Asian immigrants are a significant portion of the growing immigrant population and naturalization applications in the United States. As the nation’s fastest-growing racial group in the United States, the Asian population in the United States is expected to triple by 2050. And, it is predicted that by 2020, 50 percent of the Asian population will be foreign-born (Papademetriou and Terrazas 2009; Segal 2010; U.S. Census Bureau 2012). California has the largest number of persons naturalizing in the United States, and Los Angeles has the second largest concentration of Asians in the United States with close to half a million (Hoeffel et al. 2012; Lee 2012).

Asian immigrants occupy a unique place in United States’ immigration policy as the target of the first federal law to explicitly restrict immigration on the basis of race and ethnicity. From 1849 to 1880, Chinese immigration to Hawai’i and the United States was largely unregulated. Chinese immigrants migrated to work in fishing, mining, agriculture, and railroad work. Despite a relatively small percentage of total immigrants to the United States (5 percent or less), the Chinese were targeted with exclusion laws and consistent denial of citizenship (Chan 1991).

In 1878, the Ninth Circuit Court in California denied Ah Yup, a Chinese immigrant, the right to naturalize. Writing for the Court, Judge Sawyer ruled that Ah Yup was a “Mongolian” and that “Mongolians could not be classified as ‘white,’ and, therefore, Asians were ineligible for naturalizing” (Okihiro 2001).

The 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act excluded Chinese laborers from entering the United States. It was extended for ten years in 1892 and made permanent in 1904. Fomenting racial fears of the “yellow horde,” the Chinese were deemed biologically inferior to whites and a threat to the American labor force (Kang 2012). The Scott Act (1888) denied Chinese who had left the United States to visit family in China the right to reenter into the United States. The Geary Act (1892) forced Chinese immigrants to register with the government. Under these immigration exclusions, Asian immigrants were detained and interrogated about the validity of their identities and documents. In 1910, the Angel Island Detention Center was built in the San Francisco Bay to regulate immigrants entering the United States on the west coast. Before Asian immigrants could enter the United States, they were incarcerated ranging in length of time from two weeks to two years. From 1910 to 1940, an estimated fifty thousand Chinese passed through the detention center before they could settle in the United States (Lee and Yung 2010). The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act restricting Chinese entering the United States remained in effect for seventy years, until the 1965 National Origins Act (Hing 1993). This contested history of Asian immigration policy over much of the twentieth century sets the stage for multigenerational learning with Asian immigrants in the twenty-first century.

## **Case Study: Intergenerational Learning with Adult Immigrants**

On a warm April evening in Southern California, over seventy-five people crowded into a spacious room at a public library. Leaning against the wall, an older woman clutched her purse against her chest while raptly listening to the speaker. A young mother soothed her fussy baby as she craned her neck to hear the program in Mandarin and English. People clustered in front of tables, filling their plates with cookies and sesame *bau*. For the finale, a group of eight Asian and Asian American women of different ages filed out to form a row in front of the audience. One by one, each woman stepped forward and read one line of a poem. Their families and friends applauded, hooted, and hollered. The poets smiled, blushed, and clapped to this boisterous and joyful response.

The tone of this event reflected what had evolved over the course of the semester in a class that brought together college students and older immigrant women from LAMP. Through our weekly sessions in the public library, Asian and Asian American women ranging in age from their early twenties to late seventies shared their knowledge and experiences and gradually formed a small community. The students wrote group poems, created a website, and produced an anthology that included biographies, photographs, graphics, individually written pieces, and collaborative writing.

With a commitment to using education for creating change, we wanted to combine the resources of a liberal arts college with a community project. We intended for college students to learn not only from books and lectures but also by being engaged in the

world. As feminist educators, we wanted to nourish all the students' sense that they could create knowledge, empower themselves, and enact change in the world.

## **Building a Community of Learners**

The two different groups of students (the adult Asian women immigrants and the Pitzer College Asian American women students) brought a range of skills and experiences to this combined class. The adult immigrants from the community were all immigrants from Asia who migrated over the age of forty. The college students were all Asian Americans born in the United States. The college students provided English-language practice and citizenship coaching for LAMP students, covering different aspects of the citizenship exam to prepare them for the naturalization interview. In the combined class, the two groups delved into their life stories and worked on collaborative creative writing projects. We used storytelling not just as a matter of individual identity but also as a way for students to explore broader social processes such as colonialism, diaspora, migration, racism, patriarchy, and poverty. In one session, everyone, including the facilitators, brought a photograph or object that meant a great deal to her and discussed it in front the class. While we used these treasures to learn about each other, they were also points of departure to map out broader themes of migrations, loss, transformation, and courage. Then we wrote pieces based on those themes. In this way, multigenerational learning was more than transmitting knowledge from one generation to another.

The storytelling and writing supported both types of students to develop an awareness of themselves and others. For example, one LAMP learner, named Lily, brought a simple but elegant bracelet made of red thread. Initially shy at first, Lily later shared that the bracelet was given to her by her mother as means to remember her life in China. Lily later discussed with the class about her struggles in learning English, finding a job, and keeping affordable housing. The issues Lily confronted reflect larger struggles of not only immigrants and refugees but in particular immigrant and refugee women (Garrett 2006; New American Media 2009; Segal, Elliott, and Mayadas 2010). However, the bracelet reminded her to be strong and resilient. While the Pitzer College students responded, the other LAMP learners had a great deal of feedback for Lily. Whereas Lily was a more recent immigrant, two others had migrated a longer time ago. Through this conversation about Lily's bracelets, the LAMP learners become more aware of their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors as immigrant women who were similar to each other. At the same time, they learned about intragenerational differences within the LAMP learners.

## **Addressing Difference and Similarities**

Initially, many of the college students operated from a "missionary" service-learning model, wanting to "give" to the immigrant learners as invisible "helpers." There were hiccups along the way as students began to learn together across differences of class background, age, and immigration status. One college student, Nina, wanted a "fun and easy" class where she "could help those less fortunate" than herself. In the

beginning, she focused on the immigrant learners and did not offer much of herself. Rather than seeing the LAMP students as objects of college students' charity or pity, the focus of this class was on engaging with differences and relative privilege in order to co-create something new and possibly transformative.

The college students read academic journal articles about the differences between service learning and social justice service learning. They examined their social location and explored ideas of empowerment. They undertook research on social issues facing immigrants. Moreover, they reflected on how their backgrounds were similar to and different from the LAMP students and how this might enhance or inhibit their work together.

The course emphasized the creation of a healing, respectful, and nourishing learning community as a central organizing principle. This recognizes the fact that education can reproduce social inequalities both in course content and classroom dynamics. Rather than focusing on a text or debate as the central mode of learning, our students learned about patriarchy, immigration, and racism through democratic and collaborative learning methods. In the anthology that the combined class created, the students described their process in the introduction:

(We) learned from each other's experiences and helped to maintain a supportive space in which each woman could express her voice through writing and dialogue. . . .The flow of our voices allowed us to grow out of a classroom-dynamic and into a family.

## **Place and (Dis)placements**

A premise of this combined class was to co-create a sense of place by naming the various forms of (dis)placement that both the adult Asian immigrant learners and the college students confronted. Many of the immigrant women from LAMP discussed feeling "useless" in the United States. Several described their frustrations with learning English and finding employment. One student, Yin, reflected on her downward mobility on leaving Asia:

It is much harder for older immigrants. I was an accountant in China. I apply, apply, apply for jobs. No one hire me. I am too old. I am an in-care worker. It is hard.

Others explained that daily-life tasks were often daunting and exhausting due to racism, patriarchy, and language barriers. Their stories reflected the difficulties of navigating new places while learning a new language. As they struggled to learn English and combated discrimination, they questioned their place in this country and also challenged the subordination of "knowing their place" as Asian immigrant women in the racialized and gendered logic of the United States. Many described struggling with wellness and feelings of depression upon immigrating to the United States. One LAMP learner, Emma, explained her first day in the United States:

I had arrived in the middle of the night. My boss woke me up. I was confused. I thought I was still in China. My boss was mad. I had to start right away. Scrubbing the floors. On my hands and knees. I wanted to cry. My first day. I was shocked. No time to cry. I had to work. . . . (Later), I wanted to kill myself. . . . I tried. . . . It didn't work. . . . I am here, now. . . . I am strong.

Many women described struggling with patriarchy. For example, Amy reflected on the unspoken double-shift for women: "I come home from work. I cook and clean for my husband and son. I have two jobs. No money for cooking and cleaning." Another LAMP student explained the challenges she faced working outside the home, raising children in the United States, and trying to navigate institutions in the United States while preparing for the naturalization exam:

I try hard. No time. My son tells me: 'Mommy! Not right!' My English not so good. No time. I work. I waitress. I make food. I try. . . . [The staff for Homeland Security] talk fast, fast, fast. No smile. I worry. I no speak.

The combined class was a place where the immigrant women felt welcome. One student, Yin, reflected on why she liked the combined class: "I work. I come home. Eat fast. Come here fast. I like it here. Everyone smiles. I am not scared." Similarly, the college students described feeling out of place and experiencing marginalization on the campus and in many of their classes. As Asian Americans in predominantly white colleges with a prevalent culture of class privilege, they often felt invisible and ostracized. They were inspired by the LAMP students and began to document and reflect on the struggles and coping strategies of their own grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. The students wrote about various themes of displacement and finding a sense of place in their own personal and family histories. Most of the college students engaged intensely because they were heartened and challenged by the LAMP learners. The LAMP students felt encouraged by the college students, sought them out as resources, and also pushed them to stretch farther. Together, the students described the common themes in their lives. In the class-produced anthology, the LAMP students and the college students described themselves as a community:

All through our lives, we experience moments of vulnerability, weakness, and fragility. Inside each of us are fighters. Our courage fuels our determination to handle the curve balls that life throws at us.

## **Giving and Receiving**

Overall, both the LAMP learners and the college students in the combined class experienced the power and strength that comes from being seen and seeing others through creative expression and participatory, dialogical learning. However, it was a challenge to get to these positive outcomes. The college students struggled through some significant hurdles in this unconventional learning environment. For example, Nina worked closely with Amy, an immigrant woman in her sixties. Initially, Nina struggled with understanding how to collaborate with Amy. In the beginning, Nina

unknowingly would tap her fingers impatiently as Amy looked up English words in her Chinese dictionary. However, during the course of the semester Nina learned that Amy battled with back pain and wrist pain due to her work as an in-home healthcare worker, and that she also struggled with her husband and son. Despite these challenges, Amy always came to class and completed homework even as she wrestled with the English language and the instructors speaking too quickly. Through collaborative writing and peer editing, each learned about the other's stories, struggles, and transformations. As they worked together, Nina and Amy became curious about each other and their shared experiences as women under patriarchy. By the end of the semester, Nina had become more open to comments and insights from Amy. Moreover, Nina's poetry was deeper and more nuanced as she began to include life-changing events in her writing. At the same time, Amy developed a stronger and stronger voice in the classroom and in her writing. She started to question Nina about her poems and statements. They ended the semester with appreciation for each other's perspectives, experiences, and skills. It became more reciprocal and dialogical rather than being one-way and hierarchical. Because of their investment in their developing partnership, Nina and Amy were able to co-create the following poem together:

It happened by chance, unknowing danger would strike—an uphill battle  
He came to the United States with wonderful dreams for the future  
Life was not as easy as they said it would be in stories

In the collaborative writing process each person wrote one line and passed the paper to her partner, rotating back and forth. Rather than waiting impatiently or rushing her partner, Nina and Amy learned to work from a place of support, kindness, and empathy. Together, they were able to draw from their families' stories of immigration, highlighting themes of loss and hope.

## **Wholeness: Heart, Mind, and Soul**

Because one of the main principles of the class was to create a reciprocal, mutually beneficial, and feminist learning community, we emphasized more democratic ways of learning than is typical in many college classrooms. Often, the college students compartmentalized their schoolwork from the rest of their lives in order to survive in an intensely competitive academic environment. One college student, Mary, explained:

Usually in my classes, I just slip in. Get lectured at. Take notes. Pack up my things and go. Sometimes I don't talk to anyone, and no one talks to me. It's about learning the material and demonstrating that I learned it the way the professor wanted it.

The joint class was much more than meeting together in the same room and writing individual stories in an atomized fashion. By shifting away from competitiveness and self-reliance, students learned about and nourished a sense of belonging and collectivity. This culture of mutual respect opened up the possibility for alternative

viewpoints and constructive conflict. The feminist dialogic pedagogies contributed to building a community that encouraged all the students to give voice to what is often buried or marginalized in the classroom and in society.

One college student, Mary, was proficient in completing the assignments. She was efficient, thorough, and precise. She never spoke in class unless called upon. At the beginning of the semester her poems focused on light-hearted, happy topics. Even if they dealt with a challenging social issue such as immigration, they tended to wrap up neatly by the end. The class compelled students like Mary to participate on cognitive and affective levels. Rather than interacting only with students' minds through abstract ideas and theories, we engaged with them as whole human beings with feelings, emotions, histories, ideas, and complex experiences. Initially, there was some pushback from some college students who felt they were not learning much. Talking about their lives and their feelings made them feel vulnerable and as if they were not "serious" students. Moreover, they did not want other students to feel sorry for them. Some questioned the writing assignments as being too vague or wondered how they would be graded. As facilitators, our task was to invite the students to speak from the heart and soul as well as the head. Rather than being distant and alienated from the course content, students' lives and histories were at the center.

By learning alongside the immigrant women, the college students came to identify relevant analytical themes in their own lives and to see that their experiences mattered. They affirmed that the immigrant women's stories were personally and theoretically significant. Placing the students' stories at the center countered dominant norms about what is considered valid knowledge and scholarship. Typically, in a college classroom a book published by a university press on the topic of female immigrants is privileged over a poem written by a female immigrant. Immigrant women were seen as informants and subjects of study to be talked about by researchers rather than as co-producers of new knowledge. With a feminist approach to epistemology (e.g., how we know what we know), the course embodied the idea that everyone can produce knowledge, not just those within privileged, elite circles. Although feminist scholarship has discussed this democratizing of knowledge production extensively, creating contexts where this can happen is relatively rare. One immigrant student, Emma, was confident in speaking English but less so about writing in English. A force to be reckoned with, she gradually found a way to integrate her powerful speaking voice with her writing voice. Earlier Emma had described the rude awakening of her first day in the United States. Over the course of the semester, Emma began viewing her struggles in her immigration journey with more nuances. Emma wrote the following about her immigration experience, using a haiku format:

Once a wanderer  
Suffering pain and sorrow  
Became a fighter.

For the college students, the LAMP women were the same generation as their grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. Inspired by the LAMP students, the college women began to explore and reflect on the struggles of their own family members. For example, the following was part of a poem written by Mary:

Hearing the angry rumbles of a plane  
Her gut sank.  
Expecting bombs to fall  
And herself to die.  
Every day.

Mary made her grandma's experience central as a means to look at her own history. By making these experiences visible, Mary was able to examine how broader processes such as war had impacted her grandmother, her mother, and herself in similar and different ways. Grounded in the multiple layers of her family's experiences, this poem differed dramatically from her earlier poems. Rather than glossing over such complexities, this work engaged with both suffering and determination. Through a class with elders, Mary learned about the intergenerational dynamics within her own family. Moreover, Mary explored the similarities and differences of generational attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of immigrant women in her family and of the older immigrant students in the combined class.

## **Dialogical Learning Communities and Redefining the Political**

By knowing and naming their own stories, all of the students in the combined class came to better understand themselves in relation to the wider society. Speaking out about their experiences and the social contradictions in their lives meant being visible and engaged with the world. This paved the way for a deepening sense of political empowerment, which we defined as feeling whole, connected, and conscious in order to be active in a larger project of social change. Students learned that creating community, sharing resources—information, literacy skills, wisdom, and encouragement—and listening can be political acts. This opened the door to reimagining what is considered political and what their role might be as politically engaged women. At the end of the semester, Jill, a college student, explained her idea of “political empowerment” in the following way:

There are ways to intervene in the system of structural and individual silencing. Intervention takes various forms. One can take English classes in order to learn to use the tool that is the language of oppression, essentially learning to work within the system. Sometimes individuals can learn to break away from using those tools and find their own ways of expressing themselves. For each individual, the best way to address silencing is different. But the possibilities really are infinite.

A sense of empowerment was discussed amongst the LAMP learners. In one conversation toward the end of the semester, the immigrant learners were discussing whether they have a right to voice their opinions because they are new to the United States. The two older women both admonished and spurred the younger immigrant women. With great passion and conviction, Emma urged the younger LAMP learners to speak their minds: “Your voice matters! Your opinion matters! Don’t let ANYONE take that away from you.”

The LAMP students and the college students grappled with creating a learning community as active participants rather than as passive consumers. They wrestled with content that felt relevant, meaningful, and inspiring. Moreover, they created a deep sense of connection among the group by learning to give and take. This reciprocal relationship created a healing, restorative, and sacred space to learn and build confidence. The college students and the adult immigrant learners increased their sense of internal efficacy. One student reflected on how this would affect her future actions: “I am not going to be a turtle anymore—hiding when I want to feel safe.” By the end of the semester, all the students defined themselves as social change agents.

## **Conclusion**

The positive learning outcomes that emerged from the combined class were made possible and were enhanced by the institutional climate that fostered applied learning, social responsibility, and intercultural understanding. This class and the constructive, multi-year partnership between the college and LAMP helped water the seeds of positive learning outcomes. Moreover, the Asian American Studies department and the Asian American student centers created many opportunities for the college students to develop an understanding of the ethics of community partnerships prior to enrolling in the combined class. Several of the college students in the combined class previously had enrolled in other Asian American studies classes with community engagement components and/or contributed to and learned from community projects at Asian American student centers. In addition, the department offered a constellation of opportunities that invited students to start or build upon their knowledge of empowering education and community engagement. These ranged from summer community project fellowships, a community engagement staff mentor, and research opportunities with faculty to a senior community capstone project and a senior community project prize. The richness of multigenerational learning with immigrant communities is deepened and supported when it is situated within a departmental and institutional commitment to diversity and social responsibility.

The combined class created a concerted, intentional, and thoughtful multigenerational learning community. Integrating multigenerational learning with adult immigrants has the potential to expand “traditional” undergraduate education. Innovative “town/gown” relationships, such as in this case study, draw from the knowledge of adult immigrant populations within and surrounding institutions of higher education. A dialogical approach to community-based learning with adult immigrants fostered skills, knowledge, and motivation for college students and community members to think

critically about themselves and their communities in order to transform society and, in the words of Bell Hooks, “to move forward, to change, to grow” (1994, 202).

Linking dialogical teaching strategies to an intergenerational classroom creates a relevant education by centering all students’ lives and perspectives as the foundation to examine broader social processes like immigration, poverty, colonialism, and patriarchy. When this is done, what is considered legitimate knowledge becomes democratized. Institutions of higher education in the United States have a responsibility to educate and draw from the knowledge of a broadly representative portion of our population because talent, intellect, and potential appear in many places and in many forms. Drawing from the knowledge of lifelong learners and young adult learners, diversifies what is considered knowledge. This expansion is significant because it manifests diversity work in ways that empowers a wide variety of stakeholders as intellectuals rather than potentially dehumanizing the community and mature learners as “objects” to be helped or to be studied. The combined class moves the community engagement from a form of academic tourism and an “experience” to integrate critical thinking and analytical tools in the act of co-creating knowledge within and for the combined class.

Intergenerational learning combined with adult immigrants in dialogical classrooms engages with differences and positionalities. Various life experiences create valuable differences in perspective that can be used to educate college students and our institutions of higher education more effectively. Institutions invite and incorporate difference with the intention of engaging difference rather than transcending difference. People of different backgrounds are brought together not to remain different but to realize shared ideals of understanding, collaboration, and equity. The college students and the mature learners learned to relate to differences based on age, citizenship, primary language, socio-economic status, and political viewpoints. More than recognizing differences in interpersonal interactions, they learned to work across and beside different positions of privilege as essential for building coalitions and creating change. An awareness of differences accrued through individual and group affiliation to diverse generational positions relates to consciousness of differences in the context of social inequalities. In this way, community engagement integrates a deeper understanding of difference, the context of the communities, and how to navigate with these differences.

The positive learning outcomes highlight the potential of intergenerational learning combined with immigrant populations. This expands what is considered “diversity” work of institutions of higher education in the United States. This is not to suggest “age” should be merely added to a checklist of identity markers. Rather, the case study points to the richness of exploring intersections of generation and other positions of privilege. As such, the notion of “citizenship” is explored and expanded in many ways. Civic engagement is layered with community engagement and the politics of citizenry such as adaptation, linguistic segregation, and becoming citizens in the eyes of the state. Combining intergenerational learning with adult immigrants and dialogical

pedagogies is a way to foster intercultural understanding and social responsibility in students and to reimagine “civic engagement” in town/gown relationships.

### **Note:**

Gratitude to LAMP (e.g., Norma Arvisu, Lilian Kawaratani, Jose Garcia, and Denise Tang), Traci Kato-Kiriyama, the Claremont College and LAMP students in the course, the Community Engagement Center at Pitzer College (Susan Phillips, Tessa Hicks, and Tricia Morgan), the Weingart Foundation, Gwyn Kirk, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Ray Young, Lee Sun Ngan, Michael James, Kaela Wan, Carolyn Wan, and Karin Mak. Aliases were used to preserve the confidentiality of the students.

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