Assigning a Life-History Assignment in a course on the “Asian American Experience”

THE VALUE OF SELF-DISCOVERY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE HYPHENATED IDENTITY

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From Joann Faung Jean Lee, on Asian American oral histories, 2008

“...as a twenty first century snap shot....a tapestry of tales reflecting their lives, experiences, hopes and dreams. Ultimately the spectrum of values—in education, family, work—form a remarkable mosaic of the Asian American experience” (as distinct from Asians living in Asia or the diaspora living outside the United States)
Objective of this conversation

• To discuss the value of an assignment where Asian and non-Asian students inquire into their own life-story; that is, what does such an assignment achieve?

• I argue that discovering their histories allows for a critical and intersectional understanding of identity, by gender, history, socio-economic status, culture, and more, and for personal growth

• Participants at this conversation are invited to offer their critical comments, questions, and suggestions, and share their own experiences if they have used this pedagogical tool
Preparing students for this assignment: readings, films

- Several documentaries on Asian history in the U.S., life-stories, the refugee experience
General rubric for life-story assignment

• A semester-long assignment

• An approximately 5 page paper due on last day of class (for 25% of course grade)

• I begin the process early! I ask students to talk with (or e-mail) older generations in their family, to discover the history of their family, including coming to, and in, the U.S.

• This assignment is not a chronological account of their lives!

• I propose a focus around a theme, such as gendered differences in parental expectations; possible issues with non-cis-gender identities; educational pressures and aspirations; generational differences in religious and/or cultural values (performing to an Asian stereotype), experiences of racism and discrimination, to lose or retain a mother tongue
Some questions for students to consider

• Do we need ‘origin stories’?

• Do such stories inform who we are, do they affect our sense of ourselves, and choices we make?

• Do our stories connect us with family, with older generations, and inform the generations to come?

• Can discovering our stories reveal issues we didn’t know about (for better or worse)?

• How difficult can this be if one is adopted (e.g. into a racially different family)?

• What can be the consequences of an adoptee connecting with a birth family?
The short version, 2-3 weeks into the semester

• Two weeks or so into semester, students present their early findings and thoughts in a 2-page essay, in 5-6 minutes, in class, to their peers, for suggestions and critical comment

• They share only what they feel comfortable about!

• I myself comment in detail on Canvas on each student’s submission, with suggestions about how to better focus their paper

• This short version is not graded, and students can change the theme and focus of their paper as this develops
The longer paper, an expanded rubric

• This is a difficult assignment to grade! My criteria (with some flexibility) are as follows:
  • I require clarity in thinking, and good writing
  • A focused paper, around a theme as far as possible, given that themes might overlap (e.g. gender and religious values)
  • A page or so, at least, in conclusion should offer critical reflections on what (factually) they have learned of their history; whether this has changed their perceptions of themselves and/or of others in their families; whether they inhabit their identity, across difference, with greater awareness and possibly, comfort
  • Locate reflections in structural underpinnings (political, historical, cultural, etc.), to give context to personal experience
  • A brief reference to class readings, documentaries which resonated with students
Some outcomes

• “I now know who I am” (female Korean American student, who would go on to intern in Congress twice, in 2020 with Speaker Pelosi)

• “It was interesting to learn about our classmates’ lives” (both Asian and non-Asian students, on class discussions, and the short 2-page presentation, fall 2020)

• “I have not made sense of the absurdity of my privilege as an American white man....It is ridiculous that I can go anywhere and feel unafraid....Ridiculous that there are not bombs whizzing above my head...ridiculous that I can write this essay and say that I have never had to think what being an American meant because no one ever questioned my status....I am not exceptional. I am lucky.” (A white, non-Asian male student, fall 2020)
A Korean American female student concludes:

“By reading so many personal narratives on...racial and cultural issues that I similarly experienced, I feel more comfortable in my Korean culture. I finally feel that I have a community I can identify with, especially here in the U.S....I felt I had to create an identity that conformed into “American ideals.”....All this did was make me feel like neither the world nor my family wanted me....I can utilize my experience [of gendered conflict in her family] to grow....My culture raised me; it is the foundation of whom I am. The way I choose to perceive my own experiences based on my own culture is my world and mine only.” (fall 2020)