Now I See What You Mean: Learning from Asian American Literature

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Part One: Focusing Thoughts

Should we read ethnic literature — in particular, Asian American literature — differently from the way we read other American literature?

Although I pose this as a fundamental question, I see it as far from a simple one. The very category *Asian American literature* seems to cordon off a particular body of texts as distinct and, in some sense, discrete. Yet examining the construct of *Asian American* — a category invented in the United States that lumps together people from extremely disparate nations, cultures, language groups, and religions, as well as their descendents unto the umpteenth generation — reveals how ambiguous and artificial this category can be. With a post-structuralist sensibility, one might argue that the question itself is hopelessly flawed by the essentialist assumption that texts are linked by the continent on which their authors, or more often their authors' forbears, were born. But then one might respond to this argument with the "just-when" counterargument: we must be suspicious of post-structuralist and post-modernist critiques of essentialism that appear just when women and minorities seize on identity politics to access voice and power.[1]

I begin with this question, and with a short overview of how fraught some possible answers to it are, to argue for the importance of dwelling in the difficulty of the question itself. In considering whether Asian American literature is distinct, it is productive to consider read each text in relation to other literary works, both those within the category of Asian American literature and those outside of the category.[2]

And, of course, I ask and attempt to answer the question of how we should read Asian American literature only as a precursor to a corollary question: how should we teach Asian American literature?

Teachers of ethnic literature regularly instruct our students to read on multiple levels. We direct our students in the close reading practices that help them understand and analyze specific texts. At the same time, we demonstrate how to contextualize readings, emphasizing an individual text's place in the larger body of Asian American literature, its connection to literary movements that extend beyond Asian American literature, its place in the political and historical context in which it was produced, and its attempt to represent one or more political and historical situations. To some extent, any literature course instructs students to read with such multiple goals, but the ability to read a text from multiple perspectives, for multiple purposes, is integral to teachers and students of ethnic literature. As Donald Goellnicht observes, Asian American literature exemplifies the fact that "no text exists entirely within a single discourse system, but operates within and between a variety of discourses that overlap and intersect."[3] The question of how to teach Asian American literature has attracted particular attention because, like women's studies and other ethnic studies, Asian American studies has always emphasized the importance of teaching as a means to transform students' understandings of themselves and of U.S. society. As a result, educators continuously innovate new pedagogies within the field.[4]

Explorations of how to teach Asian American literature — or any subject — have become more complicated but ultimately richer and more productive with the advent of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). As a field, SoTL is intended to move teachers from an instinctive approach to pedagogy — that pleasantly familiar feeling of "I think things went well in class today, and I think I know why," or the unpleasant sense that "things went pretty awfully in class today, and I may or may not know why" — to a documented and replicable understanding of what specific practices enhance student learning. Even for faculty at institutions that emphasize teaching, however, there may be a certain risk to pursuing SoTL.

SoTL requires a commitment of time and resources that faculty could otherwise devote to traditional disciplinary scholarship — which is what counts most (and often solely) in job searches, tenure review, and promotion. Outside of departments of education, discussions of pedagogy may even be judged as admissions of incompetence, given the assumption that faculty should already know how to teach well.

Despite these potential drawbacks, increasing numbers of instructors — and institutions, foundations, and journals — have recognized that the "scholarship" aspect of SoTL offers a powerful new way to view teaching. As Randy Bass notes,

> In scholarship and research, having a "problem" is at the heart of the investigative process; it is the compound of the generative questions around which all creative and productive activity revolves. But in one's teaching, a "problem" is something you don't want to have, and if you have one, you probably want to fix it.[5]

Within SoTL, the first step isn't admitting you have a teaching problem. The first step is conceptualizing "teaching practice, and the evidence of student learning, as problems to be investigated, analyzed, represented, and debated."[6]

The first time I taught "Fictions of Asian America" at Reed College, I finished the term feeling like I had encountered (perhaps even engendered) a range of problems. As the double entendre of the course title suggests, I had intended to introduce students to a range of Asian American novels and short stories while simultaneously leading them to explore what meanings have been ascribed to the concept of "Asian American." Course papers and subsequent student thesis projects indicated that by the end of the term, a substantial number of students demonstrated a strong or at least adequate ability to analyze literary texts. But based on classroom discussions and encounters with students in office hours, it was clear that the course was not as successful in terms of the larger goals I had set.

In retrospect, I identified a number of factors that limited the effectiveness of the course. Reed organizes its English department offerings into two categories: lower division introduction to genre courses open to all sophomores, juniors, and seniors (and taken both by intended English majors and by other students fulfilling GE requirements), and upper division courses open only to students who have already taken a prerequisite number of lower division courses in the department (and taken almost entirely by juniors and seniors majoring in English or a foreign literature). Because I wanted this course — the *only* course in Asian American studies at the college — to be open to interested students across departments, I chose to offer it as a lower-division course. But trying to balance three simultaneous goals of introducing non-majors to the study of literature, imparting to English majors the understanding of fiction as a genre they would need to pass the department's rigorous junior qualifying exam, and introducing all students to Asian American studies proved overwhelming. Reed students are generally very confident in the classroom, and this confidence seemed to inhibit rather than facilitate learning, because a number of students (both white and Asian American) were resistant to addressing the complex contexts through which Asian American literature is produced and which are represented in the texts.

In addition, I was unprepared for how deep and difficult the transformations were that I as the instructor needed to make for the course. I had previously taught Asian American texts in many courses at UCLA, where the student population had a far deeper exposure to multiculturalism— in their own lives as well as in their schoolwork. Indeed, I decided not to assign Maxine Hong Kingston's <u>The Woman Warrior</u> in "Fictions of Asian America," because it seemed nearly all of my UCLA students had read the text in high school; I realized partway through the course that none of my Reed students had even heard of it. The students' lack of

prior exposure to Asian American literature was particularly ironic in light of one other shortcoming in the course: because I was so conscious of this being the sole Asian American studies course available to students, and because I wanted to emphasize the diversity of Asian Americans, I tried to introduce as many texts as I possibly could during the semester. Ignoring what I already knew — that the more you ask students to read, the less you can do with each reading — I assigned fifteen short stories and six novels, leaving little time for contextualizing each text. And then there was the format of the course itself: Reed classes are small and generally conducted as seminars. Coming from a large public institution, that initially seemed like a real advantage compared to the huge lecture courses I had been teaching. In practice, however, seminars present a real challenge when students lack basic content knowledge. Short of lecturing, which Reed students usually resent, I wasn't sure how to address the gross deficits I was discovering in even my most motivated and well-meaning students' understandings of the historical and cultural contexts for the literature they read.

As unhappy as I was with the outcome of the course, I was already committed to teaching it again the following year as part of Reed's Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program. Although MALS students all have undergraduate degrees and presumably are working at the more advanced Master's level, most students in the program have been out of school for many years and feel very unfamiliar with academic reading and writing practices. Moreover, because the MALS course offerings are so eclectic, it was far less likely that these students would have any prior background in literary studies than was the case even in a lower-division undergraduate course. Keenly aware of the need to rethink the course before teaching it again, I decided to make "Fictions of Asian America" the focus of my research for the Visible Knowledge Project (VKP).

Part Two: Looking at Student Learning

When I attended the 2002 VKP Summer Institute, I was asked to create a preliminary digital poster to define my "researchable problem." Developing the poster required me to answer three questions: What course would I use for my investigation? What did I want to measure and achieve? What specific aspect of student learning would I focus on? I had already answered the first question. In response to the second question, I wrote:

> How do students whose "introductory course" is a seminar learn about the cultural and historical contexts for the texts they are reading? Although it is certainly a luxury — for faculty as well as students — to meet in small classes rather than large lectures, because our students have no lecture courses in literary studies, it is very difficult to ensure they are exposed to the "basics" of literary studies, and to the necessary background for any given course topic.

As for the third question, I considered some of the digital interventions I had used in previous courses: online discussion boards, student web projects, etc. But none of these seemed likely to address both what I needed to know about my students and what they needed to know about the course materials in order to improve each class meeting and the course as a whole.

During a working group meeting at the Summer Institute, David Jaffee presented preliminary findings from the SoTL research project he had undertaken during the previous year. Jaffee wanted to integrate visual materials into an upper division history course at City College of New York, so he created a number of assignments in which students analyzed photographs and paintings. The initial exercise was given at the beginning of the term, and as VKPers listened to his presentation, we discussed the potential usefulness of asking students to return to the same images later in the course, as a measure of how their visual literacy skills had changed. Jaffee noted that after incorporating the visual assignments, he realized he "was less interested in the goal of 'getting the students to think visually' than . . . in 'getting the students to think visually

as historians,'" which meant he needed to ensure that goal was more "explicitly built into the course since the 'visual turn' can be misinterpreted by students as encouragement to move away from historical context."[7] Jaffee's observations functioned as a mirror that let me view my own course more clearly. I, too, wanted to encourage disciplinary thinking in my literature class, while making students aware of the importance of historical contexts. And while thinking visually was not integral to "Fictions of Asian America," I did want students to develop critical thinking skills that would shape their readings of all representations of Asian Americans, regardless of media or creator. So I adapted Jaffee's intervention, creating an initial analytic activity to be undertaken on the first day of class, with a similar follow-up activity to be administered at the end of the course.

On the first day of the new iteration of "Fictions of Asian America," I gave a short course introduction and a brief description of my involvement in VKP. Then I asked students to turn to the classroom computers, where they opened a diagnostic exercise I had posted to the course website as a PowerPoint slideshow. The first slide reiterated the information I had just shared with students:

> Your professor has designed this exercise as a means to assess your current understanding of topics and themes related to this course. It is not a graded assignment, nor is it a predictor of how well you are expected to do in the course. It is intended to help the professor understand how best to promote and document student learning.

Toggling between the slideshow and a word processing document, students wrote responses to a series of writing prompts that appeared on the subsequent slides:

> Define "Asian American"
>
> What are some of the common features, themes, and concerns in Asian American literature?
>
> List some of the common stereotypes people in the United States hold about Asians and Asian Americans

Write a caption for this picture [a magazine ad in which the phrase "Eastern Classic" is written across an image of a woman dressed as a geisha wearing Reebok sneakers]

List some important dates and/or events in Asian American history

Write a one-paragraph analysis of this picture [the same Reebok ad]

Does analyzing Asian American literature require different skills and approaches than studying other American literature?

Write a caption for this picture [a photograph of a young white man pointing to a sign reading "American Farmer – Japs or Hindus not wanted"]

List as many Asian nations as you can

Write a one-paragraph analysis of this photograph [the same photograph of the young white man]

From where have you gotten your knowledge of Asian American literature, culture, and history?

Compare the three illustrations of "Ah Sin" [see figures 1-3]

Write a caption for this photograph [a photograph of a young girl awaiting travel as part of the internment of Japanese Americans]

Write a one-paragraph analysis of this photograph [the same photograph of the young girl]

AH SIN WAS HIS NAME.

Figure 1

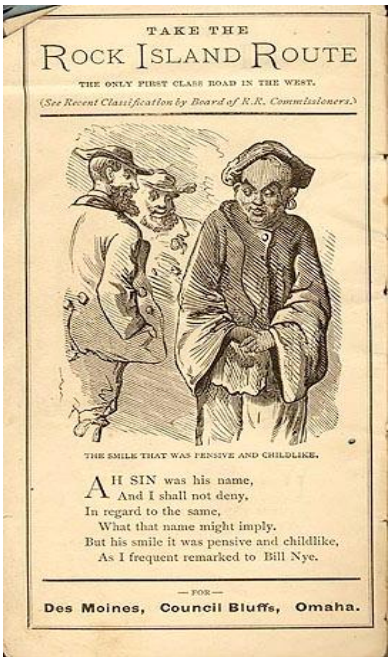

Figure 2

Figure 3[8]

This exercise served a number of useful functions, some of which I expected and some of which I did not. It gave me evidence both of students' factual knowledge and of the levels of their writing skills. The first prompt yielded a range of answers, from the succinct:

> P: An Asian-American is a person of Asian decent (at least one parent) who lives in America.[9]

to responses qualified by language indicating the students were unsure they had anything more to offer than a personal opinion (italics highlighting the qualifying language are my addition):

> J: "Asian American" is someone *I would describe* has having ethnic roots in an Asian country but living in America
>
> K: To be Asian American is either to have immigrated to the United States from an Asian country or to have a biological parent who has immigrated to the US. Perhaps the definition may be extended to grandchildren of the original immigrant also, but at some point, perhaps three generations or so here, a family would just be defined as American, *or at least I would define them that way*.
>
> S: People living in the U.S. or with a substantial connection to the U.S. who are from countries that are considered Asian countries. *I don't have much of sense* of how much reality there is to the idea of Asia and whether it is comparable to *the idea I have of* Europe. *I don't think* that there is a linguistic definition of "Asian American" since for many people considered "asian americans" English is their primarly language. *I think* that much of the idea arises out of racial politics and the ideal of racial identity as a force in American politics.

The answers indicate a range of approaches for classifying people as "Asian American": geographic; ethnic; biological/genealogical; linguistic; racial; political. Students frequently drew on more than one approach, and some students seemed to forego consistency in the approaches they had taken. Student K specifically invokes a "biological" connection to Asia yet suggests that after "three generations" that connection ceases to matter, presumably because national or social categories of identity supersede it. As the opening paragraphs of this article suggest, I want students to understand how constructed, heterogeneous, and even inconsistent the category "Asian American" can be. The students' own definitions suggest as much — but until I had a

firm understanding of how students were defining this category, I lacked the information to help them interrogate the assumptions underlying their individual definitions.

Prompts such as "List some important dates and/or events in Asian American history" and "List as many Asian nations as you can" gave me insight into students' factual knowledge. As I anticipated, all of the students were able to write something in response to both these prompts, though all the responses missed some part of the answer. A number of responses included factual errors, and in some cases students expressed a sense of inadequacy, as when student J wrote

> I'm terrible with any dates, let alone Asian American History…UGH
> 1860's – influx of Chinese to America
> 1945ish – War against Japan during WWII
> 1950s – Korean War
> 2000 – Singapore's return to Chinese rule

The exercise revealed more than just students' writing level or knowledge base or even their awareness of their lack of knowledge; it showed me how students made choices about applying what they know. In response to the question posted later in the exercise, "From where have you gotten your knowledge of Asian American literature, culture, and history?" student J wrote, "I have picked up some of my knowledge—and it is sketchy—from my interest in art, calligraphy, gardening…from friends and my Japanese-American brother-in-law (who's parents were interned in Utah during WWII)…from books" (ellipses in the original). Comparing the responses revealed that J didn't include the "personal history" learned from her/his brother-in-law in the response to important dates and events.

The understanding I gained from the opening exercise immediately shaped the course. Examining student responses gave me a sense not only of what each student thought, but also of what the variations were among students — especially important since I needed to make

pedagogical choices both about addressing individual students' needs and about how to draw on and deepen the group's collective understanding, given the seminar format of the course. At the second meeting of the class, the group revisited some of the questions, sharing responses. This afforded an opportunity for each student to contribute what s/he knew while the collective knowledge grew; for example, the students individually had a pretty limited sense of the stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans, but as we talked through possible stereotypes, the list we generated grew longer and more comprehensive. Between the first and second meetings of the class, the students had been assigned to view a video and website and to read secondary sources dealing with constructions of Asian American identity, and the class discussion on the second day afforded them an immediate opportunity to draw on what they had learned from these sources as well as what they had originally brought to the course.[10] Looking at some of the images from the exercise provided opportunities to talk more broadly about modes of representation, and, in the case of figures 1-3, all from the late nineteenth century, to deepen students' historical understanding. I was able to introduce ideas as part of the conversation, making connections to what students contributed rather than cordoning off what I wanted to convey as part of a lecture. Throughout the term, the students and I referred back to questions and images from the exercise as a shared experience on which to base subsequent classroom discussions and other course activities.

The opening activity also provided a baseline diagnostic that provided a measure of student learning when compared to students' understandings at the end of the course. At the close of the semester, students completed a similar analytic exercise. Some questions remained the same, but I also added new questions and changed some of the images students were asked to examine (additions are indicated in bold):

Define "Asian American"

What is the hardest part about defining "Asian American"?

What is the easiest part about defining "Asian American"?

Write a one-paragraph analysis of this photograph [a photograph of a young girl awaiting travel as part of the internment of Japanese Americans]

How has your definition of "Asian American" changed during this course?

Write a caption for this picture [a photograph of a young white man pointing to a sign reading "American Farmer – Japs or Hindus not wanted"]

What are some of the common features, themes, and concerns in Asian American literature?

Write a one-paragraph analysis of this picture [the same photograph of a young white man]

List some of the common stereotypes people in the United States hold about Asians and Asian Americans

Write a caption for this picture [figure 4]

List some important dates and/or events in Asian American history

Write a one-paragraph analysis of this picture [figure 4]

Write a caption for this photograph [a photograph of a man of South Asian ancestry viewed through the locked gates on the outside of a store he occupies]

Does analyzing Asian American literature require different skills and approaches than studying other American literature?

Write a one-paragraph analysis of this picture [same photograph of the Asian American shopkeeper]

Write a one-paragraph analysis of the phrase "Fictions of Asian America"

What was the most educationally useful thing you did as part of this course?

How does this course relate to other courses you have taken or plan to take as a MALS student?

Outside of your future work as a MALS student, how will you draw on what you learned in this course once the semester is over?

The students' responses to the repeated questions had changed in myriad ways. Most of the students now offered more concise and unqualified definitions of "Asian American":

P: An Asian American is one of Asian decent that lives in America.

J: Someone of Asian descent currently residing in America.

> K: Asian Americans are Americans whose family (immediate or ancestral) originated in an Asian country.

A comparison of these responses to those from the opening day activity might suggest that most students had come to articulate a more straightforward, simpler definition of "Asian American," yet student S's longer response evidenced an increased awareness of how different classificatory systems can be invoked to define "Asian American":

> S: A racial category in which a person is identified based on physical characteristics and ethnic identity. Conceptions of Asian Americans have changed based upon immigration patterns. Current conceptions have been shaped by the 1965 changes in immigration law that allowed more professionals to emigrate from Asia. The "American" part refers to living in the U.S. or having U.S. citizenship. The persistent racial nature of the classification is particularly apparent when the term is applied to people whose ancestors emigrated to the U.S. hundreds of years ago.

The responses to the next question on the closing exercise, "What is the hardest part about defining "Asian American"?" indicated that all the students had developed more sophisticated approaches for interrogating the construction of "Asian American" as a category:

> S: There is a relative lack of shared characteristics that unify Asian Americans. Differences in reasons and time periods for immigration, language, political, and religious differences mean that it is hard to pick any common characteristics. Further Asian Americans tend to be identified as having the characteristics of the larger or more prominent ethnic minorities within the group.
>
> P: The hardest part is questioning the point at which one of Asian decent becomes Asian American. Does this happen upon residency? One might argue not. Some are defined by the heritage of their ancestors, where one or both parents are Asian, particularly those who were born in America. Others are defined by where they themselves are from. Another difficult thing to distinguish is the geographical boundary of Asia.
>
> J: Asia is a huge complex continent with a wide variety of cultures, religions, languages, politics and values. Trying to "lump" everyone of Asian descent into a simple definition is the most difficult.
>
> K: The most difficult thing about defining "Asian American" is defining "Asia." The Pacific Rim countries are clearly Asian countries, and India, too. But what about Iran? Kazakstan? Turkey? The labeling of these countries purely for political reasons

> from the perspective of the west is not particularly helpful in a discussion of immigrants to the USA from a given country.

While the weekly reading notes and final papers students wrote for the course documented their development as readers of assigned literary texts, the answer to this question provided evidence they were achieving a broader, more fundamental understanding that would enrich their reading beyond the course assignments. Students were quick to comment on the evolution of their own understanding, and they seemed more comfortable with the idea that there was not a single correct answer to what might have previously seemed like very basic questions. Students now had more facts to report when asked about common stereotypes or important dates and events. Yet they also demonstrated a new awareness that mastery of facts could be complemented by an appreciation of ambiguity, as responses to the prompt, "How has your definition of "Asian American" changed during this course?" indicate:

> S: I think my initial take on Asian American was largely based on media images and tended to ignore the many differences between Asian Americans of different backgrounds. I feel like I have a greater understand of the different histories and other differences that make a grocery list approach to defines Asian Americans unfruitful.
>
> P: I'm not sure my definition has changed, although the geographic inference has expanded considerably. I can say that the depth of my understanding of what it means to be Asian American has increased. I suppose there is an aspect of how Asian American a person is. If I am one quarter French, I don't consider myself French American. However, if someone is one quarter Japanese, I think he is Asian American. Perhaps, once again, it has to do with the exterior looks. I want to categorize based on that, particularly now after the course. I have tried on the face of the Asian American and found it to be more different and more complex than I would have guessed
>
> J: I thought the definition of Asian American would become more clear. Instead, it has broadened and become fuzzier, and I wonder whether it is even a genre at all. I would not have previously included India or Pakistan as Asian, for example.
>
> K: I used to think primarily of Japanese-Americans or Chinese-Americans when I thought of Asian-Americans, but now I think of other groups as well, and also I have a greater appreciation for the immigration patterns from those countries (ie., post-

1965), and what it might feel like to be Asian-American—or, specifically, to be Korean-American or Indian-American. My perspective has been widened.

Despite this increased appreciation of the complexities and contradictions disguised by the seemingly straightforward category "Asian American," students articulated a greater confidence in their own ability to analyze Asian American literature, as a comparison of their opening day and end of the term responses to the prompt "Does analyzing Asian American literature require different skills and approaches than studying other American literature?" reveals:

Student's First Response	Student's Second Response	My Notes on the Change
S: There is a need to grapple with how we arrive at the idea of an Asian American literature and where the idea of "Asian America" comes from. I personally feel that I lack knowledge of the experiences and history of Asian Americas and that I am somehow handicapped in approaching this literature.	I think that there is background knowledge that is important for understanding at least some Asian American literature. This knowledge might not be as generally known as similar background knowledge in other areas of American literature. I guess I would question how much there is a cannon of American literature that could serve as a baseline for evaluating the different skills and approaches to Asian American literature.	Student S began the course emphasizing what s/he didn't know and thus potentially couldn't do as a reader of Asian American literature. By the end of the term, S speaks about what "might not be as generally known," shifting away from her/his own perceived lack of preparation (although seeming still to assume that the reader is outside the culture being represented in the literature). Most significantly, her/his final comment turns the focus of inquiry from Asian American literature to "American literature," indicating s/he has begun to interrogate assumptions that American literature can be easily defined or represents a cohesive, homogenous category.
P: One should consider how this sort of literature represents or resists the Asian American societal norms. I shouldn't think there would be much different from other American literature in analysis	I don't think so. One must understand context, production, history, and readership. Then, in analysis, one must look at the characters, narration, setting, etc	Although student P's overall answer doesn't change — in both cases s/he doesn't think a different approach is needed — the second answer evidences a greater understanding of what a

or approach. One must consider historical implications, etc.		critical reading of literature entails, as P lists the things one should "understand" and "look at" when reading any literature.
K: No. But it helps if we look at Asian American literature with knowledge of that culture.	I'm not convinced that the study of Asian-American literature requires unique approaches or skills, but I am convinced that a basic understanding of the history of immigration from Asian countries is helpful, as was increased awareness about what it feels like to be part of the minority population within a culture. (The link we were assigned—Peggy Macintosh's article on white privilege—was especially helpful.)	Student K begins with a certainty that the skills and approaches don't differ, yet s/he indicates that some contextual cultural knowledge is helpful. At the end of the term, K still believes that one might use similar approaches and skills. Significantly, the qualifier here indicates not only the value of factual knowledge (the history of immigration) but also an appreciation of a more thematic component, what it feels like to be a minority (something that K, a white student, had not considered prior to the course). The response confirmed the value of assigning materials beyond Asian American fiction to deepen students' analyses of literature — and of race more broadly.

As useful as the exercises were, I would revise them before administering them again, in particular rethinking my inclusion of visual images. I originally included images because the exercise itself was inspired by Jaffee's assignment, which focused solely on visual images. And the images didn't seem irrelevant to some of my larger course goals: I wanted to tie students' reading of literary texts to a broader understanding of representations of Asian Americans. I hoped the images would underscore for students how constructed ideas about Asian American identity — those other "fictions of Asian America" implied in the double entendre of the course

title — are articulated and circulated in American culture. Ultimately, though, the prompts about visual images seem to diverge from the other types of questions students were asked, and I think it would be more efficacious introduce the visual materials outside this exercise; the class did a close reading of figures 1-3 during the second day of the course, and those and other images could be presented then and throughout the term. During the analytic exercise itself, I might instead ask for one-paragraph analyses of short excerpts of literary texts, because having samples of students' analytic writing at the beginning of the course was useful.

Despite my belief that this aspect of the analytic exercises should be refined, the students' responses to the prompts about visual images provided valuable evidence of their thinking. In the final exercise, students were asked to write a caption for a cartoon they had not previously been shown (see figure 4).

Figure 4[11]

Student P wrote:

> (This picture is incongruent with my understanding of the Chinese railroad laborers. Perhaps there were exceptions or the sketch was satirical.) Largely financed by Asian investors, the building of the Pacific Railroad was a success and elevated the status of some Asian Americans who participated, enough to make courting a white American woman possible.

The third sentence reflects a student answering a question without enough information — and, not surprisingly, getting the answer wrong. But the first two sentences indicate that the student, aware that the answer is likely incorrect, is struggling over how to proceed: P knows what

background information s/he brings to the image, which s/he labels "my understanding of the Chinese railroad laborers" and s/he recognizes that the image doesn't match that understanding, labeling it "incongruent." P even offers possible explanations for what s/he realizes are discrepancies between what s/he has already learned about Chinese railroad laborers and what seems to be suggested by this new evidence: "Perhaps there were exceptions or the sketch was satirical." By choosing to include the prefatory parenthetical remark, the student made her/his reasoning process visible to me. At a later point in the exercise, the image appears again, and the prompt asks for a one-paragraph analysis rather than a caption. In response, P asserts her/his own interpretation more confidently:

> The Chinese laborers who built the Pacific Railroad came in full force, bringing with them Chinese culture, exotic in fashion and religion. The sketch shows a white woman being courted by a Chinese man who, aside from being dressed in Chinese garments, is acting like a white man. He demonstrates manners, financial wealth, and confidence. Given that the Chinese laborers were treated as subordinates at that time, the sketch must be satirical. The Church of St. Confucius is also a joke, and play on words. Perhaps at the time the sketch was published, there was fear that the Chinese laborers would in fact naturalize and become part of the white American culture. That would explain why a white male artist would be threatened enough to draw the sketch. Or, perhaps, it was more of a degrading racist joke.

Student P here draws on larger knowledge ("Given that the Chinese laborers were treated as subordinates at that time") to draw a more definite conclusion ("the sketch must be satirical"). S/he then reads specific details of the picture as evidence to support that conclusion ("The Church of St. Confucius is also a joke, and play on words"). P even hypothesizes about the creation of the image ("Perhaps at the time the sketch was published, there was fear that the Chinese laborers would in fact naturalize and become part of the white American culture. That would explain why a white male artist would be threatened enough to draw the sketch. Or, perhaps, it was more of a degrading racist joke"), thereby answering P's own concern over what had seemed so "incongruent" when s/he initially encountered the image.

The opening analytic exercise made visible a great deal about what knowledge, assumptions, and skills students were bringing to the course, and the closing exercise provided an aperture for me to view changes that developed during the term. But the exercises also served an important function for the students themselves. How Students Learn, a study by the National Research Council, highlights three elements as integral to successful educational experiences: engaging preconceptions, offering conceptual frameworks, and providing metacognitive involvement. First, "students come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information, or they may learn them for purposes of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom." Second, students can only develop competency when they have both factual knowledge and conceptual frameworks for organizing, retrieving, and applying that knowledge. Third, students are most successful in learning situations that apply "a 'metacognitive' approach to instruction," allowing students "to take control of their own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them."[12] Beginning the course with the analytic exercise underscored how crucial it was for students and for me to recognize students' preconceptions. While in the first iteration of the course, I had plunged students immediately into examining literary texts, in the second iteration, the analytic exercise created a lens for students to regard a range of conceptual frameworks to which we returned throughout the term, as their factual knowledge and their familiarity with literary texts grew. And the exercise initiated a metacognitive component for the course by prompting students to think about their own learning.

Indeed, much of the exercise engaged these three elements simultaneously. For example, in posing the question, "From where have you gotten your knowledge of Asian American

literature, culture, and history?" I gained a better understanding of my students' preconceptions, while students thought about what they would be bringing to the assigned texts and why. I intended for students to keep thinking about their responses to these types of prompts throughout the course, something that was reinforced whenever I or a student referenced the analytic exercise later in the term. In this sense, the opening analytic exercise served as a form of schema activation, an activity "designed to activate relevant knowledge in students' memory prior to encountering new, to-be-learned information."[13]

Implementing the exercises also enabled me to develop other opportunities for students' metacognitive activities. A few weeks into the term, I asked students to write a short reflection on the first analytic exercise. In responding, students again considered their own learning processes, and their answers confirmed that the opening exercise had provided an important frame for the course material:

> J: I chose the Asian Lit class because I felt that I had much to learn. The test was a wonderful way for me to see specifically how much there was for me to understand about Asian culture, immigration to America, racial discrimination. The questions themselves actually helped me get my head around the complexity of the ideas and issues that have come up in our readings.
>
> P: [. . .] I couldn't help but wonder at the time of the exercise if you would be curious of my sources, newspaper, fiction, street talk, etc. Because, frankly, at that time I was questioning my sources. How do I know this? Is it true? Have fiction novels become my educator, and therefore do I trust the information I was given? If nothing else, it has made me want to gain better evidence, so I can understand the problems of being Asian American, and other cultures as well. Second, there was a bit of a creative aspect, well, call it an interpretive aspect. Looking at photos evokes emotions; they are an art form. What a viewer chooses to see is very personal. I decided to let that fly, rather than get it right. So, suddenly I was making decisions about my own interpretations. I was going with the gut feeling. Was I already empathizing with the Asian American with my bleeding heart or was I being my white self? Heck, my ability to see things from different angles often leaves me in a snare. Do I want to get the answer right, or do I want to transmit my interpretation, right or wrong? And if there is no right or wrong, what is my evidence? I think I did not do to well here. [. . .] in spite of what may sound like complaints (they are not), I think the exercise is very effective. It is a great way for me to learn. The questions and images linger

> long beyond their obvious lifespans. I guess this is part of what I appreciate about Reed, and my own personal philosophy. Live the questions.[14]

Although these responses confirmed my belief that students were reflecting on their own thinking, student K made me aware that while J and P found the exercise engaging, other students could be put off by it:

> The analytical exercise on the first day of class was interesting and thought provoking. At first I thought it was going OK, but by the end of the hour I felt like I knew NOTHING about the topic. In retrospect, I would like the first class to be more talking and less computer time, however that might be managed. Otherwise, I really thought it got us thinking about Asian American stereotypes in a way that was helpful.

I regretted that despite the reassurances I had thought I made both in the verbal introduction I gave on the first day and on the introductory slide in the exercise, student K felt inadequate for not knowing all the answers. K was an especially motivated and talented student, and I suspect s/he was responding to prior expectations about her/his ability to master course material easily. As I noted earlier, I designed the exercise in part out of my frustration with students enrolled in the course the previous year, some of whom were so confident in their own abilities that they refused to believe they needed to learn more about the contexts that were relevant for understanding Asian American literature. But K's reflection suggested I might have inadvertently created the opposite problem: now there were students who felt so overwhelmed by what they did not know that they believed they were inadequate to the task of encountering new literature. After reading this reflection, I was able to address K's concerns directly, offering repeated reassurances about the learning process. Asking for student reflections throughout the term can thus increase both students' metacognitive engagement and instructors' opportunities to intervene thoughtfully to enrich learning.

Part Three: Visualizing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Whenever I think about the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as a field, I'm always reminded of the old Barbara Mandrell song, "I Was Country, When Country Wasn't Cool." Like many dedicated educators, I was doing SoTL not only before it was cool (indeed, as I suggested above, to many search committees and tenure and promotion committees, it's still not cool) — I was doing SoTL before I really knew that such a field existed. I was thinking about teaching, wondering how I could be sure students were learning, stumbling across books about pedagogy, discovering new approaches to increase student engagement and success, and sharing what I accomplished with colleagues through informal discussions, conference presentations, and a published article. I knew all this was important — I just didn't know there was a name for it, and that the name referred to a growing evidence-based movement across academic disciplines. When Randy Bass invited me to join the Visible Knowledge Project, I was delighted to discover an enthusiastic community of practitioners who supported each other's innovations and a body of scholarship to guide my teaching. As VKP comes to an end, I want to reflect on what involvement in this five-year project has made visible to me.

First and foremost, participation in the VKP community enabled me to envision new teaching possibilities. As my discussion of the development of the analytic exercise suggests, even as VKPers provided feedback to one another on our individual research projects, we also adapted each other's teaching practices for our own classrooms. I had already pioneered course uses of ListServs, electronic discussion boards, and student-designed web projects, but hearing about what VKP colleagues were doing in their classes motivated me to keep innovating. This mutual inspiration among participants occurred on the level of specific interventions developed to promote and document student learning, as well as overall course topics and designs. Just as

valuable as the concrete ideas that each of us might take back to our classrooms was the sense of rejuvenation that came from having a regular venue for intense conversations about teaching.

The camaraderie of VKP was especially important to me because the project launched as I was moving from UCLA to Reed. Having a constant source of support as I adapted to a new campus was extremely helpful, particularly given the extreme differences between the needs of students at the large, diverse public university and the small, predominantly white and wealthy private liberal arts college.[15] VKP brought together professors from a wide range of schools, and during the course of the project it became increasingly clear how much there is to be gained from looking at learning across institutions. In a working group discussion at the 2004 Summer Institute, I collaborated with VKP participants to develop a set of common questions raised in our SoTL research:

- What prior skills, experience, and information contribute to how students read? What course activities can reveal and shape students' reading processes, and how? How does focusing on reading as a course component facilitate larger intellectual goals?
- How do we make students aware that reading is a complex and multiple activity?
- How do we heighten a sense of intertextuality and contextuality in our students?
- What happens when students are 'reading' multiple kinds of texts (different media, genre, time periods)?
- How can we make the skills, knowledge, practice in your course become the prior knowledge for the students' future learning, with the student having a critical sense of when to use those tools appropriately?

Articulating these common questions allowed me to view my own project more clearly, as I wrote in my notes at the time: "I thought my project was about the *importance* of contextual readings, but it's about the *process* of contextual reading."

Working with VKP colleagues at two-year and four-year institutions across the nation provided a crucial opportunity for defining teaching goals that apply to all learners. My 2004

Summer Institute working group included Arthur Lau, who teaches developmental reading courses at La Guardia Community College, Sharona Levy, who teaches developmental reading courses at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, and Patricia O'Connor, who teaches literature courses at Georgetown University. In my notes on our discussions, I remarked on the commonalities that could be drawn across our very different teaching contexts:

> I think we raised really interesting questions about how to track, understand, and shape students' reading practices, particularly the productive dissonance (which we discussed last year too) between my experience and Arthur's (with echoes in Patricia's and Sharona's and other folks' as well) over the confident students I taught and the more tentative ones he teaches. The idea of needing both to recognize one's prior knowledge and one's prior ignorance AND to recognize one's habitual reading strategies while encountering new reading strategies, is quite a trick. [. . .] At some point yesterday I said we also need to make clear "how focusing on reading as a course component facilitates larger intellectual goals." That is, this is not merely remedial but integral to any kind of intellectual development for any student in any course, and to developing strategies and practices that can be applied outside the classroom and the college as well as inside a particular course. This distinction underscores the importance and applicability of the work for other teachers, across fields and disciplines and institutions.

Levy, O'Connor, and I worked with Martha Pallante of Youngstown State University to create a matrix of what we meant by "contextual readings" (figure 5). As we generated questions that applied across our SoTL projects, we simultaneously sharpened the questions we would each ask in our individual research and developed a tool that can now be used by educators outside of VKP.

What do we mean by reading?	**What are the contexts for reading (and why do they matter?)**	**How do we help students develop critical reading?**
What is: • How do we read different kinds of texts? • How do novices and experts read? • How is reading a complex, critical, diverse practice?	What is: • How does the reader's context (time, culture, background, course, other texts read, individual vs. group) affect how we read? • How does the context in which the text was created affect the way the text is read (historical period, medium of the text, original	What is: • What usually happens in classrooms? • Where do students begin in their reading practices?

	intent) etc.?	
What works: • What is "good" critical reading? • What is effective reading?	What works: • How do students and instructors see the individual contexts in which students read? • What contexts best foster good critical reading? • How can we heighten our students' understanding of a text's context and connections to other texts, in order to strengthen their reading strategies?	What works: • What strategies effectively improve students' reading?
What's possible: • Where would we look to find out how students read? • How will the meaning of reading change as new media emerge?	What's possible: • How does technology create effective contexts for deepening reading practices? • How do new contexts change the way we and our students read? • How do students transfer the strategies, knowledges, practices gained in our courses to later courses and to experiences outside school? • How do students gain a critical sense of when to use new strategies productively (depending on discipline, type of texts, etc.)?	What's possible: • How could we use new media tools to help students develop their reading ability? • How could we use innovative approaches to foster good reading?

Figure 5

As productive as it was to think about commonalities across projects, it was also incredibly useful to have so many wonderful colleagues focus attention on my research project specifically. Too often, academics resign themselves to believing that our goal should be to repeat courses as often as possible, so that we can put as few hours as possible into preparing classes in any given term. As overwhelming as it can seem to envision teaching as a constant process of innovation and improvement, SoTL communities such as VKP enable faculty to view the hours devoted to rethinking and revising our teaching practices as equal in excitement and importance to the hours spent on our disciplinary research. During Summer and Winter Institutes and through

conference calls and emails, VKP colleagues listened closely to my ideas and experiences, offering sage suggestions and provocative questions that continued to challenge my thinking long after I had finished teaching the second version of Fictions of Asian America.

Indeed, in reflecting on my SoTL research, I realize how much of my own process of discovery continued once the course I was researching ended. As I taught the class and collected evidence for my research, I often still hovered at the level of the instinctive. I found support for my hunches about student learning after the fact, as I read more deeply in SoTL sources while analyzing my evidence. As I presented my work at a Reed faculty colloquium and at an Asian American studies conference, I recognized that some of the most productive aspects of implementing the analytic exercises were ones I had not intentionally planned. Most notably, I created the analytic exercises without considering the effect of using an assessment tool that was separate from the graded course assignments. In retrospect, I would argue that these ungraded exercises allowed students to demonstrate more comfortably what they didn't know or understand. As my analysis of student responses in section two of this essay indicates, students were openly struggling with their belief that they should know the right answer, and a graded assignment would have made them more likely to attempt only an articulation of a right answer rather than a recording of their struggles.

This opportunity to contemplate what they did not know marked the most significant difference between the students' experience in the first and second iterations of the course. Being required to produce more than just graded weekly reading responses and term papers underscored for students that there was more for them to do as readers of Asian American literature than just come up with 'right answers' in the form of well articulated arguments about particular literary texts. This seeming benefit of the exercises was confirmed by my subsequent

reading of SoTL scholarship:

> Formative assessments—ongoing assessments designed to make students' thinking visible to both teachers and students—are essential. Assessments are a central feature of both a learner-centered and a knowledge-centered classroom. They permit the teacher to grasp students' preconceptions, which is critical to working with and building on those notions. Once the knowledge to be learned is well defined, assessment is required to monitor student progress (in mastering concepts as well as factual information), to understand where students are in the developmental path from informal to formal thinking, and to design instruction that is responsive to student progress.
>
> An important feature of the assessment-centered classroom is assessment that supports learning by providing students with opportunities to revise and improve their thinking. Such assessments help students see their own progress over time and point to problems that need to be addressed in instruction. They may be quite informal.[16]

My VKP research not only made aspects of students' experience visible to me, it also required a level of reflection that made my own experience more visible. During the course of writing this article, I have referred back to notes I took throughout the five years I participated in VKP. As the examples cited above indicate, these notes reflect the evolution of my own thinking about teaching and learning. Ultimately, undertaking this SoTL research, particularly within the supportive community of VKP, allowed me to be both a better teacher and a more successful learner. The countless hours spent on this project might well be viewed as my own immersion in the three key steps outlined in How Students Learned. First, I came to the project with my own preconceptions about teaching and learning, which were immediately engaged through activities and discussions at the VKP launch meeting. Second, over the course of the project, I acquired a number of conceptual frameworks for thinking about student learning, which provided the necessary structure for analyzing the specific evidence I gathered from my students. Finally, the reflections on teaching and learning I made throughout the past five years, culminating in this article, have served as my own metacognitive practice, concomitantly documenting and deepening my own SoTL learning process.

Part Four: Double Vision

In the spirit of the Visible Knowledge Project, I have invoked visual metaphors throughout this essay to describe what my students and I did and learned as a result of this SoTL project. The title "Now I See What You Mean: Learning from Asian American Literature" is, like the course title "Fictions of Asian American," intended to convey multiple meanings. On one level, the analytic exercises I described allowed me to see how students made meaning, as they articulated their knowledge, their skills, and, importantly, the processes through which they engaged their own understanding and confronted their own doubts as they responded to the series of prompts. On another level, the exercise enabled students to see what I meant by contextual readings, guiding them to a type of reading I had intended but never sufficiently articulated for the students in the earlier version of the course. In reviewing students' responses to the closing exercise, I wondered if perhaps this guidance had been too heavy handed; was I guilty of that great educational crime, teaching to the test? Ultimately, I believe I was teaching to the test — but in the best way possible, by undertaking the "backward design" advocated by Grant Wiggings and Jay McTighe. Having identified intended outcomes for my students and my course, I created the analytic exercises as learning experiences to produce those outcomes, and to yield evidence of how the outcomes were, or weren't, being met.[17] Students integrated the underlying course goals into their own metacognitive and reflective practices from the first meeting of the class, so that we shared an understanding of what was meant by reading Asian American literature well.[18]

Even as my students were, as my title suggests, learning from Asian American literature, so was I. I might have undertaken a project on how to teach contextual reading and what

learning activities are effective for seminar-style instruction in any course, and I do intend to adapt the analytic exercises for classes on other topics. But the deep questions I used to open this essay indicate why this course was especially rich for developing this sort of intervention. The complexities of understanding Asian American literature in particular as a constructed genre (and my own sense of having failed to engage those complexities in the previous iteration of the course) helped me see how much I needed to convey to students to build their expertise for engaging with the assigned texts. In a final metacognitive reflection on my own learning, I would reiterate what the third section of this essay demonstrates: I came to see what SoTL means — and just how meaningful it can be — particularly clearly as a result of undertaking my research within the collaborative community afforded by VKP. And that inquiry has made all the difference.[19]

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[1] For a discussion of how readings of Asian American literature may be shaped by the consideration of topics such as Asian American heterogeneity versus panethnicity; transnationality; and intersections of gender, class, sexuality, generation, geography, and ethnicity, see King-Kok Cheung, "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies," in An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature, edited by King-Kok Cheung (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1-36. For a critique of post-structuralist anti-essentialism, see Nancy, Hartsock,"Foucault on power: A theory for women? " in Feminism/ Postmodernism, edited by Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 157-175.

[2] For example, a critical reading of Maxine Hong Kingston's novel Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) might focus both on the way the novel responds to the plays and essays written by Frank Chin, a self-appointed founding father of the Asian American literary canon, and the way the novel engages Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

[3] Donald C. Goellnicht, "Asian American Literature as Theory," in Cheung, Interethnic Companion,

[4] Kenyon S. Chan, "Rethinking the Asian American Studies Project: Bridging the Divide Between 'Campus' and 'Community,'" Journal of Asian American Studies 3.1 (2000); John M. Liu and Gary Y. Okihiro "Introduction" Journal of Asian American Studies 3.1 (2000); Melinda de Jesús, "Integrating New Media Technology and Asian American Studies," Works and Days 31/32 (1998); Lois Leveen, "Think Link: A New Media Pedagogy for Ethnic Studies," Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Pedagogy and Scholarship 14.1 (2003).

[5] Randy Bass, "The Scholarship of Teaching: What's the Problem?" Inventio: Creative Thinking about Learning and Teaching 1.1 (1999), available online at http://www.doiiit.gmu.edu/Archives/feb98/rbass.htm

[6] Bass, "Scholarship."
[7] David Jaffee, "Visualizing History," VKP Poster Tool, available online at http://lumen.georgetown.edu/projects/posterTool/index.cfm?fuseaction=poster.display&posterid=167
[8] Figures 1-3 are all illustrations from editions of Bret Harte's poem, "Plain Language from Truthful James," as it was published under the title, "The Heathen Chinee." Figure 1 was published in 1871 by James R. Osgood & Company of Boston; Figure 2 was published in 1870 by Western News Company of Chicago; Figure 3 was published in 1872 by the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad. The full illustrations for all three editions are available online at http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/roughingit/map/chiharte.html.
[9] Throughout this article, student responses appear exactly as they were submitted. Spelling errors, grammatical errors, and typos are retained from the originals.
[10] Between the first and second meetings of the course, the students viewed Loni Ding's documentary Ancestors in the American, Part 1 and visited Racist Love, a website designed by students for a course I taught at UCLA in 1999 (available online at http://loisleveen.com/digitalportfolio/justintiffany_final/index.htm). They also read excerpts from Robert G. Lee, Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1999) and Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989).
[11] The image originally appeared in Harper's Weekly on June 12, 1869; students were not given this bibliographic information during the exercise. The image is available online at http://immigrants.harpweek.com/ChineseAmericans/Illustrations/018PacificRailroadCompleteMainBI.htm.
[12] National Research Council, How Students Learn: History in the Classroom, edited by M. S. Donovan and J. D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005).
[13] John A. Glover, Royce R. Ronning, and Roger H. Bruning, Cognitive Psychology for Teachers (New York: MacMillan, 1990) 251.
[14] Bracketed ellipses indicate my editing down of Student P's response, which in this instance was rather lengthy. Elsewhere in this article, students' responses are provided in their entirety.
[15]Enrolling between 1300 and 1350 undergraduates and 20 to 30 MALS students, Reed is small even compared to many liberal arts colleges — and certainly compared to UCLA, with its nearly 26,000 undergraduates and 13,000 graduate students.
[16] National Research Council, 16.
[17] Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, Understanding by Design (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design, 1998).
[18] It might be worth noting that the students' course evaluations for the second iteration of the course were significantly higher than for the first iteration. Of course, one of the open secrets of academia is that course evaluations tell us very little about when good teaching (that is, teaching that transforms students' lasting conceptual understanding and factual knowledge) happens, let alone how it happens. In this instance, though, the change in course evaluations reassured me that the students in the second iteration of the course felt comfortable with the analytic exercises and the lack of a sense of absolute mastery demonstrated in their responses to the concluding analytic exercise.
[19] I thank the Reed students in both iterations of "Fictions of Asian American," whose interest and achievements pushed my own thinking about how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

could shape Asian American literary studies. I am deeply indebted to my colleagues in the Visual Knowledge Project, especially Randy Bass, Melinda de Jesus, Gloria Dickinson, Ed Gallagher, Jane Iwamura, David Jaffe, Mills Kelly, Arthur Lau, Sharona Levy, Patricia O'Connor, Martha Pallante, and Kim Pearson for their continued insights into teaching and learning and their generous feedback on my research. Earlier versions of these findings were presented at the Association of Asian American Studies national conference in 2003 and at a New Media Strategies for Teaching and Research Faculty Colloquia at Reed College.