Naomi Okumura Story

Over the past three decades, the proportion of Asian and Pacific Americans (APA) has increased faster than any other group in the United States. Yet, many educators know too little about this multidimensional group to provide the best possible teaching and learning experiences, especially in higher education. Aggregate data reports often perpetuate the "model minority" myth, but this article describes three important problems for the APA population—communication, refugee waves, and generational identity—that can have negative impact on specific APA ethnic groups and important implications for teaching and learning strategies. Educational practitioners might well consider alternate and more appropriate strategies, some of which are suggested here, to avoid neglecting some segments of this diverse group.

Different Voices, Different Strategies: Teaching and Learning for Asian Pacific American Students

The notion of designing and organizing quality instruction should be based on individual differences of students, building on their learning preferences, styles, and backgrounds. Theoretically, curricula, pedagogy, and assessment should be pure and bias-free. There is a basic framework for instruction in shaping the learning experience for each student, regardless of race and ethnicity. In instructional design, we consider elements of good teaching of learning in terms of:

- who are the students and what are their learning characteristics and background?
- what should the student be able to do or know after instruction?
- what are meaningful and relevant learning experiences that help the student learn?
- what constitute meaningful and relevant practice and feedback for the student?
- how can we assess students so that we and they know if they learned what was intended?

The key factor in defining good teaching and learning context is to know who the student is. If faculty focus on each and every individual's needs, then teaching and schooling will be meaningful and relevant. Clearly, all educators want the educational experience to be a good one for each person, including themselves.

Yet, when student profile and characteristic analyses are based on superficial assumptions about or little knowledge of the target population, instructional strategies and curricula become inappropriate and ineffective—a waste of time and energy.

As educators, we must reach these layers of human capabilities in a way that makes instruction much more productive and significant. Since most of us have a commitment or calling to inspire, nurture, and build minds and souls for our future, getting beyond the stereotypes and myths of our student populations is vital to our success.

Many in higher education remain largely ignorant of the diverse learning needs and concerns of Asian Pacific American (APA) students who are part of a complex, divergent, and growing group. Often, these students themselves unknowingly believe in or foster stereotypical behaviors. It is therefore necessary that educators delve more deeply to discover their many layers and dimensions as individuals, not as an aggregate.

When educators believe that Asian Pacific American students do well or can succeed within the educational constructs of traditional Eurocentric models of higher education, a significant number of students are ignored. Statistics on Asian Pacific Americans often report a group growing in numbers in colleges and universities. Their successful academic achievement, especially in the areas of the sciences, business, and technology, influences a common myth that this population is an "exceptional"minority that requires little attention or consideration. Quite often it is simpler to ignore the plight of the APA student and perpetuate the stereotype: Why fix them if they are not broken or cannot break?

Clearly, Asian and Pacific Americans have been negatively affected by being labeled "model minorities." Reverse discrimination was frequently cited as APA enrollment rose rapidly at universities such as Brown, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, MIT, UC Berkeley, and UCLA. And, although allegations of discrimination and admissions quotas led to recent changes in admissions policies, the impact is still felt and remembered.

Asian Pacific American communities represent nearly 30 major ethnic groups—the Census Bureau labels many more races as Asian Pacific than fall in other groups. The complexity of the APA persona as part of the American educational landscape, even within the traditional framework of minority or race discourse, exacerbates the challenges of identifying instructional or curricular changes and solutions. The paradox of having an Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritage and being an American is complex for both educators and students.

Born and reared on Maui, I never considered myself as an Asian Pacific American minority, especially because Hawaii is the only state in which APAs are considered the majority race. As an undergraduate at a small, private, liberal arts college in Iowa, I did not feel that I was treated any differently from other students, and interactions with the local community were very limited. Fortunately, I was driven to seek answers to the many questions posed when people appeared awkward around me—not all were like me. Now that I am working on the U.S. mainland, I continue to discover multiple facets and dimensions, not just of different ethnic APA groups and individuals, but also of my own uniqueness among them.

I saw the invitation to contribute to this issue on diversity as an opportunity to unravel the artificially woven tapestry of differently shaded and textured threads of peoples from the Asian Pacific Rim. As an instructional designer, I was intrigued with the notion of creating instructional strategies for so complex a racial/ethnic group. This article encapsulates part of that discovery; time will provide a deeper and more critical analysis of APA student identities in higher education among scholars and researchers. I will also discuss some possible multifaceted strategies and practices in teaching that may create more relevant and long-time learning for APA students.

Different Voices

APA Profile

The categorization of Asians and Pacific Americans population blurs distinctions among diverse ethnic groups. The 1990 Census Report (), for example, labels 59 different groups as Asian Pacific. But, prior to the mid-1960s, Asians in colleges and universities were either rich and elite foreign-born students in Ivy League institutions or children of working-class first-generation Asian Americans in state universities on the West Coast. Most considered APAs as primarily Chinese or Japanese.

However, the elimination of racially biased immigration quotas in 1965 expanded the demographic profile with the influx of large numbers of Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian immigrants to the United States. The reshaping of the Asian Pacific American communities in the U.S. continues as others arrive from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan, Tonga, and Samoa. These people come with very different histories, experiences, value systems, and perspectives of the world outside their own.

In the 1996-97 Fifteenth Annual Status Report of Minorities in Higher Education, Shirley Hune and Kenyon S. Chan reflected the complexity of defining the Asian Pacific American in an in-depth analysis in higher educations in "Asian Pacific American Demographics and Educations Trends." But the ethnic diversity of the APAs has had a distinct impact on the quality of teaching and learning in colleges and universities.

Most people not born of privilege, regardless of race and ethnicity, view education as an important step to stability and opportunity. Because APAs are no more predisposed to success and achievement than any other group, stereotyping these loses a majority of that population group. It is important, therefore, that we as educational practitioners go beyond data analysis and remember to focus on individual differences. If we do not examine each layer of each group more carefully, we will, perhaps unintentionally, perpetuate stereotypes, myths, and instructional strategies that negatively impact students.

Further examination of this population, which has doubled between 1980 and 1990 and is projected to double again between 1990 to 2020, shows that APA student needs are exacerbated by their increasing numbers, refugee waves, generation, gender, and locality. A recent Census Bureau report projected an increase in Asian Pacific Americans by 412.5 percent between 1992 and 2050.

This increase negatively affects the quality of access to learning for APAs. When resources are limited and one is tagged as a "model minority," more space and attention will be allocated to other minorities. It is a common experience for minorities to fight over even the small piece of the American pie that they are given.

In addition, it is easier for those who have learning disabilities or handicaps to get lost among the larger numbers and be most negatively affected by fallacies and false assumptions about APAs as success-oriented. Yes, some APA students do have special needs. As a recent example, in Phoenix, a Vietnamese-American student who could not process complex concepts was unable to deal with a series of highly stressful and complicated issues that affected his relationship and communication with his parents. Not knowing how to deal with the system or how to cope with a complex chain of events, actions, and consequences, the young man committed suicide.

School officials claim that appropriate services were available to the student, but when we ask why he did not take advantage of them, we can only speculate that both parties lacked information. Still, his tragic situation exemplifies the growing challenge for educators and the APA population to expand their knowledge.

There are three basic aspects of the APA profile that need examination: communication, refugee waves, and the identities of different generations. These distinct factors appear to be most easily misunderstood and to perpetuate the "model minority" myth.

Communication

One critical factor that exemplifies APA diversity is communication. Unlike most Hispanics or Latino immigrants who share Spanish as a language, APAs do not have a common native language; each ethnic group's language is distinct. A few may share similarities because of historical or economic intercourse; for example, the Japanese *Kanji* and the Chinese written language are alike, but are not spoken similarly. The common explanation for the written similarity is that when the Japanese originally came from China, they took the language with them. Several Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups have an oral but not a written language, and their languages do not share common grammatical structures and context. One issue for APAs is that they must now use articles and prepositions that do not exist in many of their native languages.

Communication is not just about words, but also about meanings attached to words. Certain words cannot be translated into English, especially common terms and phrases. There is often no common meaning or context. For example, not all Asian and Pacific Islanders know what a kiss is, and snow does not fall in many Pacific Rim countries.

Most APAs can learn to read and write English easily, but to speak it is challenging. Sound textures and tonalities vary among Asian and Pacific native languages. Accents and pronunciation of English words are huge issues for APAs, especially for refugees and immigrants who comprise the larger and increasing number of the population. These students are expected to convert sounds and words that they have used all their lives into English, a language full of exceptions and illogical rules.

Conversely, those born in the United States and young children learn English fairly well, a dual language situation that can also affect relationships and communication between APA immigrants or refugee parents and children.

Many APAs speak and listen in their native languages at home and use English elsewhere. For example, even as a third-generation Japanese American years ago, I used Japanese as my primary language until age six. Then, although I learned and used English in school and outside the home environment, I was expected to communicate in Japanese with my parents. Sayings that my parents taught me as life lessons are often not easily translated because there may be no English equivalent. I frequently ask people to speak slowly so that I can differentiate sounds and phraseology or think about meaning, especially cliches or double entendres. Many share this difficulty.

Today, many APA immigrants or their children must be proficient in dual languages as a matter of survival. But for Hmongs and several Pacific Islander groups who do not have a written language, learning English is even more difficult and complex. And because bilingual education continues to be a political debate, APAs must still challenge exclusion and inequity more than 20 years after *Lau v. Nichols*.

Another issue is the lack of awareness of language differences among ethnic groups: a classroom of APA students may speak several different languages, even though the students themselves "look alike."

Several years ago, a group of APA students asked for guidance from their Asian club advisor because they felt that their college instructor in a small group communication course did not understand them, citing two instances that demonstrated the instructor's naivete or insensitivity about the ethnic diversity among APAs. The first occurred when the teacher assigned students to do a presentation on Valentine's Day, a day that had no meaning or relevance to their cultures or history. The second involved a collaborative learning activity, in which the instructor asked APA students to form teams because she noted they were quiet and shy with each other and thought they would feel more comfortable in communicating. What she did not realize was that not only were these students from different cultures who did not speak the same language, but that several were also from countries that were historically and currently enemies. They did not collaborate, nor did they communicate.

Waves of Refugees

We must distinguish between APA immigrants and refugees. Both come to the United States to live, succeed, and be happy. Immigrants, however, may have had some economic and educational attainment in their homelands. Refugees usually have little or no education or money, and moving to the United States is an opportunity to choose life rather than death or poverty. Unfortunately, many do not differentiate the needs of the two groups so that one group may be insulted and the other may be ignored.

Like most who have no social or economic structure to support them, refugees must worry first about basic needs—food, shelter, and health—before they think of

getting a college education. If a choice must be made between going to work for one's family to survive and attending classes, guess which is chosen?

Southeast Asian refugees comprise the majority of APAs living below the poverty level, and in 1991, they comprised the largest group of refugees admitted to the United States after 1975. Many receive low pay (close to minimum hourly wages), have large families, and often rely, at least for a brief time, on public assistance. Their limited ability to speak English appears to be a major deterrent to finding and retaining jobs. Unlike the first few waves in the early 1970s, many recent refugees have limited or no formal education.

Refugees often have little control over their lives. Social and health studies have shown, for example, that Cambodians tend to experience deep depression and that cases of Sudden Death Syndrome have been reported among Hmongs. Because Southeast Asians are lumped together with other APAs who have achieved economic and educational success, this significantly growing population of refugees is often overlooked or ignored. Evidence of the negative impact on this huge population group is that gangs and crime are serious problems among many—but not all—Vietnamese.

APA immigrants' transition to the United States is less difficult. Some may have relatives and connections already established in this country, and many are educated in their native language and have some economic stability. However, there is still a significant need to establish themselves. Their motivation for success, financial achievement, and stability drive many to work more hours than the average American. Family members are also often expected to work. Time for personal interest and pleasure is limited.

Both the immigrants and refugees who comprise the majority of APAs in the United States today struggle to access basic general education. A large number of APAs from the working class attend community colleges to take advantage of lower-cost higher education, but may have even more difficulty there because their survival needs are more immediate, while immigrants tend to achieve their initial educational goals more easily and often continue in four-year institutions.

Generation and Identity in the United States

Another layer of the APA profile is generational difference and identities. For those born in the United States, values and educational goals of the third and fourth generations begin to differ from those of APAs who have just moved to this country.

In many refugee and immigrant APA cultures, the first child may need to carry the burden of being educated, while siblings are expected to support the family. The first child must then be responsible for the family's future and stability. However, as the family members become more Americanized, problems begin to occur within the family unit.

Depending on their social and economic status, families may have differing life goals and perspectives about their options. For example, immigrant parents who are driven to be firmly established may not always understand the social dynamics of the American society or school system. Socialization may be associated with church or family groups, but too much social activity can detract from economic goals. Last

year, my daughter was looking for a roommate in college and invited a Korean friend, a first generation immigrant, to move in. But the friend's parents said that she must live alone in an apartment so that she would not be distracted from her studies.

The lack of socialization opportunities and experiences impacts students' ability to interact with faculty and students in the classroom. It is easier for some first generation APA students to be quiet and participate minimally, so that they are not often involved in critical discourse, but then skills and techniques necessary for higher level and creative thinking are not well developed. The focus on "making the grade" also does not allow such students to be competitive or take risks. An example is that very few first generation APAs major in English, political science, or communication.

Parents often pressure students to major in disciplines and fields that are traditionally known to be stable or will support financial productivity. Courses or programs in the arts and humanities may not be as encouraged as majors, especially for first and second generation APAs, although children of immigrants who were educated in their native countries may be allowed to take music and the arts as electives.

Usually, traditional occupations are identified as stable educational goals—health, engineering, and business. High numbers of APAs are also found in business, technology, and engineering because of the financial security such positions promise.

Clearly, however, when leadership and communication skills are not fostered or nurtured, APA graduates, even from prestigious colleges and universities, will experience a "glass ceiling" in outstanding firms and organizations. Even in higher education, very few APAs are found in administrative and executive positions, which creates an environment that lacks role models and mentors in leadership.

Still, for a third, fourth, or fifth "gen-er" who wants to attain personal interests and awareness or to contribute to society, the educational environment may not nurture their primary motivation, and some who question traditional aspects of social and economic development look to alternative roles and positions in society. Like some of their predecessors during the 1960s, third and fourth generation APAs often participate in alternative lifestyles and thinking, as well as in political and community activism. The issue is that the system does not recognize this APA identity. In addition, there are not only external barriers but also internal ones within the population.

I am often criticized by first and second generation friends because I do not behave "Japanese" or Asian enough. There is a definite disconnect between my experiences living in Hawaii and those of APAs who have lived on the mainland. Reared in a community in which APAs are the majority population, I know little about how to "act" like a minority.

Another problem identity confronts those who are biracial. These APAs experience distinct identity issues that are compounded as they grapple with their sense of cultural heritage and their identity as Americans.

Great rifts and lack of communication can occur between parents and their children. For example, even at the college level, many APA students live at home, especially those from larger families. Parents and friends pressure APAs who appear to

stray, although not all youths will acquiesce to such pressures. Those who rebel or do not obey their parents may be physically, verbally, or emotionally punished and abused. On the other hand, those who will not challenge their parents may internalize their anger and frustration, which can lead to other self-destructive behaviors and emotional issues later in their lives. Intense expectations from parents can negatively impact students psychologically and/or emotionally.

Parents often do not understand social and educational demands in the United States, and may fear the loss of control and the respect they demand from their children. Both parents and students can carry guilt and emotional stress to be and do things that are not true to their natures and spirit. Therefore, especially among APA, there may be a critical gap between personal motivation and respect for the family unit or their cultural heritage.

Different Strategies for Educators

Educators can play an important role in supporting the needs of the APA student. It is important to implement different strategies to support the educational needs of APA students, not as a group but as individuals with diverse needs, perspectives, experiences, and background. To suggest one solution for the entire population is as inappropriate as it would be to generalize the behaviors and attitudes of any single population group. We need strategies that engage and perpetuate the breadth and scope of knowledge and experiences Asian and Pacific Islanders have brought and continue to bring as serious and important contributors to our country.

Educators must realize that this aggregate population is comprised of several ethnic groups with different languages and that their context and perspectives of communication are not necessarily shared. From nonverbal to verbal interaction, APAs communicate differently among themselves as well as with others. Faculty should consider the methods and techniques that will allow students to feel sufficiently good about their backgrounds that they are willing to extend their learning and take more risks.

Storytelling, for example, is a technique that can be part of the instructional bag of tricks for engaging interest in the APA student and his/her peers in the classroom. Students can write and tell their stories as individuals and as part of more than one community. This gives others a chance to learn about the uniqueness of the student, and increases student self-esteem because of the value and interest he/she brings to the learning experience and to others, which leads to improving and enhancing technical communication skills in writing, reading, or speaking.

Engaging APA students actively is a critical strategy. Too often APA students have been known to do the safe thing and not question ideas and concepts. For example, rather than giving an "A" to a student for meeting basic task completion criteria, ask for more. To put students in situations where they must share the burden of responding and solving real-life problems can engage them in higher level thinking. Coupled with expectations of oral communication, students should be asked to present

ideas in more ways than one. A balance of pushing and pulling APA students to reach for more than they originally anticipated must be fostered with sensitivity and care, and students should be positively acknowledged for going beyond the minimum requirement for the "A."

APA students should be encouraged to involve themselves in service learning and community service activities. If a learning task involves real-life interactions with other diverse communities including other APA ethnic groups, better understanding among APAs will occur. I have learned more about the diversity and complexity of our APA groups when I have had to work and eat with them. Social responsibility and commitment are difficult attitudinal outcomes for APA students, who tend to be driven to focus only on school work and getting good grades for personal gain. This does not mean that all APAs feel less engaged in community and politics, but it is important for APAs to realize that they can be part of the solution of change and reform. Unless they have these experiences, they may not realize their influence in our social tapestry.

Strategies that recognize the relationship of APA students and their parents are important, especially for first generation immigrants and refugees. Interviewing parents as part of an oral history assignment affirms the connection between the two family groups. It may be more difficult to engage parents in direct learning activities, but they can be involved in shared reflective activities, such as being part of a performance assessment process or invited to group presentations and celebrations. College educators should attempt to include APA refugee and immigrant families in social and community networking. For example, inviting such families to special holiday and celebratory occasions can bring them to the campus. Community colleges can often provide special courses and programs for continuing education for APA immigrants and refugees so that they can experience the college context.

Students can also learn specific learning strategies for success. They should be expected to take courses that are not "easy," and not to drop courses if their grade point average is threatened. They need to realize that learning should be valued, and embrace interactions with new and different ideas. They should be encouraged to participate in cross-cultural activities. Faculty need to create learning experiences and contexts that instill such excitement about learning.

Leadership opportunities in class can also encourage APA students to grow as leaders and creative thinkers. Problem-based learning and collaborative learning help to engage students in group commitment and thinking "outside the box." These allow students to take charge of their learning, and provide opportunities for them to communicate with each other and to realize their own capabilities and deficiencies.

Opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-generational interactions can positively impact learning. Students can collaborate and work together on projects when faculty create safe and secure situations that honor differences as much as similarities. A similar process can occur when students investigate and discuss their histories and current life with their parents, siblings, and grandparents. Setting the stage for respectful and trusting communication is vital.

Conclusion

When the demographics and success data indicate a high success level of APA students, we need to examine the reports more carefully. APA students who have had the benefits of pre-kindergarten to twelfth-grade education, as well as supplemental educational opportunities in music, the arts, sciences, and so forth, are more likely to do well in accessing and completing their college education. Yet, the majority of APAs have a short tenure in this country, so that the social, economic, and educational aspects of their lives here are also brief. The irony is that those APAs who have been in the United States for four or more generations tend to reflect the same concerns as the majority population, i.e., their drive may not be as intense as those who are new to the U.S. Motivations and the value of success and education will begin to differ among APAs.

In general, APAs are not dissimilar from others. They do have distinct backgrounds and emotional dimensions that other American students may not share. It is critical that educators be cognizant of and sensitive to this uniquely diverse population and not focus on aggregate profiles and demographics. It is easy to believe the stereotypes. However, what is more detrimental is when educators ignore this population because of the "model minority" label. More importantly, APA students should not believe and perpetuate the stereotypes themselves. Strategies are simple to identify when educators truly understand students and their differences.

Suggested Readings

Hune, S. and Chan, K.S., "Special Focus: Asian Pacific American Demographics and Educational Trends," in D.J. Carter and R. Wilson, eds., *1996-7 Annual Status Report of Minorities in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education Office of Minorities in Higher Education, 1997).

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