Chapter 7

“Hmong That Could Fit Into All of Asia”: The Power of Hmong Storytelling in Service-Learning Projects

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning projects that both engage the Hmong community and make oral storytelling a component of the projects have the potential to create transformative social change. Currently, images of the Hmong in the media as well as scholarship written by people of non-Hmong ethnicity tend to re-affirm stereotypes both of refugees and people who speak languages other than English. The Hmong community has an investment in both preserving its rich culture, history and traditions and educating about these. The storytelling that emerges in service learning projects focused on the Hmong are powerful counterpoints to the often violent and destructive discourse current in the contemporary moment about refugees, immigrants and speakers of languages other than English.

INTRODUCTION

Kao Kalia Yang (2008), a Hmong American woman writer, begins her memoir by showing the many contrasting images of Hmong people confronting her at an early age. Her parents offer her an image of Hmong people’s strengths as the foundation of identity. Yet, negative images of Hmong people popular in Thailand and the United States haunt her and threaten to undermine her understanding of what being Hmong means. Moreover, Yang stresses throughout her autobiography that American schools play a critical role in rendering her people silent and invisible. Likewise, American texts reduce the Hmong to “not [even] a footnote in the history of the world” (Yang, 2008, p. 4). From Yang’s perspective,
American representations of history are both false and exclusionary in their erasure of the Hmong. Her memoir becomes the story of writing her people and herself into visibility, history, and consciousness in opposition to these many forms of silencing.

For Yang, then, Hmong people must tell their own stories in their own words. Such stories challenge the validity of the stories often told about Hmong people within American institutions, even ones viewed as potentially liberatory, such as schools. Yang’s critique (2008) raises important questions for instructors who are developing service-learning experiences for students. How do instructors structure service-learning experiences for students that foreground the voices, perspectives, and concerns of Hmong people? How do instructors prepare students to see the Hmong in ways consistent with how Hmong people view themselves? What curricular materials will thwart perpetuation of standard stereotypes of Asian, Asian American, and Hmong people and best reflect the histories and realities of the Hmong? Through engaging such questions, instructors can create service-learning opportunities that have the potential for transforming students’ understanding of Hmong people.

As noted by researchers, one drawback of service-learning projects focused on diverse communities is that they often take place within a structure that frames the student as the giver of needed service, knowledge, or expertise and the member of the diverse community as the hapless victim who needs such aid (Mitchell, 2008; Rice & Brown, 1998). This framework encourages students to understand themselves as performing charitable acts. It positions students to embrace a seductive and culturally popular image of themselves as saviors to less fortunate “others” (Mitchell, 2008). For the Hmong, interacting with students with such attitudes has the potential to echo their own or their family’s experiences with aid organizations as a refugee both in Thailand and the United States. In turn, such interactions could remind Hmong participants in the service-learning project of the false popularized image of the United States “as a benevolent savior-rescuer” of the Hmong people (Vang, 2016). The service-learning relationship between student and Hmong participants, then, has the potential to replicate long-standing historical injustices toward Hmong people.

Mitchell (2008) suggested in her overview of the research that a disruption of these kinds of injustices, hierarchies, and narratives is possible through critical service-learning. A key to this form of service-learning is foregrounding community knowledge (Mitchell, 2008). As both Goodkind (2006) and Blum and de la Piedra (2010) show, it is critical to include Hmong people’s own voices and ways of knowing in service learning projects. Until the early 21st century, almost all research and published stories about the Hmong were written by researchers of non-Hmong ethnicity and told through their lens (Vang, Nibbs, & Vang, 2016). Thus, the historical, academic and literary record of the Hmong is dominated and often controlled by White Western perspectives. This erasure of Hmong perspectives in the written record makes it all the more crucial that Hmong voices from the community be foregrounded within critical service-learning projects.

One strategy for achieving the goals of challenging the privileged White perspective and incorporating Hmong community knowledge into the service-learning experience is to create a form of story project as a component of students’ learning experience. Oral histories, ethnographies, biographies, digital storytelling, or other forms of multimodal video projects are a compelling means of teaching students about Hmong culture and worldview. Hmong storytelling has the power to reveal to students authentic images of Hmong people as embracing agency, countering popular Asian stereotypes and retaining connections to the Hmong culture as a source of strength.

In a story project at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh (UWO), this power of Hmong storytelling was conveyed in Mee Lor’s vision of the role her stories could play in students’ lives: