

WRITING LESSON

LEARNING THAT MATTERS



In the YES! Magazine article **When This Teacher’s Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court—and Won**, teacher activist Curtis Acosta shares how his school district’s “rehumanized” Mexican American Studies Program helped empower students by connecting their learning to their history and who they are.

Students will use Curtis Acosta’s interview to write about a joyful, meaningful learning experience—and what message they have for teachers and administrators who make learning tedious, or even painful.

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When This Teacher’s Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court—and Won

Curtis Acosta’s classes in Mexican American Studies gave kids pride in their heritage—until the Arizona Legislature canceled them. That’s when his students became activists, and some real-life lessons began.



Photo by Justin Haugen.

Interview by Jing Fong

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THE MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES (MAS) PROGRAM IN TUCSON, ARIZ., BEGAN IN 1998 as a few courses and grew to 43 classes serving 1,500 students in six high schools, with similar programs in middle and elementary schools.

MAS was founded with the aim of reversing some disturbing academic trends for Chicano students in Tucson. It worked.

In 2011, the high school dropout rate for MAS students in Tucson was 2.5 percent, as opposed to 56 percent for Latino students nationally. A study by Tucson United School District (TUSD) found that 98 percent of MAS students reported they did homework, and 66 percent went on to college. The program was widely regarded as helping Latino youth feel empowered and achieve

their full academic and human potential.

Immigration and cultural diversity are particularly controversial in Arizona. A politically motivated campaign against the MAS program culminated in a 2010 law banning Arizona state schools from teaching ethnic studies classes, described in the law as courses that advocated “the overthrow of the United States government” and “ethnic

We can learn a lot from Arizona...it's the Wild West for education right now.

solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.” Eventually, the school district had to stop offering MAS or lose \$15 million in annual state aid.

Teachers, parents, and students filed a legal challenge to the law and lost the case. They appealed that ruling, and three years after the ban, in July 2013, a federal court ordered TUSD to reinstate high school Mexican American Studies and add African American studies. The courses are now known as “culturally relevant” classes.

The documentary *Precious Knowledge* tells the story of the high school seniors who became activists to save Tucson’s ethnic studies classes. Among other teachers, the film features Curtis Acosta, a leader in developing Tucson’s MAS program. He talked to YES! Education Outreach Manager Jing Fong about being an activist teacher, and his current role as a national advocate for rehumanizing education.

In Lak ‘ech

Tú eres mi otro yo/ You are my other me
Si te hago daño a ti,/ If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mi mismo/ I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto,/ If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo/ I love and respect myself

—Mayan precept quoted by poet Luís Valdez

Jing Fong: Take me inside your classroom.

What were your Mexican American Studies classes like on the first day of school?

Curtis Acosta: On the first day, you walk into a very sterile room filled with unbelievably vibrant young people. But I think that teachers sometimes put walls up and they’re afraid to get close to the students. Or they’re afraid to give up the hierarchical power. We should be able to look at students and see ourselves. And not infantilize them and think, “they’re so young, and I know so much.” Or, “It’s your job and I’m your boss.” None of those paradigms should be in a person’s mind as a teacher. You should see your job as cultivating this group of folks into moving forward.

The first day...I would say the whole In Lak’ech thing, but I wouldn’t explain it to them. I would just do it. I would clap, and recite In Lak’ech and look in their eyes. Sometimes I would clap by myself and the little Chicánitas would feel sorry for me, “Oh look at that old man clapping. Let’s clap with him.” It’s true, they would do that, and I loved them for it.

When our students come in, and they’re too cool or hard, that’s because they’ve been hurt. They’re injured. They don’t always do bad things, schools, but they have. These are institutions, and people have to survive in them.

That first day I wanted to let them know that this class is different. The first day should be indicative of the amazement of the entire time. Some days you’re going to write an essay in class, but you’re going to have a context where rigorous work is fun. Paulo Friere talks about how learning should never be painful. It should be joyous. And if you’re getting it right, the students should have that perspective by the end of the time with you.

Fong: What do you mean when you refer to your students learning to know themselves? How did that relate to the literature curriculum?

Acosta: I used the term *Quetzalcoatl*, or “precious and beautiful knowledge,” in my literature class. It’s the idea of examining our lived experiences. The beginning of my classes would always be about self-reflection. Who are

you? Where are you from? Who is your family? What is your family about?

I wouldn't ask these questions, the assignments would. Sometimes students would write an annotated bibliography about themselves. Sometimes the assignment would be a personal narrative about how they learned to read and write. Sometimes it would be cultural autobiography or memoir: "Tell me about how you learned who you are as far as identity."

In my senior class we studied multi-ethnic voices, multi-identity, Shakespeare. One thing those voices all had in common is that they were counter-narratives. I tried to find themes of silenced voices and getting that narrative out there. There were some Latino voices, but not to the exclusion of everything else. When you start with an indigenous epistemology, of In Lak' ech, "Tœ eres mi otro yo/ You are my other me," you start rehumanizing the classroom space, and you start rehumanizing school.

Fong: So why did you resign from your teaching job after the ban on ethnic studies?

Acosta: I couldn't do the work anymore. I literally couldn't. It was like somebody telling me to go dig a ditch. "OK great, I have a sweet backhoe. It'll be the greatest ditch you've ever seen, and it'll be a quality you can't imagine, and I'll be done in five minutes." And then they're like, "Here, here's a spoon." I gave it a shot, and it was painful. Painful in every sense.



Still from the trailer for *Precious Knowledge*, a documentary about the banning of the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tuscon Unified School District of Arizona.

They took away everything; we were banned from our own curriculum, our intellect, our own selves. It was dehumanizing.

“Well, it’s a banned course, and we’re going to school on Sundays, and so that’s activism, Mr. Acosta.”

Fong: What did you do after you resigned?

Acosta: I got the idea to do a freedom school from the civil and immigration rights movement in Atlanta. I started with a group of 10 students at the youth center, small enough so that I could ask similar questions to those I was going to ask in my academic research.

One day the students were talking about how they perceived activism after the ban on MAS. I asked, "How does your class affect your activism?" One of the students, Esperanza, said, "Well, it's a banned course, and we're going to school on Sundays, and so that's activism, Mr. Acosta." She's so smart.

Fong: How does it feel in the schools in your community after the long, hard-fought battle for Mexican American Studies?

Acosta: They call the new classes "cultural relevancy." There's still a bunch of like-minded teachers in the classroom. We activist teachers pushed our state so far in rehumanizing education that once we were gone there was this vacuum that created a lot more freedom for those folks. But are they taking it to the street? To the legislature? Are they challenging those bullies that came after us? That's the piece that's missing.

Fong: Do you see your defense of MAS as part of a larger effort?

Acosta: I think we can learn a lot from Arizona, because they're divesting from education so

badly. We're always at the bottom, in teachers' salaries, per pupil spending, and performance. More charter schools per capita than anyone else. It's the Wild West for education right now.

I think they're experimenting with killing public education. At my former school right now, in my district, it's about 65 percent Latino. Five years from now it's going to be 80 percent. They're just going to leave this giant defunded school district filled with brown kids: fend for yourself. We better be ready to respond.

Fong: I guess the "we" has to be defined. What can WE parents, communities, teachers, do? How do we find the energy to take action?

Acosta: People need to understand this has been happening for years. This is what's happening in Georgia, in Alabama, in Arizona. And it's happening in a lot of other places. If we share knowledge, resources, and information, we can have a national response locally. We're right back to the civil rights movement, we're right back to the Farm Workers' movement for my people. We need to find new spaces to meet and organize as a community since our public institutions, such as schools, are limiting and banning us from their spaces.

The students are the present-future. It is like blood pumping through our veins, constantly moving. If I know who I am, and I know who my students are, and I know what all of my heroes and all of my ancestors had to go through, how can I not do this? So that keeps me going, to help support our communities, and carry the message forward.

Curtis Acosta helps educators and schools develop transformative learning environments, pedagogy, and curriculum that inspire every student to thrive through the Acosta Latino Learning Partnership. Curtis is also a founding member of the newly established Xican@ Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO). XITO is a sponsored program through Prescott College that strives to support the Xican@/Latin@ community through teacher preparation, social justice pedagogy, and community organizing.

Jing Fong interviewed Curtis Acosta for Education Uprising, the Spring 2014 issue of YES! Magazine. Jing is the education outreach manager at YES!

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Curtis Acosta’s Mexican American Studies (MAS) classes gave his students pride in their heritage and inspired them to do well in school.

Describe a teacher or a classroom experience that helped make learning joyful and meaningful for you. Conversely, what message do you have for teachers and administrators who make learning tedious, even painful? How could they make learning more interesting and inspiring?

NOTE: In addition to the writing prompt, students may discuss a time when their ethnic identity has or hasn’t been addressed in school. How did this inclusion—or exclusion—affect your “joyful, meaningful” learning?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

To Learn Is To Live

By Noah Carey-Smith, Grade 6

When the teacher says to the class, “Pull out your science books and turn to page 16,” the whole class groans, not because science is boring, but because this kind of educational environment makes science seem more like an enemy than a friend. Experiences are “teachers.” They teach us that every day you walk out of that door, there is a world outside waiting for you to change it. I believe that education is the best way to change the world, and that learning must be creative and inspirational to help students find their passion.

For me, self-directed learning has influenced my education for the better. Self-directed learning allows students to be their own advocates for what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. When I was in the fourth grade, our teacher, Ms. Jenelle, introduced us to the Passion Project. The project allowed each student to follow a chosen passion and take action to make his or her community a better place. Ms. Jenelle guided each student with individual meetings so they could access their knowledge and let their ideas flow.

My chosen project was on scholars. Scholars were enlightened people who knew and understood the complex affairs of the world. I wanted to follow the footsteps of the men and women who escaped from the prison of conformity. Wise and knowing scholars challenged us to be compassionate towards all people. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.” By designing a bullying assembly for my school, I believe I challenged myself and others to be compassionate towards all people. Nobody should face bullying alone, and that’s why I wanted to do something about it.

The learning environment at Aveson allowed me to explore the bullying dilemma that has plagued schools and students across America for years. I chose to design the assembly in order to understand and address this problem. Creating the assembly gave me a glimpse into the world of bullies, victims, bystanders, and allies. Everybody had a different story to tell. The assembly showed my school that no one in the dark and desperate world of bullying is alone. To prepare for this experience, I spoke with teachers and brainstormed ideas with them. They helped me put the whole thing together, gave me support, and let me venture into the thrill of making my ideas happen. This learning environment allowed me to turn a real dilemma—bullying—into positive action. I was able to show my school how harmful mental and physical abuse could be. I concluded my bully assembly with the teachers holding a circle of lights surrounding the students. This action symbolized how an educational community can illuminate students’ lives and ignite their imaginations. This moment showed me how privileged I am—what a gift it is to experience the untold wonders and joy found in each day.

Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” Even Albert Einstein, who was one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the world, thinks that knowledge cannot teach as much as imagination can. According to Curtis Acosta in his YES! Magazine interview, “When This Teacher’s Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned His Students Took the District to Court — and Won,” “On the first day you walk into a very sterile room filled with unbelievably vibrant young people. But I think the teachers sometimes put up walls and they’re afraid to get close to students.” Teachers should make

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Noah Carey-Smith essay continued)

a concerted effort to get to know each of their students and help them imagine how to change the world and become the heroes of tomorrow.

For better or for worse, teachers are strong influences on students. If a teacher is handing out worksheets all day, how is that student's mind going to be pushed beyond his or her comfort zone? A student's learning should revolve around creativity and how to help change our world, which needs all the help it can get. The teacher who cannot acknowledge the importance of imagination and creativity is a bad teacher. Learning is about having a thirst to explore new ideas. An important place where this can happen is in schools, where the pure, beautiful bud of knowledge gets to bloom.

Dr. Seuss once said, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing's going to get better it's not." He was right! Things are not going to change unless inspiring people take action. By "inspiring people" I mean teachers. Inspired kids are smart kids. Good teachers always want what's best for their students; they want them to succeed in life and grasp hold of their dreams. Good teachers help students take baby steps, which gradually become big leaps. They read them their first Bob Books and help them with their first math problem. An inspired teacher can change their students and the world, but a boring and tedious teacher can't. To learn is to live.

What We Learn Tells Us Who We Are

By Annabel Paul, Grade 7

I always try to listen in class and in school, although sometimes it's hard to pay attention, especially on Friday afternoons. During a particular unit in my English class, we were reading stories about different types of people. I soon noticed that some of the types of people I know and love weren't included.

When my dad was younger, he married a woman and had two children with her. They later divorced, for complicated reasons, and the woman he was formerly married to became a man, or what you could call transgender. My dad then fell in love with my mom and had me and my younger sister. I am close with all my family, including my half siblings and their mom, who is now like a second father to me.

Unfortunately, the topic of transgender people seems to be avoided in schools. We never read any stories, articles, or books about transgender people, nor do we learn about them in any classes. I want to learn more about this subject, but whenever I try to bring it up it seems to make teachers uncomfortable. In the English class I discussed earlier, I explained my situation and asked my teacher if there were any stories on transgender people, but she just looked away and blushed.

In my community, we learn that most people will still accept us if we are gay or lesbian, but we never learn about being transgender. Transgender people are, unfortunately, part of the null curriculum in schools, which truthfully is not fair. It's the same as not covering the topic of white people and focusing on black people, or vice versa. We should learn about everyone, and hear every perspective. Transgender identity is a topic that many people avoid, but in order to fully understand it, teachers need to tell their stories. My experience is sort of like the students of Curtis Acosta, who Jing Fong interviewed

in her YES! Magazine article, "When This Teacher's Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court—and Won." Finally something they wanted to learn about was pulled out of the null curriculum, to become received curriculum, then only to have it put back in the null curriculum again. The stories of their culture and different types of people were being told and it was something they really needed and wanted to learn about.

I believe that everyone's stories should be told, even if you have to fight for it.

Someone Like Me

By Nancy Cullen, Grade 7

Learning is most meaningful to me when I can relate my life to what I'm learning about in some way. A class is meaningful to me when it's more than just memorizing something I'll never hear about again. A class is meaningful to me when I learn something new about the world, or when I learn something I'm going to use for the rest of my life. A class is meaningful when I connect with it, when I can compare it to something I already know, something that will help me become who I want to be, and teach me how to get there. As Curtis Acosta suggests in his interview in YES! Magazine, "When This Teacher's Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court—and Won," meaningful education should start with self-reflection.

A meaningful class conversation does not have to be all positive. It is meaningful to consider hardships, both past and future. I learned this lesson in fifth grade, when a visitor to my class taught me something important.

My teacher Hazel invited a man to class. We were not told what he was going to say. He looked like a normal, white middle-aged man with short greyish-blond hair, maybe 5'11" in height, with beige slacks, and a light yellow button-down shirt. His shoes were brown and slightly fancy. He was not unusual.

The first thing he said was this: "I have ADHD and dyslexia. ADHD is short for Attention-Deficit-Hyperactive-Disorder, and dyslexia is a term to explain difficulties in learning to read." He told us about his disorders. How he couldn't concentrate very well, or for a long time. How someone with his disorders is always moving in some way, twitching, scratching, playing with his shirtsleeve. Reading and writing came slowly. School was a nightmare. Now, however, he is a lawyer. He is a success in his field, even though

everything he writes still needs to be checked by someone without dyslexia. It was possible to turn that nightmare around.

Something that he and my teacher didn't know was that last year I was diagnosed with ADD, which is the same thing as his disorder, except that I'm not hyperactive. I'm not always moving. I just can't concentrate, no matter how hard I try.

Because of modern medicine, I am able to take a pill that helps me concentrate. I decided to share my secret, and raised my hand. When he called on me, I talked about how school was challenging for me when I was younger. I told the class about the facts I knew about my disorder—how it's easier to find ADD and ADHD in boys than girls. As I talked, I looked at the other students who were completely quiet.

Everyone looked stunned. Their looks weren't ones of horror or disgust, just curiosity and bafflement. They were surprised that I, a normal girl, one of their classmates, had a secret struggle. They were surprised that someone who they thought of as smart had a learning disorder.

My classmates and I learned a lot that day. It's a day I don't think I'll ever forget. I understood things about my own disorder that I hadn't even known before.

This man, whose name I do not remember and probably never will, taught me in one class period that, to get to where I want to be, I will just have to work harder. I have to push through the bad parts, push through the parts that I don't like, to get to where I want to be.

A teacher can teach you only what will be on the quiz next week. A teacher can teach you only what you will need to learn this year. But a person who teaches like this is not a true teacher.

A true teacher is someone who not only

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Nancy Cullen essay continued)

teaches you what will be on the quiz next week, but also teaches you why this is important to learn. A real teacher will teach you something that you'll hold on to the rest of your life. A memorable teacher will teach you more than one perspective, and how to find it. They will help you find your own definition of what is right and what is wrong. And that probably won't be on the quiz next week.

If You Give a Student a Voice

By Jennifer Aguilera, Grade 9

Classroom, apple, board. This is how society imagines “teacher,” but the apple and the board are all just materials. The tools required for teaching do not come from a store. These tools include dedication, the desire to make an impact, and patience to know that change does not happen overnight. My very first teacher taught me important, valuable lessons without using a chalkboard, or even a classroom: when we were little, my older sister Karla would have me write small journal entries, or draw my favorite animal and explain its characteristics. She taught me that learning does not start on the first day of school; it begins with alphabet soup and curiosity. Since then, I have been fortunate to find other teachers who, like my sister Karla, inspire me to learn.

I was nervous and frightened but surrounded by new energy when I entered a new school in seventh grade. Everyone made me feel important and treated me as a new mind to cultivate. I noticed how the teachers worked to grasp our focus. Mrs. Vitaioli, my language arts teacher, assigned essays to help us develop a love for writing, and her feedback was pure gold. Before seventh grade, I never had a teacher who engaged in my work the way she did. She was accessible and would not hesitate to leave school later to help us. Mrs. V had a Harry Potter-themed room and was not afraid to make jokes and laugh. Conversations with Mrs. V were fluid and honest, like the ease of a wave. Her projects were full of imagination, such as creating monsters and describing how reckless they can be. They were genuinely fun! Her assignments helped me learn about myself, which is what a good assignment should do. Her optimistic attitude with students was her greatest asset; it is what made her Harry Potter-themed class a room of magic.

Not all teachers are as positive and engaged

as Mrs. V—I have also been shut down in other classrooms. My sixth grade teacher constantly told me to put my hand down, saying that I was not giving others an opportunity to answer. This had a significant impact on me. Is it bad to have the answer? I guess I’ll just stop raising my hand, right? It was easy for me to do this, and I began to lose all interest in the class.

There have been times where a teacher has had no hope in me, telling me to limit myself because I am “incapable” of reaching higher expectations, and that it’s better to stay at my “level.” Teaching approaches like this have scared me away from a classroom, draining my enthusiasm for trying new things that take me out of my comfort zone. On the other hand, these experiences have helped me realize that I shouldn’t let anybody tell me how far I can or cannot go—not even myself. I decided to dedicate myself to my constant rhythm of what I believed was okay as a learner, to keep pushing myself to be present in a classroom.

I share these experiences to help teachers avoid them. Instead of telling students to stop raising their hand, let them answer. Do not tell a student they cannot do something; instead, help them reach their goals. When we ask for help, it’s because we need it. Although it may be something a teacher has covered numerous times, it is brand new material to our minds. It only takes one shrug to make a student never ask a question again.

As a student, I look forward to learning from teachers who are engaged with their classes. I want teachers to greet me with smiles on their faces rather than a pile of worksheets with instructions on the desk. I want teachers who are not afraid to laugh at themselves even if it means breaking the hierarchy—teachers who are not afraid of diminishing the authoritative

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Jennifer Aguilera essay continued)

wall between them and students. Teachers whose passion and enthusiasm are contagious, who do not hesitate to relate to the vibrant minds walking in the hallways of a school building.

Classroom, apple, board. My sister Karla and Mrs. V do not fit into these stereotypes, and they have influenced me more profoundly than these objects ever could. Many teachers have had such a huge impact on me; they have inspired me to express myself and to learn as much as possible. If I have learned anything from Curtis Acosta's story, "When This Teacher's Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court and Won" it is that, "Knowledge is power." Everything I own could be snatched from my hands, but nobody can take away the knowledge and beliefs I have in my mind. They are mine to keep.

Part 5: Sample Essays

Teaching Students to Shine

By Salma Arredondo, Grade 11

As more people choose to go to college, college admissions are becoming more competitive. Many of those deemed below average, or even average, early on in school simply give up trying to succeed academically. The majority of students that fall into the categories of “average” or “below average” are students who have absent parents, usually due to long working hours. In my community, many of those who fall below average are those who do not receive help from their parents, largely because their parents are agricultural laborers who do not have the time to help them. Many students become focused on the grade rather than the learning, and eventually fall behind. This is a barrier that school institutions have created that prevents learning. I appreciate teachers who focus on the learning aspect of school rather than the grade.

The classes in which I have learned the most have assignments that push my learning and are student-centered, rather than grade- and teacher-centered. Specifically, my junior English class has been the best learning experience I have ever had. The teacher, Mr. H, gives his students a lot of freedom to decide what, and how, they want to learn. Mr. H also gives us multiple options for how to do an assignment. We can choose which assignments we want to do, where we’d like to do them (at home or in class), and who we’d like to work with— a group, a partner, or individually. We can even choose what we want to read. Every week we can do optional assignments (drawings, pictures, poems, essays, stories, novels, etc.) that will add more points to the grade book. These optional assignments are my favorite part of the class because we get the chance to show Mr. H our unique skills and creativity, and get points for doing it.

As a Mexican American in an American English class, I feel that I already need to catch

up to everyone else due to the limited English vocabulary I’ve been raised with. However, in that same class I have also learned new words in English that come from Spanish words that I am familiar with. When I become familiar with the root words and etymology, many derived from Latin and Spanish, I can connect with the words I didn’t know before. The experience I’ve had in that classroom has given me the confidence to reach for my goals: to be accepted into Stanford University, become an oncologist, and join Doctors Without Borders. Mr. H is the first teacher to tell me, “School isn’t for everyone. Some people learn more and get more out of life by traveling. College is just a building.” While I still hope to go to college, I know I’m not a complete failure if I don’t. I can succeed in other ways, as long as I let my light shine, and not be dimmed by teachers who tell me I don’t have what it takes to succeed.

I have also been in classes that have brought me down, and taught me how to stand up again—by myself. Teachers need to realize that they are instructing the future leaders and movers of America. They need to teach their students to become connected not only to this country but also to their roots so they can know that success is out there, for everyone.

In his YES! Magazine story, “When This Teacher’s Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court—and Won,” Curtis Acosta states, “The students are the present-future. It is like blood pumping through our veins, constantly moving. If I know who I am, and I know who my students are, and I know what all my heroes and all of my ancestors had to go through, how can I not do this?” Here, Acosta refers to the content he is teaching his students, and his struggle to continue to teach it. All teachers need to teach their students where they came from. Students need to know that they can achieve success in so many ways, and that leaders aren’t only born in America. By doing this, teachers create strong relationships with their students, and they show their students that they can achieve anything they put their minds to, just as their ancestors have done.

How to Make a Superhero

By Chiwon Lee, Cascadia College

I am a wimpy Asian girl, an I-am-obsessed-with-grades, obedient, model minority girl. I dyed my bright brown hair to black before the first day of college because I wanted to fit into the stereotype and feel comfortable. When I read the “When This Teacher’s Ethnic Studies Classes Were Banned, His Students Took the District to Court and Won” article published in YES! Magazine, I could completely understand why Latino students needed classes that would make them “feel empowered.”

I always felt like a passerby when I listened to history lectures in school. The glories centered around white complexions slowly ate up my self-esteem. Say bears magically started playing football, and were competing with humans—and they won several games. The humans won sometimes too, and also competed against other humans. But if the media covered only the victories of the bears over the humans (none of the human victories over the bears, or the nuances of the competitions between human teams), then humanity would feel powerless and discouraged when it comes to football.

Asian Americans are barely addressed in American history books even though they have lived and worked here for generations. I was waiting for a superhero from my heritage to smile back at me from my history book. This never happened until I attended a learning community class on cultural studies that unraveled the hidden truths of this nation’s history and opened the locks to my superpowers.

The name of the class was “Making it Real.” Professors David Ortiz and Sarah Zale teamed up to educate students in an unprecedented way. These two charismatic professors would roam around the room and make powerful speeches about the history of people of color in

America. They treated us like we were the only batch of children left to save the future. The unique processes that defined my classroom experience made me feel like I was a superhero in training.

Process one: The professors made us identify where our roots come from. They told us we all have beautiful and exotic backgrounds that give us the power to have unique perspectives to contribute to this society in creative ways. For the first time in my life, my feet sensed they were on a firm rock instead of being afloat. I felt like Superman identifying his background as a strength and not a drawback.

Process two: The professors exposed the uncomfortable realities of the populations that are underrepresented in this country. We challenged master narratives that left citizens of color in struggle. We were encouraged to form an opinion on topics that we usually pretended did not exist. I was fired up like Batman hearing that the Joker was tormenting innocent citizens.

Process three: The professors provided us the terminologies and tools that activists use: master narratives, counternarratives, students of color, epistemology, and oppression action continuum. These were words I never heard in my life. I also learned about different lenses through which to view the world, giving me cultural and media literacy. Like Kung Fu Panda Po receiving mental training to spot the origins of trouble, I was prepared to learn further.

Process four: Our class was divided into groups to tackle the roots of social problems, such as racism, and to find solutions to these problems by teaming up with community organizations that are already professionals in the field. With my group of unique individuals that received quality training based on their strengths, I had my own team of Avengers.

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Chiwon Lee essay continued)

Process five: We participated in the Theater of Oppressed, made a blog, filmed a video, and took action based on what we learned. I was invigorated and aware of the problems that I needed to solve. I was armed with the knowledge that my professors gave me. Now, I didn't feel like a weak spectator in society, but a hero who can recognize and solve problems that most people ignore.

To all the teachers who make classroom experiences painful: I know that there is a spirit inside you that wants to transform this society for the better. I believe that the only reason why you don't address the woes of students is because you simply don't know how to breed your own batch of X-Men. Do not let the malicious flood of delusional information drown your intelligent mind, causing you to neglect students who can save people that need support. With your help, students of color can be superheroes.
