

Teaching Difficult Knowledge of WWII in the Philippines for Transformative Learning

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Author Biography

Sohyun An is a Professor of Social Studies Education at Kennesaw State University. A former high school teacher of social studies in South Korea, she now is a teacher educator of elementary social studies education. Before joining KSU, she earned her PhD in Curriculum & Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and taught at Augustana College in Illinois. As a researcher, she examines how race, power, and privilege intersect with work for educational justice, at both a pedagogical and institutional level.

Prelude

It was in 1945, the aftermath of U.S. “liberation” of Manila from Japan. Oscar Villadolid (2004), a young Filipino boy at the time, remembers his encounter with U.S. GIs who were handing out cigarettes and Hershey bars to Filipinos in the war-torn city of the Philippines. When a GI gave him a chocolate bar, Oscar thanked him in English.

Oscar: Thank you very much.

US GI: How do you speak English? [perplexed]

Oscar: When you colonized us, you sent over a bunch of schoolteachers and so the language of instruction in school was English and I grew up speaking English.

US GI: We colonized you? [more perplexed]

The GI, along with his fellow soldiers, must have been briefed on the mission and told where to go and whom to shoot on the way to the Philippines for the U.S. war with Japan in World War II. Yet the GI was unaware that the Philippines was a U.S. colony, the Filipino boy was a U.S. national, and that he [the GI] was there to save the U.S. colony and its colonized subjects far away across the Pacific.

Goal and Description of Activity

Like the GI, my students—elementary preservice teachers—enter my elementary social studies methods class unfamiliar with U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. In the class session on teaching WWII for young children, I bring the silenced history of the Philippines as a US colony and WWII in the Philippines. Doing so, my goal is to empower my students with counterstories—narratives silenced by the dominant narrative—so that they can teach WWII in a more honest and critical way. Among many counterstories that debunk the master narrative of WWII as a good war, I focus on WWII in the Philippines as an example for teaching WWII with counterstories.

Indeed, what happened to the Philippines during WWII makes my students feel perplexed. They get disturbed to find out that: 1) the Philippines was a U.S. colony from 1898 to 1946; 2) U.S. colonial rule drew from white supremacy, which justified colonization as a “benevolent assimilation” to civilize Filipinos; 3) when Japan attacked the Pearl Harbor, it also attacked other US colonies including the Philippines; 4) despite the fact that the Philippines was a U.S. colony and fell under Japan, the U.S. government continued its Europe First policy, leaving U.S. soldiers and Filipinos under the brutal occupation by Japan (Immerwahr, 2020).

For my students, this knowledge is difficult because it refutes their previous ideas such as: WWII was a good war; the United States was a benevolent savior of peoples suffering under the empire-building of Germany

and Japan; and the United States is inherently anti-colonial. Although difficult, I believe transformative learning begins when students engage with difficult knowledge that disrupts the dominant yet dishonest narratives (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). Therefore, I invite my students to explore the difficult knowledge and reimagine their future teaching of WWII.

The lesson starts with reading Oscar's memoir noted in the prelude, as well as *Tucky Jo and Little Heart*, a children's book on WWII in the Philippines. These two sources present the human stories behind the dry numbers and dates of the war. Then, I lead a whole group inquiry using photos and other primary sources to investigate US colonization of the Philippines and WWII in the Philippines. Guiding questions for the source analysis include:

- What message does the source present to you?
- How similar or different is the message from your previous knowledge?
- What feelings does this source generate in you and why?

Then, as a small group, students go deeper with their cognitive and emotional challenges and discuss why the new knowledge may be disturbing. To facilitate the small group discussion, I revisit the key ideas undergirding the course:

1. All knowledge is partial and should be constantly interrogated.
2. It is natural for humans to avoid knowledge that might shatter their worldview.
3. The range of emotions we would experience in this course is not only natural but also an essential part of learning.
4. Being comfortable with being uncomfortable is a great asset for us to learn and grow.

After small group discussion, I invite students for the whole-group sharing, in which students collectively make sense of difficult knowledge and difficult feelings from the lesson and share their ideas on teaching this difficult knowledge to young children. I assure my students that it is okay not to have a clear answer to whether and how to teach difficult knowledge in elementary classrooms. I underscore that as we continue to explore various difficult knowledge throughout the course, we will get much closer to the answer.

Reflection

In my first year of teaching, one student wrote in course evaluation, "*If you don't like America, go back to Korea!*" Indeed, teaching difficult knowledge is difficult. It can be easily accused as anti-American or unpatriotic. Yet, as I have gotten better at my pedagogies, my students began to see the importance of engaging with difficult knowledge.

In a recent course evaluation, for example, another student wrote, "*Every future teacher needs a professor like Dr. An. One that makes you think, opens your eyes to reality, expands your knowledge, and provides critical pedagogies.*" Echoing this, student comments in the course evaluations over the past 10 years have been overwhelmingly positive and consistent along with the mean score of course evaluations as 3.96 out of 4.

I also received the Outstanding Teaching Award from my university in 2020. Many of my former students, now elementary school teachers, contact me and share how they engage their own students with difficult history such as WWII in the Philippines, Japanese incarceration, Angel Island, and anti-Asian violence amid the pandemic. My student success is the impetus for my continued teaching of difficult knowledge, no matter how risky and difficult.

References

Villadolid, O. (2004). *Born in freedom: My life and times*, cited in D. Immerwahr (2020), *How to hide an empire: A history of the Greater United States*, p. 212.

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