He talks in riddles

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As I look back at my journals between 1998 and 2000 for the two courses that I took with Dr. Aoki, I realize how much he affected the way I thought then and continue to think now, not only as an individual, but as an educator. During our first session, he immediately put the class at ease by asking questions. It was clear that he honoured what we knew and who we were. I admit that his world of metonomy, the language of doubled meanings and a multitude of possibilities was rather annoying at first.

I have spent the last many days contemplating and trying to figure out what Dr. Aoki is talking about. He talks in riddles and then not. The pieces are somehow starting to come together, but it always seems to come to me when I don’t have pen and paper before me…in the swimming pool, as I am driving, as I am teaching…thoughts overwhelm my clear, logical thinking. (Journal, Feb 16/98)

For a teacher who has always prided herself on being organized, I had to come to terms with how I was teaching what I was ‘supposed to’ teach. Curricula is an ordered and planned object that I must master, and now Dr. Aoki was calling upon me to question the very existence and necessity of how I taught. The learned and the unlearned. The spoken and the unspoken.

I myself am caught in that weird notion that learning is a linear thing that I must somehow uncover the truth in an immediate direct fashion. I doubt that kids do. (Feb 23/98)

The readings Dr. Aoki supplied us with were debated in class, but it was in my journal where I did some genuine reflection. But did I truly understand
at that point? Was I meant to ‘understand’? I was forced to question that very possibility and the ever changing evolution of what I knew to be true.

…the more I think of it, the more I understand that our identity is not one thing, but many things that change and…does it change vertically or horizontally or both?? The slippery signifier is when meaning doesn’t come in the word, but rather in the relationship between the words. Is that not what we do when we read and re-read or when we write and rewrite? The text that we read may be the same, but my understanding of it changes continuously and has a different influence on me than it had the previous time that I read the text. The act of writing seems to me more clear as an example of this notion. I learn between the words and I am doing this at the very moment. The very thing that has kept me away from writing is the fact that I feel that I must somehow uncover a specific meaning of text, written or read. (Feb 23/98)

Looking back, the irony is that I can barely express what I learned in ‘content’ that year. Yet I know it was significant enough to make me reflect deeply about life in general and about how I was leading my students to learn and be. It’s about ‘knowledge’ and the power of language. It’s about whom we were or are, and the fact that there may not be a finite ending to it all. Learning is doing and being now. I understand and then I don’t understand. I sit somewhere in the middle still even though it is not always a comfortable place to be.

It’s the communication experience, learning as a social process and learning with my students and them with me as their guide. It’s a continual thing that doesn’t end at the bottom of the page, of the chapter, of the unit, of the term or of the year. Learning in small bits. Learning that comes to some totality, early for some and later for other learners. It’s my whole existence. I live it all the time and I hope to be able to recognize when to stop and when to go…in the same direction or on another path. It’s scary. I, as a teacher, have so much power to do good or bad. Thank God, kids have various teachers during the year. The weight of this bears on my shoulders. (April 5/98)

Although it has been five years now since my initial encounter with Dr. Aoki, I remember him fondly. I am among the privileged many who have been guided and prodded ever so gently by him—to become thoughtful learners and teachers. I thank him wholeheartedly for helping me as I become a different person and hopefully, a better teacher/learner, a work in progress.
About the Author

Gayle Chin is currently teaching at Century College in Calgary.