

## Educating For Democracy -- An Uncommon Standard

By Steven Goodman

Buried under this past summer's headlines about the crisis of unemployment, the BP Gulf oil spill, and the "ground zero mosque" banning and Koran burning, was also news about education. The Obama administration is making college graduation a priority calling for an additional 8 million college graduates over the next decade;<sup>1</sup> national core academic standards were adopted by 27 states supporting K-12 students' college and career readiness<sup>2</sup>; and a competitive "Race to the Top" federal education reform grant was awarded to a dozen states, including New York.<sup>3</sup>

These college graduation goals and new standards resonate with us at EVC. Throughout the past 26 years of our documentary workshops, we have taught students to conduct in-depth research, to "collaborate to answer questions, build understanding, and solve problems" and present their findings making "logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence"<sup>4</sup> --- all skills that are naturally embedded in the process of creating their student documentaries, and all skills outlined in the common core literacy standards. They work in teams to explore the issue, weigh the evidence that they gathered from multiple perspectives, and edit their documentary to make an argument and tell a compelling story. A scan of the common core literacy standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening reveals many other points of alignment with the inquiry project-based, language skill building that students experience at EVC.

We at EVC are committed to closing the systemic disparities of the achievement gap. In New York City, only 33% of black third through eighth grade students and 34% of Hispanic students met state standards for proficiency in English this year, compared with 64% among whites and Asians.<sup>5</sup> Only 28% of black males graduate from New York City schools compared with 50% for white males (based on the 2007/8 cohort).<sup>6</sup> Students from the highest income families

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<sup>1</sup>Stolberg, Heryl Gay. "Obama Calls for U.S. to Lead in Graduation" August 9, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/10/education/10obama.html?hp>

<sup>2</sup>Lewin, Tamar. "Many States Adopt National Standards for Their Schools" *The New York Times*. July 21, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/21/education/21standards.html>

<sup>3</sup> Medina, Jennifer. "New York Wins Nearly \$700 Million for Education" *The New York Times*. August 24, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/25/nyregion/25nyrace.html?fta=y>

<sup>4</sup> Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>

<sup>5</sup> Gebeloff, Robert and Sharon Otterman. "Triumph Fades on Racial Gap in City Schools" *The New York Times*. August 15, 2010. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/nyregion/16gap.html?\\_r=1&ref=nyregion](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/nyregion/16gap.html?_r=1&ref=nyregion)

<sup>6</sup> Holzman, Michael. "Yes We Can: The 2010 Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males." The Schott Foundation for Public Education. August, 2010. p. 10.

are almost eight times as likely as those from the lowest income families to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24.

EVC's experiential workshops develop students' job skills and career opportunities in the media related industries as we are very aware of the high rate of youth unemployment, estimated at 25%,<sup>7</sup> and 45% for black teens.<sup>8</sup> The rigor of our program promotes their college readiness (the U.S. used to lead the world, and over the past decade has fallen to 12th among 36 developed nations in the number of 25- to 34-year-olds with college degrees).<sup>9</sup> To be sure, a college degree brings with it the promise of financial reward. The median earnings for individuals with a B.A. are 74% higher than for workers who possess only a high school diploma.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is worrisome that political, education, and business leaders are reducing the highest goals of education to the instrumental economic terms of the market place. Even as states are laying off teachers, cutting school transportation, arts and health programs, and even shortening the school year to save money,<sup>11</sup> Education Secretary Arne Duncan argues, "We have to educate our way to a better economy." The new standards are promoted as "fueling our nation's future economic success." President Obama predicts the Race to the Top grants "will help prepare America's students to graduate ready for college and career, and enable them to out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world."<sup>12</sup> He further defends his aim to restore our nation's first place in college graduation rates by proclaiming, "education is an economic issue" that will enable us to "lead the global economy."<sup>13</sup>

Selling school as the solution to our nation's economic problems is selling our students short. We mustn't allow the exigencies of these troubled economic times to overshadow the greater purpose of education: to prepare students for the active participation in our society as ethical and critically minded citizens.

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<sup>7</sup> Holzer, Harry. J. "Avoiding a Lost Generation: How to Minimize the Impact of the Great Recession on Young Workers" Testimony before the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. May 26, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Allegretto, Sylvia, Ary Amerikaner, and Steven Pitts. "Data Brief: Black Employment and Unemployment in August 2010" *University of California, Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education*. September 3, 2010. [http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/blackworkers/monthly/bwreport\\_2010-09-03\\_22.pdf](http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/blackworkers/monthly/bwreport_2010-09-03_22.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Lewin, Tamar. "Once a Leader, U.S. Lags in College Degrees." *The New York Times*. July 23, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/education/23college.html?scp=1&sq=college%20graduation%20rates&st=cse><sup>9</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Faust, Drew Gilpin. "Crossroad, The University's Crisis of Purpose," *The New York Times Book Review*. September 1, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, Michael. "Governments Go to Extremes as the Downturn Wears On." *The New York Times*. August 6, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/07/us/07cutbacksWEB.html?scp=1&sq=hawaii%20schools%20furlough%20students&st=cse>

<sup>12</sup> White House. "Fact Sheet: Race to the Top." July 24, 2009. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/fact-sheet-race-top>

<sup>13</sup> Stolberg, Heryl Gay "Obama Calls for U.S. to Lead in Graduation" *The New York Times*. August 9, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/10/education/10obama.html?hp>

No matter how skilled our high school and college graduates are, it is unfair to burden them with the responsibility for restoring America's competitive economic prosperity, which implies ending the deep unemployment and dislocation of the Great Recession (some 16.5 percent of America's workers are now either unemployed and trying to find a job, involuntarily working part time, or have stopped looking for work altogether.<sup>14</sup>). The rhetoric rings especially hollow as companies are now reaping huge profits by *not* hiring new fulltime employees -- no matter how career ready they may be. Businesses are continuing to cut jobs and keep wages low.<sup>15</sup>

Without access to corporate board rooms or Wall Street trading floors, schools can be expected to do little to turn the "new normal"<sup>16</sup> of structural unemployment into prosperity. But they *can* teach students to be critical and engaged citizens who can stand up to bigotry and intolerance, advocate for more government funding for youth apprenticeships and jobs and better resourced schools, challenge unregulated corporate irresponsibility, and hold the banks, oil companies, and government agencies accountable for the social impact of their actions.

Historically, education has played a critical role in empowering disenfranchised peoples to defend their rights, notably in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. As we think hard about what kind of society we want to build and the kind of skills and habits the next generation will need, the standards we hold our students and ourselves to must be about educating for democracy. (The omission of readiness for civic participation as a goal, along with standards for college and career readiness is surprising since the National Governors Association played a leading role in developing the standards.) We need not simply teach *about* democracy, but must have students *experience* it in school and in their community.<sup>17</sup> Not only in the act of voting, but in the broader sense that education philosopher John Dewey envisioned ---as "a way of life" where citizens routinely exercise habits of critical inquiry, openness to alternative views, and deliberative moral reason.

As Dewey explained it, "the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another..."

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<sup>14</sup> Rich, Frank. "How to Lose an Election Without Really Trying" *The New York Times*. August 7, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/opinion/08rich.html?hp>

<sup>15</sup> Schwartz, Nelson D. "Industries Find Surging Profits in Deeper Cuts" *The New York Times*. July 25, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/26/business/economy/26earnings.htm?scp=3&sq=motorcycle%20makes%20a%20profit%20&st=Search>

<sup>16</sup> Schwartz, Nelson D. "Jobless and Staying That Way" *The New York Times*. August 7, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/weekinreview/08schwartz.html>

<sup>17</sup> Meier, Deborah. (2009). "Educating for What? The Struggle for Democracy in Education." *PowerPlay* 1 (1).

Democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action.”<sup>18</sup>

No one can know for sure what problems the next generation will have to grapple with, and the skills and habits of mind today that will equip them for critical democratic engagement at that future time. But if the headlines of this summer are any indication, and drawing on our experiences at the Educational Video Center, I propose to add these three standards to the list already adopted:

**Critical Media Literacy:** The next generation must learn to closely and critically read, view, and analyze all forms of media, especially the news. The case of Shirley Sherrod, the former head of the US Department of Agriculture's rural development office in Georgia, who was forced to resign over what turned out to be a deliberately falsified video of her speech, illustrates just how deeply we need a news literate public -- even (or perhaps especially) among journalists and government officials at the highest levels. There can be no free back and forth discussion, or intelligent judgment and action of the most pressing issues of the day (such as, the state of race relations), without the routinely skeptical questioning of what passes as news; the images, sounds, text and editing used to convey a message; the context from which it was taken and how it has been re-framed and re-presented; the political biases and commercial/institutional aims of the producer; the perspectives heard and those that were silenced. This case also points to the need for critical literacy across the media forms. Audiences “read” Shirley Sherrod’s story in just about every mode of communication—first as a written speech that she read aloud, then as a recorded video, which conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart then re-edited and published on his blog, and then disseminated on the web as well as on commercial television, radio and newspapers.

**Youth and Community Voice:** The next generation needs to learn to be civic journalists, seeking out, editing together and disseminating multiple sources of knowledge from the local community. It is particularly important that youth and their elders from under-represented, overlooked, and often silenced communities have opportunities for their stories to be heard. In a democratic society, there is not one master narrative, but many narratives that tell stories of our common experience, weaving together varied strands of history from below.

For example, the problem of undocumented immigration cannot be fully understood without the stories of immigrant youth (see *Alienated*). The “economic draft” and the human cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars can only become clear when you hear the stories of youth who enlisted in the armed forces because their jobs didn’t pay them enough to make ends meet in the

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<sup>18</sup> Dewey, John (1976). Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us. In J. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, volume 14 (pp. 224-230). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. (Original work published 1939)

civilian world (see *All That I Can Be*). Harrowing stories of teenage drug dealing and incarceration under the Rockefeller Drug Law describe the ravaged lives and communities under misguided policies of the war on drugs (see *Another Part of Me*). Listening to the experiences of youth growing up in foster care is absolutely necessary for making the system more effective and humane (see *Not Me, Not Mine*). At EVC, students have sought out their friends and neighbors, and often turned the cameras on themselves to give voice to the social conditions around them. Schools must engage students in the inquiry and production of stories from the community outside the walls of their school. The inclusion of youth generated media is essential to creating a vibrant and well-informed national dialogue.

**Moral Agency:** We need to teach the next generation the moral ideal of democracy. This is particularly important for the future leaders of industry and government. Over these past several months, Americans have been victims of oil spills, coal mine explosions, and Wall Street deception; all incidents that can be linked to a culture of corrupt and unethical decisions that created disastrous consequences for coal and oil workers, the environment and fishing industry of the Gulf coast, and the housing and financial industries and economy at large, all for the expediency of short term profit. We need to teach students that learning has a greater purpose than financial self-enrichment. Through their questioning, learning, discussing, writing, and producing they can learn to act with conscience and empathy, contributing to the greater public good and wellbeing of the community.

Teaching moral agency through participatory action research projects, whether as video documentaries, radio reports, magazine stories and blogs, give students the experience of investigating social problems and bringing their findings to public audiences for open debate and problem solving. As producers of knowledge and agents of social change, youth at EVC -- and in youth media organizations across the country -- are working to make a difference in the world around them.

At EVC, students have screened their documentary on sexual assault (see *It's Not About Sex*) at schools, colleges and conferences to spark discussion on where survivors of abuse can get help. Screening their documentary on recycling and environmental justice (*This Can Be Reused*) with a "Take Action" guide gives youth a model for organizing to prevent hazardous dumping in low-income communities. Screening their work on depression among youth of color (see *The War Within*) has made it possible for black and Hispanic youth to express their feelings and seek help if they need it. Presenting their most recent documentary on gentrification and youth organizing in Brooklyn and the Bronx shows how young people can organize on behalf of their families and communities (see *As the Sun Comes Up, The Bricks Come Down*). At EVC's first *Annual Youth Powered Video Festival*, we screened student videos produced in classes with teachers trained and coached by EVC. Student films explored the value of community gardens, the importance of sexual health, youth violence prevention

and numerous other social issues. This summer's youth documentary on the abuse of gay and lesbian youth will be shown to homeless LGBTQ youth living in shelters, many of them forced out of their homes by homophobic family members.

Working for the democratic purposes of education is all the more urgent -- especially now in this time of economic insecurity and increased racial, ethnic and religious intolerance. Along with teaching college and career readiness, we must give students the powerful experience of civic engagement. We need to teach them to be critics, activists and artists, to challenge the status quo, to care for the greater good -- and as philosopher Maxine Greene says, "to see the world as if it were otherwise."

Taking ownership of their learning process -- with cameras, blogs, social networks, and other technical tools of expression in their hands -- students become public intellectuals reaching broad audiences, actively contributing to the current debates of the times. As Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust wrote about universities, all schools should "be producers not just of knowledge but also of (often inconvenient) doubt... [raising] the deep and unsettling questions necessary to any society."<sup>19</sup> While it may not be as catchy a slogan in these recessionary times as "educating our way to a better economy", teaching for democracy as a way of life will be sure to empower and enrich the next generation, and society as a whole, in meaningful, humane, and enduring ways.

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<sup>19</sup> Faust, Drew Gilpin. "Crossroads, The University's Crisis of Purpose" *The New York Times Book Review*. September 1, 2009.