

## CHAPTER 11

### *The Practice and Principles of Teaching Critical Literacy at the Educational Video Center*

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We did a documentary about homeless youth . . . It was an important topic for us to learn and research about because it will change not only the way we think about it, but whoever watches the video will also change their way of thinking about it. And it's gonna make a difference in people's lives.

—(Vanessa, EVC Documentary Workshop)

Overall, what I've learned from EVC and what I will take with me, is basically not only working with the camera and things like that and making a documentary, but all in all, how to go out and meet people. And how talk to people.

—(Serena, EVC Documentary Workshop)

Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.

—Paulo Freire (1970, p. 69)

Four high school students walk down a mid-Manhattan street as they talk excitedly about who will conduct the first interview. They have generated good questions to ask concerning the problem of homeless youth in New York City, but are not quite sure if anyone will stop to answer them. They pause at a street corner and work awkwardly to disentangle the cables connecting the digital video camera, microphone, and headphones they are holding. Once they sort out their equipment and their crew roles, the book bag and the camera change hands. The designated interviewer pulls out the notebook from among the extra batteries and videotapes in the bag and opens it to the page with the interview questions scrawled across it. After the third attempt, the scout succeeds in bringing a passerby over to the crew. The interviewer

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explains that they are not from the news, but are students making a documentary project on homelessness. The sound operator slips the headphones on and nods that everything is okay. The cameraperson flips open the viewfinder, zooms in to a medium shot, and pushes the “record” button. The tape starts rolling.

These students are experiencing their first “shoot” out on the street as part of the Educational Video Center’s documentary workshop. The Educational Video Center (EVC) is an independent nonprofit media organization that has worked, since it was established in 1984, to build students’ skills in documentary production and media literacy while nurturing their intellectual development and civic engagement. These students come from high schools all across New York City and spend four afternoons each week earning academic credit as they learn to collaboratively research, shoot, and edit a documentary on a social issue of immediate importance to them. By the end of the 18-week semester, they will produce *No Home of Your Own*, a documentary exploration of the problem of homeless youth in New York City (Educational Video Center, Producer, 2004). But throughout the process they will learn about much more than the content of this social issue. They will learn about the power of the media to represent ideas, values, and voices, and their own power, as learners and cultural producers, to use media as a tool to educate, inform, and make change in the community.

As founding director of EVC, I have spent more than 20 years working with students and teachers in New York City and have seen how effective the critical literacy method of media education can be. EVC grew out of my combined experience as an independent documentary maker and as a video teacher in an alternative high school in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Since 1984, it has evolved from a single video class into an organization with four main programs: a *high school documentary workshop*; a preprofessional *paid internship program* called YO-TV; a *community engagement program* using EVC documentaries in local neighborhoods to organize for social change; and a *teacher development program* serving K-12 educators throughout New York City as they learn to integrate media analysis and production into their classes. Over the years, funding for EVC has been provided by a range of private foundations, corporations, and government sources including the Open Society Institute, the Time Warner Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the New York Community Trust, the JP Morgan Chase Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York City Department of Education.

The EVC Documentary Workshop annually serves 60 public high school students. They live in predominantly low-income communities and reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of New York City. Each semester, EVC contacts guidance counselors and teachers in high schools throughout the city, requesting that they send students to apply and be interviewed. Students are selected on the basis of equity, level of interest, and counselor recommendation, but not on prior academic record. In fact, most EVC students attend alternative high schools and often struggle with academic skills, family troubles, or worse. At the end of the semester, they present their final group projects in public screenings and they present evidence of their literacy, technical, and critical thinking skills in portfolio assessment roundtables.

The impact that the learning process of EVC workshops has on the individual youth participants magnifies a thousand-fold when the products—EVC's library of over 100 youth-produced documentaries—are distributed and seen by thousands of other students in schools, libraries, and community centers across the country. Teachers can access this library online via the EVC website at <http://www.evc.org/screening/catalog.html>. The documentaries cover a range of adolescent and community issues including educational equity, media and youth identity, gun violence, AIDS, and environmental pollution. These screenings serve as springboards for discussion of the tapes and further inquiry into the issues they have raised.

I use the term *critical literacy* as the unifying concept that animates the methodology of media education at EVC. I define critical literacy in much the same way as theorists Ira Shor, who describes it as a “discourse that foregrounds and questions power relations” (1999, p. 18); Joe Kretovics, who asserts that it “provides students not merely with functional skills, but with conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices” (as quoted in Shor, p. 20); and Gary L. Anderson and Patricia Irvine, who explain the student's process of learning to read and write as part of “becoming conscious of their own experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (as quoted in Shor, p. 1). However, acknowledging the pervasiveness of the mass media and entertainment technologies in our society today, I would expand upon these definitions to include the ability to analyze, evaluate, and produce aural and visual forms of communication. I would argue that developing critical literacy skills enables students to investigate power relations within the social and historical context of their lived experience and within the broader frame of their mediated culture. In this way, students build their capac-

ity to understand how media is made to convey particular messages, and how they can use electronic and print technologies to creatively express themselves, and to document and publicly voice their ideas and concerns regarding the most important issues in their lives. Learning about the world is directly linked to the possibility of changing it (Goodman, 2003, p. 3).

This pedagogy of critical literacy is comprised of three key practices and principles:

1. *Teaching Multiple Literacies*: Students learn to analyze, evaluate, and produce texts across oral/aural, visual, and alphabetic/textual modes of language. Media production (writing) and analysis (reading) are linked. Students develop their capacity to encode and decode meaning in multiple forms of representation through speaking and listening, visualizing and observing, and reading and writing. They learn to use multiple literacies to tell their own stories and through their video production represent themselves as new storytellers.
2. *Teaching Continuous Inquiry*: The students' learning is driven by their own questions about their lived experiences; the social, cultural, and historical conditions that shape those experiences; and the media's representations of those conditions and experiences. The learner-centeredness of this approach develops the students' agency as social, political, and cultural actors in their community. Students learn to work collectively, engaging in a problem-posing dialogue with the individuals and institutions in their community and using their documentary to promote public discussion and action for change.
3. *Teaching Reflection*: Students are given multiple opportunities to reflect on their learning and development over time throughout the production process in journals, in regular critique sessions, and in end-of-semester portfolio roundtables where they present drafts of their video and written work as evidence of their intellectual and artistic development. There is a creative tension between action and reflection to ensure that the students' experience is a rich and sustained *learning process* while they also produce a high-quality *media product*.

In this chapter, I explore these strategies for teaching and learning along with the challenges they present, and examine how they so powerfully develop students' intellectual, cultural, and social capacities. Using EVC's fall 2003 semester Documentary Workshop as a window

into these issues, I draw upon tapes recording students at work, as well as on interviews with their teachers and with graduates of the program reflecting back on the long-term impact of their learning. Whenever possible, I listen to the students' voices for insight into the practices and principles of critical literacy.

### Teaching Multiple Literacies

A key principle of critical literacy is the notion of "multiple literacies": that students need to learn to proficiently analyze, evaluate, and produce meaning in visual, oral, and alphabetic forms of communication. This is in response to a few generally agreed-upon conclusions by media literacy researchers and practitioners: (1) Within our media-saturated culture, television, radio, movies, the Internet, newspapers, magazines, music, video games, and so forth, use particular codes and conventions to tell their stories and teach a particular set of ideas, values, and representations about the world and our place in it; (2) This ubiquitous, informal, and lifelong curriculum combines image, sound, graphic symbol, and alphabetic text in overlapping and increasingly integrated modes of communication; (3) These media messages and narratives are delivered by a global system of ever-expanding digital entertainment and information technologies, concentrated in the hands of an ever-fewer number of corporations; (4) Meaning does not reside in the media text itself. Audiences negotiate meaning from the various media they consume depending on a range of factors including gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, and culture (Bazelgette, 1989; Buckingham, 1990/1992; Duncan, D'Ippolito, Macpherson, & Wilson, 1996; Fisherkeller, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Masterman, 1985; Tyner, 1998).

While teaching multiple literacies may seem to be a worthy educational goal, it is not commonly put into practice. Even though the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and several states have formulated language arts standards that call for students to view and analyze a variety of nonprint media (Martin, 2003), school curricula still tend to privilege print literacy over visual literacy and segregate communication forms according to disciplines such as English, speech, and art classes. Language arts instruction is still generally considered to be synonymous with a written text-centric approach to literacy (Goodman, 2003).

Print-based literacy is rarely connected to the practice of visual arts and spoken word. There is the common idea that reading visual media is different from notational alphabetic texts in that some basic under-

standing of the rules of grammar and vocabulary has to be learned before meaning can be made from the texts. “Reading” visual texts is more direct, as there is no mediating alphabet to decode. But if the grammar of media arts is not understood—the codes and conventions of close-up shots, dissolves, rolling credits, and all the nuances of editing, sound, lighting, shadow, color, framing, angles, movement, and so forth—a student would be unable to “read” in between the lines of a film. Reading a moving image draws upon the same method of close and repeated observations of all the elements the filmmaker used to construct meaning that an art teacher would employ in reading how a painter created a painting. And an art teacher would also train students to develop multiple readings of a painting much as they would with a written text (Piro, 2002).

In the course of a day, we receive visual, oral, and print messages all jumbled together. We take for granted that sound, image, and text are broadcast simultaneously on television, that a newspaper is a combination of image and text and that much of that text is the spoken word in printed form, that music is increasingly accompanied by image on MTV and in films, and that the sound of radio shows is now accompanied by text and image on the Internet. To teach students to read in between the lines of these modes of language, students first need to become aware that these modes exist as such. Invisible as separate entities, the interwoven threads of sight, sound, and print need to be pulled apart and held up to the light for inspection.

While most of the learning and work at EVC centers around the production of a documentary, learning to deconstruct media critically is essential to the process. Time and attention are given to analyzing still and moving images without sound and to analyzing sound divorced from images. Students are then engaged in video-making activities that link analysis and production and give them opportunities to practice and apply the analytic concepts they have just learned.

To give students a sense of how sound contributes to telling a story, the EVC instructor plays a section of a movie without dialogue. She turns the video screen away from them so the students can hear but cannot see the images. Then she stops the video at various points and asks the students to list the different sounds they notice. In one scene, for example, this may include the screech of breaks, the slam of a car door, footsteps, the wind blowing, a door creaking, silence, a faucet dripping, a dog barking, and violin music.

Students are then asked: What do you imagine is happening in the movie? Why do you think this? What sound clues did you hear that

support your prediction? After listening to the section again, the students can revise their notes and then share their ideas. Then the teacher moves the monitor so the students can see the screen and she plays the scene again. They can compare their imagined interpretation of the scene with the visual and aural depiction. They learn the differences between literal sounds that evoke an image of the sound-producing source (such as the car door slam or dog barking) and nonliteral sounds that may create a mood or feeling (such as the violin music that created a sense of tension and anxiety). In addition, they analyze use of dialogue in narrative films and the use of interviews, narration, and sound effects in documentaries and in the news.

To apply this new knowledge regarding the use of sound in telling a story, students are asked to create a simple story with only sound. They practice recording different kinds of sounds using the appropriate microphones and then learn to use different kinds of sound elements to tell a story. Their stories are less than two minutes long and include music, sound effects, and sounds recorded in the classroom or in the street. They edit in sound effects.

A similar activity teaches students to analyze still images. They learn to articulate how the visual elements of composition and framing are used to represent values, ideas, characters, places, or events in a story. They learn how a documentary camera operator employs a similar aesthetic sensibility as a still photographer.

The students are clustered in small groups. Each group is given a different black and white still image to study. All of the photos relate to the topic they are exploring in their documentary; in this case, homelessness. One is a high-angle, vertical framed photo. In the foreground, a boy sleeps on a suitcase on a cracked sidewalk next to some bags piled against the wall of a concrete building. The wall that runs nearly the full length of the right side of the photo has graffiti on it. A woman carrying an infant in a snugli looks down in his direction while one of her hands rests on a stroller with another child in it. Another woman stands behind her, holding the hand of a child standing on either side of her. Near the top left corner of the photo, more women, children, and bags are behind her.

The students study their photo and jot down everything they notice. They are asked to consider such characteristics as: the type of shot (close-up, medium shot, long shot); the angle (high angle, low angle); light and shadow; and placement of elements (objects, people, etc.) in the picture (foreground, background, juxtaposition). Then they describe how the image makes them think and feel.

Using an overhead projector, each image is projected for the whole class to see. The students who first analyzed the images present their ideas. After they are finished, others contribute to the analysis. Students collectively explore questions such as:

- Who do you think took the picture?
- How are the people in the photos represented?
- What caption would you write for that photo?
- What kind of message is the photographer trying to convey?
- How do the different elements in the image contribute to get that message across?
- How might the message of the photo change if it were taken from a different angle, or cropped differently?
- Who might be the intended audience for the photo?
- How might different audiences respond to the photo (including the homeless people in the photos)?
- Where do you think the picture appeared?

The aim of this and other similar lesson activities is to develop students' habits of close observation and questioning so that they automatically bring them to bear on all the media experiences they have. Regardless of whether the student is trying to understand a visual, aural, or print-based text, habits of *questioning*, *evaluating*, and *analyzing* distinguish critical literacy from an uncritical literacy.

At the most basic level, the reader, listener, or viewer may learn to simply understand the literal meaning of what is written, said, or visualized. A more experienced "reader" can, as Dale describes (in Tyner, 1998), "draw inferences, understand the limitations of what was written, said or spoken. . . . And finally, we learn to read beyond the lines, to evaluate and apply the material to new situations" (p. 61).

Critical literacy aims to teach students the skills and capacity to read at this most developed level—in between the lines and beyond the lines—whether those lines are alphabetic, painted, videotaped, or spoken. But teachers need to give students repeated opportunities to practice and build upon the micro skills needed to progress through the various levels of development. At each step along the way, students need to practice skills and habits of close and repeated reading, with multiple perspectives, across all textural forms. Students can only initially accomplish this with a great deal of teacher guidance and assistance; gradually, they internalize the skills and finally can perform them independently.

Among the first steps in teaching critical literacy is to make the learning outcomes and levels of proficiency explicit to teachers and



students alike. At EVC, the teaching staff develops rubrics that differentiate among the various domains of learning that are embedded in the process of documentary making such as research, camerawork, media analysis, and editing. It is important to see these rubrics as living documents that teachers hold up against their practice in the classroom and based on that experience, review and revise each year. The point is not to have learning standards forever set in stone, but to have ongoing reflection and conversations among the staff about what counts as good teaching and learning and how to collectively get there.

The way that students internalize and apply multimodal critical literacy skills is difficult to quantify. In focus group interviews and surveys distributed to EVC alumni who attended workshops several years ago, Butler and Zaslow (unpublished) began to provide anecdotal evidence of impact.

If I'll be watching something on TV or something in general comes up and something's not right . . . I'll tell somebody about what I'm thinking or what I'm feeling about it. And I don't know, it usually ends up like you're explaining something to them for like an hour but definitely you look more depth at everything.

I spoke to my mom about it. She didn't really understand too much about it but one day we was watching the news and she was like, "These people will say anything on TV." And I'm like, "Well I go to EVC and I don't think they're saying it the way it's meant to be said. I think they're just editing it and making it come out a certain way." And she's like, "What are you talking about?" It took about an hour for me to explain . . . the whole thing to her, but I explained it to her. And she wanted to know if she could go to EVC but I'm like, "You're too old for EVC, Mom." (p. 8)

While their media production skills could not be assessed as not many graduates went on to work as documentary makers, the analytic skills they developed at EVC—while not easily measured—do surface and can be observed "qualitatively through their interpersonal relationships, through the change in attention and focus paid to media messages and production techniques, and in the expectations they have of themselves and of others" (Butler & Zaslow, unpublished, p. 8).

### Teaching Continuous Inquiry

Continuous inquiry has been an essential aspect of EVC's educational and cultural practice of critical literacy. The EVC model teaches students to assume a questioning, skeptical attitude; to dig deeply into

public problems; and to investigate the connectedness of those problems to the social institutions and historic trends that have shaped them and to the individuals who struggle to overcome them. This approach gives students the opportunity to move between the personal and public spheres, starting with the self-referential and then reaching beyond themselves to study their community at large. Such work sows the seeds for them to grow into what John Dewey called an “organized, articulate Public” (1946, p. 146), civically engaged citizens capable of active social concern.

Dewey is most well known for his writing on school reform and democracy. But he also wrote about the role of the mass media as an educational force in forming public opinion and consequently, its potential to contribute either to a healthy or weak democracy. Observing in the early years of the 20th century both the sensationalist reporting of the press and the rapid growth of communication technologies to distribute those reports, Dewey called for a public journalism of “continuous inquiry”:

Telegraph, telephone, and now the radio, cheap and quick mails, the printing press, capable of swift reduplication of material at low cost, have attained a remarkable development. But when we ask what sort of material is recorded and how it is organized, when we ask about the intellectual form in which the material is presented, the tale to be told is very different. . . . Without coordination and consecutiveness, events are not events, but mere occurrences, intrusions. . . . (leading to) the triviality and “sensational” quality of so much of what passes as news . . . Only continuous inquiry, continuous in the sense of being connected as well as persistent, can provide the material of enduring opinion about public matters. (Ratner, 1939, pp. 395–396)

Dewey’s commentary is just as relevant today. Much of the news is as remarkable for its instantaneous, 24-hour, global dissemination as it is for its sensational, decontextualized, nonintellectual content. We can hear echoes of Dewey’s call for journalists to practice continuous inquiry in the press and for educators to teach students to think and practice such inquiry in school so as to build a more informed public, capable of thoughtful engagement in public problems and in the democratic process.

Continuous inquiry requires skills of observation and imagination and a sense of agency. It requires the careful and repeated observation of the cultural and material world and the ability to create a sense of distance, a defamiliarizing of the familiar. For example, to pose the question: “Why are there homeless teenagers?” the questioner must

first take notice of the teens routinely passed by, sitting outside a shelter, or sleeping in a subway car or bus station, and see that there *are* homeless teenagers.

The student must also learn to imagine that which is not present. To pose the problem presupposes that there is a knowable cause, perhaps a solution, and even the possibility of a world where homelessness does not exist. Students must develop the capacity to imagine the world as if it could be otherwise.

The learner must have the self-confidence to find and make sense of answers to such questions, and also believe that a public audience would be interested in hearing what the investigator has found out. In other words, the student must have faith that the search is worth undertaking.

However, too often students come to EVC without such hope. They have not been engaged in this sort of in-depth community research before and do not believe they can complete an inquiry or that their project will make any difference. They seem to be, as Greene (1998) describes, “sunk in the everydayness” of life and so perceive the impoverished social conditions that surrounded them as wholly normal (p. 124). They suffer from what Dewey (1934) called the “anesthetic” in experience that numbs people into an inability to imagine the existence of, much less search for, alternatives. Without the self-confidence to ask questions and search for answers to them, students will be much less likely to develop the other skills needed for successful inquiry.

There are two underlying pedagogical strategies embedded in EVC’s inquiry-based approach that make it possible for teachers to actively engage students in the work: the learning process is *dialogue-based* and *student-centered*. From the first day of class, the teacher sets a tone and develops a culture of open honest dialogue and learner-centered participatory decision making. Within this learning environment, students develop a greater sense of empowerment that motivates them to take up the search as well as a respect for themselves and their peers as collaborative learners. Over time, they come to see that their inquiry can make a difference and that through the process the students are becoming teachers and change agents.

### *Dialogue-Based Teaching*

The importance of dialogue in learning is described by Freire (1970): “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no commu-

nication, and without communication there can be no true education” (pp. 73–74).

In the EVC documentary workshop, dialogue takes place on several levels. Pairs or small groups of students may have informal conversations or more formal discussions and debates. They have multiple opportunities to pose questions and conduct interviews on video with peers as well as with adults in positions of authority. In each of these instances, they learn about the subject of their inquiry in addition to learning on a meta-cognitive level that their ideas and questions count, and are in fact vital to the success of the entire class project.

They also learn that the teacher is not the sole possessor of knowledge, and that knowledge is shared and constructed by all the students and the community members they interview. This shared construction of knowledge through dialogue constitutes an oppositional shift in power relations from their traditional school experience where the teacher, in a dominant role, does the talking and asking of questions and the student, in the subordinate position, does the listening and answering. Every community member is a potential resource; every interview exploring community problems opens up possibilities for further learning and problem solving. And as such, the entire community can become a laboratory for learning and action.

Several layers of dialogue drive the documentary process: an internal dialogue between the student and her or his lived experience, and external dialogues between student and student, student and teacher, and student and interviewee. A dialogue also takes place between the teacher, student, and interviewees whose ideas and voices are represented in the documentary and the audience who views it. Finally, it is important to note that each of these dialogues is grounded in and grows out of the essential social problem explored in the tape. This process of inquiry and creative production illustrates Freire’s (1970) dictum: “Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (p. 69).

As is evident in this alumnus’s powerful reflection on his experience, students realize that they can engage in dialogue with adults, about “adult” problems, to “name the world”:

One thing that . . . I think is very true to anyone’s experience at EVC [is] just knowing that as a young person you don’t have to be older to think about certain things, think about certain topics, about certain issues and want to talk to older people to get their opinions. Understand that you are on the same level or

enough of a level that it's OK to have a conversation with an older person about politics or any number of global issues. (Butler & Zaslow, unpublished, p. 15)

Most students, however, do not begin the inquiry with the skills needed to engage in open dialogue and make full use of their "laboratory." The teacher needs to give them a great deal of practice and preparation so they can build the skills along the way. This includes teaching students how to approach a stranger on the street for an interview, how to give and accept constructive feedback from peers, how to use research to develop initial and follow-up questions, and how to turn a formal interview into a relaxed open-ended conversation. Each of these practices at some level involves a blending of oral and print literacies and of social and intellectual skills, and leads to a gradual opening up of students' curiosity and imagination.

The importance of learning "how to talk to people" cannot be underestimated. The documentary inquiry process gives students practice in journalism interviewing techniques that help them to initiate a social encounter in the community and facilitate an intellectually engaging and generative conversation. These are not skills students often learn in overcrowded traditional schools; the investigation of social issues generally falls outside of the academic curriculum and community members are often undervalued as primary sources of information. In addition, as developing skills of oral communication is emphasized less in school than is written work, students have few opportunities to practice the art of dialogue. So gaining such opportunities at EVC is appreciated by them all the more.

In reflecting on their experience at EVC, students seem to remember most the social encounter of the interview, learning to "approach" a stranger to have a conversation, whether on the telephone or on the street:

Overall, what I've learned from EVC and what I will take with me, is basically not only working with the camera and things like that and making a documentary but all in all, how to go out and meet people and how talk to people. We had to do research; we had to find people to talk to. We had to find expert interviews. We had to actually go there, call them and set up the interviews. Things like that. It was a real professionalism. You had to carry yourself in a certain way . . . Interviewing I will take with me. It taught me how to approach someone. (Serena)

Ultimately, the dialogue the students are engaged in is with their audience. They are not only posing questions to their interviewees but

are combining the answers they record on video along with imagery, music, special effects, and other elements to tell a story. Their voices are being heard through their tape, making an argument that reflects back a synthesis of the best questions, stories, and wisdom that they collected throughout the course of their inquiry.

The school and community screenings and the question and answer sessions that follow are teachable moments. These are opportunities to present new perspectives, make marginal voices heard, break the silence about injustices witnessed, change audiences' ways of thinking, and even, in some cases, move them to action. As one EVC alum reported, "My experience at EVC and the whole documentary workshop process gave me the whole understanding that there were people out there that valued my opinion and that you can make a difference by just doing a documentary on something." For many students, their EVC experience was a journey out of silence and into dialogue, and from dialogue into action.

The students also spoke about how their thinking changed as a result of their experience producing the homeless youth documentary:

I learned more in this semester about this topic than I have all my life. Before researching this topic, I too had many stereotypical thoughts and I didn't know anything else from what was visible to me, which was just the people sleeping on the streets and subways. As soon as I found out about what's actually going on, and the youth that we usually don't see, my views changed immensely. Now instead of thinking that all homeless people are bad and crazy, . . . I see them as average people, just trying to make it in this world, and people who don't have anyone to turn to. (John)

Another student explained how the video was going to "make a difference" and would change the way audiences thought about the problem.

Homeless youth . . . was an important topic for us to learn and research about because it will change not only the way we think about it, but whoever watches the video will also change their way of thinking about it. And it's gonna make a difference in people's lives. (Vanessa)

Students were no longer only students but teachers, cultural producers, and social activists.

### *Student-Centered Teaching*

The second and related strategy of EVC's inquiry-based approach is grounded in the student-centeredness of the teaching. Throughout

the Documentary Workshop, the EVC teachers give students decision-making power in the purposes, content, and direction of their own learning. It would not be sufficient to teach students to conduct neighborhood interviews if the teacher chose all the subjects to be addressed and the questions to be asked. The teacher and not the students would be doing the interesting, challenging intellectual work, and the students would miss out on important learning opportunities. The point is for the students to pose and refine their own authentic questions, find resources and information, weigh evidence, present their findings, and take a vested interest in and ownership of their own learning. The intellectual and emotional rewards are so much greater for the students if they feel connected to, inspired by, and passionate about their subject of choice. Through this experience, they grow to become independent and self-directed learners.

The EVC students consistently report that they feel more positively about themselves, their work, and their community, in contrast to their experiences in traditional teacher-centered classes. A powerful sense of engagement and excitement surrounds them when they are out on the streets, talking with their peers, and talking about subjects of immediate importance to them. They have a sense of ownership about their work when they get to decide the subject of study. And they feel tremendous pride when they present their projects and answer questions at public screenings attended by their friends, family, and teachers. While most schools do not focus on work that has an audience beyond the classroom or school setting, such work leads students to understand the importance of their roles as citizens and social critics. As one student described it:

The single most satisfying moment was at the final screening at EVC. I had my mother there, and my girlfriend at the time, and her mother. Her mother didn't know I could speak that well. She had her perceptions about me based on maybe the way I looked or my appearance. She never got a chance to speak with me or find out how I felt. But when she saw me speaking about the project and how proud I was of it, it touched her. . . . Seeing my mother in the audience and looking at how proud she was. That sticks out as well. (Goodman, 2003, p. 58)

A key principle and strategy of EVC's student-centered class is student choice of the subject of their inquiry. The students' own condition of life becomes their curriculum of study. As a collective, the Documentary Workshop students are given the opportunity to decide what aspect of their life at home, in school, or perhaps in the streets of their community is an important enough issue or problem to explore

for nearly the entire 18-week semester. This selection is an involved process that takes several class days to accomplish. Following is a brief description of the process from the fall 2003 semester that resulted in the documentary on homeless youth.

The students first view professionally and student-produced documentaries to become familiar with the genre and the issues they explore, and generate a list of criteria about what they believe makes a “good” documentary. Students then look to the concerns they have in their own lives and in their surrounding community for subjects worth investigating.

Among the topics and questions the students generated were: the representation of women in music, movies, advertisements, and TV and how that affects how they are treated in society; does music impact how we act and how violent we are as a society?; homeless teenagers; the effects of growing up in a broken or an untraditional home; stress; youth rights—why are they not allowed to drink or buy cigarettes but can be tried as adults and go to jail before they are 18; HIV/AIDS and young people; and rats and neighborhoods—why some have more rats than others, and what kinds of diseases they transmit.

The students narrowed the list down from 33 issues to 10 after an hour and a half of discussion about which topics might be redundant, which could be grouped together, and which they felt most strongly about. They then reduced the list to five and carried on the discussion by writing questions and comments to each other on five separate “graffiti boards,” each devoted to one of the top five issues.

After reviewing all of the comments scrawled across the graffiti boards, the class more closely considered the pros and cons of each topic using their criteria for a “good” documentary: a clear line of inquiry; multiple voices and perspectives; formal and informal interviews; an engaging story that educates and entertains; and new information, or a different take on what is commonly seen. They were urged to consider the topic that would make the best documentary rather than a personally favored topic. Finally, they voted, choosing homeless teenagers as their focus. As Vanessa explained it, “Homelessness, out of all the topics, seemed to be the most important one—the one that would actually make a difference and that people could relate to 10 years from now.”

### Teaching Reflection

Critical literacy teaches students to actively reflect on their own work and learning. The skills and habits of reflection are developed



through regular journal writing, critiques of a range of documentaries, and rough-cut edit screenings. However, the most intensive time for reflection that is built into the Documentary Workshop is the portfolio roundtable. This learner-centered approach to reflection teaches students to monitor and evaluate their own and each other's growth and learning. The roundtable is a time for student reflection and also a time to reach a collective assessment about the thinking and performance of the student, and by extension, of the teacher as well.

Media educators are constantly making judgments about the quality of camerawork, editing, and research we expect from our students. Often the standards are based on an intuitive sense of what constitutes good work in terms of craft, creativity, and thoughtfulness. Efforts to use less subjective measures such as multiple choice tests tell us less about what the students know than about what she or he does *not* know. These tests do not tell us what students can actually do, or how students think and grapple with problems within the real-life context of a video production. Portfolios and the student exhibitions offer a richer portrait of what students are capable of knowing and doing. They give students an opportunity to publicly show their best work and talk about it with members of the community including parents, other students, teachers, principals, researchers, producers, and artists (Goodman & Tally, 1993, p. 30).

To prepare for the portfolio roundtables, students gather a variety of records and instances of documentation produced during the course of their documentary production. These records include journal entries, rough footage from interviews, rough-cut screenings, edit plans, interview questions, tape logs, and phone logs.

The collection process is well integrated into daily work. But gathering work is not enough; students and staff have to understand how each student is evolving. This includes frequent conversations about the work the students do, making criteria for what constitutes good-quality work explicit.

During the roundtables, students present several drafts of their work to demonstrate their learning and skill development over time. The teachers, parents, media artists, researchers, and community members who sit on the panel are asked not to assign a grade, but to look carefully at the work, look for evidence of student learning, acknowledge the learning evidenced, and encourage that learning through constructive feedback. Ultimately, conversations around portfolios and screenings can help shape a culture of self-reflection and critique that students can internalize. The process of presenting a portfolio to a

panel reinforces the self-reflection. Students begin their individual presentation by reflecting on the inquiry process of making their documentary as related to the two skill areas they chose to present. Here is one student's general overview related to interviewing and editing skill areas:

We found people to interview. How we did that was we went online. I looked for shelters, called them and asked them for interviews. They agreed; some didn't. We got interviews. We went to shelters, and we videotaped kids. Then we got to the editing process. That was hard but also I had the most fun doing the editing. It was hard because you had to figure out where you are going and you had to present it in a way that everybody would understand and get your point across clearly. That was definitely the hardest part because—how you gonna go about deciphering through all this information and make it into something coherent that people will understand? (Vanessa)

Students refer to rubrics that provide such criteria. For example, students who chose to highlight camera work might evaluate their learning through the choices of different types of shots to convey a mood; students who present about interviewing might discuss how they learned to ask pertinent follow-up questions to get desired information; and students who present about critical viewing might discuss how they can now identify various points of view in the media. During her roundtable, one student showed a clip of the first street interview she conducted and critiqued her lack of basic skills, such as memorizing questions and paying attention to the interviewee.

That was a bad interview I did. I would say it was a bad interview because I didn't memorize the questions, and I was like "um, um." I was hesitant; I think I made them uncomfortable when I did that. I didn't really pay attention to them . . . I could have come up with a follow up question to that. I wasn't really paying attention; I was just trying to go straight to the next question. That was one of my bad interviews. And also, I was just hesitant. I wasn't confident doing the interview. I was like, "Uh, uh," stuttering and stuff. (Serena)

Then she showed a clip from a later street interview to show her growth and development over time. She proudly showed off the more advanced interviewing skills she demonstrated, such as asking follow-up questions and turning an interview into a flowing conversation:

I had skills! . . . I was kinda like Oprah [gestures with an imaginary microphone in her hand]. You know like, I just kept the interview flowing. And I was able

to still get information from her. When she said, “My neighborhood is good,” I was like, “Why?” So, I could get a fuller answer. Yeah. I had skills.

She then showed a tape of herself conducting an expert interview and explained how she learned to use research in her interviews:

My research, it really paid off when it came time to do the interviewing. . . . I felt more comfortable interviewing him, 'cause I knew about the topic. I made better questions and was more prepared. . . . Basically, we went to the Health Department and interviewed Mr. Kopel about environmental stress to find out more information about it. He was our expert. . . . This was a good interview because I gave examples about the article we read from the *New York Times*. . . . and I was just more confident. (Serena)

Another student showed her panel tapes of the first interview she conducted with a homeless youth and reflected on how she had improved as an interviewer:

Those were two interviews with the same person. He was nice enough to let me interview him twice. Because the first time, I was so shy . . . I asked him if it was difficult for him to find a job. And he said, “Yes, it was. It was hard to put up a resume.” So then, right there. Instead of asking him why was it hard to put up a resume, maybe because he doesn't have an address or a telephone number, I asked him if he had a lot of references. Which has nothing to do with the topic! But then the second time I interviewed him, all the questions that I didn't get to ask him, I thought about it the second time, and I kind of put them in there. The second interview was much better than the first one. (Vanessa)

At the end of each presentation, the facilitator asks for questions to clarify anything that was unclear, and allows the panel guests to probe the student's knowledge and understanding. After clarifying questions, the facilitator asks participants for both “warm” and “cool” feedback (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). Warm feedback includes only positive comments about the student's cover letter, presentation, and work. What follows is an example of warm feedback given by a guest to Vanessa, one of the student producers of the homeless youth documentary.

I thought that your presentation skills are excellent. Very clear, very thorough. The way you walked us through the information you were presenting . . . I really want to congratulate you, because I think that the interviews that you guys were conducting . . . the ones with the youth themselves, were really challenging. Because these are young people who obviously are dealing with

incredibly serious, and in some cases life threatening, situations—not having a place to live . . . So it requires real sensitivity on the part of the interviewer coming to that conversation. And I felt that as much as you thought that the first one wasn't any good. . . . your thoughtfulness and your sensitivity to the person you were talking to, I thought that really came through really clearly. And I'm sure that the interviewee appreciated that. (Tom, EVC staff member panelist)

Then cool feedback, which includes more critical comments and suggestions for the student's future learning, is shared. Students are instructed not to respond to feedback, but just to listen. Here is an excerpt from Vanessa's roundtable:

You have to listen to people before you are talking back to them. And that was definitely something you had to work on all semester. And the same thing when you go to a job interview. When someone starts to give you feedback, you don't want to interrupt them. You want to listen to them and then you speak after they finish. That's my only cool feedback. Other than that, I think you did wonderful work through the whole semester. (Maria, Documentary Workshop teacher)

After the warm and cool feedback has been given, the students can answer any questions that the roundtable participants ask. This exchange took place at Vanessa's presentation:

Participant (Tom): What were the bigger picture challenges of this whole experience of producing a documentary with a group of your peers? For you personally, what were the biggest challenges of doing that?

Student (Vanessa): Working with people.

Participant (Tom): That is the challenge?

Student (Vanessa): That is the challenge. Really. Working with people. Because, when you sit three people together to decide on something, one person is gonna have an opinion. The other one is gonna have a completely different one, and the third one is just gonna be off this earth. And there is no way you can decide on things because people are constantly like, "No, I want this." "I want that." "No, I want this." No matter what you do, everybody is not gonna be happy with it . . . You have to learn to how work with somebody you don't like. . . . And then you grow to love them. You really do.

McDonald et al. (2003), who developed and practiced protocols of assessment and reflection from which EVC's model has been adapted, describe the pedagogical significance of the process:

The point is to reach a different understanding of our students than the kind we're used to, one deeper than what is required merely to keep our teaching and their learning in sync. But this demands a great shift in energy, both practical and organizational . . . we often refer to this great shift of energy with the simple phrase "looking at student work." Here, however, we acknowledge that the "looking" we advocate is simple in the deep and disciplined way that Thoreau's looking was simple at Walden Pond and Annie Dillard's at Tinker Creek. Simple but elemental. Simple but difficult . . . such learning communities foster democracy as well as cognition. They encourage learners—whether they are first graders, graduate students or colleagues in professional education—to appreciate the value of diverse ideas and deliberative communities. (pp. 3, 7)

### Long-Term Impact

Critical literacy is both an educational strategy and a cultural practice. It seeks to address Dewey's concerns of developing a civically active "articulate public" that has the intellectual capacity to engage in collective dialogue and inquiry into the most pressing social problems; and Freire's concerns of developing a literate public empowered to "name the world" in order to transform it. Critical literacy as practiced by the EVC further addresses the concerns of Kathleen Tyner, David Buckingham, Cary Bazelgette, and other media literacy researchers and practitioners who aim to teach students to produce and "read" between and beyond the lines of media across a range of communication modes.

The power of this model of teaching and learning is evident in the student work at EVC and opens up important possibilities not only at EVC, but also in school and after-school settings on a much larger scale. But to scale up the teaching of critical literacy requires broad changes in the educational practices, goals, and structures of schools so that language instruction is opened up to include multiple literacies; the locus of instruction shifts from a teacher-centered to an inquiry-based, dialogic, learner-centered model; punitive high-stakes testing gives way to the collective reflection and deliberation of student learning through portfolio assessment forums; and the curricula are expanded beyond the state-mandated academic requirements to embrace the curricula of the students' lives and the media culture and social community in which they live.

Documenting the teaching and learning of critical literacy as it is practiced at EVC gives a snapshot of the impact it has on the students' creative, analytic, and social capacities. Such a snapshot presents the dual challenges of scaling up the work to reach larger numbers of

students in schools as well as of scaling it down (McDonald, Buchanan, & Sterling, in press), so the impact continues to be deep and lasting on each individual student. A recent study on the long-term impact of EVC's pedagogy suggests a lasting change in student thinking (Butler & Zazlow, 2004), although more research is needed. However, if focus group interviews with EVC alumni 10 and more years after they took the workshop are any indication, the results are encouraging.

Critical thinking and just thinking, and inquiry. . . . I'm a mom right now of a 5 year old, and I totally use that and teach my daughter that that's very important. You know, questioning why you see something this way. I try to nurture that within her even.

That's what really impacted me with EVC, was it's the place that I could go and . . . not just write something down . . . or read something and regurgitate it for a teacher to look at and that's it. You know, you get a mark if you pass the class or not, no big deal. But here I was getting something. Actually doing it, by yourself, or with a group and it makes so much of a difference to me. . . . And I think that's what this has, it has that feel, you're doing something, you're making these things happen. So it's important to have . . . a place that's keeping an open mind and trying to get young people to speak their mind and I think that young people are very influential and have the most influence over the whole culture and they can just reach so many different people if they're just given that opportunity. (Butler & Zazlow, 2004, pp. 9, 15).

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Embedded in literacy practices, critical literacy provides opportunities for readers to determine their ability to discern the purpose of texts and also their ability to identify ideologies presented in the texts. As they read, individuals can accept, reject or reconstruct the ideologies presented in the text (Cervetti, Pardales, Damico, 2001) to support their own life experiences (Luke, 2000).  
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