

## Documentary Work and Teaching as a Moral Enterprise

Michael S. Katz

*San José State University*

Periodically our colleagues have programmatically urged us in new directions. For example: Maxine Greene's emphasis on literature, Jane Roland Martin's focus on historical feminist scholars, Nel Noddings' moral attention on issues of caring and interpersonal relationships; moreover, special interest groups have directed us to domains such as ethics, spirituality, and racial justice. In that vein, Mordechai Gordon joins this entourage by urging us to take documentary work seriously. This work, being rich, broad, and diverse, is nicely revealed through Robert Coles' conception of it. In his article, the author raises three provocative ways for philosophers to consider documentary work. Each shall be considered.

First, he asks us to consider "what is documentary work?" Drawing on Robert Coles' conception, he informs us that it includes literature, film, journal articles, school records, court records, newspaper records, informants' and witnesses' reports, participant observations, photography, tape recordings, and much more. Here, the author suggests all of it has the same essential quality, namely documentary work is always approached from a particular vantage point with one's own values, preferences and sensitivities. Moreover, documentary work "aims to expose and record some 'objective' reality that has not received enough attention, but the search for objectivity is always caught up with our subjective passions and idiosyncrasies." Although Coles' work itself is compelling, Professor Gordon's summary oversimplifies it by ignoring crucial ways different documentary work communicates with its audiences. Professor Gordon notes that Coles tells us that as individuals we bring a different life to the others being observed and will engage with others differently. This observation is true, but it underemphasizes the complexity of how different documents function. For example, when I was teaching high school during the Vietnam era, newspapers would report the war by citing the numbers of plane sorties flown, enemy dead recorded, etc.—statistics giving us a sense of war. Simultaneously, students, as

they were reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, would experience the graphic horror of soldiers living in filthy trenches, witnessing their comrades killed and dismembered. Did both portray a common objective reality of war? Of course not. The lenses of essentialism obscure important differences. All documents are not the same; they do not function in the same way. Neither do moral stories. Many years ago, in response to a presidential address by Betty Sichel on “moral stories,” I suggested that not all moral stories were the same; she was writing about the moral meanings conveyed by a Henry James novel. I pointed out that moral meanings were also conveyed by stories from McGuffey’s readers—simplistic one-dimensional moral tales with no situational complexity. Both were stories, but the stories from McGuffey’s readers had no essential moral dimension to them, either in intent or in interpretive complexity. Another example: we might find statistics from court records and newspapers of the number of slaves sold at slave auctions in the 1850’s. Contrast these with Frederick Douglass’ biographical description of him experiencing a slave auction for the first time. My point is simple: Professor Gordon oversimplifies the real and functional differences in meaning that different kinds of documents reveal.

Next, Professor Gordon, seeks to illuminate one aspect of the teacher’s role as one doing documentary work; he considers how teachers use “their research and thinking skills to analyze student performance and make improvements based on the evidence.” He cites how data teams investigate student performance data to examine how students use different thinking skills and how such data can inform teachers’ understanding of their students. However, he assumes the relevant data is available within the system and how the reified representations of it are also included. However, we know that less than 60% of school achievement (grades, test scores, etc.) is explained by school factors.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, we know that of the in-school factors, the biggest factor is the teacher herself. So, as Ronald Glass explained to me, “this data-driven effort is like the drunk searching for his lost keys under the only street light on the block even though he dropped them elsewhere in the dark.” Later, Professor Gordon cites Dewey and suggests that educators have the power to regulate the “objective conditions” of the learning process. If Dewey believed this, he was wrong—then and now. Moreover, Dewey’s focus was not primarily on the teacher as

a researcher, but as one who could create conditions wherein students would engage in active problem-solving inquiry. They would learn how to generate useful problems to solve. Dewey's work on critical thinking, best revealed in his book *How We Think*, seems underemphasized while being fit into Professor Gordon's model of the teacher as documentarian. Finally, in sum Professor Gordon largely ignores the deep cultural biases built into contemporary data on students' performances. In this section, he also neglects other powerful features of the students as documentarians of their own work—students' reflections of their own work through journals and portfolios. To his credit, the author acknowledges the importance of such self-evaluation in his final section.

In his final section, the author explores how the analogy with teaching as documentary work breaks down. Here, he points out that the morally implicated location of teaching requires that we think of teaching as unlike documentary work but as a moral enterprise. This point is quite important, but it seems to undermine his main argument that teaching is primarily or essentially documentary work. In fairness to Professor Gordon, if his argument had been designed to reveal how teaching is a moral enterprise, he would have needed several papers to accomplish this task. However, since much of my recent work focused on bridging scholarship in ethics with the use of film and novels—all designed to examine how the teacher functions as a moral role model, let me comment briefly on the author's argument. Citing the work of Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen, the author considers how teachers' facial and bodily expressions can be viewed as a moral commentary on how students and teachers engage in their work. This example raises the following problem: what is to be counted as *moral* and why. Jackson never clearly delineates the boundaries of the moral. As a result, it seems that virtually all of classroom life from teachers' nods and smiles to many other things constitute the "moral life of the classroom." But ethicists and applied ethicists have struggled mightily to delineate moral matters from manners. They have not all agreed on the established criteria for what should count as "moral." Here is a weird personal example. Some folks have told me that I often appear to be smiling, even if I don't seem to be happy. Is my smiling a moral response to something? Not necessarily or obviously. Many ethicists have concluded that the "moral" refers to that which has an important

effect on others' well-being. That is why promise-keeping, truth-telling, not harming people or exploiting people for one's personal gain, etc. all count as morally important practices. Nodding or smiling, if the context were to establish discriminatory approval or disapproval of certain students, might be moral. It might not be. It would depend on the larger context in which it occurred.

In the final section, the author acknowledges the critical importance of teachers' moral dispositions, but he focuses this concern on whether some teacher candidates should or should not be approved. He wants teachers to use documents honorably so that a more democratic and ethical approach to documentation and assessment can be established. Fine. But is that purpose a critical part of moral teaching? Perhaps. My view is that moral teaching is focused on the development of moral persons and moral citizens, people disposed to treat others morally—fairly, in caring ways, and with total respect for their fundamental moral worth. Central to developing moral citizens is teaching them how to fight for social justice and core democratic values, and how to engage in the political process. Unfortunately, the author fails to emphasize two important ways teaching remains a moral enterprise: First, teachers enter long-term interpersonal moral relationships. These relationships reveal whether students are treated in caring, fair, and respectful ways—or not. These relationships will either foster or inhibit the development of moral dispositions. Second, teachers establish normative cultures in their classrooms, cultures of respect or discrimination, cultures of safety or intimidation, cultures of caring or insensitivity, and students interact with these normative cultures every day and are morally influenced by them. That is why Dewey reminded us that education is not only a direct instructional undertaking, as Professor Gordon notes, but also an indirect informal enterprise.

In sum, Professor Gordon has urged us to look to documentary work for new possibilities. He has encouraged us to view teaching as a form of research and as a moral enterprise. These are very worthy programmatic thrusts—ones we would do well to take seriously. For that we thank him.

---

1 My thanks to Ronald Glass and Susan Verducci for their critical comments on

the author's article. Ronald Glass supplied me with this information in an informal phone call. The quote is from Ronald Glass, Feb. 28, 2018.