

New York State Foundations of Education Association

2009 Presidential Address

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Dear NYSFEA Members:

I have been “angsting” over an appropriate President’s message for our then-future, now-materialized website ever since Celia Oylar inspiringly affirmed NYSFEA’s historic commitment to progressive activism at last year’s conference. Like most of you I find that my job teaching educational foundations and teacher education, with all of the committee work, fieldtrips, and community obligations entailed, including support of colleagues and students, takes up most of my waking hours. I have had the usual expected and unexpected family needs, events, illnesses, and even good stuff! I prepared for and presented at AESA in Savannah; some of you did this, too, and were certainly involved with other conferences, workshops, and research. Like many of you, too, I have spent the remaining few hours working on the Obama campaign. Something of the above has born (tangible) fruit!

First of all I want to say that it’s perfectly okay for people of all races and ethnicities to delight in the election of the first black president of our country without feeling patronizing! It’s okay to talk about how much and how hard you cried on election night; I, personally, need to know that I am not the only educational studies professor who got choked up in front of my students. No matter how many cynical interpretations of the Obama victory are possible, there are far more (and more powerful) socially, spiritually, and politically progressive interpretations.

Already Obama has reiterated his intention to close Guantanamo. Now we know as well that a grandmother will reside in the White House. I interpret the above as already one progressive political move and one culturally relevant social move announced in little over a week! Then, too, we have Rahm Emanuel’s apology to the Arab-American community for his Israeli father’s classist and anti-Arab remark to a reporter; when was the last time a US politician felt any obligation to apologize to an Arab community? I know that as I interpret positively, other less hopeful interpretations are possible. But I am surrounded by hopeful interpretations; watching the John Adams series (with Paul Giamatti) just the other day, my husband pointed out that Obama is bringing back respect for oratory; I immediately thought of that fabulous essay by John Angus Campbell, “Oratory, Democracy, and the Classroom,” and thought, I must add that to my history methods syllabus next term! I am intentionally choosing to invest in what I see as hopeful on the national scene, and reserving energy for the critical responses I am prepared to back up with activism.

Related to the above, officers and board members of NYSFEA will meet in Geneseo this week to plan the most effective possible use of our new website, to delegate appropriate jobs re: organizational maintenance (and possible enhancement), to make some planning decisions re: our

upcoming March 27-8 conference, and to brainstorm a possible political action goal for our organization. Hopefully, we can consider the possibility of a student conference as well.

Let me say here that I am hopeful we can agree to collectively support an anti-budget cuts coalition, exploiting for grounding not only the structural political and economic theorizing that forms the backbone of the socially critical educational foundations literature, but also the assertion of the very recent winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, Paul Krugman, that only massive investment in projects enhancing the public good can lead us out of this financial crisis.

Aside from urging our members to publicly argue against the rationality of budget cuts, I hope we will strategize about how to link our website to others arguing for federal bailout money for school districts and for job creation to support the tax bases on which school funding relies. If no website exists that argues specifically for federal bailout of public schools, then I am hoping we can make such an argument a central focus of our own website and strategize about how to get it taken seriously.

So, in light of the inspiring election results, I'd like to ditch plans to tweak my current more scholarly work for presentation here, and instead address the window many of us believe has opened for our students and colleagues in recent weeks. I want to offer some examples of my own efforts to seize what I perceive as a limited opportunity to profoundly affect the consciousness of our students, whether they are pursuing teaching formally, or more generally as socially connected citizens. I offer the following in order to inspire response, in the hopes that we can generate dialogue here on this website about how to exploit the openings some of us regularly experience to reconstruct our curricula so that it speaks to the possibilities of the current historical moment. More important, though, I hope we can offer concrete support to those of us struggling with entrenched curricula constrained by reactionary policies adopted during the right-wing shifts of the past eight years (and longer!) that have led to this moment of new possibility.

At AESA in Savannah I offered to a very small audience scholarly rationale for the building of foundational programmatic support for teacher education in three areas, based on the contemporary research from our own ranks that I find the most compelling in literacy, community organizing, and sustaining non-denominational spiritual practices. Using the Lave and Wenger paradigm of 'legitimate peripheral participation' I argued for pulling our students into 'communities of practice' led boldly by us. That is, I suggested that we allow ourselves to be models of 'masters of communities of practice' towards progressive social change in different and appropriate areas, and that we create opportunities for students to participate first peripherally, and gradually more centrally, in the experiences into which our own (necessarily partial) 'mastery' has invited us.

Specifically, I suggested three communities of practice in which I have been actively seeking the requisite experiences for my students because I can claim Lave and Wenger's expansive, but not specifically professionalized, conception of 'mastery': 1) critical literacy including critical media literacy, 2) community organizing and/or experiences with government that model the possibility for government to be an expression of the moral responsibility for every 'one another' of us (both locally and globally) that we feel but, logistically, cannot enact directly, and 3) practices of non-denominational, non-religious spiritual sustenance.

I want to take the time and space here to offer experiences from each of the three communities of practice named above as a model for intentionality in our planning for the immediate work with our students. Related to critical literacy:

After three consecutive years organizing a half-day workshop for student teachers with Project Looksharp, a cutting-edge socially critical media literacy consortium housed at Ithaca College and led by award-winning social studies teacher Chris Sperry, this summer I participated, along with a group of student teachers in secondary history and English, in Looksharp's one-week summer institute. Each of us were required to produce a film or 'media literacy event' to share with the group on Friday of our workshop week. During the week we received instruction in media production, but perhaps more significantly, in a very specific rubric for media critique. I found these lessons invaluable, and have already used in classes my own work accomplished at the workshop, which offers students two brief film clips on the building of the Panama Canal to decode for messages about power, domination, and marginalization. One of my students presented a film she intends to use as a student teacher next term in which she juxtaposes Iraq War footage and the lyrics of two popular songs that respectively extol and excoriate war. An English student created a unit on the portrayal of women in a Shakespeare play based on the decoding of a series of theater posters.

This work is transferable to less resource-intensive venues and I am convinced we could do some of it ourselves at alternatives to conventional conferences (which include students) and offer partial course credit for students involved, for instance. I raise the issue here because I can see, again within our own ranks, that alternatives to the dominance of print text media are being explored in contemporary research advocating a move away from the current constrained focus on testing and standards. I believe that a call for critical media literacy offers a positive alternative to the negative critique of high-stakes testing and that the practices of critical media literacy can also become assets in our struggle against high-stakes testing.

(Let's not forget that the Obama administration needs lots of information about the negative effects of high-stakes testing on the most vulnerable young people. Write into their transition team website, <http://change.gov/>, and encourage your students to do the same!)

After attending Project Looksharp this summer I also attended a two-and-a-half day workshop on digital storytelling. This workshop was not oriented towards critical media literacy, but did offer us some instruction in aesthetics with regard to narrative 'voiceovers' and selection and interpretation of images in the (MAC) program Final Cut Pro. We were taught a formula for this work: develop a 350 word 'voiceover' and create a film by compiling private photographs, images and film clips available (legally) on internet, and/or the same found in the print media.

I am experimenting with my own hybrid, 'critical digital storytelling' this term in my introductory educational foundations course called "The American School" here at Colgate. I had my students individually create a film with a 350-word voiceover that captured any compelling (to them) personal 'educational memory' whose meaning had shifted as a result of our course. They presented these very short films to the class at midterm. For their final papers for this course, due in early December, each student must theorize his/her film using our course texts. I believe these films and the requirement to theorize them using course texts represents one possible step in the direction of taking personally and even being able to articulate one's implicatedness in the systems of privilege and exclusion that characterize schooling in the US. The majority of the films highlight experiences

with exclusion; one obvious challenge for my majority-white and dominant-culture students that they are coming to recognize is that they will need to shift their discourses from personal psychological theorizing about exclusion, to political conceptions of exclusions; further, they will need to use the course texts (some of our authors are Paley, Fine and Weis, Dewey, Tyack, Anyon, and Cowhey) to articulate how race, class, and cultural privileges are implicated in the (generally positive) individual resolutions of their narrated and illustrated experiences with exclusion in educational contexts.

In a second course I teach at Colgate, this one contributing to our core or general education requirements, called “The Challenges of Modernity,” the most dramatic first week of the officially named ‘financial crisis’ coincided with my teaching of the (mandated) text *The Communist Manifesto*. After my students were clearly impressed by a very clever cartoon version of an abridged *Manifesto* on YouTube called *Manifestoon*, I offered them, in place of their second short response paper requirement, the challenge of collectively updating the images and re-recording the voiceover of *Manifestoon* with the goal of creating and posting on YouTube a very contemporary rendering of the conditions of capitalist exploitation. I hope to have a YouTube link to post on our new NYSFEA website in the very near future!

Another direction in which I am taking media literacy is in creating a specific challenge for my secondary history and English student teachers: that they identify in their classes a student and/or group of students they would characterize as ‘outliers,’ ‘underachievers,’ and/or school/curriculum ‘resistors,’ and that they develop a media literacy project outside of the conventional school day in collaboration with the identified student(s) and possible identified friends of that student. We are already recognizing that this assignment is tricky on many levels. Although I began by seeking and winning approval informally from the principal and cooperating teachers involved, we are already running into complications with our first such project, centered on a student interview of the great, great, great grand-daughter of John Brown when she came two weeks ago to nearby Peterboro’s Abolition Hall of Fame for the induction of her great, great, great grandfather.

You can probably imagine the multiple complications re: charges of exclusion of other equally deserving students, unreliability of school-resistant high schoolers (even after they have expressed investment in such a creative project), and competition with schoolwork, particularly in the case of marginal school ‘performers.’ I don’t want to explore details here but would welcome the advice of those of you who have tried variations on this type of assignment. What I am thinking is that we might need to reshape the assignment as a response to Elizabeth Cohen’s assertion of the need to intentionally “treat expectations for competence” of marginalized students, possibly making the assignment less intensive and less exclusive.

I do want to add that one new public rationale for this project comes from the increase in individual racist and oppressive actions of white supremacists since Obama’s election, documented by the Southern Poverty Law Center and reported even in the *NY Times*. Historically, we know from the testimony of former and reformed Nazis and white supremacists that they cite incidents of humiliation and/or exclusions in public school, including being made fun of for unfashionable clothing, inarticulateness, unappreciated interests, and/or idiosyncratic appearance as the main attraction to the social safety and feeling of belonging that come with participation in right-wing extremist groups. For me, this testimony offers a timely reinforcement for teaching our student

teachers that they must “treat expectations for competence” and not just intensify their discourses around tolerance.

Related to the above and illustrating my second type of ‘community of practice,’ that is: community organizing or representations of/participation in government as democratic in the Deweyan sense, are specific fieldtrips. The Sunday before Obama’s victory a group of educational foundations and teacher education students traveled with me to Syracuse to attend a mass public meeting of ACTS (Area Communities Transforming Syracuse) where over 1000 people met at the massive Most Holy Rosary Catholic church. Present were self-identified poor people both white and of color, disabled people, representatives of unions, and a socially diverse array of representatives of area churches, one temple, and one mosque; working in task-forces since the summer, these people had developed a platform connected to a specific winnable social-justice goal for Syracuse-region residents in four areas: criminal justice, youth needs, worker rights, and children’s healthcare.

The four specific taskforce goals were (respectively): negotiating with the justice department to insure legal IDs for people coming out of prisons so that they could become workers again and join the civic community; making the academically rigorous and Deweyan gifted-and-talented program of the Syracuse Schools the model for teaching all children in the district by producing a manual describing the program’s practices to be distributed to all teachers in the district; negotiating a ‘community benefits agreement’ between ACTS, the City of Syracuse, and the Syracuse City Schools so that local unemployed construction workers would be guaranteed a certain percentage of the contracts for the current billion-dollar school rebuilding project; and assuring coverage of 2000 more children this year in the Child Care Plus state health insurance plan. Clearly one could argue, as one legislator did, that single-payer health insurance for all is a more worthy goal than expanding Child Care Plus, and/or that the production of a how-to manual for Deweyan teaching is not likely to significantly affect teacher practices especially in an era of budget cuts and high-stakes testing. But students observed a compelling model of large-scale community organizing, interestingly, the model that Barack Obama learned and practiced as a Chicago organizer. ACTS is affiliated with the same Gamliel Foundation which supported Obama’s training in the 1980s.

The way ACTS operates is that each taskforce articulates publicly its goals and its progress in an incredibly organized and time-efficient manner during this (typically bi-annual) mass meeting; then taskforce leaders call on local and regional elected legislators, judges, school board leaders and the mayor of Syracuse (all of whom were present when we attended!), individually asking them to pledge their support for the goal of each of the four taskforces. My students experienced politicians facing working-class activist members of their constituencies in grassroots democratic process. Further, the students were invited to participate actively in taskforces in the future, and/or to pledge monthly financial support for the work of ACTS. When ACTS advertises openings for its paid summer internships for college students some time this winter, they will be welcome to apply.

Our Thurber Student Education Society, an open student organization at Colgate for those pursuing educational studies majors or minors or teacher certification is currently hosting Wednesday lunchtime conversations about how students might become involved in citizen activism while in school. At this point we are exploring various models by organizing relevant, close-proximity field trips. For instance, a group of students attended last weekend’s social justice conference at Binghamton University where Howard Zinn keynoted on Saturday night. We will now study his young people’s history text in our social studies methods seminar next term. Students will also hear

the founder of Sustainable Bronx, Majora Carter, my personal heroine re: contemporary green activism opposing environmental racism, this Tuesday at nearby Hamilton College. As podcasts and films narrating her work are readily available on the internet, students can easily take on the educating of fellow students who are unable to participate in the Tuesday evening fieldtrip.

I offer these relatively spontaneously organized fieldtrips as possibilities for the initial, most 'peripheral' involvement with the community of practice of community organizers (in which I include people like Howard Zinn who function as progressive public intellectuals). I would argue that my students who meet weekly to strategize about meaningful student activism, who produce the Manifestoon II, and/or who agree to show their films and share their theorizing at a meeting of our local Chenango Valley Peace Alliance are moving in from the 'periphery.' (A friend and activist in the CVPC who watched my student Jill Ferris' film "Conversation About a Soldier" last spring, hearing about student films this term, asked if we might not select those whose theorizations speak directly about the pursuit of social justice and show them at a CVPC meeting this December.) Their work might also be viewed as addressing the challenge Dewey has left us around contemporary enactment of his vision for enlivening the public sphere.

Again, I hope for input from NYSFEA members re: your experience in relation to the availability of stimulating politically progressive events and speakers, and the extent to which it is practical for you to exploit such opportunities in support of coursework, or, occasionally, in place of coursework. I know that many of our members, like Jane Fowler Morse, Shawgi Tell, and Brian Morgan have actively involved their students in progressive research and/or community organizing. I wonder if we might not be able to articulate on our website multiple approaches to expanding such involvement, possibly beginning with the student NYSFEA conference we proposed at our last two conferences (which I have not followed up on organizing). At our Thursday meeting in Geneseo, we can consider David McGough's recent suggestion that we empower students to run a conference concurrent with our own this March 27-8 at Siena College.

The last 'community of practice' I cited, 'practices related to non-denominational spiritual sustenance,' has been recently theorized at conferences by both David Granger and Mary Manning Silver, and specifically taken up as well by our keynoter at last year's conference, Celia Oyler. We hope to hear more from all of them again in March. I can only offer here that I have been personally reticent, despite my general enthusiasm, about introducing meditation and yoga, two practices that sustain me, except when students explicitly invite me to do so as attention to such practices arise in class discussions or informal conversations. I can say that the American Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, has some marvelous readings that make sense to me in the context of teacher education. A few I have used with limited success in specific constellations of students. I'd love to hear about any inspiration for moving ahead with a direction of including in our programs more direct attention to spiritual sustenance of activist teachers, whatever form that might take, in the context of our organization's historic vehement allegiance to separation of church and state.

I want to stop here in the hopes that my remarks stay short enough and focused enough for busy people to read, and hopefully, provoke response. I hope to see all of you at Siena College in March, and do hope you will help us publicize both the conference and our organization by sharing with colleagues and appropriate list-serves our new organizational website, which you are right now reading this address.

Thanks so much to Brian Morgan at Geneseo for the time and energy he has invested in getting this website up and running, and to Mark Garrison and Shawgi Tell who have historically managed to keep it alive despite the missing requisite investment by most of us in the organization to make it vital. Hopefully we can encourage members saddened by their new release from the Obama campaign's loose but spirited community to invest in our website and our organization's goals.

Sincerely,

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