Teaching as Documentary Work

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Robert Coles' book *Doing Documentary Work* (1997) offers the reader a penetrating representation of the nature of documentary work. Featuring the work of literary documentarians like James Agee and George Orwell, the documentary photographs of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, and his own documentary research, Coles' book attempts to make sense of this endeavor and to interrogate it from the inside while asking a host of probing and self-reflective questions. Trained as a child psychiatrist, Coles draws on his knowledge of the social sciences in general and psychology in particular to analyze the subjects of his own documentary work—migrant farmers and their children in the 1960s—as well as the work of the other documentarians that he studied. At the same time, Coles was fascinated with writers such as Williams Carlos Williams, Anton Chekhov, and Charles Dickens among many others, writers who influenced his understanding of the nature of documentary work and whose writings he went on to teach at Harvard University and at the Center of Documentary Studies at Duke University. With Coles, we get that fairly rare combination of a scholar who is at once a social scientist (being adept at conducting systematic analysis of information and evidence) and a humanist, one who is skilled at providing detailed, rich and contextual representations of the specific phenomena one encounters.

This essay is designed to introduce our field to what I believe to be some philosophically and morally rich implications of Coles' notion of documentary work. At the same time, the analysis offered here goes beyond Coles' notion since my focus is specifically on *teaching as documentary work*. In what follows, I first describe the nature of documentary work based on Coles' analysis of this endeavor. In the next part, I explore and justify the notion of teaching as documentary work in light of the ideas of John Dewey as well as other educational theorists. After defending the notion that a major part of teaching includes

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engaging in documentary work, I examine how teaching is different from the other documentary vocations that Coles discusses. I argue that, unlike other documentary vocations, teaching demands positioning oneself in a location that is morally implicated. The final part of this paper begins to address the question: how can teachers perform their documentary duties honorably?

THE NATURE OF DOCUMENTARY WORK

In the Introduction to *Doing Documentary Work*, Coles lays out the tension between the social sciences and the humanities, a tension that those engaged in documentary work need to learn to navigate. Coles writes that:

> The word *documentary* certainly suggests an interest in what is actual, what exists rather than what one brings personally, if not irrationally, to the table of present-day actuality. Documentary evidence substantiates what is otherwise an assertion or a hypothesis or a claim. A documentary film attempts to portray a particular kind of life realistically; a documentary report offers authentication of what is otherwise speculation. Through documents themselves, through informants, witnesses, participants, through the use of the camera and the tape recorder, through letters or journal diaries, through school records, court records, hospital records, or newspaper records, a growing accuracy with respect to a situation, a place, a person or a group begins to be assembled.[1]

For Coles, then, documentary work—whether a film, a written report, or a journal article—entails a search for something factual, something that the documentarian can authenticate with evidence, witnesses and records.

However, Coles also emphasizes that the documentarian always approaches one's documentary work from a particular vantage point and with one's own values, preferences, and sensitivities—all of which shape to a certain extent how one approaches and interprets this work. Coles writes that "each of us brings, finally, a particular life to the others who are being observed in

10.47925/75.2019.336

documentary work, and so to some degree, each of us will engage with those others differently, carrying back from such engagement our own version of them."[2] Thus, Coles recognizes that although documentary work aims to expose and record some "objective" reality that has not received enough attention, the search for objectivity is always caught up with our subjective passions and idiosyncrasies. Indeed, for Coles, a great deal of what made literary documentarians like Agee and Orwell so successful is that they were skilled at moving back and forth and incorporating the demands of objectivity with those of subjectivity. They were skilled, in other words, at integrating:

> The tone a first-person narrative offers as against one executed in third person; a voice seeking to be contemplative, considered, as against one aiming for passionate persuasion, or advocacy, or denunciation; a distanced, analytic posture as against a morally engaged or partisan one ... [3]

Negotiating the tension between the demands of objectivity and those of subjectivity is certainly not easy to achieve for anyone engaged in documentary work. Coles demonstrates that even skilled documentarians like Agee and Orwell would sometimes struggle with this challenge when they diverged into emotional outbursts and diatribes in their writings. Nevertheless, Coles rightly insists that we need to acknowledge that even the most abstract, dispassionate and quantitative-based documentary work ultimately relies on an individual (subjective) interpretation and evaluation of the data that is presented. That is, presenting data always entails *choices* about issues such as what information matters, how to organize it, and what needs to be emphasized versus what can receive cursory attention. In Coles' words, "the issue, finally, becomes one of judgment, and thereby a subjective matter: an opinion of someone whose mind has taken in all that information, that documentation, and then given it the shape of sentences, of words used, with all of their suggestive possibilities."[4] Even a documentary report, which relies heavily on numbers and statistics, will have to attend to issues of choice, emphasis, interpretation, and judgement when the author needs to present this data in a way that others can access and understand.

Aside from his keen observations about the nature of documentary

work, what I personally find so compelling about Coles' analysis are the philosophical and moral questions that he raises and wrestles with regarding this work. For instance, in the Introduction to *Doing Documentary Work*, Coles asks: what kind of work are we doing, and to what purpose? Later in the book, in the chapter on moral and psychological tensions, he eloquently raises a series of probing ethical questions:

> How ought we regard ourselves, with what degree of scrutiny of our motives and our manner, of why we go where we do, and how we behave while there? ... What, if anything, do we owe those we have "studied," whose lives we have gone to document? ... Is it "exploitative" to do documentary work, to arrive on a given scene, ask for people's cooperation, time, energy, and knowledge, do one's "study" or "project," and soon enough, leave, *thank yous* presumably extended? How can we do such work honorably, so that those observed get more closely, explicitly connected with it?[5]

TEACHERS' DOCUMENTARY WORK

Unfortunately, Coles, his eloquent discourse notwithstanding, did not develop the notion of teaching as documentary work even as he reminds us that the word "document" originally meant to *teach* or *instruct*. Suggesting that teachers, much like photographers, historians and journalists, can be considered documentarians, he wrote that "to take stock of others is to call upon oneself—as journalist, a writer, a photographer, or as a doctor or a teacher."[6] Likewise, when he characterized the nature of documentary work as attempting to depict and provide verification for actual phenomena, Coles included school records as one type of evidence that documentarians rely on. Moreover, when discussing the work that he does with his own university students who were conducting documentary studies in various field locations, Coles mentioned that some of them were working in "ghetto" schools. Still, Coles' book does not provide the reader with much insight about what it means to do documentary

10.47925/75.2019.336

work as a teacher.

Of course, teachers fulfil a myriad of complex roles and responsibilities from delivering content to managing their classrooms and from communicating with parents, colleagues and administration to assessing and documenting student progress among many other duties. With respect to the latter responsibility, namely, teachers doing documentary work, the first question that needs to be addressed is: what does it actually mean for teachers to do this work and to what end? From an optimistic standpoint, to refer to teachers as doing documentary work is to focus on the aspect of this vocation that involves using their research and thinking skills to analyze student performance and make improvements in their teaching based on the evidence.

A current example of teachers doing documentary work is all of the data teams that have been established in many public schools and the data-based decision-making that informs the work of these teams. Data teams refers to groups of teachers (like grade-level or subject teams) who investigate issues like student performance data, both formative and summative, while rethinking their learning needs based on the evidence. In a 2011 U.S. Department of Education report on "Teachers' Ability to use Data to Inform Instruction,"[7] the researchers studied the specific skills that experts deemed to be important for teachers in order to understand what their students know, how students perform individually and as a group, what areas of their instruction need improvement, and how to group students and apply tailored strategies. The results of this study concluded that there are five skills that teachers needed to acquire in order to do good documentary work including:

- Find the relevant pieces of data in the data system or display available to them (*data location*)
- Understand what the data signify (*data comprehension*)
- Figure out what the data mean (*data interpretation*)
- Select an instructional approach that addresses the situation identified through the data (*instructional decision making*)

- Frame instructionally relevant questions that can be addressed by the data in the system (*question posing*)[8]

The authors of this report go on to explain these skills, noting that data location skills are necessary for identifying information that will be used to inform teachers' decisions about students. "Data comprehension skills, such as understanding the meaning of a particular type of data display (e.g., a histogram) or representing data in different ways, are necessary for figuring out what data say. Data interpretation skills are required for teachers to make meaning of the data."[9] In short, data-based decision-making requires teachers to be able to display a host of higher order cognitive skills including: identifying the relevant information, analyzing and interpreting this information, posing good questions that arise out of the information that was collected, and designing helpful interventions that address the problematic situations.

Given this admittedly generous reading of data-based decision-making, doing documentary work in teaching entails adopting the mindset of a teacher researcher and reflective practitioner, a mindset that can help new teachers and teachers in general approach their craft as learners, ones who are open to making adjustments and changing course based on analysis of the best available evidence when something is not going right. Of course, the notion that teaching is an intellectual and researched-based vocation and that teachers need to become reflective practitioners is not really new and can be traced back at the very least to John Dewey. In several of his works, Dewey emphasized that teachers need to engage in research, thinking, and investigation to improve the quality of their instruction and their students' learning. For instance, in the chapter on "Thinking in Education" in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey wrote that:

> The sole direct path to enduring improvement in the methods of instruction and learning consists in centering upon the conditions which exact, promote, and test thinking. Thinking is the method of intelligent learning, of learning that employs and rewards mind.[10]

Dewey clearly recognized more than 100 years ago that in order to enhance

their methods of instruction and help students learn better, teachers will need to continuously reflect on their practice, test their assumptions, and revise their lessons based on the feedback that they get from students.

A generation later, in his book *Experience and Education*, Dewey further developed the notion that good teachers need to take responsibility for investigating their students, subject matter and pedagogy. In this book, Dewey emphasized that educators had the power to regulate the "objective conditions" of the learning process, that is, the content, methods and experiences that students were exposed to in their lessons. Dewey noted that:

> Responsibility for selecting objective conditions carries with it, then, the responsibility for understanding the needs and capacities of the individuals who are learning at a given time. It is not enough that certain materials and methods have proved effective with other individuals at other times. There must be a reason for thinking that they will function in generating an experience that has educative quality with particular individuals at a particular time.[11]

To be sure, Dewey did not refer to this aspect of a teacher's vocation as doing documentary work. Yet, it seems to me that when he talks about the need to select and monitor objective conditions, he means something very similar to what I have called teachers' documentary work—*the ability to use their research and thinking skills to analyze student learning and make adjustments in their teaching based on the evidence.*

More recently, educators such as Donald Schön and Joe Kincheloe have also emphasized the documentary aspect of teaching. Both Schön and Kincheloe highlight the integral connection between teaching and research as well as the importance of teachers becoming reflective practitioners. Schön argued that all professionals, including teachers, need to develop the ability to research and engage in reflective practice as a major part of their vocational preparation:

> The development of action science [research] cannot be achieved by researchers who keep themselves removed from

> the contexts of action, nor by practitioners who have limited time, inclination or competence for systemic reflection. Its development will require new ways of integrating reflective research and practice.[12]

Kincheloe echoes Schön's view that teachers need to become researchers in their own classrooms and that they need to develop the habit of questioning and critically reflecting on their practice. Kincheloe correctly laments the fact that "too much teacher education focuses student attention on short-term survival skills that do not offer the prospective teachers frames for examining their own teaching or subjecting their own and their school's practices to questions of educational purpose or social vision."[13]

TEACHING VERSUS OTHER DOCUMENTARY VOCATIONS

Although Coles rightly suggests that teaching, much like photography or journalism, can be considered documentary work, there are limits to the analogy between teaching and the other documentary vocations he features in his book. For one, as mentioned above, the documentary aspect of teaching is only one, albeit essential, of numerous functions that teachers perform on a daily basis. There are many important roles and responsibilities that teachers have—like communicating information to students and parents or facilitating a classroom discussion—that are not really documentary in nature. In the case of documentary photography, film or journalism, the primary purpose of these endeavors is to document, visually, orally or with words, some aspect of reality that has not received enough attention. Teaching, on the other hand, is not first and foremost aimed at documenting student work or their progress over time, but rather at facilitating student learning and stimulating their cognitive, social and moral development. The former seeks to create a permanent record or artifact of an issue or problem and is, therefore, product oriented. The latter is much more dependent on the process in that it strives to help students *discover* and *understand* aspects of the world and themselves with which they are unfamiliar.

Another difference between teaching and the other vocations that

10.47925/75.2019.336

Coles refers to in his study pertains to the point he made earlier about the need for documentarians to incorporate the demands of objectivity with those of subjectivity. For Coles, documentary photographers or journalists ought to be skilled at moving back and forth between providing a dispassionate, factual account of the evidence and offering a personal interpretation and judgement of this evidence. However, in teaching, what is at stake is not so much finding the right balance between the factual and the personal or being adept at moving back and forth between these two aspects of the profession. For teaching, unlike the other documentary vocations Coles discusses, is continuously implicated in the subjective, meaning that teachers cannot ever really set aside or abandon their personal involvement in their work with students. To use a photography metaphor, documentarians normally need to "zoom out" in order to evaluate the evidence they have collected. Yet, teachers have this unique position of being, at once, zoomed in and out. Teachers who are doing documentary work can never really remove themselves from an engaged, participatory perspective in the same way that photographers or journalists routinely do.

To be sure, the documentary photographer, filmmaker and journalist can also participate in their study and get involved with the subjects whose story they are trying to tell. But in their case, the participation or involvement is limited and temporary; it typically consists of relatively casual connections and generally concludes when the project the documentarian is working on comes to an end. In contrast, teachers, whether they are engaged in documentary work or in other aspects of teaching, are constantly and intimately involved as co-participators with their students' learning. The difference between the participatory role of teachers and those of the other documentarians that Coles discusses is related to his notion of *location* (though I am not sure that he appreciated this difference). Coles' notion of location hinges on the question: where is the documentarian located *vis à vis* the subjects that he or she is studying? In Coles' words:

> Where we locate ourselves with respect to our vantage point as documentarians will tell us not only about what (whom) we'll see, but who we, the viewers, are—the lives that enabled or encouraged us in one direction prevented us surely or

sorely from pursuing another direction … [14]

Here, Coles seems to be suggesting that documentarians always choose to locate themselves in a particular place and perspective (location) in the world, a location that shapes not only their understanding of the subjects they are studying but their awareness of themselves as researchers. His analysis suggests two important insights relevant for those interested in doing documentary work: first, that documentarians' specific location in the world has a significant impact on the way in which they view and interact with their subjects; and second, that this location also influences the documentarians' self-conception, their sense of who they are as persons and investigators. Yet Coles did not explore the implications of these insights for the issue of the difference between teaching and the other types of documentary work that he discusses. That is, despite its astuteness, Coles' analysis doesn't acknowledge the fact that a teacher's location, ideally speaking, is always engaged and partisan (i.e. concerned with her students' well-being and flourishing) and that a distanced and detached perspective can seriously undermine the teacher-student relationship, not to mention the latter's learning. My point is that teaching, unlike the other documentary vocations analyzed by Coles, *necessitates* a location that is morally involved and implicated with one's students. The final part of this essay will further develop this notion of teaching as embodying a morally implicated location.

MORALLY IMPLICATED LOCATIONS

The notion of teaching as embodying a morally implicated location is not really a new idea and indicates that teachers' work in general is caught up with a myriad of explicit and tacit moral attitudes, decisions and dilemmas. In fact, in the last couple of decades, several books and numerous articles have been written that address this issue in different ways and from a variety of perspectives.[15] One classic example is Philip Jackson's, Robert Boostrom's and David Hansen's well-known book *The Moral Life of Schools*, which analyzes in depth the hidden ethical dimensions of schooling. For instance, Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen consider teachers' facial expressions from a moral perspective, noting

10.47925/75.2019.336

that these expressions are significant because they communicate a great deal about the value of what is going on in the classroom:

> Looks of kindness, impatience, good humor, sternness, incredulity, indignation, pity, discouragement, disapproval, delight, admiration, suspicion, disbelief— … are all part of a teacher's normal repertoire of expressions that routinely come into play in the course of teaching a lesson or managing a class activity. All convey a moral outlook of one kind or another whose focus is on what the class as a whole and its individual members say and do.[16]

In short, teachers' facial and bodily expressions in general can be seen as a moral commentary on the activity in which teachers and students are engaged in, a commentary that is typically implicit rather than explicit.

Thus, to say that teaching embodies a "morally implicated location" is to claim that, unlike other vocations, education is continuously entangled with ethical concerns and issues. The problem is that all too often we neglect to acknowledge, as the quote above suggests, that teachers' everyday decisions, attitudes and actions have significant moral implications. My point is that because of its emphasis on the *inherent subjectivity of documentary work* and *the need for documentarians to acknowledge their specific location* Coles' concept can help remind us of the need to foreground the moral dimensions of teaching. In emphasizing the moral aspect of teaching, Coles' notion of documentary work brings to mind David Hansen's concept of bearing witness, which also involves carefully attending to and "a strong normative commitment to the worthwhileness of the work" happening in classrooms.[17] What I find particularly promising about the notion of *teaching as documentary work* is that it highlights the fact that even when teachers perform seemingly mundane documentary duties (e.g. collecting and analyzing student data), those duties need to be informed by sound moral considerations. Indeed, Coles insists that any documentary work should be guided by ethical ideals and questions:

> What kind of moral or psychological accountability should

> we demand of ourselves, we who claim to social idealism, or to a documentary tradition that will somehow (we hope) work toward a social good—expose injustice, shed light on human suffering, or contribute to a growing body of knowledge stored in libraries, in museums, in firm studios?[18]

In an educational context, Coles' question points to the need to investigate how teachers can perform their documentary duties honorably, with an eye toward decency and social justice. Put succinctly, what does it mean for teachers to be morally accountable for their students? Needless to say, there is no neat and easy solution to this question. Here, I would like to consider just one example that illustrates what attending to the moral dimension of teachers' documentary work might look like in practice. In his article "Attending to Ethical and Moral Dispositions in Teacher Education," Richard Osguthorpe attempts to "provide a starting point for gaining a professional consensus on a set of guidelines for attending to dispositions in teacher education."[19] The kind of dispositions that Osguthorpe has in mind—like respect, fairness, and compassion—are ones that most people consider to be morally beneficial for human beings in general and teachers in particular. The problem, according to Osguthorpe, is that most of the time we attempt to assess these dispositions or traits in isolation rather than trying to evaluate them "in relation to the manner in which a teacher candidate interacts with students *respectfully*, grades tests *fairly*, and talks with parents *compassionately*."[20] For him, the challenge is one of designing teacher education programs that connect content knowledge and methodological competence with a moral approach to educating students. Osguthorpe's own research suggests that "the development of disposition appears to require active participation on the part of the teacher candidate, including some form of self-assessment and reflection at regular intervals throughout a teacher education program."[21]

Applying Osguthorpe's insights to the question—*how can teachers perform their documentary duties honorably?*—we can begin to see that teachers will need to move away from the notion that documentary work (like collecting and analyzing student data) is a task that teachers do *on or about their students*. Instead, teachers'

10.47925/75.2019.336

documentary work needs to be conceptualized as work that teachers do *with and for* their students. Ideally, student data should not be viewed as an object that is collected and then analyzed in isolation from the students who provided this data. From a moral perspective, teachers' documentary work implies that teachers ought to actively involve their students as co-participators in the data collection and analysis process. This approach to documentary work would encourage students to become genuinely invested in understanding their own strengths and weaknesses. Such an approach also means that students would have ample opportunities to monitor and self-evaluate their own work on an ongoing basis. Students' self-evaluations could be used in conjunction with teachers' evaluations as a way to initiate a conversation with their students about their learning and development over time. In this way, the traditional, unidirectional model, based on *only* teachers grading and evaluating students, could gradually be supplemented by a more democratic and ethical approach to documentation and assessment. I envision that such an approach to data collection and assessment could have numerous educational and moral benefits like getting students to be more engaged in their own learning and improving the relationship between teachers and students. At the very least, it seems to me that teachers who approach their documentary duties in this way are attempting to heed Coles' counsel to do this work honorably and morally.

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1 Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.
2 Ibid., 5.
3 Ibid., 27-28.
4 Ibid., 21.
5 Ibid., 74 & 76.
6 Ibid., 8.
7 This report can be found at: U.S. Department of Education report on "Teachers' Ability to use Data to Inform Instruction."
8 Ibid., viii.
9 Ibid.
10 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 153.
11 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1938), 45-46.

12 Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 320.
13 Joe Kincheloe, *Teachers as Researchers: Qualitative Inquiry as a Path to Empowerment* (Bristol, PA: Falmer Press, 1991), 15.
14 Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*, 42.
15 Among the numerous works on this topic, see David Hansen's, *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).
16 Philip Jackson, Robert Boostrom and David Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), 30.
17 David Hansen, "Among School Teachers: Bearing Witness as an Orientation in Educational Inquiry," *Educational Theory* 67, no. 1, 20. I am aware that Hansen's concept of "bearing witness" diverges from Coles' notion of doing documentary work since for Hansen "the witness is not an observer, as such, nor a recorder" (pp. 21-22).
18 Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*, 74.
19 Richard Osguthorpe, "Attending to Ethical and Moral Dispositions in Teacher Education," *Issues in Teacher Education* 22, no. 1, 2013, 18.
20 Ibid., 22.
21 Ibid., 25.

10.47925/75.2019.336