

‘What We Want, What We Believe’

Teaching with the Black Panthers’ Ten Point Program

By WAYNE AU

DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT and the Black Power Movement, in particular, community self-determination was central to many peoples’ struggles. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense sought social justice for African Americans and other oppressed communities through a combination of revolutionary theory, education, and community programs.

Their party platform, better known as The Ten Point Program, arose from the Black Panthers’ assessment of the social and economic

conditions in their community. It became part of the party’s philosophical backbone and served as a model for many other community groups such as the Brown Berets, the Young Lords, and the Red Guard.

I taught about the Panthers in the context of a high school African Studies class in Seattle that focused on African history and the experience of the Diaspora. Of the 30 working- and middle-class students, most of them 10th graders, 25 were African American, four were white, and one was Chicana. When I teach about the Black



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Families in need select free clothing being offered at an event sponsored by the Black Panther Party in New Haven, Conn., in 1969.

Power Movement, I try to connect the movement to today's issues. One way is by having students review the Black Panther Party's Ten Point Program and develop their own personal versions of the program. This lesson, of course, has to take place within the context of a larger unit on the Panthers and African American history in general.

We studied the Panthers within our quarter-long theme dealing with communities of African resistance over several hundred years. Earlier, for instance, we had studied the communities of escaped slaves in Brazil called quilombos, and through movies like *Sankofa*, we looked at the spiritual, cultural, and physical resistance of enslaved Africans in other parts of the Americas. For our study of the Black Panther Party, we were fortunate, since a security guard at our school was an actual member of Seattle's chapter. He spoke to us about his experiences, including their constant battles with the police, attempts at organizing high school students, as well as their community programs—the free breakfast program in particular. He also shared some original copies of *The Black Panther*, the party's newspaper, and I printed copies of the 1972 platform from the Huey P. Newton Foundation website (<http://www.blackpanther.org>).

Today's Problems

My objectives for the lesson were two-fold. First, for students to understand some of the social conditions the Panthers were attempting to identify and deal with, and second, for students to then analyze their world today, and begin to identify social issues they would like to address.

I was not focused so much on critiquing the Black Panther Program as in getting students to use it as a jumping-off point. I began

by initiating a class discussion, asking students questions such as: "What are the most pressing problems in society, in the world, today?" "What do you think is 'wrong' within society? Your own community? Your school? Your home? At work, or your parents' work?" I tried to find out what feels important to my students as individuals and as a community of learners and to get a feel for what they are personally invested in. Through the discussion, I kept track of comments on the board. The student responses demonstrated a range of social consciousness. Some students merely wanted to have their parents extend curfew hours while others wanted to be free from harassment in shopping malls. While these could be serious critiques if framed within a context of youth empowerment and racism, the students seemed to keep these issues on an individualistic level. Other students articulated more far-reaching problems such as more funding for education, citing our crumbling school building and crowded classrooms as evidence.

From there I passed out copies of the 1972 Panthers' Ten Point Program. I explained that the founding Panthers looked at the needs of their community and developed a vision of what they thought was necessary to find freedom. This vision of freedom manifested itself as the "Platform" of the Black Panther Party, which became better known as "The Ten Point Program."

We read through the program together as a class and, for each point, I asked the class to identify specific issues the Panthers saw that needed fixing. This can develop into a good list of the problems that the Panthers saw in their community, as well as create the opportunity for the class to delve more deeply into the program's rationale and language. This process also helps students make the connection between the community issues and the creation of a clear set of goals

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based on those issues—thus providing a model for shifting our original brainstorm of individual problems to address broader social issues.

I always make it a point to highlight the tenth point of the program—“We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace, and people’s community control of modern technology.” In their explanation of that point, the Panthers literally inserted the beginning of the original Declaration of Independence. This prompts discussion questions such as:

- Why would the Panthers include this statement?
- How would it apply to the African American community?
- How might the inclusion of this portion of the Declaration influence readers’ perception of the Ten Point Program?
- What connections to Thomas Jefferson and the so-called “Founding Fathers” are the Panthers trying to make?

Student Programs

Individually or in small groups, I had students brainstorm their own list of pressing social or global issues and develop their own “Ten Point Program.” I tried to keep this part as much student-guided as possible. Some students sought self-determination as students within an oppressive school structure. Some sought it in relation to their homes or family structure. Others followed in the footsteps of the Panthers and addressed more communitywide issues.

Nathan offered the following straightforward, powerful platform:

1. We want free housing for the homeless people in the United States.
2. We want equal pay for both genders.
3. We want all the drugs off the street.
4. We want more people of color working in the schools.
5. We want an end to discrimination.
6. We want less police brutality.
7. We want educated people in the workforce.
8. We want everyone’s voice to be heard.
9. We want non-racist presidents.
10. We want free health care for low-income people.

Nathan uses some of the Panthers’ ideas and adds some of his own, such as an incorporation of gender issues by asking for “equal pay for both genders.” What I find most striking is his request that “everyone’s voice be heard,” which speaks to students’ sense of powerlessness and lack of voice.

Another outstanding piece came from Tonya, who developed a “Ten Point Program for the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgendered/ and Questioning (GLBTQ) Community”:

1. All people, including members of the GLBTQ community, should be free from hate crimes.
2. GLBTQ community members should be free from questioning or harassment because of their sexuality.
3. GLBTQ community members should have the equal right to marry whomever they love, regardless of the genders of the two partners.
4. GLBTQ community members should have equal rights to adopt children, care for foster children, and raise their own children.
5. GLBTQ community members should be equally represented in educational curriculums, and should have equal access to a safe and supportive learning environment.
6. Job discrimination against GLBTQ community members should end, and GLBTQ community members should have equal access to employment.
7. Housing discrimination should end and GLBTQ community members should never be denied housing based on their sexuality.

8. Life partners should receive benefits equal to those of spouses, regardless of marital status.
9. The GLBTQ community should be represented in government.
10. The GLBTQ community should be represented accurately in the media, and should have positive public role models represented fairly and openly in the media.

Tonya's program represents a solid community identification and lays out very concrete goals. Her piece also reflects contemporary Gay Rights struggles, since many of her demands reflect several hot topics such as the marriage of same-sex couples or the adoption of children within the GLBTQ community. Unfortunately, and quite understandably given the level of homophobia in our society and in our schools, Tonya did not feel comfortable sharing her piece in class; but even her willingness and ability to give voice to these issues speaks to her own strength and resistance.

Marcus created a Ten Point Program that challenges capitalism and corporate control of the United States—one that reflects the ongoing legacy of the 1999 protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization.

1. We want the mask of capitalism lifted and economic classes disbanded.
2. We want an end to the solitary control of mass media by corporations.
3. We want an end to the use of Third World labor as a way to circumvent the American minimum wage.
4. We want a clear separation of corporations and government. We want an end to bribery in the political system.
5. We want an end to the health insurance system in America. It is time to end corporate control of Americans' health.
6. We want fair treatment of all criminals. Rich money launderers and tax fraud

offenders should receive the same punishment as armed robbers and drug dealers.

7. We want an end to all uses of military force to obtain resources for corporations. We want an end to the war against Iraq to protect U.S. oil prices.
8. We want an immediate payment of all debts and damages owed to the Native American community. It has been too long, and the promises made years ago need to be fulfilled.
9. We want an end to all corporate funding of education. The public education system is being used by corporations as a training ground for future employees.
10. We demand an end to the growing separation of the economic classes of America. The enslavement of the middle and lower classes by the bourgeoisie must be put to a stop.

I find Marcus' piece notable for its relentless attack on corporate America; it demonstrates a growing consciousness among students about issues such as sweatshops, media bias, campaign financing, and the encroachment of private industry on public education. In class, students were impressed by Marcus' articulation of political ideas.

The Ten Point Programs students generated varied greatly, and I was bothered by what I perceived as a lack of "seriousness" in some programs. For instance, with a class that was predominantly African American, I had hoped there would be a stronger, more personal connection to the injustices experienced by the black community, and that this identification would come out in students' programs. For that matter, I expected all the students to be frustrated with the world, ready to let loose their seething resentment and alienation.

But for all my expectations, some students still came up with blanks for this part of the exercise: the anger and passion I was waiting for didn't manifest itself in all of their programs.

And it wasn't for lack of problems in their own lives. To the contrary. Many students who had difficulty with the assignment were working-class, didn't like school, and were even having troubles at home.

At first this surprised me. I took for granted that there is a very long list of things to improve in the world. I think that I had forgotten, however, that in our society we are generally not taught to critically analyze our own life situations. Further, students' sense of personal powerlessness is generally reinforced on a regular basis within our school system. Instead of proactively dealing with our problems, disengagement often becomes the primary response.

Which brings us back to the Panthers' Ten Point Program. The Panthers were also struggling against cynicism, powerlessness, and resignation. My hope is that the lesson laid a groundwork, so that in the future the students will have some tools with which they can assess issues they see in their own communities and their lives and perhaps develop Ten Point Programs of their own. The Ten Point Program may be a place where students are able to find their voice and speak out about the problems they see in this world—and, more difficult, begin to organize to put their program into practice. ■

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Associated Press

Many people are unaware of the Black Panthers' community service work, such as this breakfast program in Philadelphia in 1970.

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The Panther Party's Ten Point Program

1972 Platform

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black and oppressed communities.

We believe that Black and oppressed people will not be free until we are able to determine our destinies in our own communities ourselves, by fully controlling all the institutions which exist in our communities.

2. We want full employment for our people.

We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every person employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the American businessmen will not give full employment, then the technology and means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

3. We want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our Black and oppressed communities.

We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of 40 acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over 50 million Black people. Therefore, we feel this is a modest demand that we make.

4. We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.

We believe that if the landlords will not give decent housing to our Black and oppressed communities, then housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that the people in our communities, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for the people.

5. We want decent education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of the self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else.

6. We want completely free health care for all Black and oppressed people.

We believe that the government must provide, free of charge, for the people, health facilities which will not only treat our illnesses, most of which have come about as a result of our oppression, but which will also develop preventive medical programs to guarantee our future survival. We believe that mass health education and research programs must be developed to give all Black and oppressed people access to advanced scientific and medical information, so we may provide ourselves with proper medical attention and care.

7. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people, other people of color, and all oppressed people inside the United States.

We believe that the racist and fascist government of the United States uses its domestic enforcement agencies to carry out its program of oppression against black people, other people of color and poor people inside the United States. We believe it is our right, therefore, to defend ourselves against such armed forces and that all Black and oppressed people should be armed for self-defense of our homes and communities against these fascist police forces.

8. We want an immediate end to all wars of aggression.

We believe that the various conflicts which exist around the world stem directly from the aggressive desire of the United States ruling circle and government to force its domination upon the oppressed people of the world. We believe that if the United States government or its lackeys do not cease these aggressive wars it is the right of the people to defend themselves by any means necessary against their aggressors.

9. We want freedom for all Black and oppressed people now held in U.S. federal, state, county, city and military prisons and jails. We want trials by a jury of peers for all persons charged with so-called crimes under the laws of this country.

We believe that the many Black and poor oppressed people now held in United States prisons and jails have not received fair and impartial trials under a racist and fascist judicial system and should be free from incarceration. We believe in the ultimate elimination of all wretched, inhuman penal institutions, because the masses of men and women imprisoned inside the United States or by the United States military are the victims of oppressive conditions which are the real cause of their imprisonment. We believe that when persons are brought to trial they must be guaranteed, by the United States, juries of their peers, attorneys of their choice and freedom from imprisonment while awaiting trial.

10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace, and people's community control of modern technology.

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are most disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpation, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.