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ABSTRACT

Some of the difficulties involved in teaching inside maximum security p sons, and ways a media studies teacher met these challenges, are described in this paper. The first section of the paper deals with the prison security system and the stresses it can cause for both teacher and student, while the second section discusses the influence of the public and public opinion on prison educational programs. The third secion offers suggestions on how to adjust classroom practice to take account of the range of nonverbal communication behaviors that are an essential part of prison culture, and the fourth explores the need for a flexible course structure that can be adapted to meet the expectations of class members. The fifth section looks at the heightened level of political awareness found in the prison student population and suggests that in this unconventional setting media studies have the potential to become a powerful learning tool. The concluding section observes that the atmosphere in maximum security institutions is not conducive to learning and cautions prospective prison teachers against expecting too much from their students. (RBW)

TEACHING MEDIA STUDIES IN MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISONS

Farrel Corcoran

With the numbers in prison climbing towards 500,000, there is little argument these days with the statement that crime is a social pathology, so far incurable, that has already reached epidemic proportions in America. The FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reports document the grim statistics, which give the U.S. by far the highest crime rate in the Western world. The U.S. also sentences more people to prison, and for longer periods, than almost any other country (Clark & Lehrman, 1980, p. 137). It is estimated by the Bureau of Prison Officials that up to 50 percent of these prisoners can neither read nor write, while in a majority of penal institutions, at least 50 percent of those in custody over 18 years of age have less than an eighth grade education. (Reagen & Stoughton, 1976).

Advocates and practitioners of education behind bars operate within the purview of the rehabilitative approach to incarceration, which stresses that the function of prisons is to induce criminals to turn their backs on crime (through education, vocational training, counselling, drug treatment, etc.) and re-enter society "cured." The fortunes of prison education have, therefore, waxed and waned more or less in tandem with the economic and political vicissitudes of this approach. During the 1960s, prison reform was increasingly legitimized, with opinion polls showing that the majority of Americans then accepted rehabilitation as the purpose of imprisonment (Jacobs, 1977, p. 7). Universities and junior colleges across the nation began to offer degree programs in criminology and academic journals on the subject proliferated. Civilian teachers began to enter prisons in greater numbers and many states organized their prison schools into a single

school district under the authority of a governor-appointed school board. Universities became increasingly involved in prison life in both their research and their teaching functions, though correctional management, concerned with program shortages in dangerously overcrowded male institutions, have given only limited support to university education in women's prisons. The theoretical assumption behind all the education programs developed, however, is that if becoming a criminal is primarily a learning process, the remaking of useful citizens is more the task of education than it is the outcome of custody or punishment. In practical terms, this has spurred the hope that education will have the positive effect of reducing rates of recidivism.

This essay describes some of the difficulties of teaching inside maximum security institutions and discusses ways in which the challenge can be met. Little as yet has been published on this, although some attention has been paid to the delivery of communication courses to correctional personnel (Brooks, Winsor & Shoemaker, 1980) and to the teaching of other social sciences to inmates (Kandal, 1981). This discussion is primarily a reflection on the author's experience of teaching Media Studies in two maximum security institutions in Northern Illinois, one female, one male. As such, it may not specifically address the problems encountered in state and federal prisons elsewhere, with markedly different population characteristics, overall size and penal philosophies. But it is hoped that the discussion will be of at least some relevance to others who are tempted to exercise their professional skills behind bars. If it is true that lack of awareness of the teaching milieu is a severe handicap for the educator in the

conventional setting of a university campus, pedagogical naivete in a prison setting can be disastrous. Knowledge of the environment is at least as necessary in the case of prison as it would be in a foreign teaching situation laden with cross-cultural complexity. It is in this spirit that the following remarks are offered.

Maximum Security, Maximum Stress

Probably the most urgent problem for the prison teacher is coping with the prison security system and the stresses it can cause. The specialization of space, for example, which is used to impose a high degree of social control on inmates, must also be endured to some degree by educators. It becomes "a way of conditioning human behavior by reducing local choices, that is, one specific place for one specific action." (Ramsey, 1976, p. 44). The prison instructor must learn to deal with the electronic gates, the surveillance cameras, the searches. Classes are frequently interrupted or cancelled because of security requirements such as "counts" or "lockdowns." Periodic cou require a freezing of all movement within the prison until all residents have been accounted for. Lockdowns, which keep students in their cells for days or even weeks at a time, are usually a response to a "crisis," a maiming or a killing, though residents frequently complain that lockdowns are imposed arbitrarily by the guards as symbolic gestures of "control." Lockdowns, along with disciplinary or protective segregation, have the effect of interrupting courses for long periods and breaking the whole momentum of the learning experience. Along with these physical restrictions on the management of a college course comes the psychological strain of dealing with the ever-present knowledge that

prisons, at least male ones, are dangerous places. The security system at the women's institution is refreshingly more benign, with fewer gates, searches and cameras, more pleasant guard-resident interactions, greater freedom of movement between buildings and a less pervasive sense of violence.

An important aspect of the security system that must be seen as crucial to the success of college courses behind bars is the attitude of guards to prisoner education. Many older guards, for instance, view the expansion of prisoner rights, including education, as an erosion of their traditional authority and power and as concessions which pamper or coddle prisoners (Fox, 1982). Many guards receive low pay and little respect from society and jealously watch inmates "become certified mechanics, high-school graduates and even college graduates." (Clark & Lehrman, 1980, p. 93). The resultant frustration can be vented against students, in the discretionary use of disciplinary measures for "silent insolence," for instance, and against instructors in such measures as the premature termination of classes "because it's time," or the perpetuation of the notion that school is a subversive enclave inside the walls, responsible for the circulation of drugs or money or other contraband (Jacobs, 1977, p. 93). It is true, of course, that educational programs make guards' jobs more difficult because they allow more movement and more free time, thus increasing security and control risks.

What is it like to be an incarcerated student? Although there is evidence that the majority of those entering prison do so with symptoms of severe psychiatric stress (Gibbs, 1982), the very experience of

prison itself greatly increases psychological stress; which in turn has numerous effects on the operation of educational programs. Some cope with the stresses through endurance, others break down, sometimes to the point of suicide, a fact which leads to the observation that different prisoners "do time" in qualitatively very different ways, depending on their powers of psychological survival (Thomas et al., 1980). These differences can easily be observed in the classroom.

For incarcerated students in women's prisons, the stresses produced by adaptation to confinement are uniquely different from male prisons. Factors such as predatory sexual aggression, normative violence and social conflict are less in evidence, but there is the added factor of anxiety and guilt associated with being separated from children. There is no research evidence yet to suggest that this factor is also salient for male prisoners. Concern over the erosion of the mother-child bond is often accompanied by worry over the child's possible rejection of the mother forever, especially where imprisoned mothers have placed their children in foster care and have little chance of regaining custody. This is compounded by the difficulties experienced by many families in visiting members incarcerated in rural prisons, which are also isolated from volunteer groups and educators who might be interesting in working with prisoners. Again, the mood-swings related to such stresses can be discerned and adjusted to throughout the duration of a course by the observant instructor.

Such tensions peculiar to women's prisons are ameliorated a little by the development of new kinship networks within the prison, based on the "cottage" model of housing, which consists of several loosely-

structured "family" units, routinely giving interpersonal comfort, sharing limited resources and providing crisis intervention for acute adjustment problems (Fox, 1982). Homosexual relationships within these networks have in the past been the target of a horrified staff, both custodial and educational, intent on stamping out all opportunities for homosexual contact. That policy has now evolved into tolerance of the inevitable, if not outright respect for the supportive role of relationships. Visitations by small children to their mothers has been made less negative by the creation of the Federally-funded "Sesame Street" project in which young visitors are supervised by other prisoners in a special play area during the visitation, although the program is no longer operative at some prisons.

For other minorities besides women, incarceration brings stresses caused by the predatory nature of many prison interactions, particularly exposure to physical assault, rape, extortion and constant harassment. One reaction to this has been the formation of ethnic organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan and the House of the Golden Dragon for Whites, and the Latin Kings for Hispanics, which must be recognized as an important aspect of the educational environment. "Off-brands" or unaffiliated inmates, have often been the target of predatory behavior, but even "off-brands" have in the past formed associations such as the King's New Breed. Inmate organizations in the Chicago area are dominated by three Black groups: the Black P Stone Nation, the Devil's Disciples and the Conservative Vice Lords. These are referred to by Jacobs (1977, p. 139) as "supergangs" because of "their great size, the relatively high age of their leaders and their imperialistic annexation

of smaller gangs." The term is rejected by inmate writers, however, because of its pejorative connotations. They argue that resident organizations function much like the Boy Scouts or the Republican Party "when looked at as a group of men united in an informal network for a variety of specific, instrumental and expressive ends, coming together with certain values and norms that are reinforced through social interaction as well as coercion." (Thomas et al., 1980, p. 48). Viewed in this light, they make a positive contribution, inside as well as outside the classroom, to mediating the difficulties of doing time by promoting "a form of group unity which facilitates individual protection and helps oppose the atomization and loss of self created by prisoner existence." Their influence in the classroom will be discussed below.

Public and Public Opinion

The final set of factors to be considered in the matrix of prison education are those who have an influence on policy from outside the walls: the public, the politicians and the press. Because of the close links between prisoner education and the rehabilitation theory of corrections, prison programs can be radically affected by shifts in the public mood, or by perceptions of what that mood is. During the Depression years, for instance, as violence on the streets continued to rise, pressure on prison administrators was exerted by a press that became increasingly concerned about "coddling criminals." (Jacobs, 1977, p. 18). Even today, media stories about criminals who receive college degrees behind bars sometimes create the impression that prisons have

become "country clubs" and that prisoners are being given opportunities not open to the general public.

Educational programs, as well as general theories of incarceration, are affected circuitously as politicians feel no pressure from their constituents to pay inmate education anything but lip service, and as administrators keep an eye to the political climate by avoiding actions that might be criticized by voters, such as educational furloughs for convicted felons. It is also easier for administrators not to allocate resources for "soft luxuries" such as noise-curbing insulation for classrooms, or special housing for students, close to a quiet reading room, even though such minor allocations would greatly enhance the teaching situation (Goldin & Thomas, 1981). Politicians have responded to public fears about crime by making it an issue in elections at every level in the political process, whether or not they had anything relevant to offer. Even the reporting of crime statistics by the FBI and by big-city police departments has become highly politicized in recent years. Most political campaigns advocate a "tougher" approach to incarceration in the belief that there is no constituency for mercy. These policies affect even incarcerated students themselves, who usually view prison education as a control device intended to placate residents and present to the public "a symbolic edifice of rehabilitation which, when it fails, will be used to illustrate the futility of both rehabilitation goals and philosophy." (Thomas, 1981, p. 10). The practical effect of all this involvement by the public, the press and the politicians is that most prison education programs are grossly under-funded and poorly administered.

View from the Classroom

One of the most difficult facets of actual classroom practice for instructors to adjust to is the whole range of non-verbal communication behaviors which form an essential part of prison culture. At this level, being in prison is little different from being in an alien culture, prison producing all the stresses of culture shock that can be experienced in other cross-cultural contexts. Being aware of some of the ways in which non-verbal configurations and their meanings help residents make sense and order of the chaos of prison experience, is an important first step for the neophyte instructor.

Each resident organization has its own colors and insignias displayed on T-shirts and sweat shirts, for instance, the Latin King's crown or the Stones' inverted pyramid. Members greet each other with esoteric salutations, the Disciples, for example, by crossing their arms and hitting their fists against the chest, while the Stones offer a Black Power salute accompanied by "Stone Love" or "Stone Thing." (Ramsey, 1976). Youthful white inmates will often assume a deliberately unshaven and unkempt appearance and a "tough" stance in order to avoid sexual assault. Homosexuals, likewise, employ non-verbal codes to indicate their intentions. (Ramsey, 1976, p. 46). Spatial arrangements in dining halls, serving lines, the auditorium or the classroom also carry their own meanings. Without full participant-observation, it would be difficult for the instructor to decode all non-verbal cues (proxemic, sartorial, haptic, etc.) but an openness to learning can be very helpful in the development of a successful prison course.

Who is the typical incarcerated student? How do you know what type of prisoners are motivated to enroll in your course? Hefferman (1972) divides female prisoner populations into three subsystems, having their own goals, codes of acceptable behavior and means of mutual support: those who stress the accidental nature of their original offense, adhere to institutional regulations and try to recreate a conventional way of life within prison ("the square"); those who reject the normative basis of conventional society, including staff authority, and have developed a general societal critique ("the life"); and those who accept conventional societal norms but see themselves as deviant from them, while rejecting neither responsibility for their offense nor the nature of the offense ("the cool"). Those who enroll in college courses tend to be from "the cool" and "the life," since "the square" are alienated from the rehabilitative presumption behind prison education by their perception of themselves as non-criminal, therefore not in need of rehabilitation.

There is an obvious tension in the present prison system between the goal of corrections and the goal of education: While corrections is designed for custody and control, the purpose of education is freedom, growth and self-actualization. The tension can be seen in the tendency of prison administrators to view education as a method to control prisoners, as well as a public relations device to present a good image to the public, the press and politicians. The tension can also be seen in the various motivations among students for engaging in educational programs. Taking a course may be a necessary requirement to be fulfilled for the purpose of impressing a hostile parole board

(Reagen & Stoughton, 1976, p. 121). It may be a means of completing a communication network for resident organizations, in an environment where the flow of messages between inmates is severely controlled. Or it may be a means of accelerating time or escaping from the tedium of prison routine. Awareness of the range of possible purposes for pursuing education, that are peculiar to prison as opposed to conventional campus settings, will relieve the burden of the instructor's naivete about student motivations.

Once the course has begun, it is important to have a continued awareness of the psycho-social effects of prison life on incarcerated students. Prison deprivations present problems that are both cognitive and affective "in that the student may be dealing with an idea, a happening or an artifact that he cannot experience while in confinement." (Reagen & Stoughton, 1976, p. 17) The sensory and aesthetic deprivations of prison can also produce an ennui which dulls the appetite to learn. Nor does the massive, rigid, custodial architecture in any way relieve this listlessness. Cell blocks are impossibly noisy, making quiet study time very difficult. In the present writer's experience, for example, reasons for not completing assignments on time have ranged from having to rise before dawn to eat, during the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, to not being able to sleep all night with the noise of guards trying to quieten an inmate who had "cracked," to not being able to concentrate because of constant threats from a dealer in an adjacent cell that he would kill the student unless he paid for a bag of marijuana bought on credit. This last excuse was made chillingly real for the instructor a few weeks later when another

inmate was murdered the night before his release on parole, for neglecting to repay a $20.00 loan. Actual and threatened violence by other inmates, as well as shakedowns and lockdowns by staff, can play havoc with the learning process. When the level of tension rises throughout the prison, leading usually to rumors of an impending lockdown, it is reflected in the classroom in the form of moodiness, anxiety, hostility and decreased concentration. Efforts to achieve full participation or optimal communication in discussion groups under such circumstances will probably fail.

The rigid custodial architecture must be endured by instructors as well as students. Programs usually operate in areas of the prison which were not designed for educational purposes, where the primary consideration of security precludes remodelling. Noise is pervasive. Controlled lighting for purposes of film projection, useful for any area of study but essential for Media Studies, is impossible. Ready access to A-V storage areas is difficult. Access to the library, or any area where class materials may be placed on reserve is rarely possible, as is the ability of students to work in small groups outside of class. As Reagan and Stoughton (1976, p. 118) point out, "no matter how much paint and progressive attitude are applied, there are still grills, bars, fences, guard towers and massive walls to overwhelm the perceptions and sensory inputs."

Course Planning

The effects of the psycho-social and the physical aspects of prison life can sometimes erupt in the classroom and be directed against instructors, at least in men's institutions. This often takes the form

of intense suspicion that education fits into the general custodial pattern by functioning as a control technique to keep prisoners busy and quiet. Courses are often perceived as having a White, middle-class bias that is unresponsive to the varied interests, needs and cultural backgrounds of incarcerated students. Indeed, this bias is sometimes seen as "a subtle but nonetheless pernicious form of racism." (Thomas et al., 1980, p. 48) It is ironic that prison staff sometimes see courses as too "radical," while inmates may see them as containing a conservative, ethnic or class bias, designed to indoctrinate them into the dominant values of Anglo-American society. The instructor may be confronted on the first day of class with a roomful of suspicious students waiting to see if this is another discredited, control-oriented course or not. It may take a few meetings to break down the suspicion that this is just another "sham" course, structured not to succeed, presenting a façade of rehabilitation without actually delivering an education that is emancipatory. For this reason, it is highly desirable not to plan the course syllabus in any detail until after the first class meeting, during which such perceptions and expectations can be dealt with. In this writer's experience, there was initial hostility to a "Social Impact of Television" course, based on the belief that this was going to be another example of White, middle-class ideology, an extolling of the virtues of the present commercial television system and an explanation of "how it works" so "successfully." When it was realized that the bulk of the course was going to draw on the emergent perspectives of Critical Media Theory, (Gerbner, 1983) rather than the older but more dominant liberal-pluralist view of media and society,

suspicion and hostility melted into enthusiasm and dedication, and the course was one of the most satisfying this instructor has ever taught. Ironically, the same course offered around the same time to a White, middle-class group in a Chicago suburb was met by positive expectations on the first day, followed by antagonism and resistance as the course unfolded a critical approach to television.

Instructors' expectations of actual classroom interactions must be tempered by an awareness of how coping strategies, developed to deal with the stresses of prison life, can be manifested in classroom behavior. Extremely aggressive behavior, or a posturing stance of scorn for every idea presented, or a total withdrawal, are reactions rarely found in conventional educational settings. On the other hand, an appetite for controversial topics, though rare in conventional settings, is common in the prison classroom and can be a refreshing change of pace for an instructor wearied by regular student apathy. However, hidden agendas in discussion can create difficult situations. Gang influence, for instance, or factors related to homosexual liasons, may inhibit some students from participating freely. Topics such as power, class, religion or politics, which persist in surfacing in media-related classes, can stimulate arguments that develop more animosity than enlightenment. Furthermore, as Thomas (1981, p. 8) suggests, "among a population for whom classroom participation may become an outlet for a variety of frustrations or may provide an opportunity to prove onself in a manner perhaps not possible in daily existence, open discussion can become a latent conflict situation with considerable potential for displays of pent-up aggression, abuse and even domination."

In this, as in all other kinds of classroom interactions, the personality of instructors, particularly their ability to earn the respect of prisoners, is crucial. Successful prison courses depend on the ability of instructors to motivate learners in far from pleasant learning conditions. One potential ally in male prisons comes from a surprising quarter: the gangs. These have had a profound effect on the prison social system, particularly on inmates' sense of organizational allegiance. One instructor reported that "the gangs are highly disciplined. It's remarkable the way they are able to keep the class in order--there are no disruptions. It would be a much more serious challenge to carry out the program without them. I don't know if I could do it." (Jacobs, 1977, p. 167).

This writer has had personal experience of a gang leader dampening tempers during an animated debate over the meaning of McLuhan's "hot/cool" distinction and patiently taking the instructor aside after class to explain that prison inculcates racist attitudes, even against sympathetic instructors. Furthermore, the dramatic shift in acceptance by students between the first offering of a course and the second a year later, a shift from suspicion to friendly acceptance and curiosity, can probably be traced to gang leaders approvingly "passing the word" in the interim. Such cooperation can work, however, only if the instructor is prepared to suspend conventional stereotypes of "street gangs," which are usually race- and class-biassed, and see gangs as having a positive and necessary role within the prison social organization.

Media Studies and Political Awareness

Many students enrolled in prison classes have a substantially higher level of political awareness than other prisoners. They are also more politicized than non-incarcerated students. This is true of both male and female prisoners, though female radicalism has been slower to develop, as have feminist perspectives among male prisoners, who often regard feminism merely as a middle-class phenomenon. The gangs initially contributed to the growth of Black consciousness and awareness of the political implications of imprisonment. This politicization has been accelerated in recent years by the influx of FALN activists and sympathizers from Puerto Rico into the prison population.

It is doubtful if any course offered in prison, at least in the humanities or social sciences, can be considered "a success" unless the instructor somehow takes this radical politicization of many students into account in the planning of the specific content of an educational program. Media-related courses overcome the problem of prison depriving incarcerated students of first-hand contact with the object under study. Television is viewed in massive quantities in prison. Daily newspapers also make their way inside, including many copies of the radical underground press, which has been given access to inmates by the courts, despite intense opposition from prison administrators believing that this literature heightens tension in an already volatile situation (Jacobs, 1977, p. 135). Certainly, such radical papers as Rising Up Angry, On Top and Up Against the Bench have contributed to politicizing prison populations, at least by offering a vocabulary in which the new political consciousness can be articulated.

Designing courses in Media Studies offers many opportunities for developing an emancipatory potential, in that lectures, readings, films and discussions create conceptual tools for use in analyzing the functions of media in the here-and-now of prison as well as in American culture in general. Students are already highly aware, for instance, of the use of television for surveillance as well as in a closed-circuit context for one-way communication to cells from the central administration. This Orwellian perspective is sharpened still further by the observation that the introduction of commercial television into individual cells was an act of control rather than benevolence. It is frequently observed by old-timers that prior to television, the announcement of a lockdown made the cell houses bristle with resentment and rebellion, but that since then, a lockdown means little more than being forced to watch more television than usual. Indeed, many insights consonant with Critical Media Theory are arrived at by students sitting in their cells at night on the top tier of a roundhouse, contemplating the bluish lights of four hundred television screens flickering all around and below them. These perceptions can later be rendered more positive in a Media Writing class, where television scripts can be prepared which explore such alternative themes as racial oppression, Black history, survival in the ghettoes, the distribution of power and authority in society, the ideas of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Media Studies in this unconventional setting has the potential to become a force capable of transforming students' (and instructors') views of the world. It makes them aware, for instance, of the ways in which television "makes sense" of the world and how we "read" and understand

visual images. It stresses the process of "construction" rather than "reflection" of reality involved in all media representations. It encourages examination of the industrial and material base from which media messages are produced. Such an experience thus can come close to Paolo Freire's (1968) ideal of emancipatory education. It can also, as Heffernan (1972, p. viii) suggests, be an emancipatory experience for the instructor, not only to realize that media stereotypes of convicts as animals are obliterated by warm relationships with actual prisoners, but also to analyze American society and popular culture from the perspective of inmates, as together we view White versions of the Black experience in "Roots," or the criminological assumptions of "Scared Straight" or the reflections of porn peddlers in "Not a Love Story."

Conclusions

The prison system in this country, as it has evolved from Philadelphia's famous Walnut Street Jail to today's state and federal penitentiaries, offers to inmates a physical and psycho-social setting which is not conducive to the process of education, emancipatory or other. The instructor must try to work with all of the consequences of this and gain the acceptance of staff and inmates. The chances of a prisoner earning a degree are slight, given the difficulties of putting together enough courses for a major. Even where universities have made their credit requirements more flexible and induced enough faculty to offer enough courses to incarcerated students frustrated by lack of choice, the noisy, violent, highly restrictive atmosphere of a cell block weighs very heavily against the odds. The current spending of scarce government dollars on prisons is adding more cells rather than

more educational programs. This would suggest that the dominant corrections model is now deterrence or incapacitation rather than rehabilitation. At the same time, there is no evidence that this kind of deterrence works. It is widely believed that the decivilizing influence of prison will impair, rather than improve a person's potential for a crime-free adjustment to society. The longer people stay in prison, the more it is they will recidivate. A former Director on the United States Bureau of Prisons put it tersely: "Anyone not a criminal will be when he gets out of jail." (Clark & Lehrman, 1980, p. 120).

In spite of this depressing picture, however, universities have a role to play in the prison reform movement by encouraging more academic interest in corrections. To date, very few doctoral dissertations have been written on higher education in prisons, or on corrections education generally. Only two texts have ever been written on prison education and only one school in the country includes it in its teacher education program (Reagen & Stoughton, 1976, p. 27). The situation is not hopeless, however. Criminology and penology curricula have spread across the academic landscape and academic journals increasingly focus on penal issues. Riots at Attica and Santa Fe have concentrated public and press attention, however short-lived, on "the prison problem." There is some hope that the creative use of instructional media in academic programs behind bars, especially video cassettes, electronic blackboards, and closed-circuit hookups with universities, perhaps via satellite, will lead to an educational breakthrough within the present prison system. If the university is to continue to reach outside itself effectively, however, the effects of removing the instructor from face-

to-face contact with incarcerated students must be studied seriously and the results of experimental uses of various media, both in this country and in the progressive penology of regions like Scandinavia, must be fed back into academic circulation by practitioners in the field. A good place to start the study and the feedback is in journals like this one.

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