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ABSTRACT

When teaching remedial writing in a correctional facility, a teacher may carry assumptions shaped by formal education that do not always translate to a prison context. These include the idea that the classroom will provide a sphere of intellectual activity, immune from heavy-handed institutional intrusions; that students will want to get to know one another, share ideas, and form a learning community in a de-centered classroom; and that the teacher should establish personal relationships with the students in order to diminish the student/teacher gap. The reality of teaching in prison, however, is quite different. The classroom atmosphere is determined by the facility's pervasive regulatory system; the blackboard is dwarfed by a long, narrow, barred observation window and loudspeakers continually blare Orwellian commands. Moreover, sharing ideas and getting to know one another runs counter to the convict's code where inmates are expected to mind their own business. Other problems are presented by the fact that students appear and disappear with no explanation; inmates are reluctant to keep journals containing personal information; teachers are not allowed to give newspapers, magazines, copies of articles, or uncensored letters to students; and facility guidelines advise against sharing personal information with prisoners. Teachers in a non-traditional learning environment such as a correctional facility must be prepared to modify their teaching methods. (KF)

Walking the Line: Teaching Remedial Writing in a Correctional Facility

Henry Hays Crimmel III

Paper Presented at The Annual Conference of the Community College General Education Association (13th, Albany, NY, May 5-7, 1994)

Once a week I drive forty miles to a compound, that glows orangely in the night. Entering the complex, I encounter something like an airport security check, which can include a walk through a metal detector, and a search of my bag and jacket. I step into a compartment, while the door hums shut with a solid metallic click. Outside stands a building resembling an airport control tower, yet the structure is not for controlling flights, but for controlling people. It is, in fact, a prison guard tower, watching over a medium security correctional facility. Stretching from the tower to the most distant high pressure mercury vapor lights are fences topped with miles of razor wire, their stainless steel rolls punctuated with thousands of gleaming, sobering, t-shaped barbs. This is my campus.

These wires, walls, fences and towers mirror the restrictions and limitations prison educators face, and in this paper I explore the challenges of teaching remedial writing in such a facility. When I walk through the steel and electronic gates of the facility, I bring with me a certain set of assumptions shaped by formal education that do not always translate to prison contexts. I assume the classroom will provide a sphere of intellectual activity, immune from heavy-handed institutional intrusions. I assume that the students will want to get to know one another, share ideas, and form a learning community in a de-centered classroom. I assume that I will want to, and should, establish a personal relationship with my students, and that I should try and diminish ıe student/teacher gap think these assumptions can pose problems in college classrooms too, of course, but in the context of a correctional facility, they, and the approaches they engender, need to be rethought.

To begin, let me explain some differences encountered in prison teaching. Given the totalitarian nature of the institution, the classroom atmosphere is determined by the facility's pervasive regulatory system, a fact not diminished by any measure of

euphemisms. My students and I know that our class, called Writing Program One, means remedial writing, just like "correctional facility," means State Prison, and "special housing unit," means solitary confinement, just like "incarceration" means imprisonment and "correctional officer" means guard. Although these are kinder, gentler names, they do not alter the facts of prison life.

Inside the squat cinderblock building I teach in, building number thirty-seven, my classroom has a blackboard, but the observation window, long and narrow like those in aquariums, dwarfs the blackboard. My classroom has windows, but the windows have bars. The person wandering by observing my class and me is not a dean or department chair, but a guard packing a heavy wooden nightstick and nickel plated handcuffs.

These security requirements intrusively define, regulate, and set the tone for my class. For example, the ceiling mounted classroom loudspeakers continually blare out Orwellian commands during our discussions. The frequent interruptions "Early go-back from the rec, early go back from the rec" "Anderson 93R-4028 report to B-Dorm, Anderson 93R-4028 report to B-dorm," remind the students, (and myself) of their places at the bottom of the power hierarchy.

Similarly, I am reminded that our class has little priority in the institutional scheme of things. Last year two students came to my class badly beaten; the first apparently had a run-in with the guards, and the other, whose stitch-filled mouth was swollen shut, could not speak; I never found out what happened to him. Students are shipped out to other facilities or placed in the "box" --solitary confinement-- from one week to the next for security and disciplinary reasons. I am given no warning, no notice, no explanations for the comings and goings of my students. Stepping into an environment like this one day a week is disorienting, at best. Like an airline passenger, without really belonging to the environment, I occupy my space temporarily.

In light of these persistent reminders of authority, if I don't check my pedagogical baggage at the gates of the facility, can I expect my students to check their mental survival gear at the door? When teachers import into the prison classroom simple decentering techniques such as breaking up the class to do small group work, or asking the class to sit in a circle instead of in rows, they assume these inmate-students need and want what this type of classroom model has to offer. Establishing a site where the students exchange ideas about the writing process, and support and criticize one another's texts seems reasonable enough. And for a writing class where establishing trust and respect among students and teacher is important, decentering seems sensible, and generally works well.

But when I try to establish a site where the students can get to know one another, and share ideas through a series of journal writing exercises, it resembles teaching a cat to swim- the very idea goes against their instincts. While we in academia are often reluctant to share information with strangers we have just met in an unfamiliar environment --and teachers in correctional facilities have to remember that for most students the classroom is not their second home-- in the prison opening up to others runs counter to the convict's code. As one student said, "In prison ya gotta walk the line. There's like a code, ya know: Mind your own business, be cool, don't talk to the police (the inmates name for the guards), don't snitch, don't steal.

Thus, one common response the prisoners have to a decentered classroom is to remain silent. Since personal revelations are chips played in a dangerous game, asking the students to, say, read their texts to the class out loud, can result in everyone folding their hands. Likewise, since it is in the inmates' best interests not to let anyone get under their skin, trying to agitate them so they will talk about their writing and that of others does not always function. Furthermore, if the journals contain personal information, the students feel even less inclined to share them

with the class, let alone leave them in their "dormitories," as I found out when I asked the class how they felt about the idea of writing journals. "Aww, man, in prison you know it just isn't a good idea to leave shit like that lying around," groaned one student. As I wonder why some of my assignments just don't click I need to keep in mind my status as a visitor here, and realize that freedoms I take for granted don't always exist in jail. And really, can prison teachers expect student inmates immersed in a totalitarian atmosphere, to easily make the transition for three hours every week to a de-centered, democratic classroom?

But the questions of decentering the classroom can seem minor compared to the snarled tangle of legal, ethical, and personal obligations in which writing teachers can find themselves, in the relationship between citizen and convict. I am reminded of the visit of a former governor of New York to Sing Sing Prison. The governor reportedly began his speech to the inmate population with, "My fellow citizens," but remembering convicts were not citizens, began again with, "My fellow convicts," which didn't really work either; the governor hesitated, then jumped into the first line of his speech. Negotiating confusing situations of this sort are one of a prison teacher's biggest challenges.

As a teacher, do I want to dissolve the distance between myself and my students? Yes, my students are human beings; some are friendly, personable, bright people. But they are also people who have chosen to break the law. Many serve time for selling drugs. But others are more violent. One man told me he savagely stabbed another man. Another, right before he was paroled, told me matter-of-factly, "I couldn't see raping a woman, but if I took her purse and knocked her out, and she gets eight or ten stitches from the butt of my gun, well, that's o.k." These thoughts are in my mind whenever I think about bending the facility rules because I find them obtrusive and unfair.

Where do I draw the line between teacher and citizen? As a citizen I feel obligated to uphold the regulations of the facility. As a teacher, I want to do as much as possible to break down the power structures in the classroom, but as I have pointed out, these structures are established in large part by the facility. What is going to give? My sense of what is best for the students, or my respect for the law? Sometimes I am tempted to skip the procedure of securing gate clearance for video tapes I wish to show, or articles I want to read to the class. But the rules are explicit- I may not give newspapers, magazines, copies of articles, or uncensored letters-all considered contraband- to the students.

This aside, the mere desire to establish a personal relationship with the students so they will trust me enough to share their writing creates problems. Facility guidelines advise against sharing personal information with prisoners, and I, as do other teachers, have to be on guard against prisoners who attempt to discover where we live, details of our personal lives, or requests for favors including, of course, the importation of contraband into the prison. One walks a fine line between being friendly and placing oneself in a precarious and possibly illegal position. Female teachers in male prisons have to contend with notes from the inmates professing love, containing obscene remarks, indecent proposals, and the like. These factors influence the teacher's relationship with the students, and tend to limit the extent to which the classroom can be decentered.

In conclusion, the reality of much of the teaching done today is a world away from the ideal classroom imagined by the purveyors of current classroom pedagogy, or those privileged enough to sit in graduate classrooms. Consequently, those of us finding employment not in the proverbial hallowed halls of academia, but in razor-wire topped compounds would do well to re-examine our pedagogy. We as teachers in facilities and other non-traditional teaching environments need to be aware of the different rules and hierarchies at work inside such a system, and while de-

centering classrooms may work well within certain bounds they need to be modified before being applied liberally to prison college classrooms.