DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 536 CS 216 010

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TITLE	Preconceptions and Misconceptions of Teaching Composition to the Incarcerated.
PUB DATE	1997-03-00
NOTE	14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *Classroom Environment; College Curriculum; *Correctional Education; Correctional Institutions; Higher Education; *Institutional Environment; *Prisoners; *Student Needs; *Student Reaction; Teacher Student Relationship; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	Liberatory Learning

ABSTRACT

The prison college classroom exists in an environment cut off from the outside world, where the debate over the prison classroom's very existence is fueled by public perceptions and media-generated ideas. The violent Lucasville riots in Ohio in 1994 are fresh in the minds of the public, and movies like "Shawshank Redemption" and "Natural Born Killers" distort prison life. Certain family patterns emerge, however, among incarcerated individuals: parental violence, sexual exploitation, abandonment, and lack of love; 19% of prisoners have less than an eighth-grade education, 78% did not graduate from high school. Inmates' academic skills may be lower than students in colleges on the outside. While the students have little academic background, they are often eager and responsive. Dialogic education, in which cooperation, unity, and cultural synthesis lead to critical consciousness, finds rich soil in a prison education system. Paulo Freire's liberatory pedagogy may help to understand incarcerated students. In seeking to liberate students, a composition classroom is a place where students come to see the world of oppression and commit themselves to its transformation. Unfortunately, the public will accept vocational/technical training for the incarcerated, but not liberal arts education. In Ohio and other states, since the elimination of Pell funding for prisoners and the tough-on-crime stance of politicians, many voices continue to insist that college programs in prisons be eliminated altogether. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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Preconceptions and Misconceptions of Teaching Composition to the Incarcerated

by: Stephen Spencer

As a first assignment in a composition class at Warren Correctional Institution in Lebanon, Ohio, I asked my students to recount the most important influences in their reading and writing lives. I asked them to consider earlier experiences with literacy and events that shaped the readers and writers they are today. One of my students wrote about how he didn't think writing was important before he came to prison, but since his incarceration, writing became the only way for him to connect to the outside world. He began to write letters and became quite skillful, he believed, as evidenced by the publication of his letters in *Hustler* and *Penthouse*.

This is a teaching moment that most likely would never occur in the traditional college classroom, but one that reveals how very different the prison college classroom is from those on the outside of the fence. The prison classroom exists in an environment cut off in many ways from the outside world where the debate over its very existence is fueled by public perceptions and media-generated ideas. The violent Lucasville riots in Ohio in 1994 are fresh in the minds of the public and movies like *Shawshank Redemption* and *Natural Born Killers* distort prison life.

Prison environments are intended to be different from the outside world. When approaching a prison, one notices the sense of isolation, a sense of isolation that is deliberately calculated. In an age of inclusion this place is designed, using location and modern technology, to be separate from the outside world. Most striking is the harshness of the place, in every aspect. Prisons are typically located in rural areas and surrounded by open fields. Teachers, who are professionals in the outside world, are immediately

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stripped of their authority when entering the world of the prison. Teachers, like all employees in the institution, must remove outward trappings of individuality--belts, wallets, jewelry, watches, sometimes shoes--to pass through a metal detector. Corrections officers rifle through bags, briefcases, and purses. Sometimes, teachers must even wear an electronic warning device called a "man-down alarm," which will sound an alarm if tilted at more than a forty-five degree angle. Then teachers must pass through a series of gates that definitively say "you are entering a place cut off from the outside world."

The prison environment outside the classroom, where the incarcerated student must try to survive, is a world further away from the classroom. Often seeing them as sellouts, inmates in the general population are sometimes hard on students. Incarcerated students have little or no extra-curricular activities, and teachers have little, or no, contact with students outside regular class hours. Since movement is restricted, teachers are unable to hold office hours and teachers are told they should not be interested in the personal lives of their students.

Our society conditions us to think of inmates as having less than average intelligence with strictly predatory instincts rather than as individuals. However, prisoners are simply people who have committed crimes. 47% have committed violent crimes, 12% homicide, 25% property offenses, and 21% drug offenses (Beck). Teachers in a prison environment must face the issue of danger, whether real or imagined, but inmates do not see teachers as threats or enemies. Prisoners are often unskilled at resolving conflicts without violence and pressures of confinement for extended periods may lead to outbreaks of violence. Inadequate heat and air-conditioning systems, close

quarters, overcrowding, pent-up physical energy, competition for status, racial tensions, and the threat of personal harm inevitably bring out the worst in people who may already be less socialized than people on the streets. 19% of prisoners have less than an 8th grade education and 78% did not graduate from high school (Beck). Before going to prison 53% made less than $10,000.00 a year (Beck), one-third had annual incomes of less than $5,000.00, and one-third were unemployed at the time of their arrest (Batiuk 1). 43% lived in single-parent households, 14% lived in households with neither parent present, and 26% reported their parents abused alcohol (Beck). Certain family patterns emerge among incarcerated individuals: parental violence, sexual exploitation, abandonment, and severe lack of love (Brown 98).

Despite their backgrounds, experience and research suggest that a relatively small proportion of prisoners have below-average intelligence (Brown 98). In a writing assessment study conducted by Wilmington College, 90% of prison students demonstrated minimal critical thinking skills equivalent to high school level of ability, compared to 88% on the main campus. However, academic skills may be lower than students in colleges on the outside. The same Wilmington College study found that 67% of students in our corrections branches were meeting minimum writing standards expected of high school students, compared to 90% of main campus students. Reading placement exams at Wilmington College's branch at the Warren Correctional Institution, a close security prison with a population of approximately 1,400 men, show that of 284 students tested over two years, 44.7% of entering students tested below a 10th grade reading level.

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Given the family and educational backgrounds of prisoners, the prison environment seems to facilitate little or no increase in moral development and maturity. Shawn Young cites seven studies that suggest that prison perpetuates the low level of moral development commonly found among inmates (153). David Werner found that prisoners tend to be politically conservative and often buy into the traditional western valuing of wealth as a key to and measure of success. Racism is also a reality of prison, where racial identity is important to personal identity and personal safety. The prison is made up of segregated spaces and grouping by race is always present, in the chow hall, in the recreation yard, and in the classroom.

As prison populations increase prison education programs continue to be cut. Legislators passed the Federal Crime Control Bill in 1994, which prohibits Pell grants for incarcerated individuals (section 20411). Many states are following the lead of the federal government by eliminating funding for post-secondary education in prisons. In Ohio, for example, state Department of Education grants for incarcerated college students will no longer be available after July 1, 1997. Policy makers insist on empirical evidence that education will reduce recidivism to justify post-secondary programs in prisons; however, available data is contradictory. Some studies conclude that prison education doesn't work because education programs do not cause significant reductions in recidivism rates, while some even suggest that prison education programs have a negative effect on recidivism. Some scholars take a middle ground arguing that prison education can work if certain conditions and criteria are met, such as extensive small group interaction, follow-up support services, and targeting of higher risk participants.

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In the most recent study of the connection between education and recidivism available, Mary Ellen Batiuk, Paul Moke, and Pamela Wilcox Rountree conclude that inmates who received more education in prison were more readily employed after parole and thereby recidivism over an extended follow-up period was less than their less-educated counterparts. Critics argue that recidivism is lower for these inmates because these inmates are already motivated. But removing education programs will eliminate places that foster motivation and self-change in these motivated individuals.

Prison education programs and the prison system are at odds: the goal of the educator is to bring up or draw out, to develop mental and moral growth, while the goal of the prison system is to close in and contain. Werner says, "To teach in a prison is to compromise" (105). Education is a democratic enterprise in an authoritarian place. Wayne Knights, a teacher at Simon Fraser University's liberal arts program in four Canadian prisons, says that prison education programs create a "relative oasis," an autonomous place within the routine of the prison (61).

Richard Brown argues that the only avenues of change for people with inappropriate life theories are mental or physical breakdown, conversion through religion or other kinds of inspiration, and self-directed change (100-102). The Freirian concept of liberatory education provides the opportunity for self-directed change for incarcerated students. Werner says teachers in prisons must accept the strategy that "cultural literacy and critical thinking skills can help students 'think their way through life's problems' and are therefore equal in importance to the more fundamental marketable skills" (163). Brown asserts that prison education assists self-directed change by: sharpening understanding and knowledge, enhancing the will, and improving self-image (101-102).

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This approach to education provides the base for profound conversations and broad understanding about education, power, and responsibility.

Although studies of the impact of education on recidivism are contradictory, many scholars argue that education in prison is valuable for the same reasons that many of us in composition are committed to education. Daniel Lockwood concludes that participation in humanities courses has no effect on recidivism(198), but he justifies prison college programs because they have a positive impact on prison environments (199). Lockwood argues that college programming helps to "normalize" an abnormal setting and contributes to psychological survival (199). Newcomers to prison are shocked at how nice prisoners are. Richard Brown suggests that they are nice because decent, meaningful relationships have been allowed to develop in prison educational programs. Teachers are often shocked when their students are cruel or violent when circumstances bring out negative or violent behavior in other settings within the prison (Brown 100). "The single goal to which prison education must strive," states David Werner, "is *individual empowerment*" (156). One study shows that moral reasoning increased for prisoners enrolled in humanities courses (Young 154). The goals of many educators in the humanities are appropriate for incarcerated students: to think clearly, judge wisely, and communicate effectively; to respond to action morally and ethically; to allow students to see information within the political and social circumstances which produced that information; and to allow students the opportunity to evaluate their own social and political circumstances critically.

The idea that education is transformative is certainly nothing new in the public forum. In response to attacks on the Department of Education, Secretary Richard Riley

said, "Eighty per cent of the people in America's prisons and seventy per cent of people on welfare are high school drop-outs. The fastest way I know to end the violence and keep people off welfare is to improve this nation's education system." According to prison educator Richard Brown, in the long-term, prison education "offers opportunities for significant personal change" (97). Vocational and life skill education does not reach the serious problems facing incarcerated students. Young concludes that prisons should implement programs that will foster moral growth (163). Education must provide inmates with structures for reasoning about their social situations, to recognize that demeaning and oppressive atmospheres provide a climate for anti-social thought (163-164).

The idea that education is a subversive force creating subjects who transform their worlds is quite appropriate for prison education programs. Dialogic education, in which cooperation, unity, and cultural synthesis lead to critical consciousness, finds rich soil in a prison education program. Paulo Freire's central assumption in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is that human individuals can be subjects who act upon and transform the world (their worlds) and in so doing move to fuller lives both individually and collectively. Freire sees no neutral educational processes. Education functions as a vehicle for individuals to see the world creatively and critically and discover how to transform reality. Ira Shor sees education as "a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change" (15). One of Shor's assumptions is that the self and society create each other: thus education must maintain as its goal the development of "strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change" (15). The college classroom in prison is the place where

incarcerated individuals can learn democratic values that will help them re-enter society as thoughtful, active citizens.

Freire's philosophy may also help us to understand incarcerated students. If a characteristic of the oppressed is to align themselves with the oppressor, and the oppressor consciousness "tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination" (Freire 40), and if violence and physical force are used by the oppressors to control incarcerated individuals, then physical force as a reaction to situations is logical for those incarcerated. Freire also argues that another characteristic of the oppressed is self-deprecation, in which the oppressed internalize the oppressors' view of them. Given the predominant personal and educational backgrounds of incarcerated individuals and their treatment while incarcerated, students in a prison environment may feel that they are without knowledge, that those in authority, including the teachers, are the ones who possess knowledge. In seeking to liberate students, a composition classroom is a place where students come to see the world of oppression and commit themselves to its transformation. Once this transformation takes place, Freire's second stage of liberatory education is possible, in which this pedagogy becomes the pedagogy of all people in the "process of permanent liberation" (36).

James Berlin and Michael Vivion share this view of education. Their brand of cultural studies presents a liberatory pedagogy in which students study the ways social formations and practices shape consciousness and reality, for the purpose of making students subjects. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb see the study of composition as "an inquiry into cultural values" (1). In their metaphor of composition as contending with words, Harkin and Schilb argue that to contend is "to manage, to cope, to deal with a

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situation, to endure, to get along." (6). Henry Giroux sees pedagogy as illuminating "the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power" (30). He sees pedagogy as a site of struggle, "a form of cultural politics that addresses how different identities and experience get produced, and how they come to function in the broader community" (63). Education of this sort offers students the opportunity to be self-reflexive and dedicated to individual responsibility. This view of education is idealistic, but it enables us to deepen and expand the possibilities to improve human life.

Teaching in the prison system presents an entire set of new problems that has rarely been addressed in academic circles. While often the students have little academic background, they are many times more often eager and responsive. However, due to the system itself, the psychological makeup of the inmates, and the constraints of the environment, the writing teacher must adjust his or her classroom techniques and curriculum. Ruth Spack says " . . . we need to understand who we are as historical, political, social, and cultural beings in order to gain a fuller sense of the complexity of the relationship between teacher, student, and text." (10). Spack writes, "We have multiple identities that cross language, cultural, racial, religious, and other boundaries as do the students we teach. Furthermore, socially constructed readings of the teacher are not limited to students whose identity does not match their teacher's" (16). This awareness first came to me as I began to teach writing to incarcerated students. As a teacher in a prison setting for six years, I have probably learned far more from my students than they have learned from me.

Incarcerated students insist that teachers treat them as they treat non-institutionalized students. Students will frequently ask if a teacher's standards are the

same as those outside the prison. Prison education should be voluntary and the mode of teacher should be the informal counselor providing students with a range of choices (Brown 102). Teachers should accept incarcerated students as individuals and respect their positions. Teachers should not probe into the backgrounds of students or over-identify with them, but should show respect for the privacy and personal lives of incarcerated students just as they would students on the outside.

Wary of newcomers to the prison environment, prisoners will test new teachers to see where they stand. Sometimes this testing may appear to be discipline problems: students may use profane, racist, or sexist language, students may brazenly argue with the teacher, students may arrive late or leave in the middle of class, or students may ask inappropriate or irrelevant questions. When faced with these behaviors, teachers must establish the ground rules and remain consistent. In this environment, everything depends on a prisoner's ability to read another person to determine how the relationship will be defined. When students see that the teacher is committed to education, supportive but firm, and honest in approaching students, and when they see that the classroom will be a space separate from the rest of the institution where they will not be demeaned or threatened, students relax and commit themselves to the class.

Teachers in prison programs must be prepared to give something of themselves. As Brown argues, "Above all the need is for sensitive, flexible teachers who fully understand the plight of their students" (Brown 103). Correctional educators tend to remain for brief periods of time or stay for long periods of time (Werner). Those who leave usually quit as a reaction to the oppressive institutional environment. Teachers should not expect thanks. Students will generally not thank you or attempt any contact

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with you after they leave the prison. Teachers must understand the overwhelming out-of-classroom issues facing incarcerated students. Out of necessity, the prison is a bureaucratic world obsessed with security. Security is the top priority of prison staff and security issues are often pre-eminent in the minds of correctional educators, sometimes superseding educational issues and priorities. Prison staff may be unsympathetic to correctional educators and some corrections officers, most of whom have no college experience, view teachers as soft on inmates. Robert Sedlack and Stan Karcz found that prison educators easily fall into the habit of using practices antithetical to those that facilitate learning (325). David Werner suggests that students are unfamiliar with the classroom setting and behaviors, like discussion. The insularity of a prison educational setting may lead to different standards than those of outside educational programs and affect the speed at which a prison accepts new educational technology and concepts (Werner 100).

According to the Bureau of Justice, at the end of 1995, 5.3 million people were on probation, in jail, or on parole. 1.1 million people were in state and federal prisons. By the middle of 1996, the state and federal prison population had risen by another 500,000 people. Prison education is education to make a difference, education to change the world around us. The reaction to crime and prisoners is largely an emotional one. Reason suggests that despite our emotional and moral arguments against education for incarcerated individuals, it is the only way to address the roots of the problems of crime and prison over-crowding. On July 1, 1997, funding for prison college programs in the State of Ohio will run out. After public opposition to prison educational funding, months of legislative committee meetings, and intense lobbying from colleges and universities

throughout the state of Ohio, funding for prison college programs will be housed in the State Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. To date, the proposed new structure will severely limit the number of prisoners who will be permitted to enroll in college courses, will not lead to a degree, and will not allow humanities-based, liberal arts courses. The public will accept vocational and technical training, but not the liberal arts. In Ohio and other states, since the elimination of Pell funding for prisoners and the tough-on-crime stance of politicians, many voices continue to insist that college programs in prisons be eliminated altogether.

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