

Creating a Curriculum and Accommodating Teaching Methods at a Federal Prison's  
Special Housing Unit

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## Abstract

The federal prison system provides a number of opportunities for inmates to further their education. These prospects can be made available at the prison and can include, college correspondence, the formal classroom, or at the inmate's cell in the special housing unit (SHU). While it is common for inmates to receive a more appropriate education at the education department where classrooms, students, and teachers are provided, SHU is a unique environment that limits inmate movement and the one-on-one interaction between students and teachers. As long as SHU inmates are held in SHU, they cannot officially test for the ABE, PGED, or GED, but they can participate in the SHU Educational Program where they can learn these subjects through these three programs, earn program points, and a certificate of completion so that when they do leave SHU and do return back to the classroom, they can quickly progress via these programs and earn their GED. Review of the literature was conducted through Google Scholar and ERIC and revealed a number of scholarly articles. It takes a special type of teacher to work with inmates to help them reach their educational goals. This paper reveals how teachers can create a teaching environment for SHU inmates as well as how to continuously create and maintain an effective environment to ensure that learning can continue.

## Creating a Curriculum and Accommodating Teaching Methods at a Federal Prison's Special Housing Unit

The federal prison system provides a number of opportunities for inmates to further their education whether in pursuing a degree or their GED. These prospects can include, college correspondence, the formal classroom, or at the inmate's cell in the special housing unit (SHU). While it is common for inmates to receive a more appropriate education at the education department where classrooms, students and teachers are provided, SHU is a unique environment that limits inmate movement, the one-on-one interaction between students and teachers, and limits the level of education they may pursue. As long as SHU inmates are held in SHU, they cannot pursue ABE, PGED, or GED educational goals until they are no longer assigned to SHU as an inmate. But while in SHU, they may enroll and participate in the SHU Educational Program where they can learn the various subjects offered in these three programs, earn program points, and a certificate of completion, but they cannot be officially tested until they are no longer assigned to SHU.

The U.S. Department of Justice (2011) defines SHU as "housing units in Bureau institutions where inmates are securely separated from the general inmate population, and may be housed either alone or with other inmates" (p. 2). The purpose of SHU is to "ensure the safety, security, and orderly operation of correctional facilities, and protect the public, by providing alternative housing assignments for inmates removed from the general population" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011, p. 2). Prisons have to provide a

range of resources for individuals with many different requirements including an educational establishment, a hospital, a provider of psychiatric services, a job center and a rehabilitation center, but, above all, the imprisonment has to be seen to serve the public's growing desire for punishment (Ridley, Richards, Smith, & Walker, 2010).

MacKain and Messer (2004) explained that when it comes to solving the inmate placement problem, the solution in some jurisdictions is to transport uncontrollable inmate patients, at great expense, to one of the relatively few prison inpatient facilities. These inmates are "frequent fliers," often racking up highway miles per year in prison transfers. In the community, this strategy of shuffling hard-to-treat individuals with mental illnesses from place to place, in hopes that they will someday "land" in an ideal treatment environment, is sometimes termed "Greyhound therapy."

Since the tranquil placement is rarely found, correctional systems are recognizing the value of providing more varied levels of care for the mentally ill (Hughes, Wilson, & Beck, 2001). Mentally ill inmates are more likely to have behavior problems, be victimized by higher functioning inmates, and find it difficult to understand and follow rules (Adams, 1986; Jemelka, Trupin, & Chiles, 1989). This work will explain how new teachers can create a teaching environment for SHU inmates as well as how to continuously create and maintain an effective environment to ensure that learning can continue.

### **Setting up the SHU Classroom**

**SHU tour.** Before I was given the official assignment of providing a SHU Educational Program for SHU inmates, a few of my staff members took me on a tour of

SHU to let me see what its environment consisted of. After having the opportunities of visiting SHU, I was able to construct a mental plan as to what I would need to create a classroom to what I felt would be an effective plan of teaching SHU inmates. SHU can be constructed into sectors where each can have 2 floors, an upper and lower level. One of the main challenges I found was how these inmates were contained in their cell for 23 hours a day, except for 1 hour a day, when they are locked up in their cells. These metal doors are not a bar gate type door. These doors are solid metal with two small vertical windows, a small perforated area located halfway in the middle of the door to allow for communication between the inmate and prison personnel, and a small drop trap door accessed only by a prison key for which only materials can be exchanged between the inmate and prison personnel. Since there is no carpet or anything hanging on the walls in this environment, the bare walls and floor echo all sound. Understanding how these SHU cells are constructed, teachers can then begin to create a curriculum that can best serve these inmates.

**Creating a SHU curriculum.** As the SHU Program Coordinator, I met with the education department supervisor to discuss how this curriculum was to be developed. The purpose of the SHU Education Program is to engage SHU inmates in an education program that would prepare them to take the official GED tests once their time in SHU had been completed. This program consists of three levels: Adult Basic Education (ABE-grade school level), PreGeneral Educational Development (PGED-middle school level), and General Educational Development (GED-high school level) study guides. All three study guides consist of Math, Science, Social Studies, Language Arts-Writing,

and Language Arts-Reading. SHU inmates would be awarded 20 program credit hours and a *Certificate of Completion* for each unit and unit test they complete. Once the curriculum has been completed and the education department supervisor has approved it, the supervisor must create and approve codes for each unit students complete that will later be displayed in the prison's transcript software.

### **Recruiting SHU Inmates**

**Collecting materials.** In order to best serve SHU inmates before visiting SHU to begin recruiting inmates, there are a few steps educators can take to prepare themselves so that they can better serve these inmates. As our program began with ABE/Math/Unit 1 packet, it would best to make a handful of copies of this packet and the participation form, and put all these copies into a folder. Create a computerized table on paper of what inmates you will have recruited (after they have signed the form), who signed the forms and what unit packets you gave them.

**Meeting the inmates.** Once you get to SHU, you need to collect a few things. You would need to retrieve the key from SHU's central command that would open the trap door that's on each of the inmates' door. SHU can be divided into various wings or sectors. Each wing/sector can be divided into upstairs and downstairs, then further into cells. Take note of what sector/wing, upstairs/downstairs, and what cell you have visited so that you won't waste time visiting the same areas. When you meet an inmate, introduce yourself, what program you can offer them, explain the program's benefits and if they would like to join. One of the greatest challenges is how they will react to you. Some of them will be excited just to want to do something to pass the time away.

Others may be gruff. The door that separates you from them is your safety net. If the inmate agrees to participate in the educational program, give them a packet through this door. Have them sign the SHU Program Education Participation Form and explain that you will try to be back in a few days. This gives them time to do the work. Once you've visited and recruited as many SHU inmates as possible, these inmates would need to be processed through the prison's education software.

### **Teaching SHU Inmates**

Any education that is provided to all federal prison inmates is administered directly by the Corrections Departments (Frolanger-Ulf, 2001). Teachers are themselves employees of the Corrections Department which makes it easier for the Department to closely control what is being taught and gives the prisoners fewer contacts with outsiders (Frolanger-Ulf, 2001). After having taught for about four months at SHU, I've learned one basic fact, regardless of what these inmates have done that got them into SHU, they are basically just people who have committed a crime and are being punished for it. Some of them are average people, while others may appear to obviously have behavior problems. In some ways, it takes a special type of person to care for these inmates and to help them get to their goals. According to Randall (2004), teachers must feel for and help their students, but not to the point that they deprive students of their dignity as individuals. One teacher described her role as "doing with" not "doing for" her students (p. 193). Care is "showing concern for the individual student believing in him, feeling responsibility for his success and helping him to develop a sense of self-worth and achieve his goals" (Randall, 2004, p. 194). Noddings

(1999) also reported that caring in a prison setting truly involves “receiving the other” but not absorbing her/him into myself, becoming a duality of “self-other” (p. 45).

Wilde (1996) reported that care is not something added to teaching; it infuses teaching and makes it whole. It is embedded in the school philosophy. Students in prison need a safe environment for experimentation, for creativity, and for personal growth. Much as teachers must care for their students to be effective in prison, students should be taught to care for others in society and feel that need to respond to the “plight of the poor and the homeless, the abused, the struggles of teen parents...” (p. 197). In this way, caring relations in school rehabilitate, as prisoners become students, persons and citizens who care for others. Wilde continued that teachers believe that caring institutions provide good health care for inmates, appropriate rehabilitation programs, programs that teach job skills, and opportunities to live on drug-free as well as smoke-free ranges. Wright (2004) later reported that teachers in prison struggle to care within institutionally prescribed prohibitions on relationships with inmates. Teachers described the importance of learning to be closed to them and staying far enough away, so that imagined or socially constructed boundaries are not crossed (Wright, 2004).

**Good qualities of teaching in prison.** Carr (2000) reported that, according to one teacher “by teaching in the prison, I am able to have adult conversation which is important, yet I can teach on a lower level. I can converse with them as adults and teach on their level (p. 8). Another teacher reported,

I like the fact that I don’t have any gradebook. You don’t take any grades

because you don’t have to make out report cards every six weeks. I love the fact



that this is no duty like bus duty, playground duty, or lunchroom duty. I love the fact that I don't have to deal with any parents, there are no parents. (p. 8)

Another teacher reported that teaching at a prison

is more than teaching – it is more like a ministry of healing. [We] reach out to those members of society that are often forgotten, often those who no one else has been able to reach. Those whose lives touch [ours] are better for the encounter. (Carr, 2000)

Frolander-Ulf (2001) found that imprisoned students quickly take ownership of the curriculum and become involved in course development and other aspects of the program. Many act as mentors for other students; some have been co-teachers; and some help organize discussions to ensure that everyone gets his turn to speak. The classroom provides one of the few spaces inside the prison where free-flowing discussions can occur in a relatively safe environment unencumbered by the presence of people in authority. And here education is not taken for granted. The generous welcome we get reminds us of just how precious it is to engage in a learning process that helps free our minds, not further imprison us mentally.

Rose and Voss (2003) sought to create a respectful environment between teachers and students in their classrooms at correctional facilities as well as among students, encouraging them to push aside socio-economic and racial barriers while in the classroom. Rose and Voss also began addressing students by their last name as she expected them to address her, and as a result, her students began calling one another by Mr. So and So rather than by prison nicknames further creating a sort of utopia in the

classroom, intentionally rising above the subversive environment found in the rest of the prison. An educator must be demanding yet caring, motivational, and empowering, and an expert in their field who truly enjoys teaching and working with incarcerated students. The teacher must also be able to recognize and nurture potential talent in the students, and must never give up on the students.

**Bad qualities of teaching in prison.** Carr (2000) also reported from one teacher, What I don't like is we don't have any teacher rights. Your rights get violated all the time [name of institution omitted here], all the time. And they don't think anything about it. They don't follow TEA rules and regulations that all the public schools are supposed to follow. It's not right. We are not inmates and I am tired of being treated like the inmates. I think that inmates have more rights than we have. (p. 8)

According to Vacca (2004), many problems interfere with the incarcerated students' education while in prison, such as inadequate access to computer equipment, complicated security routines, repeated transfers between prisons, disturbances in prison and lack of access to literature. Kozol (1992) also found that students in many parts of the country sit in classrooms with leaking roofs; others are housed in trailers; many do not have access to laboratory facilities or even textbooks, and there is a qualified teacher's shortage.

Taymans and Corley (2001) reported that the challenges of providing educational programming in a correctional setting are multifaceted. Given that the primary goal of a correctional facility is to provide security, it is not uncommon for instruction to be

interrupted in the interest of security or for inmate-students to be transferred to other institutions, to meet with their attorneys, or to be scheduled to appear in court.

Education staff must deal with the continual and unpredictable turnover of students.

During instruction, teachers are faced with the ever-present challenge of finding the right balance between “being correctional and being educational” (Wright, 1998, p. 53).

Taymans and Corley continued that teachers must find ways to motivate learners to become goal-oriented despite the present world of confinement that contributes to limited expectations and motivations for the learner. Williamson (1992) found that most adult literacy teachers try to find ways to relate new learning to learner’s prior experiences, this may not always be appropriate in correctional settings: some offenders have life experiences that are not socially appropriate and therefore not a reliable resource for further learning.

Frolanger-Ulf (2001) reported that if the teachers are transformed, so too can the students undergo a radical change. Of utmost importance to people in prisons, both in terms of their sanity and their ability to make it in the “world,” is contact with persons who are not part of the criminal injustice system. Teachers are such persons, and they and the struggle to keep them there, are all the more important given several ominous trends.

### **Assessing Work and Rewarding Inmates**

Once the student has completed a packet, the teacher can then grade the unit using the answer keys from the ABE, PGED, or GED study guides. If the student passes

that unit, the teacher can create a certificate of completion and make copies of the next unit, all which go to the student.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching SHU inmates can be a challenge for both the inmate and the teacher. The more informed the teacher is at knowing these environments and how the inmates can learn through their environment, the more creative the teacher can be at providing an enriched curriculum. As these inmates come from various backgrounds, teachers need to be as prepared as possible to accommodate their needs.

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