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Bonnie Gasior

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Free Minds Book Club: Students Reading and Responding to Incarcerated Writers' Poetry

BONNIE GASIOR

California State University, Long Beach

Abstract: Nearly two hundred students, faculty, staff, and community members gather in a series of events to read and respond to poetry written by incarcerated authors. The program engages inmates in poetic self-expression, reflection, and personal growth while challenging honors students to consider what they have learned in literature classes in a broader context of incarceration. Monthly write-nights via Zoom and Miro prove rich and cathartic during the coronavirus crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; poetry (literary form); incarcerated youth; community engagement; California State University, Long Beach (CA)—University Honors

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Free Minds Book Club is part of a youth intervention program based in Washington, D.C., that underscores the life-changing power of reading and writing. One feature of the organization is “On the Same Page: Write Night,” the community engagement piece of Free Minds Poetry, which allows inmates to share their ideas with those on the outside. In this program, inmates write poems of self-expression, reflection, and personal growth. While staff often cite inmates’ initial hesitancy to participate, a symptom of their self-doubt and skepticism, inmates in hindsight often praise the cathartic growth opportunity.

Our first Write Night on campus, which the California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) Honors Program sponsored, attracted nearly two hundred students, faculty, staff, and community members. With five or six people

at a table, individuals received a small stack of poems, which they shared among each other. Throughout this process, poets' intellectual property and student responses were identifiable by first name or initials only.

Until this past year, the D.C. office's procedure was to send us a zip file, which we would print, distribute, and then return via USPS (thanks to a small grant from my college). Now that COVID has forced their hand, the offices have pivoted to host-scheduled, monthly Write Nights via Zoom (and the collaborative whiteboard, Miro: <<https://freemindsbookclub.org/get-involved/attend-write-night>>), which, while lacking the traditional in-person dynamic, enable anyone—anywhere—with internet access to attend. Free Minds has plans, once lockdowns lift, to resume face-to-face readings as well as to continue with virtual ones.

On our first Write Night in 2019, participants were instructed to write with a unique colored marker so that authors can see how many people are, in fact, responding to their piece. Free Minds encourages as many comments as the page will accommodate, and after only a few minutes, the pages reflected a rainbow of color. After approximately one hour of writing, we paused to encourage students to share their thoughts and words with the larger group. Because many of our students come from low-income families and found relatable elements in the poets' voices—for example, one student referenced an incarcerated family member—the emotions that the poems expressed evoked both laughter and tears as we collectively concurred that poetry is the maximum expression of the human soul. Free Minds reminds us that while bodies may be incarcerated, the mind can never be bound by bars or walls.

Our second event, some six weeks later, adopted the same structure and format with one minor change: a formerly incarcerated individual who now works as a Free Minds Ambassador joined us virtually to share his story and to reflect on the Free Minds program in general. Our guest's participation set the tone for the reading and allowed students not only to put a representative face to the poems but also to interact with him, thus better understanding common themes and the impact of feedback for poets. Inmates often cite the motivational remarks from readers as one of the few pleasures they have to look forward to given their isolation and circumstances.

“Community” events like these are more relevant now than ever given the recent social justice movements in this country; since most inmates in the program are Black or Latinx, such events serve as overdue restorative justice endeavors. Furthermore, Free Minds exemplifies “what works in honors” by connecting inmates with students, many of whom take literature classes;

destigmatizing incarcerated populations; and humanizing students as they recognize through poetic language that inmates are humans, too. Ultimately, Free Minds Poetry reinforces the idea that prisoners should not be defined by their offense.

Free Minds Poetry proves ideal within honors education as a high-impact assignment, project, or research topic in any humanities-related course. In addition, Free Minds Poetry now includes a Spanish-language counterpart, “Mentes Libres,” which caters to Hispanic inmates, and it also serves a local women-only penitentiary.

As the Free Minds Book Club website states, the organization is committed to “Empowering incarcerated youth to write new chapters in their lives.” Equally as important is that our honors students see how these readings give new meaning to “community engagement” and redefine their intellectual, service, and leadership roles within and beyond the honors programs and colleges they represent.

For more information about Free Minds Book Club, including hosting your own Free Minds Poetry event and bringing your students on as interns and local representatives in your area, please contact Outreach Coordinator Janet Zwick: janet@freemindsbookclub.org.

REFERENCE

Free Minds Book Club. (2002). <<https://freemindsbookclub.org>> Accessed 17 November 2020.

The author may be contacted at

Bonnie.Gasior@csulb.edu.