

INCARCERATED MOOCs:

MODERNIZING THE PRISON EDUCATION MODEL

By T. Lamont Baker, Incarcerated Thinker, # [REDACTED]

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In this essay I expound on the diluted and unproductive nature of the education programs that are deployed within North Carolina's prisons. I also offer online instruction as the ultimate solution to the problems that these programs continuously fail to solve despite their constant consumption of inordinate amounts of human and financial resources.

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Current
Mailing
Address:

T. Lamont Baker [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

INTRODUCTION

"The teachers of today just go on repeating things in a rigmarole fashion, annoy the students with constant questions, and repeat the same things over and over again. They do not try to find out what the students' natural inclinations are, so that the students are forced to pretend to like their studies, nor do they try to bring out the best in their talents. What they give to the students is wrong in the first place and what they expect of the students is just as wrong. As a result, the students hide their favorite readings and hate their teachers, are exasperated at the difficulty of the studies and do not know what good it does them. Although they go through the regular course of instruction, they are quick to leave it when they are through. This is the reason for the failure of education today."

When I first read these words I immediately thought of my experiences with prison education programs. I compared the ideas... no... I compared the COMPLAINTS conveyed in this caption with the ways in which education is administered amongst the incarcerated here in North Carolina, and I was shocked that some of these complaints apply so well to my background in prison classes. But I'm not shocked simply because they "apply" to me. I'm shocked primarily because

they still apply at all—aren't you?... I guess you need more information and a better explanation before you can answer this.

Briefly put, this caption is Lin Yutang's translation of an excerpt from the ANALECTS, which is often referred to as the "Confucian Bible." It was written by Confucius over two and a half millennia ago—about five centuries before Jesus was born! Are you shocked now? You should be, because the realization that ancient but legitimate grievances, undeniably fixable grievances that predate Westernism itself, are still alive and strong today exemplifies "shocking."

I guess this hits a little closer to home for me because not only are these complaints still alive and strong, they're also mine now. Confucius' grievances are an Incarcerated Thinker's grievances. That's actually fascinating! Well, at least to me it is. Maybe it's some sort of afflatus or something. Maybe The Fu is sending me a sign from wherever he is....? (If so, he shouldn't mind if I refer to him as "The Fu," right?) Or maybe not; maybe I'm wrongly deifying a mere coincidence—who knows?

What I'm not wrong about, however, is the applicability of Confucius' complaints to North Carolina prisons' education programs. Prison pedagogues don't know their students' inclinations, they don't bring out the best

of their students' talents, they teach the wrong material, and they have unrealistic and misplaced expectations. Also, their incarcerated students often pretend to like the curriculum, they hide their skills and interests, they usually dislike their teachers, and their minds tend to magnify the course's irrelevance. These arrangements, these fruitless practices and attitudes, cause the pupils to go through the motions and abandon the "course of instruction" as soon as the class ends. This is the true state of penal education in this region—an almost identical replica of the truth as Confucius saw it many centuries ago. Better yet, in the words of former boxing promoter Don King, these things are "irrefutable, indisputable, and inconvolutable..."

And who cares if "inconvolutable" isn't a real word; that doesn't matter. What matters here is the antiquated structure of prison education programs, the intellectual stagnation that results from such a structure, and the absence of practical and substantive suggestions of how to mold, modify, and modernize this structure.

The latter of these will be my focus here. In the following text I will outline and argue for the implementation of a very contemporary prison education model, a model centered around inmates' enrollment in, and completion of, massive open online courses (referred to hereafter as MOOCs—pronounced "mooks"). I maintain that this education model is easy to actualize and, if properly established,

could apply tremendous long-term downward pressure on the recidivism rate by applying tremendous long-term upward pressure on the habilitation rate. I aim to shine light on what is currently a lightless situation and illuminate the intellectual masterpieces that are currently imprisoned in pitch black, iron-clad art galleries.

THE PROBLEM

In Part Two of my first book, *A CONVICT'S PERSPECTIVE: CRITIQUING PENOLOGY AND INMATE REHABILITATION*, I addressed many of the problems that currently stifle efforts to educate inmates here in North Carolina. I also provided provocative solutions to these problems; one of which pertained to making MOOCs available to convicts.

Recent events, however, have compelled me to stand on my own shoulders, to re-ignite and build upon this previous MOOC discussion. A few months ago I observed a situation and conducted a few extensive interviews as a result of my observations. (My subjects didn't know that they were being officially interviewed by-the-way; just one of the few perks of being an "insider.") The findings, interpretations, and conclusions that emanated from my informal reconnaissance mission have made it apparent that the second part of my book didn't go far enough in expanding on prison's need for MOOCs. So now I will build a bridge

between this part of my previous work and my intended destination (which is a clear and comprehensive explanation of the need for, and benefits of, granting prisoners access to MOOC platforms).

The aforementioned situation consisted of the emotionally charged rant of an inmate named "Lee." In short (and minus the expletives), Lee was enraged because he had just learned that he couldn't take a culinary class unless he completed a brick masonry, plumbing, or electrical wiring class first. Lee was angry because his interests were in culinary arts, not construction. (He was on the verge of becoming a sous chef prior to his incarceration.) He was mad at being denied the opportunity to develop his culinary skills merely because he hadn't completed any of these made-up prerequisites. He also hated almost everything about construction, which is what all of these fake prerequisites entailed. One of his slightly edited comments was "What the _____ does laying a _____ brick have to _____ do with making _____ chicken cordon bleu!?! (Use your imagination to fill in the blanks.)"

After Lee's rant I decided to do some research. I conducted a limited survey to determine whether other inmates had been in Lee's position and if so, how they responded or reacted to it. It turned out that a bunch of guys, especially young ethnic minorities, could relate very well to Lee's conundrum. Many of them were denied

a seat in the class of their choosing because they hadn't taken a completely unrelated class that was designated as a prerequisite.

All of the guys I spoke with who were not allowed to enroll in the cooking class specifically for this reason told me that a Johnston Correctional Institution administrator by the name of "Mrs. Reid" accused them of only wanting to take the culinary class so that they could "cook and eat." According to them, she also claimed that their completion of a construction class would prove to her that they wanted to take the culinary class for "the right reasons;" the implication being that "cooking and eating" is the wrong reason. I disagree with Mrs. Reid on this latter part; I don't think that an inmate's willingness to merely show up to an electrical wiring class everyday for three months is evidence of his desire to take a cooking class for "the right reasons."

The very act of identifying the "right" reasons for enrolling in school is just plain stupid to me also. Inmates are never denied enrollment in a brick masonry course simply because their reason for enrolling stems from the joy of laying bricks. They also are never denied enrollment in a plumbing course simply because their reason for wanting to enroll in such a course is the pleasure derived from connecting water pipes and troubleshooting waterheaters. So, if the joy of laying bricks isn't the wrong reason for

enrolling in a brick masonry class, and the pleasure of connecting water pipes isn't the wrong reason to enroll in a plumbing course, then why is a desire to "cook and eat" the wrong reason to enroll in a culinary class? Inmates aren't denied enrollment in these classes for these reasons, so why is culinary class different?

This lack of denial—i.e. absence of prerequisites for construction-related classes such as brick masonry and plumbing—likely exists because Mrs. Reid knows that guys generally don't sign up for brick masonry or plumbing classes for these reasons. She knows guys that sign up for these construction classes expect to actually learn how to perform these crafts and work very hard in the process. She knows that before the first day of class they expect to literally perform these tasks once class begins and, through hands-on participation, learn more about these activities and become better at them. They usually don't expect to really enjoy themselves in these courses, and this is just fine with Mrs. Reid. To keep it real, any reasons for taking a class that are disconnected from enjoyment or an expectation of fun are the right reasons in her eyes. She believes that nothing about prison life should be enjoyable, not even education or the learning process. (I interviewed her too.) This belief is the reason that inmates who signed up for the cooking class, who expected to enjoy the cooking and eating associated with learning culinary arts, were first

ordered to jump through the random prerequisite-hoops that the ringmaster - Mrs. Reid - had manufactured.

More pertinently, almost all of these guys decided to jump through these hoops and enroll in these concocted prerequisites, but their lack of interest in the subject matter caused them to constantly misbehave. They felt they were wasting their time in these classes. They were bored, rowdy, disruptive, and easily distracted because they didn't care about increasing their knowledge of construction-related trades (which have nothing to do with foodservice).

As you can imagine, this mindset led to behaviors that frequently attracted negative attention. These inmates were reprimanded by their teachers almost daily for their behavior. In response to these reprimands they would often say things like "I don't even want to be here," or "You're lucky I'm even showing up to this stupid ass class," thus further irritating their instructors. This would only lead to more reprimands and more irritating responses.

Eventually these inmates got tired and discouraged and threw their hands up in despair. They lost their desire to go to ANY class, even the culinary class in which they were initially interested. They passed these prerequisites simply because they showed up to class every-day, but since completing these classes they've

abandoned all efforts to pursue further education. They gave up and unknowingly turned towards recidivism.

THE SOLUTION

I find this popular "Lee dilemma" (fabricated and spontaneous prerequisites resulting in utter discouragement) to be quite troubling. Inmates who are deciding to embark upon a journey of scholastic advancement are being discouraged by what is already a very UNimpressive scholastic system, and something needs to happen so that this sort of discouragement will cease.

I've realized that MOOCs are that "something." More specifically, MOOC platforms are that "something." They are the solution to this problem. These diverse, multi-level course providers offer hundreds and hundreds of classes that cover all academic levels. They can teach someone how to read in their native language or they can help someone navigate the deeper recesses of quantum chromodynamics. There's literally something for everyone, from Baby Boomers with fourth grade educations to Millennials with Ph.D.s. Such diversity should really resonate deeply; having such an expansive selection of courses to choose from should really speak loudly to proponents of inmate reform. It means that these "prerequisiteless" courses address the needs of every individual prisoner here in the state.

A forty-year-old drug dealer with an interest in accounting can explore this interest through Coursera or

edX. A thirty-three-year-old gang member can learn to more productively exercise his leadership skills via Udemy, Udacity, or iTunesU. A twenty-two-year-old identity thief can learn to code and design apps through CodeAcademy. A twenty-one-year-old underachiever who dropped out of school in the seventh grade can catch up by utilizing the services of Khan Academy. (All of this can be accomplished in the same room at the same time!) Not to mention the fact that lectures can be viewed on platforms such as Yale Open Courses, CoursePad, and TED Talks. The channels for convicts to foster legal and fulfilling lifestyles via these platforms are truly limitless.

This type of diversity is ideal for North Carolina's captives; inmates in this state need such an opportunity for individualized education. Convicts could benefit a lot from this sort of specialized attention because their academic and intellectual needs are very diverse and their individual interests are so very unique. They could also benefit from interacting with college professors and the huge and very colorful pool of people that would undoubtedly be enrolled in MOOCs right alongside them. Interacting with educated thinkers via the open forums that many MOOC providers have created will motivate the imprisoned to think critically and enable them to go beyond the high-school-learning paradigm.

As of right now, most inmates operate from this

high-school-learning paradigm. This means that they define intelligence as the ability to remember stuff and to regurgitate it at will. To them, "smartness" is obtained by memorizing a bunch of facts and training oneself to extract particular tidbits of information from one's memory on command. This is very high-schoolish, the level where a person can excel just by recalling what they've read. This is also the paradigm that MOOCs can help inmates transcend.

MOOCs can catapult convicts into the college-learning paradigm, where memorizing information takes a backseat to generating information, where remembering facts is secondary to dissecting, analyzing, and complementing facts, and where knowing theories is less important than theorizing. This paradigm is built on strategic thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, and educated decision-making, all things that inmates must be proficient in just to avoid criminality's sticky web. Convicts have been left behind by a society that has moved toward an economy that's more technological and service-oriented than any other economy has ever been. Operating from a college-learning paradigm is the only way convicts can go from lagging behind to functioning well in this advanced civilization.

Mechanisms that prepared people to function in the old society, prior to many convicts' arrest, no longer can prepare people for new, real-world demands in 2013 and beyond, and an analytical paradigm is what's needed to

traverse this new terrain. Technology has changed everything—from how people repair cars to how they do their banking—and inmates are extremely unaware of such changes, let alone how to adapt to them.

For example, neither tablets, Twitter, Kickstarter, Instagram, Tesla, mass produced 3D printers, Playstation 3, a black American president, MOOCs, TMZ, LinkedIn, the movie *AVATAR*, nor Bitcoins were a reality when I got incarcerated. iPhones didn't even exist—I've never seen one and I have no clue what makes them "smarter" than my old Flip-phone. I'm an Incarcerated Thinker who is slightly above average as far as inmate intellects are concerned. Yet despite my relatively high capabilities, even I'm not prepared for modern day life and this criminogenic fact cannot change under the current educational umbrella that the North Carolina Division of Adult Correction has been holding up for decades.

The reality of our evolving civilization is a reality that convicts cannot afford to be disconnected from, and the college-learning paradigm can equip inmates with tools necessary to enter and thrive in it. More importantly, MOOCs are the paths that lead directly to this paradigm; they're the one-way highways that go from "highschoollearningville" to "collegelearningopolis."

And those who claim that such educative measures would only teach criminals how to become better criminals are sadly mistaken. They should

stop clinging to falsehoods—it's not a good look for them. It makes it seem like they're completely ignorant of the plight of convicts and the concept of habilitation. Either that, or the little bit that they think they know is definitely based on a lot of misinformation.

Those who hold this position don't seem to realize that many convicts adhere to deeply ingrained American values such as competition, material prosperity, individualism, freedom, hard work, loyalty, and acquisitiveness. Criminality itself is often birthed by rigid adherence to these principles—which collectively serve as the primary American value system. This means that the things in people's hearts and minds that led them to academia, the military, or corporate life are the same things that propelled others into criminal activity. Convicts wanted what others wanted before getting locked up—a high-quality life and complete control over their well-being—yet convicts were pretty much taught that the only route that would lead to such ends was the route of illegality. You must realize that those who've been thus taught and compelled simply need a little careful guidance. They need a little loving yet thorough instruction, the kind offered by contemporary educative measures such as MOOCs. These convicts simply need the things that are readily available to kids in upper-class, gated-community America: attention, support, education, access to resources, a clear path of upward mobility, and

people who believe in them and actively show it with their words and deeds. Such provisions are the key to reducing recidivism and preventing other civilians from getting victimized by ex-inmates.

So those who believe that educating inmates is counterproductive should come down off of their pedestals and accept the fact that most convicted criminals aren't too different from the person they saw in the mirror this morning. Most inmates WANT to rehabilitate themselves and live safe and societally legitimate lives, but they just don't know how. We all could benefit if anti-inmate reformists would suppress their arrogance enough to realize that if convicts were mentored, taught a different life direction, and shown accessible examples of people who've went in this direction and succeeded, they would make a change. And MOOCs are a promising, practical, and scalable way of accomplishing the first part of this "if," of teaching these guys a new life direction.

The same cannot be said for any of the almost six dozen prehistoric North Carolina prison GED programs in which inmates enroll across the state to dawdle their days away. It's only a few small but worthwhile steps that need to be taken to replace three or four of these GED programs with MOOC programs. I envision two medium custody prisons and two minimum custody prisons

that offer MOOCs exclusively — no GED, no Adult Basic Education, no vocational classes, no Alcoholics nor Narcotics Anonymous, no Thinking For A Change, just MOOCs and MOOCs alone. (The fans of these classes and programs can relax; replacing them with MOOCs at four facilities would still leave these classes fully operational at over sixty other prisons.)

Here at Johnston Correctional Institution, a medium custody prison as of these writings, there's a computer room that has twenty working computers. But this doesn't translate into twenty inmates enrolled in twenty need-based MOOCs simultaneously. As a matter of fact, almost the complete opposite is occurring. The fruitless and almost completely wasteful classes that are held in this computer room neither require nor permit incarcerated students to use these computers for anything other than mind-numbing games such as Solitaire, Pinball, and Hearts. We can't even use the word processing software. In addition to the twenty computers in the computer room, there's also a massive file cabinet in one of the other classrooms that has twenty laptop computers locked inside its belly, doing nothing but collecting dust and taking up space.

The money that's allocated annually for the GED[®] aforementioned classes is enough to fund the equipping of these forty computers with internet access — the computers in the administrators' offices already have

internet access so expanding it shouldn't be really expensive. This money is also enough to pay for the installation of necessary firewalls as well as the employment of a technologically savvy maintenance person who could possibly accomplish her or his jobs objectives with part-time work. Actually this money is more than enough. There is currently one GED instructor and four ABE instructors employed here at this institution. With the elimination of these programs and the implementation of a MOOC program, these five positions would be consolidated into one (the part-time maintenance person). Also the money that this facility spends on writing supplies such as pencils and paper, on instructional materials such as teacher manuals, on the continuous training of teachers, and on the administering and proctoring of GED and ABE testing would be saved or allocated elsewhere. Simply replacing the GED and ABE programs with MOOCs and leaving the vocational classes in operation would realize tremendous financial savings and an increase in the habilitation rates.

To go a step further, North Carolina could follow Ohio, Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, Michigan, Washington, and North Dakota and allow inmates themselves to purchase tablets with their own money while heavily restricting, limiting, and monitoring the activities that these tablets can perform. (Google Hristo Bojinov's "Anfacto.") It would be a win for the prison because money would be saved—did I mention that MOOCs are completely free?—and it would be a win

for communities because inmates who're released would be better educated and reformed.

THE SOLUTION 2.0

The prison could also go a little beyond this by granting inmates access to vehicles that provide scholastic accreditation. One such vehicle is the College Level Examination Program ("CLEP"). This program allows an individual to take a test to prove that he or she possesses the knowledge and skills that a particular college course is supposed to impart. Upon passing this test, the person is given the same number of college credits that he or she would've received had he or she enrolled in and completed said college course using the traditional route. This is a great way for inmates to earn such credits.

Along these lines, the Council for Aid to Education has also created a test that inmates should have access to upon completing MOOCs. This test is known as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or "CLA+," and it could prove important to inmates' futures. Simply put, the CLA+ is an SAT-like assessment that is designed to report its takers' REAL value to the employers who refer to it after they've lost faith in the time-worn means of reporting college graduates' worth and potential — GPAs and degree accumulation.

Studies show that a steadily growing number of employers feel that many recent graduates aren't prepared for the workforce. These job providers are basically sick of

being fooled by people who use alleged indicators of potential (such as good grades or a good resume) to cover their inability to write well, to express themselves with lucidity, and to make an argument. They're fed up with these cloaks. Companies such as General Mills Inc. and Procter and Gamble Co. have even come up with their own tests to judge the abilities of potential employees who are fresh out of school because these companies have grown to strongly distrust these so-called indicators. And don't for a second think that they've monopolized such distrust. In a 2010 survey conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities, it was discovered that only twenty five percent of employers think that two- and four-year colleges are doing a good job preparing students for the global economy. A co-author of this study, Duke University professor Stuart Rojstaczer, was quoted as saying that a "college diploma is now more a mark of social class than an indicator of academic accomplishments."

The Council for Aid to Education is attempting to address and compensate for this devolving state of affairs. Their creation—the CLA+—goes over and around the shortcomings that many are beginning to associate with the traditional tools used to measure intellectual capability, capacity, and flexibility. This organization has armed employers with this weapon which will be used to combat scholastic credentials' inability to reflect graduates' potential. By going beyond

simply measuring subject-area knowledge, by assessing other, arguably more relevant skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, document literacy, writing, and communication, this test serves as a real-life alternative to an untrustworthy GPA and an inadequate post-secondary degree.

This is definitely a good thing for inmates; this is definitely a positive innovation that could initiate a progressive paradigm shift. Making the CLA+ as well as MOOCs and the CLEP available behind North Carolina prisons' walls is a money-saving way to augment this state's labor pool. (It's worth noting here that, unlike MOOCs, neither the CLEP nor the CLA+ are free of charge. The CLA+ costs thirty-five dollars and tests administered through the CLEP range from eighty to two hundred dollars each. But if these things are made available to us, we would find a way to pay for it ourselves. Taxpayers and fiscally conservative legislators need not worry.)

The extent to which prisons become hard-knock universities or urban think tanks is the extent to which inmates will boost North Carolina's economy. The extent to which we are given the opportunity to complete MOOCs and then to enter into the CLEP or take the CLA+, or to earn "badges" for online learning (a system funded by the MacArthur Foundation), or to complete either the Lumina Foundation's standardized tests, the Educational Testing Service's Graduate Record Exam, ACT's National

Career Readiness Certificate, or any other initiative geared towards measuring one's intellectual prowess, is the extent to which the recidivism rate will go down and on which our passion about the Life of the Mind will be capitalized.

CONCLUSION

We are on the cusp of a new era in higher education. Foresightful progressivists coupled with a generation of iconoclastic Millennials are shifting the very foundation on which erudition has rested for decades now. Dissatisfied with the status quo, people like Shiza Shahid and mechanisms like Donorschase.org have fought on behalf of students and pedagogues by introducing technology into classrooms nationwide and elevating the art of meaningful and modern instruction. They've shunned and discredited the cultural, gender, and socioeconomic exclusivity of yesteryear and happily included all of humanity.

These critical organic catalysts are shifting prestigious scholasticism's sights from "mainstream upper-class WASP America" towards "mainstream Humanity" by cultivating the notions of shared prosperity, humanitarianism, and equal opportunities. Pretty soon students will be free to learn in environments that aren't plagued by unnecessary marginalization, myopia, and fanatic self-centeredness. Collectively these environments will form a contemporary and interdependent world where aiding and modernizing the entire human race will be

the supreme good. This world will be well-served by including the hungry souls and thirsty minds that currently reside behind prison's fences. In light of this approaching world, prison education models should ride what has become the tidal wave of academic evolution in this society; they should mirror their futuristic, non-imprisoned counterparts by nourishing convicts' intellects in a climate of mutual benefits and productive unity.

For such ends, I must humbly ask you to please contribute to this cause as soon as you're finished reading these words. Contact me. Support my effort to modernize prison's scholastic arena. Help Incarcerated Thinkers educate ourselves (and others) so that we can escape criminality's gravitational pull. Help us make MOOCs available to North Carolina's captives so that we can patch the holes in our boats and ride the rising educative tide that iconoclasts and progressivists are currently supercharging.

These courses are the solution to many penal-related problems, and I need you to help me make this "solution" available in prison so that I can uplift and be uplifted, so that I can educate and become educated, and so that I can help others while helping myself — which is what my generation was born to do. I'm cerebrally malnourished and I need you to feed me, to provoke me, and to motivate me; I need you to challenge me, to petition for the establishment of a prison MOOC program in North Carolina,

to visit me, to ground me, and to even beat me in a structured debate; I need you to basically stimulate my intellect in any significant way so that I can do what critical organic catalysts do best: empower other people.

If you can't do these things, please help me gain access to the massive open online courses that can. If my writings haven't pushed you to act, then I implore you to put this essay in the hands of someone with the fortitude to engage an original Incarcerated Thinker, challenge an aspiring convict criminologist, and reform the prison education model.

Please forward my work to an authentic prison or education activist so that my rally cry will be answered, so that my fellow inmates will never again commit a crime because they believe that they have to, and so that the ancient grievances of Confucius will cease their habit of traveling from generation to generation, unaddressed and unrectified despite an overabundance of available solutions.