

For APWA

Nonfiction

Better Living Through Editing

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On a cool Wednesday morning in October, the incarcerated learners of Cornell's Prison Education Program (CPEP's Auburn campus) assembled in the yard, awaiting word over the loudspeakers to enter the chapel, where Cornell University Provost Michael Kotlikoff would be lecturing on human engineering through genetic modification. There was great anticipation for this lecture topic, along with some concern among students that the material would be too difficult to understand.

They needn't have worried. Dr. Kotlikoff proved to be comprehensive, yet comprehensible. In the moments before taking the podium, he mingled with the sixty-plus students in the warmly lit chapel. After an introduction by Mary Katzenstein, a tireless supporter of the program, I shared a nice exchange with him regarding the dogs in our respective lives (his border terrier, my wife's two Labs). Dogs: the great leveler.

When Dr. Kotlikoff began his talk by explaining the impressive curriculum vitae that Rob Scott, Program Director, and the indefatigable Kyri Murdough, Program Coordinator, had given outline to, Demo leaned over to me, and whispered, "He's been in a classroom all his life." Demo is new to CPEP, a student in the non-credit prep class, and his comment was not an anti-intellectual jibe, but an expression of awe at this living embodiment of the dictum that learning is a lifelong process. As a basketball game lightly thudded in the gymnasium above the chapel, we went over a colorful handout with pictures and labels—Genetic Modification of Animals and Plants, GMO Foods, Human Gene Editing, Cloning—like an analog PowerPoint deck. And like any good slide, it was light on text, leaving Dr. Kotlikoff the space to shape the discussion, while answering more questions than he's probably used to.

He made sure to establish a shared language of the rudiments of gene editing, explaining the difference between germ line edits, the more controversial changes that are passed down to future generations, and somatic edits, which only affect the patient. When Tyson asked, "How does society benefit?," Dr. Kotlikoff referenced *in vitro* fertilization for families with genetic

disorders, and mentioned a cutting edge gene therapy employing somatic edits to cure blindness, something he said had appeared in the *New York Times* that very morning.

After the groundwork was laid, he gave an overview of the gene editing technology called CRISPR, which is used to make targeted edits to the genome. At this point, the questions began to explore the darker implications of human engineering, and Dr. Kotlikoff, apparently no Pollyannaish booster of the science, expressed his view that within the next ten to fifteen years human engineering will be taking place, so there is a need to have regulations in place. When science goes past somatic edits and into germ line edits, Dr. Kotlikoff emphasized that “we cross at our own risk.”

I noticed more than a few classmates taking notes, the bulk of whom are in the prep class. There was Beans, Dave, Demo, Country, J.O., Just, Leap, Luxe, Premo, Pusha, Swole, Tyson, Umar, and Zach. This was the second lecture they attended, which in and of itself is a big deal, since this is the first year that prep students are allowed to attend. The prep class was started in the fall of 2016 as a means of improving the skills of students who scored in a high percentile on the entrance exam, but not high enough to be granted entry. Professors Robin Hinchcliff and Mary Katzenstein work with the students to knock the cobwebs off skills some haven't used in a long time, or never learned—grammar, essay structure, advancing a critical argument, and close reading. The prep students were assigned CRISPR-related articles to read prior to the lecture, and the diligent note taking I observed was a direct result of Robin telling them that they would be writing an essay on Dr. Kotlikoff's lecture.

And I would be working with them on that writing. I've been given the tremendous opportunity to be a tutor in the prep class from its inception, a role that marries my passion for writing with my desire to help my peers. I was a traditional student at Syracuse University before coming to prison in 1999. After completing a bachelor's degree through a distance-learning program while in Attica, I was accepted into an MFA program, and made it all the way to being provided a university email account, before the school's attorneys rescinded my acceptance. After that, I continued to write, but didn't think I'd be able to further my academic career, certainly not in a robust and collegial learning environment. That's why my time in CPEP has been such a blessing. However much the students learn from me, I learn more from them.

Class meets Monday nights, but I have them in tutorial on Thursdays, where we work on homework (identifying sentence fragments, tightening essay structures) and discuss the readings (“unpacking” the deeper meanings). Often, I find myself performing work ancillary to the lesson, yet essential to their academic success: note taking strategies, study skills, creating a process for their writing. But perhaps where I’ve been able to add the most value are the instances of coaching, motivating, or mentoring. When, for instance, Leap was frustrated with an assignment and remarked, “I’m doing life; thesis statements can’t help me,” I talked to the men around the table about the myriad academic opportunities I’d thrown away in my formative years, how education allows one to make better choices of what to focus on, while improving the quality of one’s life. Plus, I noted, I’m doing 25-to-life, just like Leap, and learning is how I make the most of my time rather than getting high in the yard. As David Foster Wallace observed in his uplifting commencement speech at Kenyon College (you can Google it, for my peers I make copies), the value of education is teaching one how to think, as cliché as that phrase has become: “the liberal arts cliché turns out not to be insulting at all, because the really significant education in thinking that we’re supposed to get in a place like this isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about.”

Zach, Leap, and Umar nodded along as my argument crescendoed, then redoubled their efforts on the text. Leap’s comment was oddly similar to that of critics of college-in-prison programs, who feel that any such program is a waste of resources, and even, for that matter, to certain proponents who feel that funding should go only to inmates five years away from being released. That would eliminate me and Leap from the program, along with dozens of others.

Clint Smith, a Harvard University Ph.D. candidate, who teaches in a Massachusetts prison, writes in the *Atlantic* of the benefits of his teaching certain prisoners who will never be released (“The Lifelong Learning of Lifelong Inmates,” June 2017). True, he notes, college in prison has been shown to reduce recidivism and increase post-incarceration employment, but that doesn’t address those who are never going home, and it certainly glosses over the transformative impact that education has on the prison environment as a whole. He explains that college-in-prison programs provide “spaces [which] serve as intellectual communities that restore human dignity,” and argues that “people in prison deserve education because the collective project of learning is and should be understood as a human right.”

While I'm certainly no objective observer, CPEP fills a basic need that is not met by the prison's official programs that dole out mandatory rehabilitation in one-shot, ten-week courses. We connect with professors and undergraduate teaching assistants who voluntarily enter a place most people only dream of escaping. Their teaching provides the shared frames of reference that facilitate lasting connections to the marketplace of ideas. But perhaps more importantly, they treat us like humans with ideas worth listening to. Rather than focusing on simply surviving a day-to-day existence, college allows us to ascend towards the top of Maslow's hierarchy where we find belonging and acceptance among like-minded, positive people, and slake our intellectual thirst.

One can tell who's going to class just by how he walks: as opposed to inmates meandering and making a hand-rolled cigarette last on a slow walk back to their cells, the CPEP student practically bounds up the steps to the school building. The difference in our emotional affect registers to peers, who, matriculated or not, are students of human behavior. After Dr. Kotlikoff's lecture, when the cell block was abubble with a positive, giddy energy, a friend who's not in CPEP said, "You sound different." I knew what he was referring to. Just over a year prior, before I entered the program, I was reading in my cell when the block became alive with an unusual levity. A handful of men had come back from CPEP's Debate Society's victory over Cornell University's, on the topic of letter grades. One of our debaters, Sean, whose cell was right near mine, had likened letter grades to "pedagogical crack," and everyone was replaying their favorite line, giving him kudos. On top of several friends who urged me to enroll, it was Sean who had me fiending for pedagogical crack.

In the year since, I have experienced how CPEP provides entrée to world-class professors and peer-reviewed material, as opposed to the conspiracy theories trafficked in by the louder elements in the cellblock. I have heard how students elevate the nature of the dialog of those non-students around them, who, in turn are incentivized to stay out of trouble and practice writing so they can pass the yearly entrance exam. In providing positive outlets that the criminal justice system has abandoned, CPEP creates students who are altering the course of their lives, something they can pass on to their children. Now, that is the best kind of human engineering, and there is nothing controversial about those edits.