

1

For years, I've wanted to get involved in prison education. Chances to do so have come few and far between, so when my English Department chair sent an email in January 2021 - one week before the semester was set to start - asking if anyone was interested in teaching freshman composition at a prison in our district, I couldn't pass it up. Despite COVID still raging and having to rearrange my current load of classes, I wanted the chance to teach in an environment where the students really needed it. I made the right choice.

During the summer of 2021, I taught freshman composition, as well as a support class, college composition and writing, to 10 inmates at FCI Englewood. The classes were the first in a program designed to help students get an associate degree in business administration with a focus in entrepreneurship. The program had been in the works for years, but it struggled to get off the ground even before COVID hit.

The discrimination formerly incarcerated people face upon reentry to society is no secret. Their records erect barriers to finding a place to live, securing a job, being approved for loans, and to countless other necessities. "According to estimates by researchers Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, for men, incarceration reduces hourly wages by 11 percent, decreases annual employment by nine weeks, and lowers annual earnings by 40 percent" (Oakford et al. 18). These obstacles exist despite the fact that their debts to society have been paid. They have completed their sentences. They are ready to move on, but society won't let them. One out of three, which equates to 70 million people, adults in the United States have a criminal record that will show up on background checks by employers (9 out of 10 employers do background checks), which also disproportionately negatively affects African American and Latinx populations (Emsellem and Rodriguez). This has to change. Thanks to great companies like Honest Jobs and others, businesses and society are making positive steps forward, but it's not fast enough.

That's why we also need educational programs in prisons, especially ones that will help give people with criminal records business and entrepreneurial knowledge. The research into the effectiveness of education programs in corrections institutions leaves no doubt: it works. A 2018 landmark RAND study aggregated 57 studies over 37 years on recidivism and "found that inmates participating in correctional education programs were 28% less likely to recidivate when compared with inmates who did not participate in correctional education programs" (Bozick et al.). That same RAND study concludes that "Every dollar invested in prison education programs saves taxpayers, on average, between \$4 and \$5 in three-year reincarceration costs" (Davis).

So I wanted to be part of that kind of education. I have been teaching writing in community colleges for about seven years. I truly believe in the power of writing. I believe it is a masterful tool of empowerment that can be used for therapy in things like journaling, for communicating in clear and important ways to express yourself to help improve your life, and more. I believe this for all my students, regardless of campus or community. I now believe it even more for incarcerated writers.

Teaching this class, despite its challenges of not having computers or internet and other logistical things, was a breath of fresh air. It was a reminder of why I got into teaching in the first place. The students are motivated. They are engaged. They want to be there. They are grateful for the opportunity. They were respectful. Thanks to their attitudes and behavior, paired with the amazing educational correctional officers at the facility, I never once felt unsafe. In fact, I woke up every day energized to get into the classroom, especially after three semesters of Zoom classes in a global pandemic.

Just to provide some data: both classes (English 121 and CCR094) had a 100 percent pass rate (compared to 79 percent in one of my English 121 classes on the campus a semester before). The attendance rate was 97.75 percent with 10 students combining to attend 391 out of 400 class sessions. In that same English 121 in the spring, attendance was less than 70 percent. The assignment completion rate for both classes was 99.17 percent (595 out of 600 assignments), compared to 81% in my spring English 121 class. Those numbers are impressive and beyond even realistic goals for any freshman composition class – on campus, online, or in a prison.

More importantly than the data was the fruitful and engaging class discussions around articles, writing processes, or the book we read for the 094 class – *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Every student read the entire book, which was evident not only by their response writings and completed worksheets, but by their reactions. They had questions, they talked to their families and fellow inmates about it, and they brought up things I had never considered, despite reading the book several times and teaching it for years.

Their essays for English 121 were authentic. They had the unique feel of thoughtfulness, as opposed to the all-too-common – “how long does it have to be?” and regurgitated fluff that comes from students who aren’t invested in the material. The students wrote about Carol Dweck’s *Mindsets*, completed rhetorical analyses of print versions of websites of businesses created by formerly incarcerated people without ever using the internet themselves, wrote research papers on topics of their own choice with aid from ACC’s incredible librarians, and finished the class with reflections of their growth and writing over the course of the semester. They weren’t always great essays, but the students invested in the revision process and continued to work on draft after draft to improve them. It’s the grit that writing improvement demands, but rarely gets so much buy-in from college students in a first-year writing class. These students have time and they are using it to better themselves and improve their skills.

While I got a plethora of positive feedback from the students and hope that I was able to start their college careers off on a strong track that will set them up for success as they pursue the rest of their degree and their careers “on the outs” as they say (post-release), I feel as if I am the one who benefited most from the experience. The class broke down stereotypes society has constructed of those serving time behind bars. Sure, they are criminals who broke the law. They are also humans. They are people with families, with stories, and their fair share of injustice. All humans deserve a chance at education, regardless if they are people who have made mistakes and broken the law – regardless if

they are going to rejoin society or not. I have always believed these things, but now I have proof.

Teaching at FCI Englewood has changed me. It's made me a better teacher and a better human. I believe so strongly in this program that I have become its liaison. I am trying to recruit more instructors, build up campus support, and make sure I stay connected to the students. We are doing that through optional assignments between semesters, as well as optional submissions to our online student newspaper, *The Pinnacle*. Another way to stay connected and encourage continued growth in their writing has come through encouraging them to write for the APWA. It was optional for our writing class and it will continue to be optional for the duration of the program. When I got some of their responses to mail in, I wanted to make sure that I took the time to contribute my story as well. I couldn't possibly include each moment that inspired me or became another pillar in my belief system about the power of education. But I do want to be a life-long advocate for prison education. For those of you who have wanted to be involved in prison education, do it. For those who haven't or have doubts, do it. You will be investing in an underserved community, you'll be investing in a safer society, and you won't regret it.

References

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