

We are all Human Beings

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Abstract

This article describes a teacher's journey into prison where she delivers university writing classes. The author explores techniques and strategies that foster empowerment in prison classrooms. Based on the author's experience and secondary research on critical pedagogy and transformative learning, she explores what it means to treat university writing students in prison like human beings and how to inspire emotionally and socially engaged learning.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy; human being; prison education; prisoners; transformative education.

Introduction

One of my introductory activities in a writing class is to ask my students what their expectations and objectives are for the class. Unlike the usual responses of on campus university students saying they want to be better writers, more adept at research, or improve grammar, a common objective for my students in prison is that they just want to be treated like human beings. That has been my goal in my writing classes on campus and especially in prison: to treat my students like human beings, to look into their eyes and see them as humans, not as numbers on a roster. I try to see my students in prison, for more than what they have done to be in prison (Stevenson, 2013). This paper first looks at the literature on teaching philosophies conducive to student empowerment that strives for emotionally and socially engaged learning. Second, in light of the literature, I reflect on my experiences in prison classrooms and explore what it means to empower students and treat them like human beings in the spirit of cosmopolitanism.

Program Director of Teachers College at Columbia University David Hansen (2014) talks about "cosmopolitanism as cultural creativity" (p. 1). Hansen (2014) explains that "cosmopolitanism's global reach is rooted in its Greek origin, namely the idea of a kosmopolites or 'citizen of the world'" (p. 3). Traditionally, prisoners are citizens the world has forgotten about, let alone think they should be beneficiaries of cultural creativity. A cosmopolitan person would usually have knowledge and experience in different cultures, but prison culture would usually not be included in that encounter. The walls of a cell and yard confine prisoners to a tightly controlled world. Education in those walls can be the access point to learning about different cultures, the medium for students to metaphorically travel to different lands, and to learn cultural creativity. It starts with feeling accepted as human beings. Education offers the potential for unfurling the imagination for learning and growing as human beings and citizens of this world.

Teaching philosophy

Whether I am teaching Freshman Composition in prison or an upper-level class on campus at my university, I have adopted the teaching philosophy of critical pedagogy as a model for how to treat my students as human beings, especially in prison where my students are otherwise numbers in a system. I do not claim to have all the answers and am on a continual quest for how to fashion my writing classes into places where students feel like human beings. Poet Ali (2019) suggests that we all speak the language of being human. Education should always be conducted in the language of human being.

Education as a certain fluency in reading, writing, and numeracy is based on an ideology that values a specific definition of literacy, which translates into certain behaviours and performances. In *'I Go to Get Away from the Cockroaches: Educentricity and the Politics of Education in Prisons*, prison

ethnographer Anita Wilson (2007) defines educentricity as “a view of education that is based either on their [students] own experiences or related to the perceived educational needs and experiences of those around them. It is usually based on what we (or they) think education is or ought to be and is tied strongly to the value placed upon it” (p. 185). Compliance with the majority expectations leads to success as a learner, but failure to acquire fluency leads to exclusion. In prison, I see many experiences with failure and miscommunication in the language of being human.

Educators and scholars Giroux and McLaren (1992) concur that schools support specific systems of social beliefs, exclude others, and package knowledge with particular wrappings to perpetuate power and the status quo. Unfortunately, those that lack power do not own the tools to challenge the status quo; if they acquire the skills, the only system they know to copy is the one they experienced; therefore, the power method is replicated (Freire, 1972, 2002; Kaufmann, 2000). This paper looks at the impact of what Wilson (2007) calls “literacy-related activities and practices” (p. 185) in prison, aims to understand what it means to be treated like human beings, and how a university writing class can challenge traditional systems of power, as ironic as that may sound. In this section, I look at how to implement critical pedagogy to treat students like human beings so they can shed defenses to learn deeply.

Critical pedagogy

Teacher’s approach and pedagogical tools have the power to profoundly impact students’ writing development to give them either a sense of accomplishment or failure (Ball, 2006). Critical pedagogy invites students to bring previous knowledge to the learning and be active participants and co-creators in their education (hooks, 1994). In the 1970s, Paulo Freire (1972), the father of critical pedagogy, proposed liberation from the oppressive education system through a process called ‘conscientization’. Conscientization occurs when students become aware of how knowledge is defined, dispersed, and acted out. This awakening happens in the dialogue and discovery process, leading to a transformative experience and hence a change in action (Freire, 1972; Kaufmann, 2000). The traditional ‘banking concept’ of education is where teachers fill passive students with regurgitated knowledge, like the process of writing on a blank slate (Freire, 1972). The teacher is the writer and the students the blank slates.

Contrary to the banking concept, ‘problem-posing’ education illustrates conscientization where educators invite students into a dialogue and participation in educational decisions (Freire, 1972). hooks (1994) writes “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). Education that empowers means making a safe space for students to recognize oppressive systems which can lead to deconstructing a worldview. Subsequently, conscientization can happen, especially in a place like a prison that is highly hierarchical. The goal in ‘problem-posing’ education is for teachers to learn in dialogue with students (Freire, 1972). In a give and take between teacher and students, critical and thinking and reflective practice makes room for transformation (Giroux, 2003; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; Halasek, 1999; Kaufmann, 2000; Shor & Freire, 1987).

Critical pedagogy has garnered both applause and critique. Critics say that ‘conscientization’ still requires teachers to lead the process because they have access to the power to decide how and when voice will be exercised (Gore, 1992; hooks, 1994; Kaufmann, 2000). Educator and scholar Jennifer Gore (1992) sees critical pedagogy as having good intentions but still serving as “instrument[s] of domination” (p. 54). Although Gore (1992) maintains that empowering oppressed groups is a good goal, she challenges academics to engage in authentic power-sharing. How that is to be done, remains unclear.

Not only is it uncomfortable for students to shed passivity and take responsibility for their learning, educators do not come equipped to share power. Power-sharing can be the essence of treating students like human beings. No one theory perfectly addresses all the variables in education, but critical pedagogy addresses all learners’ human rights within an especially constricted environment like a prison. Transformative learning is not guaranteed, but possible.

Some people may assert that since prisoners have taken rights away from law abiding citizens, they no longer have the right to a voice. However, higher education in prison has slowly gained energy; its objective and impact has been debated by many (Higgins, 2004; Davis et al., 2013; Irwin, 2008) and challenged by just as many, not especially on the merits of the data, but the “audacity of giving voice” (Waldram, 2009, p. 4) to people that many do not think deserve a voice (Waldram, 2009). This article intends is to offer insights from a writing teacher’s perspective, trying to the best of my ability to treat my students as human beings by implementing critical pedagogy theory and seeing what happens when my students are allowed to have a voice.

Unlike the obstacles that medical and psychological anthropologist, James Waldram at the University of Saskatchewan (2009) talks about when entering prisons, I encountered relatively few. A customary police record check, applying for access and entrance to prisons, correctional officers daily opening, and locking doors on the way to the classroom and back, all worked very smoothly. To get to my class, I also had to pass through multiple metal gates and doors, showing my ID multiple times, but it eventually became a routine walk and opportunity to greet the correctional officers with a smile and thank them for their work. This simple gesture of goodwill made the entrance and exit function smoothly. Faces became familiar, and although conversations with administration were not usually part of the routine, smiles and eye contact went a long way. Even correctional officers that entered the classrooms did so with respect and patience.

Visiting and teaching classes in prison is not the same as living or working in prison daily. Still, the frequency of class attendance nonetheless made the visits feel like a “normal social interaction” (Ugelvik, 2014, p. 471). I acknowledge that my writing here is subjective, anecdotal, and storytelling, but I still hope you find it of value. Afterall, “we are creatures of stories. We are the stories we tell, we’re the stories we are told” (Jeffers, 2020, Ted Talks) and we learn through stories.

Professor of Criminology at the University of Bath, Yvonne Jewkes (2012) does not see the need for tidying up the lived experience. By writing from my perspective, I hope to take Jewkes’ (2012) challenge seriously and explore how experiential learning can benefit the corpus of prison writing. Here is my messy account from the trenches in my learning quest for how to treat students like human beings in writing classes in prison, how to speak the language of human, based on my understanding of critical pedagogy.

An attempt at power-sharing

My first day of teaching in prison is different from on campus with no office to run back to if I forget something. Getting to the classroom is a long process, so I have to be in the prison parking lot about an hour before class starts. Depending on the prison, but usually no backpack to carry my books, papers, and pens, no sharp objects like paper clips or coiled metal notebooks are allowed. If I forget, they will be confiscated. If I bring a purse and cell phone, they must stay in the car. My ID must always be on me, so it is tucked into a pocket. I concur with research associates Julia Braggins and Jenny Talbot (2006) when they say that “prisons are unusual working environments” (p. 4), so teachers need to come prepared, not only physically, but emotionally as well. Prisons are not open to the general population, and most people would never have been inside one nor want to be.

My classroom has posters on the walls featuring grammatical rules and historical timelines. Late afternoon sunlight spills into the room. Although I imagine there are many prisons where the teaching environment is far from comfortable, the prisons where I have taught have made classrooms comfortable and inviting.

Some students are already in the class while others saunter in. They take their places at the tables in friendly configuration, not in strict rows. Good start for dismantling power structures. The teaching assistant introduces himself. He has taken a few more English classes in prison than the other students, qualifying him as a TA. I have never had a TA and ask him, “What does a TA do?” He says he is here to help with whatever I need, like making copies or handing out papers. He turns out to be

the best kind of TA any teacher could ask for. During the first class, he proudly stands next to me for the whole class's duration, except when he is compiling our social responsibility contract at his desk.

I write the agenda on the board:

1. Introductions;
2. Distribute materials;
3. Course outline;
4. Social responsibility contract; and,
5. Writing Sample.

When most of the students are there, I introduce myself and what brings me to be teaching a writing class in prison. While the students introduce themselves, I draw a class map and where students sit so I can remember their names. My TA helps me distribute the notebooks, pencils, and folders allotted to each student. Next, I invite students to make name tents, which will also help me remember their names. Besides their names, I ask them to add a quote they would like to be known for, like a yearbook quote. Besides quotes, some of the students exhibit their artistic talents by illustrating their name tents. Most of the students are happy to share their quotes with the class, a good introduction to the many performative pieces the students will write in the class.

After going over the course outline and answering many questions about the assignments and homework, we come to the social responsibility contract. Prisons are places where prisoners have autonomy over very few things in life. Therefore, a social responsibility contract that my students generate is one attempt at the power-sharing that author, professor, and social activist bell hooks (1994) talks about. Instead of me making the rules and stating them, I am giving the students the power to generate the tenets of the social responsibility contract, fully acknowledging the critique of critical pedagogy that as teacher, I am still the one deciding how and when the students will exercise their voice (hooks, 1994; Gore, 1992; Kaufmann, 2000). Nevertheless, my goal is that we will learn together through dialogue.

My prompt for the students is: What does a safe and healthy class look like where everyone feels welcome to participate and learn? I explain the concept that we will jointly form a contract/treaty of what we think a safe and successful learning environment can look like. Before we start collecting ideas for our contract, a student asks what will happen if someone breaks the treaty? My response: "Good question. We will jointly decide on consequences for the breach of the contract. How does that sound?" They think that sounds like a good idea. The students take some time to write their thoughts down, and then we make a list on the board. It looks something like this:

1. Practice Active listening;
2. Come prepared;
3. Respect for the person talking;
4. Keep side talk to a minimum;
5. No putting people down;
6. Stay on topic;
7. Be open-minded when engaging in discussions;
8. No ranting;
9. Speak in I statements;
10. Confidentiality – what is spoken in class stays in class;
11. We are all in this together;and,
12. Come on time.

I couldn't have developed a better list myself. I let the students know we can keep working on the contract throughout the term, adding and deleting things if necessary. And what about breaking the contract? The students suggest we could remind each other of the joint agreement if we feel someone is not adhering to the tenets of a safe learning environment.

By now, one student is sleeping at the back of the class. Head back and almost snoring. He must be exhausted. Not sleeping in class is not on our social contract. In a later class, I ask the students whether they should get participation points if they sleep in class? A lively debate ensues among the students, and we eventually vote on the issue with the results stating that even if a student takes a brief nap, he should still receive participation points. The reason is that some students rise early to work in the kitchen, and a little afternoon nap helps with concentration. I don't exactly agree, thinking they could nap on their own time instead of in class, but students taking responsibility and ownership of their environment is resulting in excellent attendance. Students rarely took naps that semester, and when they did, I eventually felt honoured that they sensed the environment safe and comfortable enough to sleep.

For the remaining minutes of the first class, I invite students to write a short writing sample on their preferred learning style and how I, as their teacher, can help them achieve their goals. I hope that my students will bring their strengths to class and share them. Near the end of the semester, students mentioned appreciation for the social responsibility contract and having space and time to create rules for the class. As artificial as it may seem, sharing power was effective in students feeling like they had a voice in this class and that their voice mattered. I don't remember having to remind any students of the social responsibility contract agreement. Incorporating student input in terms of learning styles also garnered appreciation. Navigating the unsettling process of old habits, belief systems, and ways of learning clashing with the new (Mezirow, 2000) was sometimes smooth and sometimes bumpy, but we all learned. Power sharing was one way of treating my students like human beings and to promote an emotionally and socially engaged learning environment.

Dialogue in class and in between

Author of *Just Mercy*, Brian Stevenson (2013) in his Ted Talk says, "If you are a teacher, your words can be meaningful, but if you are a compassionate teacher, they can be especially meaningful" (Stevenson, 2013). Students in prison cannot always arrive to class on time like on a university campus because there can be unexpected delays in navigating your way from the yard or cafeteria to the classroom. Therefore, before and after class, there is an opportunity to engage in conversation with students. While waiting for everyone to arrive, I give the students writing prompts that I hope bring meaning. An example of a writing prompt would be: An example of a writing prompt would be: Write about the teacher who impacted you most. Either in a good or bad way. The students compose beautiful pieces of writing, and when I invite them to perform their writing, most are eager to share with the class. One day the prompt is what their strengths are and when a few indicate that music is their strength, I invite them to write the lyrics of a song. That day we have a concert.

One day a student brings in stacks of paper and tells me he has tons of things to do besides the work for this class and what is the minimum amount of work he needs to do to pass the class. I tell him I won't force him to do anything, but if he is busy doing his personal work during class, he prevents us from learning from him. How much he contributes is up to him, depending on what he wants to get out of the class.

Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor, Benedicta Egbo (2009) contends: "empathy is our ability to understand and be compassionate about other people's experiences" (p. 212). Asking about their everyday life without prying into their personal life helps establish rapport with the students. Before class, I ask one student how his marathon training is going. He says he ran 19 miles this week, all around the yard outside. Good job. He is ready for the big marathon day.

When I return homework, I invite students who have written exceptionally well to read their piece to the class. In one critical review, two students took opposite positions on an issue, but accomplish the task equally well by supporting their position with facts. The students' eyes shine with pride after reading their pieces. Treating someone like a human being means acknowledging success.

One day we arrange the chairs in a circle around the classroom and use the Socratic method to discuss an assigned article. First, I ask questions, and then we go around the circle where everyone is invited to respond in 1-2 sentences on the theme. Participation is lively and active.

After this discussion and chairs back in place, we go to the debate prep. The students decide they want to form their own groups and choose their own topics for the debate. The room is a hubbub of conversation. I circle the room responding to the many questions. Students offer to bring materials for other groups on their respective topics. I tell the students I will give them class time to work on their debates because it may be difficult for them to get together to work outside of class. They all seem willing to get together outside of class to work on their debates because they just live down the hall from each other so able to meet on their own time. Being treated like human beings gives them extra motivation to do well and work hard.

Students are kind in giving positive feedback to the class. Braggins and Talbot (2006) suggest that
 There have been major changes in the way education and training services for prisoners have been delivered over the past decade. Contracting out such services has meant the entry of new providers, with much to offer in educational expertise, but often little or no experience of working in prisons. There has been a high staff turnover, and some difficulty in the recruitment and retention of, and support for, the predominantly part-time workforce on which education in prisons has traditionally depended. (p. 13)

High staff turnover makes it difficult for students to experience continuity. University professors who teach in prison usually do not have prison specific training. I entered my first writing class in prison with no prior experience in teaching in prison. Students noticed how the education system was managed in prison, expressed appreciation when it worked well, and were gracious with my inexperience.

Students also feel free to critique the class. One student would like less in-class time spent on me answering individual student questions about their papers. He thinks it wastes everyone else's time. We will work on that. The debates are coming along very well. The groups have brought in materials for each other. The TA has made copies for the students. I am "no longer merely the-one-who-teaches" (Freire, 1972, p. 67), but I am learning from my students.

Eye contact

Egbo (2009) challenges teachers to "treat each student as an individual human being requiring special attention whenever necessary" (p. 211). Eye contact is a powerful invisible and quiet human interaction that gives individual students special attention. Jewkes (2005) contends that 'wearing a mask' is a common coping mechanism for survival in prison. Being able to drop that guard and be oneself is essential for prisoners to keep their self-esteem intact (Jewkes, 2005). When students work on their papers and have specific questions about notes I wrote in the margins or want me to read their rough draft and give them feedback, I sometimes sit across from a student and am only about two feet away from their face. At the beginning, I noticed a lot of averted eyes and hesitancy to have eye contact with me during these conversations. Eventually students became more comfortable, and while editing one particular student's paper, he finally met my gaze when talking to me. I still see his eyes. His slightly red eyes would be a visual representation of the German word 'Weltschmerz'. The literal translation of 'Weltschmerz' is world pain. This man carried the world's pain in his eyes, and I had to avert my gaze because the pain that emanated from his eyes was too deep. I do not know his life experience, but the pain I saw in his eyes still catches in my throat. Of course, no physical touch is allowed, not even a handshake, but unwavering eye contact is a powerful human connection. If as Jewkes (2005) writes, the weak are preyed upon in prison, not letting others see into their soul is a coping mechanism to stay safe.

In my eye contact research, I find that a mutual gaze has a powerful physical and mental effect and influences interpersonal communication (Schreiber, 2016; Jarrett, 2017). Researchers have also found that eye contact can enhance memory, improve overall learning, and even positively impact decision making. In fact, eye contact can cause individuals to make more altruistic decisions (Schreiber, 2016). New York based writer and social worker Katherine Schreiber (2016) in *Psychology Today* suggests: "We do the right thing because we assume we're going to be judged, we're being watched, or we just like the person whose gaze looks warm, and we'd like to be nice to them out of

sheer gratitude for being favorably noticed.” Eye contact can also be therapeutic. By having eye contact, we acknowledge each other’s humanity.

Wilson (2007) writes about ‘the third space’ in prison as a place where people experience the freedom to express themselves, usually without institutional constraints. “Educentricity enters the third space ... when ‘teachers treat you like individuals’ (according to a young man in England)” (Wilson, 2007, p. 199), and here I may add when teachers look into the eyes of their students and see them as human beings. I hope that the debates we did in class, the writing prompts that the students did not want to miss, and the social responsibility contract would be part of the ‘third space’ that Wilson (2007) describes. Wilson (2007) states that in the ‘third space’, education is no longer a prison but a new form of educentricity. Wilson (2007) suggests that “a prisoner can be transformed into a student, where prison officers are replaced by teachers, and where it is possible to see and use colour, eat the food that you have made yourself and enjoy a more conducive environment” (p. 199). The “more social model of education” (Wilson, 2007, p. 199) sees the classroom as a place where students support each other, pick each other up when a classmate receives troubling news about a parole date or a family member, remembers a student’s birthday because no one else will remember, or remembers to ask how the marathon went on the weekend.

According to Wilson (2007) education in prison is a ‘third space’ where students are transported to a positive place away from the ‘cockroaches’ (p. 200) that often symbolizes the negativity of everyday life in prison. Looking at students in the eyes and addressing them by name is part of making the writing classroom a positive ‘third space’ where students are treated like human beings.

Conclusion

This article offers my reflections and observations of what critical pedagogy could look like in a writing class in prison. Some successes. Some failures. The debate about prison education and pedagogical models to inspire transformation continues. I intend to invite conversation, eye contact, debate, and questions. I concur with Wilson (2007) who suggests that they “have few definitive answers to many of the questions” (p. 201) presented and that different ways of doing prison education should be recognized and valued where everyone is treated like a human being.

My students in prison and colleagues in prison work have taught me many things about approaches and pedagogy. However, there still exist gaps in the knowledge that would benefit more effective prison education. For example, research inviting input from students on what they think would be helpful in classroom work would improve prison education practice. In addition, qualitative research on student experiences and perspectives would provide valuable data to be implemented in classes.

I end with a quote by Bryan Stevenson (2015) in *Just Mercy: A story of justice and redemption*:

Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned. (p. 188)

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