More than Transformative: A New View of Prison Writing Narratives

**Larry Barrett, Pablo Mendoza, Logan Middleton, Mario Rubio, & Thomas Stromblad, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

Common in higher education in prison (HEP) and writing studies research is the idea that writing and education are transformative for incarcerated populations. While we believe that both can be powerful tools for reflection and social change among people on the inside, the prevalence of such transformation narratives can contribute to stereotypical depictions or understandings of incarcerated people and their literacy practices.

Drawing upon our experiences with the Education Justice Project (EJP), a college-in-prison program, this article argues for expanded recognition and study of literacy practices, genres, and prison education beyond those typically discussed in HEP and writing studies scholarship. In doing so, we draw on the work of Martinez (2017) to present four personal scenes of writing and education as counterstories that intervene in master narratives about how incarcerated students are transformed by literacy. This approach not only grounds our work in methodology that values the lived and experiential knowledge of marginalized people but also enables us to push back against stock stories of prison writing that might inadvertently stereotype incarcerated students. Through telling our stories in this article, we call on academics to join us in composing different stories about incarcerated students that honor the complexities of our multiple identities and literacy practices.
As college-in-prison initiatives continue to gain prominence in the landscape of American higher education, so too does the role of writing in these programs. It makes sense, then, that prison writing and literacies are often objects of analysis in scholarship emerging from higher education in prison (HEP) and writing studies. Especially common in literature from these fields is the notion that writing can serve as a powerful tool for writers behind bars: a means for reflection and transformation (Meiners 2007; Appleman 2013), public engagement (Jacobi 2018), and social change (Lewen 2014). Taken together, such narratives stand to alter stereotypes of people who are incarcerated (Jacobi 2011, 44) and serve to “affirm [their] humanity and inherent dignity” (Reynolds 2014, 98).

We have no doubt that education and writing can be transformative for incarcerated populations. And we also believe they can play a role in enabling social change with regard to oppressive institutions. But these stories are not the only stories that people on the inside have to tell about writing.

In this article, we push at the boundaries of these narratives about writing in prison contexts. As students from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, one nonincarcerated graduate student and four incarcerated undergraduates, we collaboratively offer accounts that speak to a broader range of prison writing and literacy practices than those typically discussed in writing studies and HEP work. Drawing upon our experiences with the Education Justice Project (EJP), a college-in-prison program, we argue for the expanded recognition and study of such writing practices, genres, and education in these bodies of research. In doing so, we complicate stock ideas about what writing and literacy practices look like in carceral settings and add to existing dialogue about what work they can do for those on the inside.

First, we survey writing studies and HEP scholarship to pinpoint those genres, topics, and predominant narratives of literacy, writing, and learning that permeate this literature. Afterward, four EJP students—Thomas, Mario, Pablo, and Larry—share four scenes of writing. These narratives trouble trends in scholarship that overwhelmingly present writers who are incarcerated as bound
up with discourses of transformation and social change. Thomas considers writing into a new genre—a book review—while Mario addresses copyediting in the context of *The Amplifier*, EJP’s student newsletter. Next, Pablo comments on how traditional systems of schooling fail to take into account the relationships between writing, language, and education and what implications these absences have for teaching and learning in prison. And finally, Larry speaks to the need for multimodal writing in carceral contexts—especially for reentry purposes. Logan did not author a narrative for this collaboration because we wanted to prioritize the experiences of EJP students and what they have to say about writing and education. Due in part to our lack of access to outside materials, Logan worked to craft this article’s introduction, literature review, and conclusion with multiple rounds of feedback from the rest of us. We mention this because, per Castro and Gould (2018), we want to be transparent about the academic labor we performed and to explain how we enacted the ethics of co-writing as inside and outside students (3).

As such, Thomas, Mario, Pablo, and Larry’s scenes stand alone as individual authors’ experiences with writing. Read collectively, they illuminate the interwoven identities, textscapes, and literacies that EJP students produce and participate in. In doing this work, we shine a light on undertheorized labor as well as literacy practices within colleges-in-prison. We see these spaces as dynamic settings where individuals are never only reading, writing, or speaking but also always thinking, feeling, and making meaning for a wide range of purposes—educational or otherwise.

Finally, we want to note that EJP is a multifaceted organization that operates in accordance with the University of Illinois’s College of Education. Spanning across Danville Correctional Center (DCC) as well as outside communities in both Champaign-Urbana and Chicago, EJP “demonstrates the positive impacts of higher education upon incarcerated people, their families, the neighborhoods from which they come, the host institution, and society as a whole” (Education Justice Project 2019). Students must complete 60 credit hours of lower-division coursework before enrolling in EJP courses; these upper-level classes cross subject matter as varied as machine learning, critical race theory, and the history of the book. In addition, EJP offers
extracurricular programming at DCC, including math workshops, a mindfulness group, and Language Partners—a program in which EJP students provide English language instruction to emergent bilingual people.

**CHARTING THE GENRES AND NARRATIVES OF PRISON WRITING**

This literature review surveys how writing and literacy are framed in HEP and writing studies scholarship. It’s necessary to examine work from both fields because they comprehensively show how scholars represent the connections between literate activity and education at large. Working from this literature allows us to take stock of those narratives about prison writing that circulate in these fields, challenge and differentiate our stories from this work, and add our voices to such conversations.

Research from both disciplines suggests that scholars largely position autobiography, life writing, and creative writing as focal points of prison literacies. Whether through literacy narratives (Berry 2018), autoethnographic work (Carter 2008), or autobiographical writing (Reynolds 2014), incarcerated people are frequently framed as writing to tell stories about their lives—to reflect upon and find agency in them. For instance, in detailing her experiences teaching a pre-college literacy course at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Biscoglio (2005) explains how she instructed students to write about a relationship with either a parent or guardian (25). In addition, writing studies scholars present poetry and fiction as aiding workshop participants in developing creativity, voice, and storytelling (Jacobi 2004; 2012; Alessi and Jacobi 2014; Reynolds 2014). This approach to teaching on the inside is most centered in writing studies through Jacobi’s work with SpeakOut!, a writing workshops series. While Evans (2018), an incarcerated student, speaks to his composing experiences in writing code (5), reading responses (5), and professional genres (10) in Common Good Atlanta’s college-in-prison program, many other literacy initiatives primarily discuss creative and life writing genres (Coogan 2014; Roy 2018) as a means of fostering self-reflection.

Just as crucial to identifying prevalent genres and approaches to writing in HEP and writing studies research is recognizing predominant narratives about incarcerated students in this scholarship. These
texts overridingly promote ideas of how prison writing, literacies, and education enable individual and social transformation. Within this work, college-in-prison is often presented as a conduit to future material success. Maher (2015) describes how Bedford Hills students find careers after release; they “make it on the outside as a result of the college degrees they earned while in prison” (87). Similarly, Lagemann (2015) narrates the growth of “an impulsive and often violent young man” who, after completing his undergraduate education through the Bard Prison Initiative, became “a mature, successful, tax-paying businessman” (415). In addition, Heppard (2019) discusses the possibilities for HEP to change individuals (4) while Scott (2018) and Karpowtiz (2017) echo this sentiment in observing that one of HEP’s primary purposes is to transform incarcerated people and their futures. Even students writing from the inside describe how HEP plays a critical role in “transform[ing] . . . lives” (Evans 2018, 3) and becoming “newer, better version[s] of [their] former selves” (Davis 2018, 9). Select articles in writing studies literature analogously present literacy as a mechanism of this individual growth and self-discovery. What Jacobi (2018) describes as SpeakOut!’s approach to “literacy as an active and dynamic tool for self-expression, reflection, communication, and social change” (110) is a thread that’s woven throughout other accounts of prison writing. Berry (2018) observes, for example, how literacy narratives “chronicle a process of becoming” (30) in which “literacy is fused with a sense of rebirth and uplift” (30). Others chart the empowering benefits of such programming as helping writers make sense of their pasts (Jacobi 2010, 76) and resist dehumanization (Reynolds 2014, 98). On a more systemic level, scholars also describe participants’ writing and education as a means of social transformation (Lewen 2014, 353). These efforts can challenge dominant institutions (Lewen 2014, 360) and advance social justice causes (Jacobi 2010, 76; Reynolds 2014, 114).

Although HEP and writing studies touch upon the academic literacies of incarcerated students, we seek to broaden the scope of those genres, processes, and aspects of writing discussed in the literature. Even as writing studies takes a capacious view of writing, there is, for instance, little sustained focus on revision and editing when it comes to the discussion of prison literacies. Also important is that, aside from Cavallaro et al. (2016), the multimodal dimensions of writing
are even less discussed in prison contexts. We view these areas of inquiry as starting points from which we can build our own work. Below, Thomas and Mario narrate their experiences with revision and copyediting, demonstrating how incarcerated writers navigate process. Larry’s work, conversely, makes a case for the necessity of multimodal writing instruction on the inside. In speaking to these considerations, we expand conversations about how incarcerated people engage in academic writing, which is rarely discussed from inside perspectives.

As this literature review suggests, writing and education can be life-changing for incarcerated individuals. Yet it’s just as imperative to provide alternatives to these master narratives about prison literacies, which we complicate below. For some in prison, education doesn’t facilitate critical consciousness or material success after release. In his section, Mario reflects on his work with The Amplifier to push back on tropes in these common stories. And as Pablo observes, we should consider the detrimental effects of schooling for incarcerated people just as much we theorize their educational experiences. Collectively, our narratives provide more varied understandings of how writing, literacy, and education matter for people in prison.

CARCERAL COUNTERSTORIES: A NOTE ON OUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

While the literature above seldom or explicitly defines transformation for incarcerated people, it’s clear from this work that this process marks dramatic change in individuals from one disposition to another. For us, however, transformation can be coopted by or deeply embedded in notions of rehabilitation, treatment, and control—all carceral logics (Castro and Gould 2018, 4). While often well-intentioned in educational contexts, such discussions are often taken up by the general public as metamorphoses of “prisoners” from “uneducated” to “educated,” “deviant” to “reformed,” and “criminal” to “citizen.” From our experiences in college-in-prison, we’ve found that these discourses of transformation can inadvertently result in saviorism, academic tourism, or outside people thinking that we’re in need of redemption. Thus, we avoid engaging transformation here because we are not interested in participating in or enabling these stereotypical stories.
In the narratives that follow, we draw upon the work of Martinez (2017) in order to present each experience of writing as a counterstory. As a critical race theory method, counterstory serves as a means for “marginalized people to intervene in research methods that would form ‘master narratives’” (Martinez 2017, 83). This approach grounds our stories in a framework that validates lived and experiential knowledge—especially that which is produced by people of color and those from underrepresented backgrounds (Martinez 2017, 69). We use counterstory as our methodological frame because each story that follows pushes back against dominant narratives about how incarcerated students are transformed by writing and education in prison. This method helps us create a foundation for communicating underrepresented ideas about prison literacies that speak to increased recognition of these practices in carceral space.

To be clear, we do not submit such writing to offer accounts of how college-in-prison helps people become “better” or “new.” Nor do we position our narratives as explicit efforts to change social institutions. Our ultimate goal is, instead, to shift academics and instructors’ perceptions of incarcerated populations from people who are changed by education to complex individuals who are thinking about writing just like others on the inside and outside. This intended outcome, we believe, is not the same as transformation. And so, we use counterstory to generate “[n]arratives counter to [those] majoritarian or stock stories” (Martinez 2017, 81) to avoid flattening the experiences of and harming people in prison.

THOMAS’S NARRATIVE (BOOK REVIEW)

Writing in a new form has never come easy for me. But when a workshop on writing a book review came around, I jumped at the opportunity. Unfortunately, I ended up missing the first of the two sessions. I kept sending in requests to attend the workshop, and fortunately I made it on the final day. The only caveat was that I needed to write a 1,000-word review in one day. Little did I realize that it’d be published in The Amplifier, for which I had just become a staff writer. In hindsight, I may have been a little too sure of myself. I heard the words come out of my mouth: “Sure, I’ll write a book review.” I thought, This’ll be easy. It’ll be a summary and my opinion about the piece. Later that day, though, I found myself pondering, How
do I write this? Who am I to judge some author’s hard work and artistic expression? What’s the best way to get the readers’ attention? That is, if they should even read the book at all. What if I do this book more harm than good? But the one-day deadline turned out to be a blessing. I dove in and put my concerns on the backburner. My last thought before starting was, Here goes nothing… After eight hours and three cups of coffee, the first draft was done.

As I began to proofread my work, I realized it read like a summary. Should it? Who can I ask what I did wrong, if anything, and how can I fix it? Luckily for me, a volunteer, Logan, was around. I asked him for help. My luck continued as he gave me great ideas on how to improve my review. I began to notice my mistakes. Oh, that’s where I messed up. And there. Let me fix these issues and get an opinion on the corrections I made. I gave a copy of my review to another outside EJP volunteer I’d just met, and it came back with more corrections than I anticipated. I lost all direction at that point. I struggled with how to address these concerns, but I ended up working on what I thought were the structural issues and sent it to the editor of The Amplifier. He thought I included too much detail and that it read more like a summary than a book review. Returning to my work for another draft the next day, I thought to myself, They say the third time is the charm; one more try. I’m just going to have to do my best and let the cards fall where they may. Let me go back and reread some of the book reviews I’ve read in the past and see if that’ll help me. Hmm, most of them read as a summary. Well, this certainly doesn’t clarify a direction for me. There doesn’t seem to be a real set standard for this genre. I’ll have to do what I feel works best.

I initially took this workshop to expand my horizons! I pondered, Why am I stressing about this? This is what I signed up for. Let me take in all the advice I get, use what I am capable of, and learn from the experience.

I dove into the corrections head-first. My mind raced. Done. First book review ever. I hope someone likes it as much as I liked the book I wrote about. I wonder, does writing these reviews get easier? Will I get better, and by whose standards do I judge my work? artistically, maybe the only person’s standards that matter are mine. Realistically, it’s the reader’s opinion that matters. But for the reader to even have a chance to read it, it’s the editor’s standards that must be met.
Looking back, I’ve come to realize that the ultimate judge of an author’s work is himself, and we are much more critical of our own accomplishments than others. The decision of who to satisfy must be a compromise. We must be true to ourselves, and yet, we must be sensitive to the concerns of others, especially if we actually want to share our work with the world.

While this book review has created a lot of questions for me, it’s taught me that it is difficult to try new things, and yet those tasks can be very rewarding. The two greatest lessons that I’ve learned from this endeavor are that I needed to be more descriptive in my writing, giving the audience more information to flesh out and bring to life my arguments. Second, I made too many assumptions on what the audience knows. It is too easy to forget that the audience may not know information that the author may have taken for granted. Further, this genre is different than any school assignment, and it’s afforded me the opportunity to explore a form of writing that I’ve never attempted before, better preparing me for future projects.

Since my completion of the book review, I have been able to apply lessons learned to my fiction writing, school papers, and conference papers. I learned that all forms of writing are enhanced by good storytelling. Through this experience, I’ve become more proficient at telling stories—fleshing them out and bringing them to life so the reader doesn’t just feel they’re reading stories but are actively engaged in the scenes being described. This has enhanced my EJP papers and other academic writing. Being able to relate all of the pertinent information to readers has elevated my capabilities to argue my points and to take them along a path that is fluid and easy to follow, making me a better writer one word at a time.

We want to show that just because we’re incarcerated doesn’t mean that we can only participate in and talk about a select few categories of writing. The next author, Mario, will show that not only can we be proficient in writing itself but in copyediting too.
MARIO’S NARRATIVE (COPYEDITING)

*The Amplifier* is a student-run newsletter that’s been around since 2016. The material that we produce deals primarily with authors writing what they know—mainly stories of transformation in parts of their lives. We also encourage authors to write book reviews, puzzles, summaries of the classes they’re in, and poems. That said, we strive to produce material that reflects some of the best writing that our fellow EJP students have to offer. We circulate *The Amplifier* to most of the DCC populace; we print a full issue bi-monthly and a calendar with small articles in the months that we don’t run full issues.

As copyeditor of *The Amplifier*, it’s my job to ensure that the writing we receive is in pristine condition. I am tasked with simple line editing (spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors), and I also undertake the more challenging task of sifting through drafts to get to the final product. In a way, I try to get to what the writer is saying in the piece. Style, voice, grammar, syntax; these are just some of the terms that I constantly run into. Each one requires a certain amount of knowledge to produce an article that is worthy of our prestigious paper. We like to let writers produce whatever they want, but we often have to resort to heavy editing due to limitations of the authors’ writing abilities.

As I read first drafts that are submitted by EJP students, all I can think is, *What the hell is going on here?* These articles are riddled with run-on sentences and most go on tangents that aren’t even related to the starting topics in the first place. We also often receive “transformation articles” in which authors write about recurring themes of making mistakes, learning from said mistakes, and then redeeming themselves through an approved method of redemption. They’re not bad, but we get so many of them that we tire of working with prospective writers who start their work with the dreaded “I’ve learned from my mistakes.” Beyond this topic, there are hidden jewels in there, which many incarcerated individuals can relate to—overcoming our insufficient knowledge. I bring this up to writers, tell them to focus on those ideas and to get rid of the excess. They typically respond with arguments I’ve grown tired of hearing—“You’re taking my voice away.” This is another problem
that I constantly run into. I, in turn, respond by telling them, “I’m not blocking or stealing your voice; I am simply refining it.” The only reason that I have the knowledge to edit other peoples’ work is through years of reading and by becoming familiar with the rules that govern the written language. Through reading investigative magazine articles, I’ve learned different ways to cite authors’ work. Through reading countless (non) fiction books, I’ve learned different ways that authors present ideas when they write stories.

I try to tell writers that all papers have problems. I say, “Even some of the teachers and volunteers have had their articles rearranged or edited.” What I leave out are the differences in mistakes. Often, teachers or volunteers’ articles have minor grammar or punctuation issues while EJP students’ articles have problems that often require two to three rounds of editing. It’s these articles that give me the most trouble due to the problem of having to explain every little change. Don’t get me wrong; I am more than happy sharing my knowledge. But it saddens me that these authors never have opportunities to learn what it takes to produce passable papers.

I hope that by imparting some of my copyediting knowledge, authors will learn the importance of this useful skill. Copyediting allows writers to think ahead and self-edit their own work so it can stay in line with what they’re saying—their voice. When writers know the rules of writing, they learn when it’s acceptable to break them. “Why would you want to break the rules?” they may ask. Maybe your writing style doesn’t mesh well with the particular genre you’re writing in. So you break the rules to reinvigorate your voice, so who you are comes through the writing, and your style can make the impact you want it to make.

By becoming an autodidactic, I taught myself some of the more difficult terms associated with the editing process. Autodidact is not a word that most people will hear in their lives. It is an all-too familiar term to those of us wishing to become educated but don’t have access to the right materials, can’t get into school, or are being taught incorrectly. We incarcerated individuals end up taking on the task of lighting that torch of knowledge ourselves. After years of fumbling in the dark with sticks and stones, we eventually learn what
it takes to light the torch—a beacon that will become the guiding light for our future.

Why do we need to go through so much just to produce something that people may or may not read in the end? Maybe it’s due to some much-needed catharsis, or maybe we’re just bored. My hope is, though, that someone on the outside will read these articles and realize that incarcerated people can be more than just transformation writers. When they do, I want what we produce to reflect who we can become as writers.

We’ve spoken on some of the difficulties that we face with writing in prison. Pablo will now touch on some of the issues that outside schooling systems have created for us on the inside.

**PABLO’S NARRATIVE (EDUCATION)**

My participation in EJP and Danville Community College in prison as a student, evaluator, ESL instructor, and a literacy / math tutor has uncovered serious flaws in my writing process. A typical response paper always seems to morph into an exercise of patience that ends up drastically crippling my academic morale. Recent attempts to shore up compositional deficiencies has led me to conduct a retrospective analysis on the reasoning for such struggles. I have concluded that my elementary education is at the root of the problem because it failed to introduce to me methods of self-expression.

Elementary school provided me with basic tools for comprehension and content regurgitation. I look to stray away from all that I’ve learned during those early years as I strive to establish a solid writing foundation. I am constantly haunted by mind maps and essay formats. None of the aforementioned has assisted me in composing a paper where I express my own ideas or create a workable understanding of subject matter. I am repeatedly choked off from my words as I drown in locutionary (what I say), illocutionary (what I intend to say), and perlocutionary dynamics (what’s actually understood by my audience). As a result, I can’t help but feel silenced.
My current experience as an ESL instructor for Language Partners has revealed some questionable results. As an instructor, I tend to ground myself in the type of rudimentary instruction I received. This type of instruction doesn’t seem to produce much fruit. Students always struggle with writing assignments when limited to the traditional grammar exercises we teach. In contrast, when presented with free-write or journal exercises, they usually have a more accurate and expressive handle on the English language—one they lack in controlled writing or grammar exercises. The students I work with repeatedly challenge my position as an instructor, and they write deeply amusing stories filled with emotion and drama that always leave me wanting more. More often than not, I’m the one who benefits from their instruction.

I have learned through academic study that traditional writing instruction stifles students’ cognitive development. Academics would be better served if they were allowed to express themselves in a manner that’s more in tune with the way they learn. To me, assessment tools that provide students with opportunities to utilize newly acquired knowledge are more effective. Presenting students with chances to challenge knowledge instead of purely being knowledge-holders can bring about a metamorphosis through which they can transform into knowledge-creators. I align closely with Freire (1970) in accepting all parties as knowledge-holders and knowledge-creators to create an environment of reciprocal learning.

A good portion of my audience will interpret my writing to be a dig at the carceral educational experience because they can’t see past my incarceration. I want to explicitly state that this piece echoes the educational challenges of my academic peers. We come from varying walks of life yet regardless of age or race, we share a similar educational experience—the public school system.

Writing instructors, then, need to meet students where they’re at and value their lived experiences. Instruction of any kind is multifaceted. It’s a perfect picnic of language, writing, and education. My contribution to this publication is to challenge instructors to view their students as more than numbers—demographic, statistical, or otherwise—and see them as living, breathing individuals.
Pablo’s scene concerns our past classroom experiences and calls for additional modes of personal expression. Our next colleague, Larry, addresses the importance of multimodal literacy for individuals reentering society.

LARRY’S NARRATIVE (MULTIMODALITY)
Learning to become literate in this modern climate is complicated for anyone, but it is even more so for people who are incarcerated, cut off from a high-tech society that is converting to more multimodal forms of communication. To be literate in any of these forms of composition is to be able to navigate and negotiate any combination of these modes, “forms of communication that utilize material use of color, still and moving images, embodied performances, objects, textures, scents, nonlinear movement, sound” (Shipka 2006, 356) and any of the digital platforms. There is a void for some incarcerated individuals who are disenfranchised members of society that goes unfilled, limiting how they represent their identities, utilize their agency, and create messages to communicate their ideas effectively. Because media and communication are ever-changing—and the learning environments within prisons are not—a person who’s been in for an extended time would have difficulty relating to this outside society. For example, the ability to mobilize people to stand up for a cause through the use of a tweet, podcast, or blog is lost upon inside populations that are not afforded opportunities to use their voices in such a manner. Instructors, then, need to change the pedagogy used in prisons to enhance the agency and voices of these people so that they can learn the tools to enact lasting change in their lives and in society.

Generally, literacy is a rarely discussed topic within populations that are incarcerated. While thoughts of what a person ought to know upon release are present within their minds, literacy is not often among the considerations. Literacy, however, is a part of peoples’ daily lives. It’s not only the way that we understand one another; it allows a survivor the ability to form a message using a particular mode of communication in order to speak out against oppressive behavior by a person that harmed them (e.g., the #MeToo movement).
Nevertheless, for people who are incarcerated, there is not only the need to learn the affordances and constraints of certain modes of composition or the consequences of using fast-developing trends of communication. People returning to society must also learn tools to think critically about composing and interpreting messages. Developing such understandings of multimodal communication would allow these people to function as “literate citizens in a world where communications crosses geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic borders” (Selfe 2009, 618).

There is also a need to allow the use of technology both in the classroom and in the daily lives of those who are incarcerated. Although contact with technology is something that I am afforded almost on a daily basis, this is not the current reality of most people in Illinois state prisons. Access to technology is important to become an active citizen of society, something that most people in positions of power don’t realize is critical to reintegrating into a modern society. For example, instructors in prisons can help individuals learn how to create concise messages that capture the entire essence of their ideas in creative ways, such as in tweets, mime or text forms, or even in essays written on ballet shoes (Shipka 2011, 3). This thinking outside of the box can enrich innovation and allow us to push against oppressive institutions within this nation.

The close examination of literacy skills of incarcerated people sheds new light on the neglected issue of incarcerated people’s reentry back into our communities. Through learning these skills, this unique group of people would gain the affordability of being able to navigate and negotiate different forms of communication. This would offer a better understanding into the meaning of messages, like Donald Trump’s tweets that use dog-whistle language, so that only a certain few will understand how he’s using his platform to show support for the alt-right. Acquiring these skills can allow these women and men on the inside to speak out against injustices in their lives in an effective way that could reach lots of people. In addition, this pedagogy would give this group additional ways to represent and communicate their ideas effectively to the communities in which they live. Learning new or refining multiple forms of communication...
is more than just the ability to communicate effectively; it is a way to push back against unjust practices to form a more perfect world.

**CONCLUSION: WHAT’S NEXT?**

Per Martinez (2017), counterstory serves as “a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told” (70). We don’t use this approach solely to say that the stories of incarcerated people are often silenced. We also leverage counterstory to amplify stories of incarcerated students that address how we write and revise, teach and learn across multiple spaces in college-in-prison environments—the likes of which are often untold in HEP and writing studies literature. We are not just “prison writers.” We are researchers, teachers, facilitators, editors, and thinkers. These aspects of writing, literacy, and education can spark learning just as much as those stories of life writing and transformation.

Thus, we use our platform to call on academics to join us in writing different stories about incarcerated students, ones that don’t center transformation. Start by working with us more to theorize how we navigate genre, revision, copyediting, teaching, language, schooling, and multimodality. Ask us about how we design and conduct research from the inside with limited resources and materials. Consider our perspectives as instructors of language and literacy in prisons when crafting writing pedagogies that take up ideas of access. And grant us a seat at the table when it comes to writing the stories of our lives and learning. Doing so can honor the complexity of our identities, not solely as students or as incarcerated people but as scholars and human beings.
WORKS CITED


Reynolds, Sadie. 2014. “Good Intentions Aside: The Ethics of Reciprocity in a University-Jail Women’s Writing Workshop Collaboration.” In *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars,


Larry Barrett, Pablo Mendoza, Mario Rubio, and Thomas Stromblad are undergraduate students in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Education Justice Project. Logan Middleton is a PhD student in writing studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.