

Review:

Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison

by Patrick W. Berry

Sally F. Benson,

University of Arizona

When legislation¹ passed in 1994 denying Pell Grants for incarcerated students, prison college programs—once considered a valuable instrument for transformation—became nearly extinct. Access to higher education is increasingly aligned with privilege, and the messy intersection of incarceration and higher education aptly reflects the use of oppression, inequality, and surveillance as a means to profit—also known as the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). Decades later, American taxpayers are realizing how costly this failed institution, the PIC, has proven to be. A 2013 study by the RAND Corporation linking prison education to reduced recidivism and employability provided an evidence-based argument on the economic savings of prison education (Davis 2013). Scholars and policymakers frequently cite the RAND Corporation study in their

1 H.R.3355, Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994

claims for providing access to higher education to individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. As a result, the case for college in prison has largely become an argument of economics. This evaluative approach highlights important outcomes of prison higher education, but it also risks dehumanizing those who take part in such programs. A transdisciplinary conversation is taking place around access to higher education for individuals impacted by incarceration. Both incarcerated and non-incarcerated scholars, and others who recognize the critical value of education for its own sake and not only as a means to an end product, are speaking up.

In his book *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison*, Patrick W. Berry (2018) enters the conversation on literacy and higher education in prison with a much-needed perspective on the value of being in the moment and of the importance of considering the context of incarceration. Historically, literacy has been a tool for marginalizing, and Berry is skeptical of narratives that situate literacy as a magic bullet in the face of broader social and cultural problems. If our reasons for literacy in prison are *only* to serve future goals, such as job readiness, then less-measurable benefits of literacy practices based on the present are often overlooked. Berry locates literacy in the context of incarceration, and he asks us to consider “how we might develop pedagogies that are untethered to naïve beliefs in literacy’s power, yet mindful of realistic possibilities as well as the work that can take place in the present moment” (6-7). What Berry refers to as the “contextual now” includes narratives beyond those on the page—the “spaces wherein students use writing to share their stories” (38). He augments outcome-based literacy by esteeming the “acts of composing and of becoming that lead to deeper engagement with the world and one’s place in it” (14). Juxtaposing personal literacy narratives, rhetorical frames of literacy in prison, and the perceived purposes of prison higher education, Berry questions how incarcerated students make sense of both literacy and of life while taking courses in a college program. As a researcher, Berry considers his own literacy narrative and how it shaped this project. Having had a father who spent time in and out of incarceration, Berry perceives a narrow gap between the world inside and outside of prison.

Berry is careful not to negate the important connections between higher education and reduced recidivism and employability. And yet, prison higher education, if linked only to reduced recidivism and job prospects, not only commodifies education but also further marginalizes those with lengthy or life-term sentences. Berry insists on an expanded attentiveness to “the rich ways in which literacy and higher education can contribute to rehabilitation” (101). One might question the use of “rehabilitation,” only because it suggests a *return* to a functional state. Education may change the person in prison, but can it change societal mistrust of those with criminal histories? The need for equitable access to higher education responds to a problem more fundamental than one’s individual path to prison. As our world becomes increasingly fragmented, access to higher education has become symbolic of an unsettling question, which concerns how we care for one another. Berry is right to be critical of statistically based assessments that both dehumanize and further marginalize students in a system of power—particularly incarcerated students who are not close to the door. Equal access to higher education can raise prospects for more than a select few.

Berry introduces readers to an in-situ prison college program called “Project Justice.” Through ethnography and narrative inquiry, he investigates how students as well as instructors in the program situate literacy practices to weave together these partitioned worlds—in personal narratives, business proposals, pedagogical stances, and life after prison. Berry compares his own literacy narrative to those of his students to illustrate how beliefs about the power of literacy are shaped by gender, race, and class. Literacy narratives offer incarcerated students a tool to re-enter a world that they have been historically erased from, argues Berry, and teachers’ narratives inform pedagogies to support students in constructing these “narratives of possibility,” linking literacy with social change (21). By highlighting teachers’ narratives, Berry hopes to better understand “the motivations that inform their practices and perspectives” (69). The teachers in Project Justice represent a broad range of disciplines, yet each cares about social justice and about their teaching, and “their observations about what was happening in prison and what was not happening on their home campuses warrant close attention,” advises Berry (87). Whether in search of alternative teaching experiences, authentic pedagogy, or ways to connect teaching to social justice, those who teach inside

undoubtedly add a new dimension to this discussion, as their own experiences may be transformational.

Challenged to teach professional writing in a prison context, Berry situated incarcerated students as ethnographers of the conditions and limitations of being incarcerated. This authorial ethos allowed the students to develop proposals advocating for programs supporting life *inside* prison. By presenting their proposals in a symposium called “Writing for a Change” (59) to prison administrators and Project Justice representatives, students engaged the role of audience and narrowed the divide between the world they knew and the world they were writing toward. An authentic audience “added weight to the assignment, leading at first to anxiety but then, ultimately, to appreciation” (64).

Berry urges outside educators, whose beliefs about literacy and education may be shaped by their own histories and privilege, to practice Krista Ratcliffe’s *rhetorical listening* to better understand students in the context of incarceration and to understand literacy “as a rhetorical act shaped by our specific understandings of ourselves and the world around us” (106). *Doing Time, Writing Lives* offers a nuanced reading of the ways incarcerated students locate literacy to mobilize beyond static identities of crimes of record. Moving toward “figured worlds” or third spaces that allow for more fluid identities, students can begin the process of transformation in their own narratives. The final chapter discusses the role of literacy in post-incarceration and problematizes “the dangers of a commodified curriculum in which education and literacy are reduced to mere instruments of economic progress” (90). Berry draws from a case study of a formerly incarcerated Project Justice student who, despite his education, faced employment discrimination. He illustrates both the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the program and the limitations of measuring prison higher education by situating students as only economic data linked to recidivism. In its mission to understand how incarcerated students situate literacy and higher education, Berry’s project challenges notions of literacy as the paramount solution for success, particularly as related to prison higher education. He has compassionately established the work of his students with the work required of a society if success of the larger community is to occur.

Perhaps the single most critical goal of Project Justice cited by Berry, “to help students come to see themselves differently” (101), is one that we can all embrace in order to effect change.

Prison education resides at a difficult intersection of what needs fixing in the broader apparatus beyond prison walls—the societal ills that create a climate that accepts mass incarceration and cultivates beliefs that warehousing human beings is somehow a solution to a problem—and the commodification of higher education. Berry’s *contextual now* offers a rhetorical frame for literacy as a means of understanding how we compose lives and meaning in a world that must be answered. Before change can occur, a belief that change is possible must be present. If we are to change why we have been complicit for so long while the PIC has been constructed, and why many now are behind the effort to dismantle this failed model through education, then perspectives such as Berry’s offer urgently needed insight, reminding us of *why* we advocate for an educated citizenry in the first place. Literacy skills and higher education cannot take away a criminal record and the discrimination it accompanies. What Project Justice offered was an alternative space for participants to become involved in “the complex work of reimagining oneself in the moment through education, writing, and the pursuit of realistic possibilities” (100). These narratives reflect the power of human transformation and the need that each of us has to transform, in the context of what prison is about.

WORKS CITED

Davis, Lois M., et al. *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. RAND corporation, 2013.