

Review:

Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers

Eds. Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson

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Demands for more innovative approaches to prison education have flooded the calls for papers in rhetoric and composition journals (Hinshaw & Jacobi 2018; Smith McKoy and Alexander 2018), marking a necessary push toward more dialogic prison engagement and collaboration. Specific to this special issue, Hinshaw and Jacobi (2018) hope to curate pedagogical awareness to include mass incarceration into the rhetoric and composition vocabulary, taking a critical approach to the process of establishing prison education programs and cultivating rehabilitative promise. Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson's (2018) edited collection, *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*, is highly kairotic due to the current breadth of prison education programs that struggle to meet the educational needs of prisoners, speaking directly to the nearly two thirds of released prisoners who are rearrested for a new crime within three years of release ("Recidivism"

2014). This edited collection approaches the performance of prison teaching and learning through multiple perspectives and intelligences. The opening quote by Albert Camus sets the tone: “In the depths of a prison, dreams have no limits, never held back by reality” (Lockard and Rankins-Robertson 2018, ii). Prisoners struggle to attain effective means of rehabilitation due to varying curriculum designs, distracting and demanding prison lifestyles, and the stigmatizing effect of being labeled “prisoner.” To address this injustice, Camus’s quote is effectively a call for action for prisoner educators to keep an eye toward accommodation, empathy, and exploration.

The twelve chapters in this edited collection are divided into three thematic parts. Part One reimagines the limits of the prison classroom as a dialogic interaction that attempts to break stereotypes, actualize communicative potential, and accurately represent prisoner voices. While most of the chapters advocate for pedagogy catered to prisoner voices, the selected chapters highlighted in this book review demonstrate specific models for combatting the marginalization of prisoner voices. For example, Bidhan Chandra Roy revamps Foucault’s platform for prisoners to bring their voices into public discourse by working directly with prisoners, problematizing the rhetorical function of how meaning is conveyed and addressing the socioeconomic privileging of those who already know how to write well. Roy explains how his “project sought to empower prisoners to speak for themselves rather than have public intellectuals, such as Foucault, speak on their behalf” (34). Prisoner voices that are cultivated through dialogue rather than representation avoid potential scrubbing of prisoner voices. Foucault’s platform to bring prisoner voices into public discourse, on the other hand, dealt only with prisoners who could already write, effectively silencing the voices that struggled with writing. Roy capitalizes on dialogic pedagogy to help students cultivate their own writing voice. By creating a space for dialogue, students are more able to engage with the instructor, the classroom culture, and the process of articulating their thoughts. Engagement contributes to meaningful creation and self-awareness, skills necessary for self-improvement.

To sum it up, Juan Pablo Parchuc writes, “Prison writing teaches that the margin is never a limit but a border and very often a platform

from which new frames give shape to other worlds and horizons,” echoing the tone Camus’s quote sets at the beginning of the book (67). Contrary to the inflexible structures of prisoner life, prison writing can be incredibly flexible with how meaning is created, exchanged, and articulated. Both Roy and Parchuc champion the margin as merely a starting point to expand and reshape our perception of the transformative nature of writing through dialogue.

Part Two continues the discussion of educational limitations by showcasing specific issues in prison classrooms, accenting meaningful social change and strengths-based transformation. For instance, Tasha Golden uses trauma-informed pedagogy for young incarcerated women in response to detention facilities “still designed and operated with males in mind” (128). By explicitly addressing the specific needs of her students, Golden affords her students a space that’s conducive to their creative personalities. Golden argues that “opportunities for directed writing in a detention facility should result in improvements in participants’ mental and physical health,” always prepared for needed adaptation and autonomy building (132). Meaningful social change in prison education programs depends on unearthing the potential of our students, fundamentally upending our current perceptions of how students should learn by encouraging students to embrace their own ways of learning. Golden’s trauma-informed pedagogy may be limited to her female prisoner demographic but can be adapted and molded to fit the needs of other students.

The chapters in Part Three demonstrate various projects in organized prison education programs, which are effective models for burgeoning prison educators. By detailing the success of the following programs, this edited collection highlights the social justice initiatives of the past as well as pushes for more variations in the future. To illustrate my point, Julie Rada and Rivka Rocchio develop prison theater workshops that cultivate a “dynamic interplay of intimacy and distance and perhaps serves as an antidote to the invisibility and isolation that constitute the prison experience” (172). Performance provides agency to the artist to control the message and interaction with the audience, a practice denied by the structure of the prison system. Rada and Rocchio’s prison theater workshops further develop Roy’s dialogic pedagogy by employing a medium that

may better accommodate prisoner voice expression. This exploration of different mediums speaks to the core philosophy behind dialogic pedagogy: meaning making is rarely achieved from one-sided instruction; rather, effective meaning making comes from a mutually beneficial relationship based on trust, empathy, and consideration.

Following the discussion of effective meaning making is Meghan G. McDowell and Alison Reed's chapter on the critical establishment of effective prison education programs. A significant deterrent to utilizing dialogic pedagogy that prioritizes prisoner voices is the rhetoric behind the construction of these education programs. McDowell and Reed argue, "the rhetoric of dehumanization in jails and prisons to be part of the same mechanism that facilitates the humanization of jails and prisons through the civilizing mission of the neoliberal university's production of 'good' (i.e., capitalist-conforming) subjects" (156). Serving as more of a commentary on the social issues between university and prison partners, McDowell and Reed's chapter demands that university prison education programs be more critical of how they structure the meaning-making process with imprisoned writers. While the writing produced in prison classrooms is meant to represent prisoner voices, unfair privileging of university voices may sanitize or truncate prisoner voices. Perhaps a chapter better placed at the beginning of this edited collection, McDowell and Reed argue that savior formations of prisoner education programs do not yield dialogic prisoner education programs, a key concept that should foreground the stated projects.

Similar to McDowell and Reed's chapter critiquing the neoliberal university's production of prison education, Kimberley Benedict takes a meta-analysis, arguing that writing-about-writing pedagogies help make students better writers by communicating: "You are welcome to have access to the same information that writing authorities and experts have, information that is constructed less like a rulebook and more like a dialogue in which contributors build on, critique, and revise each other's ideas" (226). Both McDowell and Reed's and Benedict's chapters take appropriate measures to engage in dialogic pedagogy from the start by communicating that dialogue in the prison classroom starts with dialogue in planning for the prison classroom.

Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers aptly describes how prison education could reflect a prosperous exploratory space in which teachers and students learn and create together. I suspect future research on teaching incarcerated writers would include chapters on how students develop into peers and instructors through their education, further enabling the community engagement and interconnectedness that prison culture controls. In addition, future research could explicitly instruct how to develop prison education programs in universities that currently have none, catered specifically for inexperienced prison educators.

Regardless of your experience with imprisoned writers, approach this book the way you would any classroom at the beginning of the school year: realize that your students last year will not be the same this year; acknowledge that the nuances of your students' learning personalities will help guide the curriculum; and recognize that students learn best when they feel connected to the content, the instructor, and their peers. Opportunities arise with an open mind, "never held back by reality."

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