

(Re)Defining Literacy

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When I first stepped into an official college classroom inside prison, I had no idea that my writing had value. I was always told that I was an articulate person, an attribute that made me stick out amongst my peers in and outside of the correctional facility. I took on the habit of quickly learning the local vernacular to better camouflage my love of complex, formal language. Yet, those pesky, multisyllable symbols still managed to sneak out of my mouth and into my conversations at the most inopportune of times. Slurring or mincing words could not mask the slip of “multitudinous,” “ambivalence,” or “fruition” from my everyday speech. In the classroom, however, as I began to write academic papers, I realized that my grasp of the formal constructions of the English language that came so naturally to me gave me a clear advantage in speaking the local lingo of education.

While I have never been a huge fan of writing and cringed at the thought of sitting

through an English 101 class after having tested out of both 101 and 102 when I entered community college in my pre-carceral life, I came into this college classroom committed to learning. To my surprise, my superpower unfurled and flexed as if wings had sprouted from my back after years of being restrictively bound inside my skin. Let me temper my ego here by saying that I was far from perfect. My professor knocked the certainty of my ability to wield words on paper down a few notches with every piece of work I turned in. The beauty is that her criticism came in the form of questions, begging me for clarification, asking me for more fleshing out of ideas, never seeking to blunt my skill. This constant challenge to my strength made me grow exponentially. I realized it was not just putting my thoughts into language, but honing the skill of thinking critically and complexly about the world around me that was the true value here. Close reading paired with the art of articulation remade my previously hidden talent.

In English 102, I wrote a paper on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and for the first time, I felt like I had thought so far beyond what the author may have intended that the thought itself felt my very own. This was the moment I became an academic. What I never imagined on that first day is that I would reach a point where words had to catch up with me because I was learning that language sometimes had to be stretched, morphed, and reshaped to convey the workings of an active mind. The "carnavalesque," "microaggressions," and "the spectacular"—all of these words my word processor refused to recognize as true or correct in their context and yet are words that demanded to be used nonetheless.

Long deserted was the feeling that I would show English a thing or two, for English class was beating me down and building me back up into a literary force to be reckoned with. Again, again, I humbly recognize that my skill always and forever needs honing. However, it is with this constant nudging, pushing, and sometimes downright shoving in the classroom that my mind and my pen wield power I never knew I had. Am I a lingual master? Hardly. But my writing has value. Moreover, my experience has value, and it infuses all of my ponderings in the classroom with a flare that is uniquely my own. This value is not just present because I happen to have a veritable

talent for stringing effective sentences together; instead, it is there because I make the language work for the vastness of thoughts my mind constantly produces. I am a student in prison. I am an academic. I have value. And I make words work for me.

Proper English is not the measuring stick, as I once believed, for even in the slangest of terms, a keen mind is molding the complexities of language to fit the diversity of everyday life. We are all literate in our own way. Rarely do I find myself code switching to hide my superpower now. I speak and write proudly in my common tongue. I have witnessed the college classroom inside the prison become a place for the melding of dialects. A symbiotic relationship has developed in which professor and student, carceral world and free world, respect one another's experiential literacy, exchange fluency, and are ultimately more articulate for it. What I have learned here is that literacy comes in all forms, and we are shaping the world as we both grasp and create anew the words to describe it.

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