

If We Knew Our History: Building on the Insights of Past Prison Teachers

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The future of higher education in prison remains a pressing question more than twenty years after incarcerated students were denied access to Pell grants. We are still considering questions about who should be incarcerated and why. The forces were different in the '70's and '80's, but we still have much to learn from those who labored in prison literacy classrooms in those times. This project, based on oral history interviews with six teachers who taught in writing workshops and higher education in prison programs in the 1970s and 80s, a time when prison arts, education and literacy programs were undergoing drastic shifts resulting from social, political and cultural forces, can help us understand the evolving nature of this practice. Additionally, the interviews can help us understand how these teachers' experiences of teaching in prison at a time when carceral environments were often dangerous and challenging reflect and refract the prevailing narratives of literacy at the time. As Stanton, Giles and Cruz note about their investigation into the history of service-learning, "we should build on the insights of those who have confronted these challenges before" (xiii). This project provides not only reflection on these experiences and the ways they can help us understand the past and future of literacy teaching in prison, but access to insights that are, because of the marginalized nature of this teaching, in danger of being lost to history

If you know your history

Then you would know where you coming from

—“*Buffalo Soldiers*,” Bob Marley

Several years ago, as I drove down the New York State Thruway on yet another Tuesday night to my writing workshop at a men’s medium-security prison, I began to wonder about how many times I had made the drive. I had started teaching writing in a college-in-prison program in 1984 and had begun the non-credit, voluntary creative writing workshop in 1995 after the college program closed due to the loss of state and federal Pell Grant funding. The math of it all defied me as I concentrated on my nighttime drive, but I began to reflect not only on my own history as a prison literacy teacher, but also on my own place in a lineage of prison writing teachers. How many others, I wondered, had made these long journeys, usually at night, to prisons in remote, usually rural locations? What was the history of these programs and the stories of the people who had taught in them?

The future of higher education in prison remains a pressing question more than 20 years after incarcerated students were denied access to Pell Grants. We are still working towards criminal justice reform with steps such as the limited restoration of the Pell Grant in 2015 through the Second Chance Pell Grant program, which provides need-based Pell Grant funding to eligible students in 65 college-in-prison programs in 15 different states (Vera Institute). The forces were different in the 1970s and 1980s, but we still have much to learn from those who labored in prison literacy classrooms in those times. This project, based on oral history interviews with teachers who taught in writing workshops and higher education in prison programs in the 1970s and ‘80s—a time when prison arts, education, and literacy programs were undergoing drastic shifts resulting from social, political, and cultural forces—can help us understand the evolving nature of this practice. As Stanton, Giles and Cruz (1999) note about their investigation into the history of service-learning, “we should build on the insights of those who have confronted these challenges before” (xiii). This project provides not only reflection on these experiences and the ways they can help us understand the past and future of literacy teaching in prison, but access to insights that

are, because of the marginalized nature of this teaching, in danger of being lost to history. Prison education and literacy programs have existed in prison almost as long as there have been prisons (Silva 1994). While scholarship on prison literacy programs has increased dramatically, (Jacobi 2014; Berry 2018; Hinshaw 2018; Branch 2007; Plemons 2013), we are only beginning to examine both the history of individual prison literacy programs and the histories of the trailblazing teachers in those early programs. Additionally, these oral histories begin to provide a context, or long view, of our pedagogies and practices.

A feminist methodology can help us think about why it is important to widen our view on who teaches and where that teaching is taking place. Feminist historiographers (Hogg 2006; Royster 2008; Sinor 2002; Wood 2016) have pointed to compelling reasons to look beyond expected narratives and archives in order to call attention to marginalized voices and sites of literacy. Royster and Kirsch (2012) call for feminist rhetoricians to look at “rhetorical and literate practices in in various contexts and communities,” (32) and Glenn and Enoch (2010) suggest that “By widening the scope of the sites for our historical research, we necessarily confront new questions about and new possibilities for archival recovery, archival methods, and historiographic intervention” (18). We can draw on these ideas in order to consider other marginalized sites of literacy and sources of archival treasures, such as prisons and jails. Additionally, Glenn and Bessette call for us to pay attention to “small, local archives” such as these oral histories. As Kristen Fleckenstein (2001) notes, “we need to honor individuals’ eloquent stories as fundamental supplements to more abstract structural information and analysis as sources theoretical concepts and insights in their own right” (336). These oral histories work to honor those “eloquent stories.” Nelms (1992) points to the importance of oral histories as a method of collecting these stories, especially those “that would otherwise be lost...and giving voice to those marginalized politically, socially and professionally” (356). All of the teachers I spoke to, working on the margins of our professions in adjunct or otherwise contingent positions, had not saved any materials from their prison teaching, although all wished that they had done so. We need to circulate the voices of these teachers both to honor those who laid the foundations for many of our current practices and to investigate how these early prison

writing teachers responded to pressing social issues and forces that formed the context for their prison teaching.

Except for Patrick Berry's (2018) research on the literacy narratives of teachers in a higher-education-in-prison program, there has been little work done on the lived experiences of teachers in college-in-prison or other literacy programs other than to examine their pedagogical strategies and classroom experiences. However, as Berry states, "we would be well served by better understanding prison educators" (68). I interviewed six participants by phone, in person, and via email in order to begin to understand these past prison educators. These teachers taught in a variety of prison literacy programs such as college-in-prison programs, non-degree-granting creative writing workshops with and without formal connections to colleges or universities, and even established newspapers and literary journals edited by the incarcerated writers. Following are profiles and excerpts from conversations with those teachers who taught in various carceral sites during the 1970s and early 1980s. All except one asked to be identified by their first name only. Chris, Craig, Dave, Kirpal, Jeanne, and Rex generously shared their memories, stories, and thoughts on the past and future of literacy education in prison.

Silva (1994) notes that the availability of Pell Grants to incarcerated students after 1965 was responsible for the proliferation of post-secondary programs in prisons in which myself, Craig, and Kirpal taught. The rapid growth of college-in-prison programs in the 1960s and '70s coincided with the Civil Rights Movement and other progressive social movements of which participants such as Chris were a part. Bernstein (2010) discusses how the conflicts in American prisons during the 1970s gave rise to the growing prison arts movement at the time. Bernstein also notes the dismantling of many of these programs in the 1980s, when prison became "a flashpoint for a society in transition" (95) reflected in the changes that Chris, Craig, and Dave observed.

CHRIS

Chris is an activist, author of nine published volumes of poetry, and professor at Bucks County Community College. His poetry collection, *Cell Count*, reflects his experience of teaching creative

writing classes in a Bucks County, Pennsylvania jail beginning in the mid-1970s. Chris continued teaching in jails for 30 years. Chris has a long history of social activism as he has worked as a probation counselor, volunteered at a women's shelter, and advocated for the rights of the homeless and farm workers.

Chris noted that a sense of "identifying with the oppressed" brought him to teaching writing in jails and volunteered that his mother had been institutionalized when he was a child, which provided him with a sense of "solidarity with the oppressed." When I asked Chris if he would identify himself as a "political activist," he replied that "when I had my first child and my friend went off to Viet Nam, I became involved in the peace movement."

Chris began teaching in a program in a Quaker jail outside of Philadelphia that had "a lot of citizen involvement." This jail, was, according to Chris, a "remarkable old jail," where the cells were so small "you had to bend your head down to go into the cell." The jail offered a large number of programs staffed by a cross-section of community members. Chris noted the change in the jail's attitude towards community involvement in the 1980s, saying:

And then of course Reagan came along and the 1980s came along and the new jail came along, but at the time the new jail was built the old jail cells that were meant to house one or two people housed five, six people in one cell, so it was bursting at the seams. The new jail was a whole other animal. The numbers of incarcerated bloomed, not only the numbers but the attitude towards community involvement changed and community programs were much more curtailed. The county commissioners didn't like the idea of tax money being spent on inmates.

Chris's prison teaching changed him both as a person and as a teacher. Chris reflected:

"The more people I worked with, the more I became aware of my own naivety, and aware of the limitations of what could be done. It was learning on the job; it helped that the program said, you're

not to come in with an agenda; you're not here to save these guys. You're not here to bring Jesus into the jail. You're here to help them explore, to develop their thinking skills, to open themselves up to possibilities; in other words, to do exactly what you do in your job as a teacher in your job in the community college. I began to realize that this was not going to change any of these lives and that what I could do was create an environment where they were thinking, they were as much fully themselves as they could be... to make that time a meaningful time in a day that wasn't very meaningful. It seemed the same process where ever one is, and the pleasure and the great thing in teaching writing is the privilege of getting inside people's lives and experiences. People will write about stuff they would never talk about, and that's just breathtaking.

CRAIG

Craig is also a published poet and has been a writing teacher in the educational opportunity program at the State University of New York at Albany for over 30 years. Craig taught developmental and first-year writing as well as literature in the same college-in-prison program I taught in, for over 10 years beginning in the early 1980s. Like Chris, Craig similarly identified himself as a "child of the sixties" and as someone who grew up with a sense of injustice and denied opportunities. Craig cited his adolescence in the "blue collar" town of Paulsboro, New Jersey as an important factor in his social awareness. He stated that he had a keen sense that "our culture's been less than fair to people." In addition to his awareness of poverty and social inequity, Craig, like Chris, cited the social atmosphere of the 1960s and '70s as an important factor in his decision to teach in prisons. Craig stated:

I think the other part of it was coming of age in the '60s; I didn't think the prisoners were just evil and the rest of us were just innocent. Not that I was totally naïve ...Attica was in the news; I mean, you hang out in the '60s or even the '70s and you can't go to a party without taking drugs, so am I supposed to feel that the people who were arrested for drugs are criminals and the people who were recreationally getting high are not?

Craig also commented on how the changing social and political climate of the times ultimately ended the college-in-prison program in which he taught:

I think even the college itself had a lot of nice things to say about helping people out and community values and so on, but they were making a fair amount of money on that program and the students paid for it on the basis of tuition assistance from TAP, which is the New York state program, and Pell, which is the federal program. Given the politics of the '90s, that support disappeared, and as soon as that support disappeared, the college pulled out. The attitude of the time was "why should taxpayers be paying for college-in-prison, so convicted prisoners get it for free?"

Craig reflected on the reason why people might be attracted to teaching in prison:

You see people going into prison teaching and you see that there is something esoteric about it that attracts them because you're coming into contact with people that are marginalized by society—they're dangerous, and there's something attractive about that. In the second stage of teacher development, according to Mina Shaughnessy's "Diving In," the person positions themselves as a savior. I'm sure I went through that myself in earlier stages because it's something you feel proud of, you're doing something heroic, and in instances in which the inmate is responding, you can pat yourself on the back as a kind of savior. So I would say that the advice would be to just to think about what you're doing and why you're doing it. If you can't question your own motives and laugh at yourself a little bit and also take responsibility for if in fact you are trying to save human lives—don't do that. Don't just go in there and make yourself a hero and write about it and walk away from the terrible realities that seem to continue.

DAVE

Dave is unique in that he is a formerly incarcerated writer whose involvement in Richard Shelton's workshop at Arizona State

Penitentiary led to a prolific writing and academic career. After Dave's release from prison, beginning in 1977, he directed multiple workshops in prisons and jails in Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Dave also taught high school in Colorado, was invited to participate in the Tao Center For Creativity, and also worked with underserved communities under the auspices of the Western States Arts Council as well as the National Endowment for the Arts.

Dave explained that Shelton's encouragement was influential in his development as a writer and teacher. He remembered:

Shelton had all of these books on his shelf, and I said "This is great, wonderful." I started reading them, and I tried my hand at some of them. I tried a narrative poem and I tried a sonnet. Shelton said "you should try and come to some of the workshop sessions."

Dave became one of the organizers of the workshop at a prison in Florence, Arizona that brought writers from racial and ethnic groups that typically did not associate with one another together. Dave explained that "we reached an agreement that anyone who wanted could go to the workshop. That was remarkable because that hadn't happened at the prison up until that time. And that was when Shelton and I became really good friends and I became the co-organizer of the workshop."

Dave also noticed changes in attitudes towards programming over the years:

They're just looking for an excuse to shut down these rehabilitation programs. I think that's the biggest change I've noticed; in '76, although there was a lot of violence and stuff, there was still a strong voice that believed that rehabilitation was possible. With the change in the drug laws and the increased population in prison, it became more just like "lock 'em down and forget about it." Rehabilitation is not going to be a major force in corrections. It's become more difficult to get into a lot of prisons, to have a voice to get an interview to talk about a program

with the warden, who will probably just say “oh, no, we’re not interested in that. It takes too many people to supervise.” So that’s the main thing I’ve noticed.

JEANNE

Jeanne is a published poet and professor of creative writing and coordinator of the creative writing program at California State University at Chico. Jeanne first taught a creative writing class at a women’s prison in Arizona in 1977. She grew up in “a small industrial farm refinery town in Ohio” where there was a prison and noted that the presence of the prison in the community was a strong influence and an intriguing presence in her everyday life. Jeanne stated that “...it was kind of big on the horizon; I have a poem in my first book that describes driving by there going to the swim club every day and seeing prisoners out in the fields. It was kind of this large spectral figure in my life growing up.”

After she left Arizona, Jeanne began teaching at this prison. Like the other interviewees, Jeanne’s interest and involvement with social movements of the times—in her case, feminism—influenced her decision to teach in prison. Jeanne explained:

I was very interested in their lives and the stories they had to tell. So that was kind of a fit for me; I was very keen to work with women on their writing, so keen to work with prisoners and...to get my feet wet as a writer in a community setting.

Jeanne also realized the complex humanity of her students:

Well, I was a new mother when I first started. I remember a woman named Mary who started writing about being away from her children. I was devastated. I was absolutely devastated, and I looked at her and any assumptions about her I could make or did make about who these people were went right out the window. She was well-educated, articulate, and she could have been anybody I went to school with. I realized there wasn’t so much difference between the women I was working with and the women I went to school with. And the level of vulnerability was quite something.

KIRPAL

Kirpal, a poet and writer, spoken word artist, and currently a writing teacher at Hofstra University, began teaching in prisons in Arizona around 1976 when he taught in Richard Shelton's workshop in Arizona State Prison in Florence. Kirpal also identified his involvement with various political and ideological movements of the 1960s and '70s as foundational to his prison teaching. In addition to his teaching in the workshop at Florence, Kirpal taught at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility in Staten Island, New York from 1982-89, where he taught a number of literacy classes, coordinated various programs, founded and published a prison newspaper, *The Arthur Kill Alliance*, and established *Empire!*, a statewide publication of work from writers incarcerated in New York state.

Kirpal perceives his educational experiences as important to his sense of social justice. In high school, for example, he "refused Advanced Placement on the grounds that this was undemocratic and un-Whitman-like...the competitive class ranking, the National Honor Society, the whole idea that this education was for getting ahead instead of sharing wisdom seemed like a sad joke perpetrated on the unknowing and the insecure and the obedient." Kirpal also cited his undergraduate work at the then-experimental Fordham University, his experience living in a yoga ashram, and his studies at the Naropa Institute with poets such as Allen Ginsberg as important to his openness to the marginal and the innovative. Kirpal brought his unique background as a poet grounded in the Beat movement and the lineage of yoga to his prison teaching.

Kirpal, like Chris, learned that he could not impose an agenda on his students:

So I learned that so much of the work was meeting them on their own terms. My door was open whether I was there or not, and my door stayed open even when I moved around the jail. This one dude was mopping this little area. This was the thing that really changed me. A remarkable guy named Henry and the other Rastas said "dude, you gotta lighten up."

"I'm the teacher," I said.

"No, that dude mopping that hall that you think needs an education and that you think needs to elevate himself, make his game and make his time work, that's all this dude's got. That dude never had nothing. The only thing he's got for his manhood is the chance to keep this little neck of the floor clean. You try to take that from him, what's up?"

I said "You win, you're right. That's a hole in my bucket. My game is that we should do this, and that we should help one another do this, and you're all right to point out that that dude has every right to clean that floor."

This was a transformational moment for Kirpal.

REX

Rex, a professor of writing and medical humanities at St. Cloud's University, also taught in Shelton's workshop at Arizona State Prison, while he was a graduate student in the Arizona State University MFA program. Rex names the strong sense of place inherent in the Southwest setting as part of his motivation to teach in prison. Rex commented that, "I had been involved with indigenous communities off and on, and more than I knew, I think that influenced me. There's something about the Chicano environment that is indigenous and political." Rex brought the teaching that he did with indigenous communities in Arizona to his prison work:

I worked up on the Apache reservation and with the Hopi, and it seemed as though working with indigenous people reverberated with my experiences in the prison... I walked into different environments with people who had good reason to be suspicious of me. And so I welcomed that.

Rex also remarked on the materially dangerous conditions in the Arizona State Penitentiary, the site of several deadly riots in the '70s:

The workshop was sort of buried in the bowels of the prison. While I was there, there were knifings. Because of my lack of experience, I assumed that this was the norm for all prisons, but I since then I learned that Florence was one of the most violent places in the country.

Rex reflected on negative treatment from the corrections officers who “were belittling and pretty much bullied everybody, and the tone carried through the whole prison. They also deliberately suggested that you weren’t going to be able to get out.” Rex also reflected on the effect this environment had on him:

I actually stopped going in to teach in prison when one of my classes sat me down and said, “You’ve been in prison, haven’t you?”

And I responded: “No, what do you mean?”

“Well, you’re always looking for a way to get out of here.”

Rex notes the trauma of teaching inside the violent, hostile carceral atmosphere.

Like Craig and Chris, Rex learned about his students and himself as he realized that his incarcerated students were the experts on their own lives.:

The first thing I knew is that I didn’t know a hell of a lot about their lives or what was going on, and I wasn’t about to tell them. And the nice thing about a writing workshop is that they get to tell you. You’re not in there to lecture about them. So I think those lessons about a teacher’s place have carried over into everything I do.

This is difficult work, indeed, as Craig notes, but it is heartening that 40 years later we have online communities, conference presentations, and workshops that provide a forum for us to talk with each other and

share the difficulties, rewards, triumphs, and traumas of literacy work in prison. It is heartening as well that members of this community have taken Craig's admonition to not walk "away from the terrible realities that seem to continue" by carrying on the legacy of these teachers who walked into often dangerous situations without much, if any, preparation or training. While there is increased support and available resources for prison literacy educators and prison reform has become a national discussion, we know all too well that decades later, these programs are still vulnerable and subject to prevailing political climates, public attitudes towards crime and incarceration and the decisions of current administrations. What also remains constant is our need to pay attention to the histories of these programs and the people who taught in them.

As I reflected on my conversations with these six teachers, I was struck by the variety of backgrounds they brought to their prison literacy teaching as well as the many kinds of prison literacy programs they taught in or established. These instructors currently teach at a variety of sites ranging from community colleges to four-year colleges to Higher Educational Opportunity programs. All of them are published poets, and some, such as Jeanne, identify themselves primarily as poets and creative writers. Only Craig brought an extensive background in writing studies to his work with incarcerated writers. The programs they taught in—which range from the credit-bearing college program Craig taught in, to the non-credit creative writing workshops Chris, Rex, and Jeanne taught in, to the work Kirpal did with the writers and editors of a prison newspaper and literary magazine—afforded these teachers multiple ways to interact with their incarcerated students, who wrote in a variety of genres such as formal papers for developmental and first-year writing college courses, poems produced in creative writing workshops, and newspaper articles and editorials.

We might consider the range of backgrounds these teachers brought to their writing as well as the variety of programs and kinds of writing represented in these oral histories in order to reflect on whether or not we are considering such an array of programs and genres of writing in our current research. Even a cursory glance at a national directory of higher education in prison programs

compiled by Rebecca Ginsburg (Bryan and Ginsburg 2016) and Education Justice Project volunteers reveals an intriguing array of programs from Second Chance Pell Grant-funded credit-bearing post-secondary programs, to certificate programs, book groups, non-credit-bearing creative writing workshops, to theater, music, and ministerial programs. Many of these programs continue the legacy established by early programs such as Richard Sheldon's workshop at the Arizona State Penitentiary that Kirpal, Rex, and Dave taught in, or the classes taught by community volunteers such as Chris in Pennsylvania. Surely the teachers and volunteers staffing this array of programs bring a diversity of backgrounds and experiences to their work. Is our current research reflecting the depth and breadth of the current programs and the kinds of writing being produced by the incarcerated writers and students in these programs? While the restoration of Pell Grants and the expansion of post-secondary programs in prison is of vital importance, in reality, such programs will be available to a minority of incarcerated people; non-credit-bearing programs such as creative writing workshops and book groups afford additional literacy opportunities. Are we considering the diverse backgrounds that prison literacy teachers bring to their work in our research, or are we focusing on those of us in academia who teach in college-in-prison programs? As these interviews demonstrate, we can benefit from the experiences of teachers with diverse backgrounds who teach in many different types of programs.

Current archival projects at carceral sites such as the Indiana State Women's Prison, San Quentin, the Washington State Prison History Project, and the work of the Prison Public Memory Project in New York and Illinois call attention to the importance of this work, which is only beginning. Additional archival work can focus on the experiences of our predecessors, who taught in challenging or often dangerous situations, who often brought a strong awareness of the place of prisons in the community and a complex awareness of their own motivations for teaching in prison. We need to begin to archive our own work, narratives, and materials, so our voices, experiences, and programs are not in danger of being lost to history; will we regret, like these teachers, that we have not archived or saved any materials or records from our current programs?

Berry (2018), in his study of literacy teachers in a higher education-in-prison program, reminds us that “Too often prison education research focuses solely on what the teacher (or program) gives the student- whether content knowledge...a voice, or a space to write and learn...I argue that teachers need to be part of the frame of college-in-prison programs.” (69). These oral histories support Berry’s claim and remind us that we need to continue to include teachers’ voices and experiences in our research. Lockard (2018) observes that there are many reasons that people teach in prison and notes that “our responses to this question will change over time and with teaching experience, for there is no one definitive answer. What is important is that we continue to ask questions of ourselves and find motivation in renewed responses” (25). The oral histories attest to the multiple and complex reasons these teachers had for teaching in challenging and even dangerous situations.

These interviews also call attention to such issues that are relevant to the future of our programs—such as the trauma Rex notes that he experienced as a result of teaching in the violent environment of Arizona State Penitentiary—an issue that our field is only beginning to explore (Jacobi and Roberts 2016). Additionally, Kirpal, Rex, and Chris reflect on the importance of listening to our incarcerated students and taking care not to impose our agenda on them; while we are beginning to include the voices of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated in our conferences and publications, we need to continue this trend and monitor our reasons for teaching in prison.

Kirsch and Royster (2010), in their call for us to engage in feminist rhetorical practices, note that this approach “calls for work that is not merely analytical but embodied, grounded in the communities from which it emanates and deeply rooted in the traditions we feel obligated to honor and carry forward” (659). The reflections of these teachers will honor those traditions and help us move forward as we reflect on our own motivations for teaching in prison, the needs and concerns of our incarcerated students, and the history we are already creating.

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