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## Diving in to Prison Teaching: Mina Shaughnessy, Teacher Development, and the Realities of Prison Teaching

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- This article presents interviews with six composition and rhetoric
- teachers who teach writing in prison. Mina Shaughnessy's 1976
- article "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing" is used as
- a heuristic with which to look at this material. As little work is
- available on the experience of teaching writing in prison, these
- interviews are a preliminary step in describing and understanding
- this transformative experience. The differences between the prison
- writing teachers and the teachers Shaughnessy describes illuminates
- how much the field of composition has grown in the last forty years.
- The interviews with these six teachers speak to the experiences of
- teachers in community outreach teaching situations and may be a
- step in understanding and articulating these experiences

In her foreword to a special issue of *Reflections* on prison literacies, narratives, and community connections, Tobi Jacobi observes that she was "surprised by the number of my composition and rhetoric colleagues who had teaching ties to prison," and that "little scholarship is available to help contextualize the complexity and significance of that work" (2). Despite the strong connection Jacobi demonstrates between the rhetoric and composition community and prison teaching and literacy programs, the amount of scholarship available on the experience of teaching in prison for rhetoric and composition teachers and the growth and development of those teachers as prison writing teachers is limited. In order to explore the experience of teaching writing in prison, I interviewed six composition and rhetoric teachers



who also teach or have taught writing in a prison setting. These interviews may be a preliminary step in researching the experience of teaching writing in a carceral environment. Through my conversations with these teachers, I discovered, not surprisingly, that these members of the composition and rhetoric community have been transformed by their experiences; their identities as teachers and as citizens have changed and grown as a result of their work with incarcerated writers. The conversations I had with these teachers suggest interesting and rich new directions for the field of composition in general, and to those involved in community literacy efforts—such as prison literacy projects—specifically.

Mina Shaughnessy's article "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing" suggests a heuristic with which to look at these interviews. Shaughnessy wrote this article in the highly pressurized institutional context of the newly developed "Open Admissions" program at the City College of New York in the 1970s. Many of the teachers in this program were traditionally trained literature teachers who were unprepared by the deviation of the writing of the Open Admissions students from the accepted standards of academic writing; they believed that these students could not possibly succeed in college "unless someone radically lowers the standards" (95). Shaughnessy was faced with the challenge of dealing with teachers who, for the first time, had to teach students vastly different from both themselves and the students they were used to teaching. In her article, she offers the then (and still) radical notion that teachers need to change in response to their students, and "that there may still in fact be important connections between the changes teachers undergo and the progress of their students" (94). Shaughnessy describes a four-stage "developmental scale" (95) for teachers, and describes each stage with a metaphor to expresses "what lies at the center of the teacher's emotional energy during that stage" (95).



While the students in the CUNY program were not prison inmates, the inmate writers in these teachers' classrooms and Shaughnessy's "basic writers" share similar educational and social backgrounds. Shaughnessy characterized the students placed in "basic writing" as "true outsiders" in the academic world, very much as inmate students are "strangers in academia," even though the writing workshops many inmates participate in are not part of formalized college programs. While it is true that the teachers I interviewed all chose to teach in correctional facilities (unlike the teachers in the CUNY Open Admissions program, some of whom openly resisted teaching the Open Admissions students), they still needed to make emotional and intellectual adjustments to teach the incarcerated students. Most importantly, Shaughnessy argues and demonstrates that teaching what she calls "basic writing" is, like teaching in prison, far from basic and is in fact extraordinarily complex.

There are, however, many important differences between the teachers Shaughnessy describes and the teachers I talked to, as the field of composition and rhetoric has grown and changed tremendously in the past forty years. Shaughnessy's work was instrumental in instigating much of that change; she not only called attention to writers outside of the mainstream of academia, but emphasized understanding the context of their writing. Additionally, Shaughnessy intended her model to be prescriptive, as she outlines a progression to an end point she hoped teachers might reach. The model I have adapted from her work is descriptive, based on the teachers' narratives and is meant to describe the experiences they have had and which other teachers in similar teaching situations may experience. It is not my intent to use Shaughnessy's work in order to claim that any of these stories "match" or "illustrate" the stages she outlines, but rather to use them as a tool for analysis, or as a way of illuminating or shaping experience. Even though Shaughnessy's schema suggests a linear developmental model, the growth of these teachers is recursive and complex; her stages of



development have been preserved for the sake of clarity. Following is a brief summary of the stages of the growth and development of the “basic writing” teachers Shaughnessy outlines in “Diving In” that can be re-named and re-imagined to examine the evolving identities of prison writing teachers.

### **Guarding the Tower**

The title of the first stage of Shaughnessy’s schema refers to teachers who believe that their purpose is to “guard the tower” of academic writing. Teachers at this stage do not believe it is their job to invite students into the academy; instead, they focus on maintaining practices that will prevent these students from entering and/or succeeding in academia. Teachers can also “guard the tower” by protecting themselves from students by assuming great emotional distances from students they see as very unlike themselves, investing their emotional energy in avoiding or escaping their students instead of coming into closer contact with them (95).

### **Converting the Natives**

The colonialist language Shaughnessy uses to describe the second stage of her schema is deliberate, and indeed reflects some of the attitudes the City College of New York teachers brought to their teaching in the new Open Admissions program. Shaughnessy states that in this stage, change occurs even though teachers and students may still maintain some distance from each other. Teachers attempt to teach their students although they assume they are “empty vessels” to be filled with “new knowledge” (96). In order to move through this stage of development, the teacher has to change the “preconceptions” (95) she has about her students and to find some ways to communicate with them. Shaughnessy writes that teachers and students are “obliged, like emissaries from opposing camps, to send messages back and forth. They meet to consider each other’s worth and separate to study them in



private” (95). The teacher, however, still needs to adjust her pedagogy to the needs of her students.

### **Sounding the Depths**

According to Shaughnessy, at this point the teacher becomes dissatisfied with her teaching and begins to understand that she needs to change her pedagogy in response to the needs of the students. Shaughnessy writes that teachers need to “turn now to the careful observation not only of his students and their writing but of himself as a writer and teacher, seeking out a deeper understanding of the behavior called writing and of the special difficulties his students have in mastering this skill” (96). Teachers at this stage need to understand the particular difficulties and challenges their students face. They need to turn to their students to observe and learn from them and must be willing to accept them as co-explorers. Once the teacher understands these difficulties, she can then move on to the next stage.

### **Diving In**

Shaughnessy ends her article with a fourth stage of teacher development she calls “Diving In,” the last and most mature stage in which the teacher “who has come this far must now make a decision that calls for professional courage—the decision to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (99). Shaughnessy describes three steps teachers need to take in order to “dive in.” First, teachers must recognize that they need to “remediate” (98) themselves, as “diving in” requires a conscious decision to alter one’s teaching. Shaughnessy defines this decision as “courageous” as the teacher/student relationship is altered. Secondly, the teacher must change her position from an authority figure, one who dispenses knowledge, to a “teacher who is a student of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their



incipient excellence” (99). The third action teachers must take is to become students of “new disciplines” (99) in order to better facilitate understanding of their students.

## **Research Methods**

I located the subjects of my interviews by contacting people who I knew had published or presented material at conferences about teaching writing in prison and thought might be interested in talking with me and reflecting on their experiences. The research was conducted with IRB approval from my institution. I prepared a set of questions regarding these teachers’ experiences as prison writing teachers and provided all of the interviewees with these questions prior to our phone conversations. As the interviews/conversations were informal, the questions were not always asked in the order in which I prepared them, and sometimes the conversations veered off into unexpected directions. I took notes that were as complete as possible during telephone interviews, transcribed them, and sent them back to the interviewees for their comments and revisions. Except for one very minor revision, none of the interviewees requested that I change anything in the interview transcriptions. Because notes were taken by hand during the telephone interviews, some excerpts may be slightly paraphrased. I have chosen excerpts from the interviews that address how the teachers changed, grew, and created evolving identities as prison writing teachers. In order to preserve their anonymity, the research participants are identified by pseudonyms.

My primary research method, then, was a very limited case study approach. Linda Brodkey, in “Writing Ethnographies: Narratives” states that “We study other people’s stories not because they are true or even false, but for the same reason that people tell them and listen to them, in order to learn and to make sense out of their lives” (47). It is my hope then that participants in my case study came to some new understanding or gained insight into their unique experiences. In



the same book, Daniell notes that case study research is largely the researcher's telling of the story, influenced by her own positionality and subjectivity. I believe that it is important to note my own position in relationship to this subject matter; I have been teaching and volunteering in prisons since 1983. I used Shaughnessy's framework to look at my own growth and development as a prison writing teacher in my dissertation (Rogers). The participants in the study were aware of my position as a prison writing teacher and as someone with a shared background and experience. All of the teachers were interested in telling their stories; many talked to me well beyond the time I allotted to these conversations. Clearly, these were stories that the participants needed and wanted to share.

### **Breaking Down the Tower Walls**

Borrowing from Shaughnessy, I call the first stage of development "Breaking Down the Tower Walls." Because of the changes in the field since Shaughnessy wrote her 1976 article, none of the teachers I spoke to had any interest in "guarding the tower" of academic writing. Many teachers expressed that they brought their interest in feminist and critical pedagogies to their prison teaching. The prison teachers identified themselves as people who work against established boundaries; however, because of the violence and intensity inherent in the prison setting, some teachers found themselves unconsciously "protecting" or "guarding" themselves from the emotionally disturbing prison environment. Still, the recognition of the existence of these barriers formed the basis for the initial impressions of prison teaching for many of these teachers.

Deborah, for example, who teaches a workshop in a women's jail, actively tries to break down the perceived barriers between herself and her students. Even though her workshop is a voluntary, non-college credit workshop, she works hard to "dismantle the hierarchy of academics coming in to teach in jail." She states, "The interns and I stress that we



are writers coming in to work with writers. Sometimes the jail reinforces the idea of hierarchy, but the women do not necessarily see this as a bad thing.” Deborah, however, has no interest in maintaining the hierarchy the prison tries to reinforce.

Allen, too, works to break down barriers between himself, his inmate students in the life-writing workshop he teaches at a men’s jail, and the hierarchy between writing that “literacy and not necessarily basic writing or a formal writing class. My goal is to teach life writing that would influence other lives as we have pushed this world away from out lives and both liberals and conservatives have made it easy for us not to know.” Allen encourages the inmates in his workshop to write not only for themselves but for a wider public that may not be familiar with either the inmates’ lives or the world of the prison; he is interested in dissolving boundaries not only between him and his inmate students, but also between the inmates and the outside world. However, Allen also spoke at length about difficulties of crossing the inherent “inside/outside” boundaries of the carceral setting and of establishing a relationship with his all-male group. He commented that even though he felt he was able to achieve solidarity with his group, there were differences to be surmounted.

Many of the inmates did not feel the same hunger for education or for normal, mainstream achievements that I did. I felt that this was because inmate did not have a role model or because they somehow wanted to resist mainstream norms. Many of them seemed depressed or hurt in some way; they seemed to be writing their way back into a mainstream environment.

Despite these boundaries and differences, Allen was able to cross these borders and create a sustained relationship with his group. Shared male experiences helped group members cross lines of “inside/outside” even though Allen reported that “a lot of these inmates were ‘macho’ guys, and I am not a ‘macho’ guy.” Ultimately, shared life experiences helped





the group achieve a certain “homogeneity.” Allen added, “There was a certain solidarity among the group that came from teaching men close to my own age. Despite our differences, we had unifying experiences we could talk about.”

The theme of crossing borders or boundaries, of “breaking down walls” and “toppling towers,” was a common one in almost all of the conversations I had with these teachers. Margaret, for instance, chose to teach in a prison college program funded by her institution in order to “challenge” herself. Margaret stated, “I needed to know something and wanted to learn. It opened up my eyes to another side of life. I had lived in slum areas but needed to know more.” However, even with her experience of living in an inner-city neighborhood, Margaret still found it difficult to come into the prison environment even as she resolved to stay open-minded about her prison students and their writing.

Sarah, a teacher who founded a voluntary linked writing class between her on-campus classes and inmates in a men’s correctional facility, also actively works to dismantle these inside/outside boundaries established by the correctional facility:

Inmate students live in two different worlds; sometimes they can almost “forget” the world outside. They live in a restricted and manipulative world inside. It is important for them to have contact with people from the “outside.” Inmates need a sense of self; writing can be an important means to tap into that sense of self... I avoid the use of “they” when talking discussing inmate students as “they do not need anything different from on-campus students.”

In her description of “Guarding the Tower,” Shaughnessy points out that in their initial contact with students who may seem “other,” teachers may feel the need to not only “guard the tower” but to guard themselves emotionally. None of the teachers I talked to considered their inmates as people who did not “belong in the community of



learners,” (95) or as less than fully human. The violence implicit in the correctional facility system, however, which can seem like a world removed, made it initially difficult for some teachers to acclimate to the prison environment. For example, Jason’s initial contact with the prison occurred when he went to an event at a maximum-security facility where tables were set up from various inmate organizations. He began talking to the editors of the inmate-produced newspaper; this conversation became the basis for a long-term research project on the newspaper. When I asked Jason about how he initially felt about going into this prison where Death Row is right inside the prison gates, he replied, “Terrified.” However, even though the atmosphere of this prison was oppressive and disturbing, and at times Jason “felt scared,” he felt drawn to many of the inmates, especially the peer tutors and the men who worked on the newspaper.

Even though I initially felt scared, that began to change as I began to know the Angolite staffers. They were amazing writers who wrote to save their lives and used writing and literature as a way to survive in a place that makes you numb. These truths came to the forefront for me after many conversations and many cups of coffee.

Shaughnessy’s second stage of teacher development can be re-named and re-imagined as “the other side of the wall.” In this stage, teachers such as Jason begin to form relationships with their students as they reach out and begin to achieve some understanding of the world of the prison. Even though these teachers did not feel they and the inmates were necessarily “emissaries” from “opposing camps,” as did Shaughnessy’s teachers, they experienced the process of formulating relationships with their students who lived in very different worlds from themselves.

### **The Other Side of the Wall**



As teachers began to formulate changing relationships with their inmate students as well as a new understanding of the prison environment, they were transformed. Although Jason, for example, began his research anxious about the tense environment of the maximum-security prison, he was drawn into a closer relationship with many of the inmates. Jason's initial feelings of trepidation changed as he got to know the inmates he worked with on his project. Jason began to see the intense emotional value writing held for many inmates; for many, writing was a lifeline. Jason also began to understand that even though many inmates had very low literacy levels, "many inmates were working with a wide range of literacies such as legal documents, letters and many other types of writing." Jason did not see inmates as persons devoid of literacy and without "logic and values" (96) of their own, but rather as people to who valued literacy and who participated in complex literacy systems. Additionally, Jason came to respect many of the inmates; one man in particular stood out to him.

There were many inmates I respected and miss, particularly one man, an ordained Baptist minister, who at 60 had helped many other people. I recognized and respected the help this man had given. However, there were other inmates that I would never want to see again.

These truths came to the forefront after a long time period; through interactions with the inmates, Jason came to see the inmates he worked with as fellow human beings. Although Jason did not believe that he and the inmates were from the "opposing camps" that Shaughnessy names, he did realize the different worlds they lived in and the distances they had to travel to achieve any kind of relationship. Even though Jason's work in prison was enormously important to him, he decided not to return to this prison. His total experience was "too draining and difficult," partly because of the complications of "gender, race and class." While Jason was able to surmount many of the differences between him and the inmate students and create human



relationships, the many difficult differences took precedence over those relationships in terms of his decision to continue work at this prison. Still, Jason's experience was a transformative one for him.

The commitment of the prison writing teachers to maintaining the integrity of the inmate's work, like these teachers' commitment to "breaking down walls," can be seen in the context of changing disciplinary assumptions and their own commitment to certain pedagogies. For example, Tim, who tutored inmates in a GED program at a men's minimum-security prison, worked with students to help them "trust their own ideas."

I worked with writers on an individual level, on whatever tasks or aspects of their writing they wanted to focus on. Many focused on essay writing for the GED exam, which is very formulaic writing. I helped them think about ways of approaching the GED but emphasized to students the importance of trusting their own ideas. Some inmates brought me novels or other creative work, and I would look for cues as to what these writers needed or wanted and tried to help them achieve these goals.

Similarly, Allen works with students in his writing workshop in a men's jail to help them write not "confessional" stories but "writing that explores their own agency and helps them to understand that writing is transforming their experience for other readers." He explained, "My goal is for them to produce writing that has the potential to transform other lives." Deborah similarly sees herself as a "facilitator of the work of the women in her jail workshop and of where the women want their writing to go."

Shaughnessy's next stage can be re-imagined slightly as "Sounding the Depths of the Prison" to accurately describe experiences of prison teachers as they move beyond formulating relationships with their students to understanding the particular challenges and



difficulties their students face, especially in terms of writing in a carceral environment.



## **Sounding the Depths of the Prison**

For prison writing teachers, the “special difficulties” their students face may not be the difficulties of writing academic prose, but rather the difficulties of writing in the prison environment and the surveillance of texts in this environment. For example, Margaret, who taught inmates in a youth facility, began her prison teaching hoping that she would be able to create a “safe writing space” for her students. However, as she explained, this proved to be a challenge.

I felt I was able to achieve this in my classroom but the prison environment made this difficult. Boxes of computer disks with my students’ writing on them vanished, and I was not able to retrieve them. I wondered whether the fact that I had gang members in my class was connected with this experience. I wonder how a teacher maintains a safe writing space in this kind of environment.

Deborah echoed Margaret’s concerns over the security and surveillance of inmate student writing. Although Deborah has come to feel more comfortable with the jail environment over time, she is careful not to jeopardize her relationship with the facility where she works. She feels fortunate to work with a program coordinator who is supportive of her work. Still, like most prison teachers, she feels the need to be “careful.” Deborah feels alert and cautious about how she works with women inmates.

I did have to be careful with some images that were published in a journal of the women’s work such as a photograph in which, unknown to me, contained a person making a gang sign. I do try to address issues of surveillance when my group is working on publication of their journal. We discuss which works are appropriate to include, for example.

Sarah similarly noted that she observed “different power structures” at work in the prison where she conducts her linked program; for example, a teacher in an arts-in-education program was dismissed from



the program because she put her arm around an inmate in a friendly gesture. Sarah commented, “I feel fortunate to be working with a current warden who is supportive of my program but am well aware that the existence of my program could be threatened with a change of administration.”

Shaughnessy calls for teachers to turn to “careful observation” of both their students and themselves in order to achieve a better understanding of the difficulties the students face. The prison writing teachers need to also turn to “careful observation” in order to understand their students’ difficulties; however, these teachers need to pay careful attention to the difficulties and challenges of writing and teaching in an environment where writing is potentially always under surveillance. Once they begin to understand the complexities of writing in a prison environment, teachers can begin to appreciate the magnitude of the task before them.

Shaughnessy names her next stage “Diving In.” I believe that many prison teachers, although they may have to change and grow as prison teachers in other ways, begin their work at this stage. The decision to voluntarily begin to teach a class in the intimidating atmosphere of prison or jail is one that calls for courage, professional or otherwise. For some teachers, their involvement with prison work was a contributing factor to important changes in their approaches to teaching, their understanding of the prison environment, and their understanding of their students.

### **Already Diving In**

In this stage, Shaughnessy defines the emotional energy of teachers as invested in changing themselves in order to better meet the needs of students. Jason, for example, described his initial involvement with prison work as a time of great change and “turmoil” in both his personal and academic life. Jason talked about the changes prison teaching brought about in the way he thought about himself as teacher.



I was a literature teacher before I began teaching at Angola. My involvement at Angola came at a time when I was radically re-thinking my life in many ways. I became immersed in composition and rhetoric classes in which I did lots of reading that was new to me such as Berlin and Rose. My project at Angola gave me a way to think about teaching from a social-constructivist approach...

Jasons's prison teaching experience provided him with the opportunity to "remediate" himself, immerse himself in disciplines that were new to him, and think about teaching differently; it was the beginning of a powerful transformative experience. The transformative nature of prison teaching also allowed several teachers to become "new" teachers, as they found themselves becoming the "students of their students," or teachers that, ironically, were able to find a new freedom in teaching in the restrictive prison environment. Sarah, for example, talked at length about her preference for prison teaching:

My on-campus teaching is more restricted. I feel more of a sense of freedom as a teacher and can play around with the curriculum more in my prison classes. This teaching is more authentic teaching and is more discussion-based and is intended to facilitate student discovery as on-campus students are still in the 'get the right answer' mode of thinking they bring with them from high school. My prison teaching has brought a sense of freedom and is a welcome change.

In prison, Sarah is a teacher who is not restricted by the norms and standardized testing she feels restricted by in her on-campus teaching; the voluntary prison classes allow herself to identify herself as a teacher who is free from these restrictions and able to engage in teaching that is "new, valuable, and worthwhile." Prison teaching is so important to Sarah that "she would have retired long ago" if it had not been for the prison teaching she feels is "more authentic" teaching than the on-campus work that she does. Prison teaching has provided Sarah with





an alternate, new identity to the on-campus teacher who has to teach within established parameters. In prison, Sarah feels she can change and grow to meet the needs of her students, which Shaughnessy feels is an important component of this stage of growth.

Sarah also felt that she has arrived at a relationship with her inmate students in which she feels that her prison students are not students, but colleagues who often teach her about prison issues. Shaughnessy states that, at this stage, the teacher/student relationship is altered and the teacher becomes “a student of his students”(99). Sarah described her relationship with her inmate students:

They are colleagues more than students who teach me about issues surrounding prisons, sentencing laws, and so on. They educate me and I trust them. I can even discuss on-campus issues with them as they provide an interesting perspective. There is an important sense of collegiality with the group, and is a place where I can go and say ‘I am frustrated with this....They provide a support group, in a sense. They provide a basis for me to stand on.

Sarah demonstrates a willingness to accept her inmate students as her teachers, to accept them as experts in areas in which she is not; she has no difficulty in perceiving their “incipient excellence” (98). Her identity as a prison writing teacher depends not on a hierarchical relationship with her students, but an equitable one. This is perhaps ironic as the prison setting works to discourage such relationships with its clear and powerful reinforcement of the hierarchy between guards and inmates, “inside” and “outside.”

Allen, expressed similar feelings about the relationship between himself and his students; he feels that he and his inmate students can “learn from each other.” Allen clearly indicates his willingness to reverse the traditional student-teacher hierarchy; through his work with the men in his jail group, he learned about “the power of love” and



that he did have things in common with men who initially seemed very different from himself.

In addition to reversing the usual student-teacher relationship, Shaughnessy believes that teachers at this stage need to “become a student of new disciplines.” Sarah, for example, has named prison teaching as “an important source of transformation” for herself as she has become newly involved with several community activist groups. Additionally, the reading Sarah has done has allowed her to gain, as she said, “a new understanding of many social issues and contexts surrounding the prison system.”

The “remediation” the prison teachers experienced affected their relationships and perceptions of their on-campus classes as well as their prison classes and changed their perceptions of themselves as teachers. Jason believed that prison teaching had impacted him in a very positive way, and commented that he hoped that “I am less cold and academic about teaching,” and further stated that he now understood that teaching is not “ivory tower work.” Jason’s work with inmates at Angola has caused him to reconsider his classroom teaching:

This work has disrupted what usually goes on in the classroom, which can get neat and tidy. Teachers can get rusty. There are small moments that can fracture things that are important. It is possible for counterhegemonic teaching to take place even if it is in a prison or in some weird basement of a writing center.

The prison teaching that Tim, Allen, Deborah and Jason did, was so important to them that they began teaching courses in prison writing to their on-campus classes in an effort to share their new understanding of the prison system and related social issues with their students, and, by extension, with the larger community. Deborah said that this work was a “revelation” to the senior English majors who were taking her Prison Writing class. Tim noted that his students “do not think about



people behind bars and do not understand that they exist in a deeply flawed system. I want students to understand that prison inmates are not monsters, but creative, compassionate and deeply flawed people, even people on Death Row.” Prison teaching became so important to all of these teachers and so deeply a part of their identity as teachers that it was important to them to bring this work into their on-campus teaching. The new understandings they have brought to their on-campus teaching have caused many of them to reflect on their teaching and to try and perhaps re-consider and re-discover the sources of their students’ difficulties—not necessarily with writing particular kinds of texts—but with coming to terms with and understanding pressing social issues.

### **A Fifth Stage: Surfacing**

The prison teachers’ narratives suggest that there might be a “fifth stage” of teacher development in which prison teachers reflect on societal issues that are of relevance to the community, the importance of prison teaching to their personal lives, and the importance of this teaching to the composition community. I suggest that this new “fifth stage” be called “surfacing,” to reflect the changed understanding teachers bring with them to their on-campus teaching and share after undergoing the experience of “diving in.”

Many participants talked to me about a new awareness they gained of the complex social issues surrounding the current correctional facility system in this country. Allen stated, “We have pushed this world away from our lives as both liberals and conservatives have made it easy for us not to know.” Allen observed that the world of the prison system is hidden from the general public. Tim also noted that “we as a nation need to think very seriously about the significant number of people incarcerated in our country and the fact that the system is growing in an unprecedented way. We don’t want to look at this, but we need to.”

Margaret echoed Tim’s observations; she now sees our nation as:



...a country within a country; why do we isolate prisons in rural areas? Now I have a awareness of big prison complexes that are hidden. My prison teaching experience has shown me that we are a society at war with guns, ideological differences, and different economics and neighborhoods. We as a society need to engage in open, frank and honest discussions of these issues. We need to ask questions such as “why are people so separated?”

Similarly, for some of these teachers, their professional identities as members of the composition and rhetoric community changed. Deborah and Tim, for example, discussed the responsibility of the composition community to engage in work with similar outreach populations and called for activism on the part of teachers. Deborah, who identified herself as a teacher who is committed to issues of social justice, would like her colleagues to understand:

We have a responsibility to look beyond campus boundaries to larger issues of community literacy. We have a responsibility to contribute what we know about the teaching of writing. We can contribute in many ways, such as donating books, doing guest workshops and coming in as guest speakers. People have fears about coming into prison; they have stereotypes about inmates that are fed by reality TV shows that extend stereotypes about prison. As the prison population keeps growing, it is important to bring up issues we care about and break down stereotypes.

Tim also emphasized the importance of teacher involvement in prison education and activism. He pointed out that it is important for people to understand that education has a positive impact on the high recidivism rate and in “humanizing” people. Tim noted “unless we begin to prioritize education, our nation will suffer.” Like Deborah, Tim believed that teachers need to understand the importance of doing this, and would like to find some way of organizing teachers and calling



them to activism, perhaps through a non-profit organization that would mobilize teachers to engage in prison literacy efforts.

Directly or indirectly, all of the six teachers I talked to were clear that prison teaching has had a significant impact on their lives. Perhaps the most revealing comment I heard, however, was from Sarah, who said that her prison work, now that she is no longer so involved in a church community, has been a means for her to find a way “to live a meaningful life.” In some way, I felt that this was what all of the participants were saying about their prison teaching: it was a way for them to create a meaningful, socially responsible, compassionate life. It was interesting to me to listen to the language teachers used to talk about this work and to speculate about the kinds of discourses that were invoked: words such as meaningful, compassion, openness, honesty and love were used, invoking not a discourse associated with education, but one of spirituality. My conversations with these six teachers is perhaps only the beginning or suggestion for additional work that needs to be carried out as we begin to explore the nature of teaching in prison.

## **Conclusions**

At the end of “Diving In,” Shaughnessy calls for the democratization of teaching and writes, “so irrevocable is the tide that brings the new students into the nation’s college classrooms that it is no longer within our power, as perhaps it once was, to refuse to accept them into the community of the educable. They are here” (68). The ironic connections between Shaughnessy’s words of over thirty years ago and the current “tide” of incarcerated citizens is apparent, even though many inmates are no longer in “college classrooms” following massive budget cuts and lack of public support that have terminated college programs. Society has refused to admit inmates into the “community of the educable” by taking away funding for inmate higher education in many instances. It is my hope that Shaughnessy, with her remarkable capacity for empathy and insight into the needs of marginalized



students would be pleased that her work has been used as a tool for illuminating the narratives of those who teach perhaps the most marginalized students in our society.

Shaughnessy's work was done at a time of great change in the composition and rhetoric community, change that has continued since then. If Shaughnessy had lived longer, it might as well be possible that she would have revisited the stages of teacher development she describes in "Diving In" to reflect the "social turn" the field has taken. The six teachers I interviewed embody that emphasis in their willingness to take on the difficult work of teaching in carceral institutions and in their new understanding of the social forces at work in producing and maintaining the existence and growth of these institutions. The very fact that their experiences do not "match" the stages Shaughnessy outlines does not invalidate Shaughnessy's developmental schema; many of these sites of literacy may be as new and unexplored as was the Open Admissions program in 1976.

As Patricia O'Connor points out in her Afterword to the special issue of *Reflections*, narrative is an important way to "reach others with the story of our experiences" (200). O'Connor points out that Robert Scholes likewise acknowledges the importance of narrative: "narrative is not just a sequencing, or the illusion of a sequence. Narrative is a sequencing of something for somebody" (200). Narrative, then, is a powerful tool for not only understanding one's own experience, but for shaping and reflecting on that experience so that others may understand it. That understanding is important as it has the power to illuminate what has remained largely hidden from public view and therefore vulnerable to fears and misconceptions. Several teachers in this study have noted the importance of sharing their knowledge and expertise, of participating in some way in this important work. A number of our colleagues have taken it upon themselves to educate the most marginalized members of our society and have called upon us to understand the social and educational



implications of educating-or not educating- these citizens. Their stories can illuminate their experiences and perhaps inspire others to take on this important and challenging work. Although this small study of six teachers offers no generalizations about what teachers teaching in similar outreach kinds of communities may experience, it may suggest common ways of experiencing these situations. The eagerness of these teachers to talk about their prison teaching also suggests the importance of reflection for all teachers, but particularly for teachers in similar settings who may feel isolated from the larger composition communities and who may have unique and powerful stories to tell. Continuing to talk and write about these experiences may be an important step in understanding how best to accept the responsibility of teaching those who have been refused acceptance into the “community of the educable” (99) and in understanding our own compelling teaching experiences in carceral institutions.

### **Author’s Note**

Portions of this material are drawn from my dissertation, *From Guarding the Tower to Diving In: Learning to Teach Writing in Prison* (2001). This article also evolved from a presentation at the March 2008 annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. I would like to thank all of the teachers who graciously shared their experiences and commentary for this project. I would also like to acknowledge Craig Hancock and the *Reflections* editors for their insightful comments on earlier drafts.