Phyllis G. Hastings with Jim Morrison

Do You Hear What I Hear?
Voices From Prison Composition Classes

The article describes the dynamics of freshman composition classes for medium-security inmates at the Saginaw Correctional Facility which were linked to parallel classes at Saginaw Valley State University, supported by SVSU student-tutors, and enhanced by collaboratively produced publications of student writing. It presents excerpts from inmates' essays that tell their stories, explore their relationships, and portray their prison world and discusses the impact of writing on inmates enrolled in the linked composition classes.

My first entry to the prison was not an intentional one, any more than the entry of most of my prison students was intended. It was a result of chance, attending a session at a Michigan Campus Compact institute in which a presenter talked about teaching in a prison and introduced the book that became my intellectual starting gate. Earl Shorris's study of the poor in *New American Blues* considers the surround of forces that keep people in poverty and claims that what the poor need is what the rich get (but often don't take advantage of), namely education in the humanities, which offers tools one needs to become political in the sense of taking control of one's life.

Why Composition?

I was familiar with creative arts and drama programs in prisons and could understand the value of promoting self-expression. I had read with excitement about Shorris' project teaching humanities in a prison. But why first-semester composition?

First, teaching composition is the most basic thing that I do. And while composition is often conceived of as a skills course to prepare students for the discourses, forms and formulas of college and more advanced academic writing, I had developed the course with a broader base. My teaching has been focused not just on the finished product but on the complex of attitudes and abilities that go into creating the written work. I see writing as thinking and communicating, both of which are essential and fundamental life abilities. This is the way

I've come to analyze the growth that needs to occur as writers develop: what I call the PQRST model:

Processes of writing: developing strategies for planning, organizing, producing and revising

Qualities of writing: learning models for presenting ideas

Rhetorical awareness: understanding the needs of audiences and being able to adapt to them

Stance of a writer: taking responsibility for one's work, and

Thinking: being able to use various processes for exploring, developing, and testing ideas

As Shorris saw the value of history, philosophy, arts, and literature for successful living, I see the value of being able to develop one's own ideas and to relate to others in a variety of modes as essential for full human life. How those abilities would be developed with incarcerated persons I had yet to discover.

Structure, Methods, and Goals of English 111

The structure of the course I took into the prison, linked to my on-campus class, had been developed originally in collaboration with my colleagues at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) as a basic plan for first-semester composition. Using Axelrod and Cooper's book *The Concise Guide to Writing* as the primary text, it centered around a series of five assignments:

1. Remembering an event in your life in which you discovered something new and important about yourself, the world or what's valuable.
2. Profile of a student, teacher, writer, or educational space with which you are familiar
3. Explanation of a concept: a value, term that plays an important role in an activity such as a sport, or a term important in a course, presented to non-experts
4. Debunking a myth, using logic and evidence to show a reasonable adult reader why a certain stereotype, widely held belief, or common idea is faulty
5. Proposing a solution to a problem in some organizational structure you are a part of, such as work, the university, or your community.

The assignments were chosen to give students experience with a variety of discourses: a range of subjects from self to familiar person or place to external subject; a range of approaches from dramatic to general impression to argument; a range of thinking processes from significance of event to controlling impression to problem analysis and support of proposal. They were chosen and defined so students would collect material from their past or their surroundings rather than depending on secondary sources. Class sessions were generally

workshops: discussions of readings related to the particular task taken from the book and supplementary sources; development and sharing of ideas for papers; and peer review of drafts. Each paper was submitted with the writer's analysis of his or her target audience and purpose for the paper, a description of the processes used during writing, and the writer's evaluation of the document. A preliminary grade was given when the paper was submitted, but the course grade was based on a portfolio containing three of the five papers completed during the semester, accompanied by a cover letter about the works chosen.

The Class in the Prison and the Linking of Classes

The class at the prison used the same materials, assignments, and schedule of activities as the class on campus, meeting two nights a week. Because I had taken a pre-retirement option of a reduced teaching load, I could volunteer my time for the added class and the linking processes. Students received written peer reviews from their own classmates and those on the other site. Since they did not have access to a Writing Center as campus students did, inmates also received comments and later one-on-one conferences on their papers from student tutors, SVSU students enrolled in an upper-level class on tutoring writing.

Transferring papers for peer review was pedagogically valuable but logistically complex—a nightmare of sorting, transferring and redistributing within a four-day time frame. Each class was divided into groups of five, and each group's drafts went to the corresponding group at the other site. The inmates' papers took a detour to the student tutors for their review. In spite of the difficulties, the process contributed a great deal to students in both groups. The depth of comments was much greater than I see in unlinked classes, since the students were not as concerned about making and keeping friends. They received comments from a variety of perspectives, not just people like themselves. And both groups seemed to take more seriously their role as colleagues.

A second opportunity for interaction was the production of an anthology. Students at both sites submitted papers, and each class established a peer review board which reviewed papers in a given category and assigned rankings. The student tutors worked with me to make final decisions and to copy-edit the works chosen. Then the student tutors designed the publication and we had copies printed for distribution on campus and elsewhere. Almost all inmates submitted work and had their work selected; only about half of the university students did. The process gave an additional incentive for consideration of audience, for collaboration, and for serious revision of work.

Prison students, given the opportunity to stretch their minds, interact with others outside the prison, and try something new, responded well to the challenge. They had no tangible reward—no grades or credits, and no tuition investment—only an opportunity to improve themselves. Their one frustration

was with the concept assignment. On campus, students could explain a concept from a course they were taking or from a sport they were involved in, but inmates had trouble finding a subject for that assignment. The proposal assignment evolved into a group project, with lively debate and the engagement of one of the student tutors as devil's advocate in relation to the group's proposal to provide college education for inmates. The debate was turned into a dialogue for the anthology. The publication opportunity gave the incarcerated writers a voice and, in the absence of credit and a grade, the only tangible reward for their hours of work.

I. Telling Their Stories: Life-Changing Events

The events we experience during our lives, especially the most powerful ones, are often beyond our control. They can shake us up, call into question our self-image, challenge our sense of self-esteem, or shatter our image of the world as a secure place. Our responses to events may be equally unsettling. To regain our equilibrium and restore our sense of self, we need to share our stories. This process helps us interpret and reinterpret who we are and what our place is; to create selves we can accept, to gain control of our lives, to understand who we are as our lives change. For those of us outside of prison, there are friends and families to listen to us as we relive events that scared or tested or humiliated or confused us, or events that showed our strengths or weaknesses or our ability to influence others or to overcome obstacles to achieve our goals.

For those in prison, however, interested listeners are hard to come by. Motivation to reflect on one's experience is limited within the mind-numbing routine of everyday prison life. Especially when the past contains the humiliation of arrest, sentencing, and imprisonment (sometimes repeated), it must seem best to just chill out and do one's own thing, one's own time, and wait.

Shadd Maruna, an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York at Albany, sheds light on the value of telling one's story. He compared two groups of persons who had been regularly engaged in criminal activity. One group had persisted in their criminal ways and the other eventually desisted. He interviewed them all, asking them to talk about their lives. In comparing their stories, he found clear patterns of difference between the two groups. The way each individual talked about his life had made a difference in whether he was able to maintain a commitment to change. My composition class did not teach students how to talk about events in their lives, nor did it ask students to discuss their criminal activity. But the course did invite them to do that talking, and to do it in the presence of interested listeners.

The first writing task was a typical one for first-year composition courses—a narrative about a learning experience. Students were to make their story vivid and dramatic and make the significance of the event clear to the reader. The tar-

get audience was not to be persons interested in the writer (e.g., not mothers, who would find any story about her son fascinating and worthy of attention), but persons who were curious about life, interested in exploring its various dimensions and learning about it from a variety of sources.

The preparation included a great deal of interaction. Within each class they brainstormed topics, talked to another about the event, and reviewed drafts. Then drafts went outside the class to the other group and the peer tutors for review. As a result, the inmates were not only revisiting events, sometimes powerfully emotional ones, but exposing the events, and themselves, to a number of other persons, both their fellow inmates, with whom they lived 24/7, and outsiders whom they had never met. Not just challenging writing but also risky. As Jim Morrison, a student in the first prison class, described the experience:

> Revealing something of yourself, something no one else around you knows, can be a painfully difficult exercise. It's almost like giving birth. You have this entity inside of you, and the need to purge it is there. Letting go of something personal and intimate to those you might barely call acquaintances is risky. Those types of risks are not common in the prison environment. But it can be a cleansing experience, the value of which can only be known by the cleansed.

Students wrote about a variety of experiences, most of them from their pre-prison lives. Some were personal success stories, ranging from the common occurrence of applying for a first job to the almost unimaginable event of dodging bullets to escape repression in the writer's native Albania. Kareem Cooper, wrote of his recovery from a serious car accident in which a friend had been killed. Doctors told Cooper he would never walk again, but he decided to leave the rehab facility and teach himself how to walk. To keep from having to ask for help, he would push his wheelchair off the porch, then scramble down the stairs and climb back in it. After months of surgeries and exercise, he regained use of his eye, his arm, and finally his legs and now can play every sport imaginable (Cooper 13).

While these stories celebrated high points and achievements, in other stories of crisis the writer was rescued. In his essay "In the Time of Need," Kevin Harris tells of attending the funeral of his mother, who had been murdered. As he fought with his feelings of disbelief in preparation for his trip to the funeral, Harris was shocked to find he would have to attend in prison garb. Only after his family assured him they wanted him, prison garb or not, was he ready for the journey. The trip through the suburbs into the pothole- and bullet-riddled city reminded him of his childhood. As he approached his destination, he began to experience anew the guilt and shame of his incarceration:

> Would I be able to look at my grandmother's face, or would shame overtake my mind? Could I face my family? Could I face my mother's friends and business colleagues? Would I be able to look at Nester

> Munis, who'd once given me a job as a personal favor to my mother despite my errant ways? (8)

Just when he felt his mind was about to shut down, he began to feel a presence in the car which gave him the strength to do what he had to do and be strong for the sake of his family. After the service was over and he had kissed his mother goodbye, he commented:

> I was glad the service was so dignified. She deserved it and it was more than I could have ever done for her. The dam holding back my tears broke (8).

Jim Morrison, in his essay "What We Love," tells of another kind of crisis, a night when his wife, then nine months pregnant with their first child, suffered a seizure. Young and inexperienced, without phone or friends in the neighborhood, clad only in his pants, he ran into the sub-freezing outdoors to summon help. When the ambulance had arrived, his panic was evident as he answered questions without knowing what he was saying and, when his wife was taken to the hospital, he beat the ambulance there by three minutes. Doctors examined his wife and assured him she and baby were both fine, but when he went home alone his terror returned.

In reflecting on the event at the end of the essay, Morrison makes clear the powerful effect of the event and then shifts to a lighter tone, bringing the narrative to a close with a traditional birth announcement and an understated finale.

> How often do we realize how fragile our existence actually is? I faced the possible loss of the only two people I loved more than life itself, and one of them I hadn't even met. Events such as this make you stop and appreciate what matters most in life. No amount of money, no possession, no status, regardless of how high, can ever take the place of the people you love or the people who love you.
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> Just in case you're interested, my son was born on December 15. James Christopher Morrison; a healthy, happy, seven pound, eight and one half ounce baby boy...I'm glad I got to know him (7).

Harris and Morrison have shown theirs readers––those present and the unseen readers of their anthologized works––their times of weakness, of fear, of retreat, but finally of survival.

Writing these narratives challenged the inmates on a variety of levels–trust of colleagues, awareness of audience needs, ability to involve others through effective narrative writing, and ability to interpret and show significance for others. Not all the students in the class were as successful as those whose writing appears here. Some narratives were boring; some were confusing because the writer didn't adequately clue in the readers. Even then, the presence of multiple readers said to the writer, "We want to hear what you have to say." And usually the writer came through with something worth hearing.

II. Re-collecting Relationships: For Better or Worse

Just as the pivotal events we experience create defining moments and need to be revisited and recast as we develop our identity and self-image, relationships with others are also critical in providing ongoing challenge and/or support. We define who we are through our association with others: our friends and our enemies, our families and our colleagues. Even relationships from the past–a relative who has died, or a romantic attachment that ended or never started–can continue its hold over us. Our role models, our idols, and our mentors are essential for helping us move ahead.

For persons in prisons, memories of relationships play a strong role in maintaining one's sense of identity and belonging, since actual relationships have usually been strained or broken. Steve Wilson, in the essay he wrote for the first class, said, "Prison is a place where you can go for years without feeling the touch of a human hand and where you can go for months without hearing a kind word. It is a place where your friendships are shallow and you know it" (11). Who is available for an inmate to follow? Again in Wilson's words, "Prison is a place where you see men you do not admire and wonder if you are like them. It is a place where you strive to remain civilized but where you lose ground and you know it" (11). And how do prisoners retain their sense of connection with the outside world? Wilson tells us, "Prison is a place where you learn that nobody needs you and that the outside world goes on without you. It is a place where, if you are married, you watch your marriage die. It is a place where you learn absence does not make the heart grow fonder, and you stop blaming your wife for wanting to live with a real man instead of a fading memory" (11). The writing students did during the class did not restore the relationships that had been fractured but it allowed them to retrieve and reconstruct some meaningful relationships in the only way possible.

Students wrote about relationships for two of the assignments, the learning experience narrative and the profile. One wrote about a probation officer who taught him about life. K. Shabazz (Miles) says that the job of Mr. Watkins, "an officer of the court and overseer of...adolescents was to give us hope, discipline, and direction" (12). His first words to the writer were, "If you mess up one time, the next time you come to report bring your toothbrush" (12). The hope came through as well: "Little brother, you can be whatever you want to be if you put your mind to it. You're not dumb, stupid, or crazy. What do you want to become when you get older? Well, start setting some goals for yourself" (12).

Another student in the class, Marvin Grey, wrote about a place rather than a person which showed him a value in life. In "The Ballroom," Grey described the gym at the Dexter-Elmhurst Recreation Center where he and others observed and learned the skills and teamwork of experienced basketball players:

> People looking on at the D.E. Center, both young and old, were not just being entertained. Rather they were making notes as if they were in a classroom learning¼.. I spotted one thin, lanky fellow with long arms and skinny but muscular legs named Silky Slim. He would signal to a shorter guy with dazzling, speedy ball handling skills called Shorty Smooth to throw the ball up toward the rim. When he did, Slim would catch the ball in midair and slam dunk with great authority, time after time, and from their reaction you could feel the adrenalin flowing through the crowd like an epidemic (10).
>
> Not only was the immediate impact conveyed strongly, but so was the long-term effect.
>
> I give a lot of credit . . . to the hard core ball players who played at the D.E. center's gymnasium for showing me another way of expressing myself and putting my mind at ease (11).

Scott Engler, in his essay "True Love Revealed, wrote of an incident involving his father. As a twelve-year-old boy, he had finished his paper route and was preparing for an outing with his friends involving "foxy babes in their sexy bikinis." Excited anticipation of the event was increased as they shared the marijuana Engler had provided. But the mood was shattered as Engler heard the booming voice of his father: "Scott, you get your ass up to the house." His friends encouraged him to run away or take refuge at their homes, but after a period of "deep, deep deliberations," knowing he would have to face his father sooner or later, he headed home.

> When I walked into the house, the air seemed to hang thick with impending doom. I was finding it difficult to breathe! I could already feel the burning on my backside and hear my father saying, "This whipping is going to hurt me more than it hurts you, because I love you so much," as he had said and done so many times in the past.
>
> I found my father sitting at the large dining room table. . . . He looked at me and said in a surprisingly low, soft, and gentle voice, "Son, just what do you think you were doing? Don't you know that smoking marijuana is the stepping stone through the door to harder drug addiction? Do you want to purposely ruin your life?"
>
> Then he came around the table and told me to stand up. I did. . . . As I stood before him, I noticed a tear running down his cheek as he put his powerful arms around me in a compassionate embrace and whispered in his ear that he loved me (9).

Like Morrison's essay in the earlier section, Engler's doesn't indicate the future of the relationship, it only shows that at one point he felt his father's care. And for a moment, at least, there was reconciliation and the love previously claimed was seen as a reality. As Engler completed the assignment and it was published in the anthology, he was anxious to get a copy to send to his father who was then in critical condition in a hospital, and it was obvious Engler

would not see him again.

Ricky Yocic's essay "The Teacher" is also about a father-child relationship, but this time the writer is the father. He tells of taking his six-year-old daughter, Jennifer, to see *Beauty and the Beast.* As the movie became scary for her, she moved onto his lap and wrapped his arm around her "as if to say she felt safe in my embrace." Then came the climax in which the Beast was killed.

> A sigh and a sob came from Jennifer, as the tears silently rolled down her face. Seeing her in this way touched the sensitive elements within my heart, causing doors to open to feelings I was always taught that boys who want to be men just didn't have or show.
>
> With the ending of the movie came a rush of unfamiliar feelings which were taking hold of me. I hurried Jennifer...so we could beat the crowd out the door. I guided her by the hands so that I could avoid anyone seeing me in this state. Jennifer broke loose and moved in front of me so that I would pick her up. Then as I raised her to my chest, she looked at me, taking her tiny little fingers and wiping the unfamiliarities from my face, saying, "Dad, it's ok, these are just feelings."
>
> ...And I thought I was going to be the one who would teach my daughter the significance of life (12).

For readers of these essays, including the on-campus students, the student-tutors, and myself, these essays provide some startling perspectives, both confirming and challenging the stereotypical images of the incarcerated. We might well expect a probation officer to be part of an inmate's past, assuming the inmate had been through the system before. We might not expect that officer to be so invested in the lives of the young men in his charge. We might not be surprised at a community gym at the heart of the inmate's childhood, but might not realize the power of the images it created. We might expect physical punishment to be a part of the inmate's young adulthood, but be surprised at the moment when that punishment was replaced by an embrace. But the final image, a big, muscular man allowing his cherished daughter to teach him he can cry–well, that's an eye-opener. We see that inmates are human: flesh, blood, and emotion. Just because they live behind bars doesn't exclude them from humanity.

III. Coming to Terms with Their Prison World: Locating Their Lives

"Where we are is who we are," says Miss Moore, the self-appointed teacher of the ghetto kids in Toni Cade Bambara's story "The Lesson." "But it don't necessarily have to be that way" (125). At the beginning of the story, the narrator Sylvia doesn't even understand she lives in a ghetto. By the end, she has deeply experienced her ghetto status and is deciding how to relate to it. Most of us do become defined by our immediate environment, and it takes a conscious effort for us to mentally move beyond it.

In *The Soul Knows No Bars,* H.B., a prizewinning playwright and inmate

who was part of a group studying philosophy with Loyola professor Drew Leder, points to a similar idea in relation to an inmate's situation in prison.

> There's a difference between *leaving* prison and *getting out* of prison. When you *get out* of prison, you get out before you leave. If you can *get out* you can stay out with no problem. But if you just *leave* prison, nine times out of ten your ass is coming back (in Leder *et al* 171).

What he means by "getting out" is making some kind of fundamental decision: "you woke up one day and got sick and tired of what you saw in the mirror" and you decided to change (171). For both Sylvia in "The Lesson" and the inmate in prison, a critical part of *not* being defined and confined by "where you are" is coming to terms with where you are and what that means, and then creating your own way of relating to that reality.

In writing about prison and publishing *Inside Out*, students in the classes were working on getting out, in Johnson's sense of the term. They were also providing for readers unfamiliar with the prison environment images and insights necessary to challenge the widespread ignorance, faulty assumptions, and prevailing stereotypes that govern our unproductive approaches to prison management.

The assignments for which the following pieces were written varied. The essay on the writer's baptism was written as a narrative of a learning experience. "My Hideaway" and "Prison is a Place" were written for the profile assignment described earlier. The other two were written for the last two assignments for the course, the first designed to challenge students to argue a point by debunking a myth and the other to argue by analyzing a problem and proposing a solution. Preparation for these two assignments involved practice in understanding the position of the intended audience, understanding the way the audience presently understands the situation, and challenging their understanding by using logic and evidence. The intent of these later assignments was to encourage the writers to move outside the writer's viewing area, to focus on the subject and to keep themselves in the background.

Three students make very strong personal statements about their stances toward prison life. Michael Sherman, in an essay that later appeared in the weekly newspaper of the Saginaw Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, tells of his baptism in the prison:

> As my eyes opened to the sight of endless rows of prison cells and bars, I heard the utter finality of the door slamming shut. In this nightmare, hope filled my soul. It was as if, like Jacob, I had wrestled with God for most of my life! In that moment I finally realized I could not win (1).

Donald Page's essay "My Hideaway" offers another positive view of life in prison, again based on religious understanding. He talks of the beauty of the

prison yard with its abundance of flowers and the sun's rays sparkling off the razor wire of the fences. His room he calls his hideaway, where he reads the Bible, watches a movie, writes, or reads letters from his family.

> It's very easy to get caught up in pessimistic views of life. For instance, I could say that it wasn't my choice to have what I have in life, but I would rather say that I will make do with what I have. I could also ask why I had to give up everything that I own–my family, my home, and my life–to live in this tiny place that was not meant for beauty...
>
> This is a place to let us know we made a mistake, and now we have to pay for it...I believe we can either fight this situation or we can use it to transform ourselves into something useful to society (10).

Steve Wilson's profile, "Prison is a Place," presents a series of vignettes that vividly portray the human reality of life in prison. The power of the essay lies in its brevity, its indirectness, its deep honesty, and its use of symbolic concrete reality to represent deep experiences. Wilson does not whine or indulge in self pity: his pointed comments are often about the "you" of the essay, namely the inmate.

> Prison is a place where you write letters and cannot think of anything to say. Where you gradually write fewer and fewer letters, finally stopping altogether.
>
> Prison is a place where you hate with clenched teeth, where you want to break, kick, and scratch and you wonder if the psychologists really know what they are talking about when they say you actually hate yourself.
>
> Prison is a place where you feel sorry for yourself. Then you get disgusted with yourself for feeling sorry for yourself; then you get mad for feeling disgusted and then try to mentally change the subject.
>
> Prison is a place where you lose your respect for the law because you see it raw and naked, twisted and bent, ignored and blown out of proportion to suit many of the people who enforce it.
>
> Prison is a place where you are smarter than the parole board because you know which guys will go straight and which ones will not. You are wrong just as often as the board members are, but you never admit it and neither do they.
>
> Prison is a place where you forget the sound of a baby's cry. You forget the sound of a dog's bark or even the sound of a car's horn.
>
> Prison is a place where you go to bed before you are tired, where you pull the blankets over your head when you are not cold. It is a place where you escape: by reading, by playing cards, or by going mad (11).

Wilson's essay speaks powerfully of the pain of prison life, the separation

from even the most common aspects of life––the touch of a hand or the bark of a dog––that we often take for granted or even regret. He shows the dehumanizing effects of prison, the withdrawal of the kinds of resources that can restore, and he makes the reader wonder at what point we would want a convicted felon to become restored, and how that might happen.

Bilal Lewis writes to debunk a myth about inmates, but he does so in an indirect way. Aware of the common view of inmates as hardened, self-centered thugs, he offers a contrasting view, waiting until the end of the essay to reveal that the life he is living is in a prison. His essay "A Day in the Life...," tells of getting up at 3:00 a.m., praying, then reviewing the previous day and its concerns: his seven-year-old daughter crying because she misses her father, his son's problems in school, his neighbor who smokes too much, his childhood friend who has died, the violence he has read about in Chicago. He moves on to consider the program he wants to begin to "enhance our morals and ethics" and his interest in finding out the name of the concerto he just heard. Then he follows his plan to learn a few Arabic words each day. He concludes: *Is this my place?*

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