

Prison Collaborative Writing: Building Strong Mutuality in Community-Based Learning

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With a response by

“Wes”

This essay explores the pedagogical lessons of student-inmate peer reviews conducted during a prison outreach project in a first-year composition class. Collaborative writing between inmates and students reveals the positive outcomes that can result from strong mutuality in community-based learning relationships. Through a qualitative analysis of student reflection papers and prisoner oral reflections, this essay shows how an emphasis on the personal during this project did not preclude systemic considerations, but rather produced productive, political outcomes. This essay concludes with a response from my community partner—a prisoner in a medium security facility and participant in the peer reviews. We hope to demonstrate how a reciprocal, relationship-based orientation can facilitate not only productive community-based learning outcomes for students and communities, but also a new type of scholarship—one more thoroughly enriched by community voices.

Most service and community-based learning practitioners can recall Bruce Herzberg’s seminal article, “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” published in *College Composition and*

Communication in 1994. Herzberg shared lessons from a course that investigated the power structures inherent in the educational system, while also engaging students in literacy tutoring at a homeless shelter. Yet this service learning component was not entirely successful. The problem, according to Aaron Schultz and Anne Ruggles Gere, was that while Herzberg’s student tutors “cared for” others, they did not alter their beliefs in individualism and meritocracy. Herzberg himself concluded, “[i]f our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the person for a systemic explanation” (309). Other scholars have echoed this warning. Margaret Himley worries that forms of service learning such as tutoring can uphold “power asymmetries,” while Linda Flower contends that “[t]o rest in the mere personal puts one on the slippery slope of philanthropy and charity that preserves the status of giver and receiver, expert and client. It allows one to ignore or evade the larger social systems and logics that create a world of ‘Others’ in the first place” (Himley 417; Flower 2).

For many years, service and community-based learning practitioners were therefore cautioned to avoid the “mere personal” in favor of community work that illuminates systemic reasons for social problems such as imprisonment, poverty, and homelessness. More recently, however, scholars such as Tom Kerr, David Coogan, and Lori Pompa have helped turn attention back to “personal” or relationship-based orientations in service and community-based learning. Kerr, for instance, reports on his course “Writing for Social Justice, Writing for Change,” a capstone senior seminar in rhetoric in which students corresponded with prisoners through “the intimate medium of personal letters.” This medium enabled “embodied, personal dialogue” that transformed student attitudes towards prisoners through “connect[ions] with people” (67).¹ David Coogan also advocates personal dialogue in his article, “Moving Students into Social Movements: Prisoner Reentry and the Research Paper.” Reflecting on students’ work with a nonprofit prisoner reentry

1 Kerr explains, “[i]t is one thing to read an anthologized personal account of prison life or of experiences leading up to prison, yet quite another to be addressed by name and to have one’s own questions taken up thoughtfully by currently incarcerated people. It is the difference between disembodied, relatively risk-free ‘academic’ discourse, and embodied, personal dialogue that carries with it possibilities and risks connected to any human involvement” (67).

program, Coogan affirms the power of dialogue to inspire critical thinking capable of contextualizing processes of social change and promoting students' participation in these processes. For this reason, Coogan advocates outreach projects "that center on writing and the relationships that writing can form with community partners" (151). Finally, Lori Pompa's "Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program" joins students and prisoners in a semester-long course held in a local prison. This program positions students and prisoners in a reciprocal relationship as fellow learners: "[w]hen students attend class together as equals, borders disintegrate and barriers recede," Pompa explains. "What emerges is the possibility of considering the subject matter from a new context—that of those living within that context" (27).

Similar aims informed the prison outreach project discussed in this essay. This project occurred in conjunction with my course, "Containment and Liberation," a first-year theme section of rhetoric and composition. Exploring literal and figurative forms of entrapment and freedom in American Society, this course included a community engagement component that invited students to participate in a partnered, in-person peer review with a prisoner. Incarcerated participants were enrolled in a prison education program sponsored by a local Christian university with outreach ties to my former graduate institution (a large state research university). This education program offered prisoners associate degrees in exchange for five years of service within the state's Department of Corrections.² Prior to meeting in person, students and prisoners read and responded in writing to Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," a short story which students interpreted in the context of Foucault's "The Carceral" and prisoners interpreted in the context of their own institutional experiences.³ Student and prisoner pairs met for one hour during the exchange to read and discuss their papers together before reconvening for a group debriefing.⁴

2 Graduates serve as mentors and assistants to the education of other prisoners, in addition to AIDS Ward workers or hospice care assistants, for instance.

3 Should I conduct a similar project again, I will offer prisoners the opportunity to read Foucault as well. During this project, I taught a guest lesson in the prison on Foucault's "The Carceral," but I now recognize the importance of assigning the actual text.

4 Student-prisoner pairs were selected voluntarily as opposed to being assigned. During the group debriefing, each student-prisoner pair shared lessons

My choice of peer review for this outreach project (a perhaps more manageable option for community-based learning practitioners lacking the resources to orchestrate a semester-long class) stemmed largely from the possibilities inherent in personal dialogue—those advocated by scholars such as Kerr, Coogan, and Pompa. By fostering student-prisoner dialogue around a common text, I hoped to “draw people normally separated by difference into new roles as partners in inquiry” (Flower 44). An exploration of this outreach project reveals the positive outcomes that can result from establishing strong mutuality in community-based learning relationships. Peer review levels the hierarchal structure of service models like tutoring, initiates dialogue about social and institutional containment, and thus carries potential for producing mutuality—defined here as “the sharing of ideas in a learner-to-learner environment by establishing a personal respect between parties as teachers/learners/scholars.”⁵ In view of this emphasis on mutuality, this essay therefore jettisons the term “service learning” (which implies a hierarchal outreach relationship) in favor of the term “community-based learning” (which better captures the reciprocity that informed this project). Even more importantly, this emphasis on mutuality extends to the reciprocal nature of this essay—a product of my collaboration with my community partner, a prisoner and peer review participant who has served as co-investigator and essay respondent for this article.

This scholarly reorientation builds upon Cushman’s “Sustainable Service Learning Programs,” which encourages professors to “view the site as one where research, teaching, and service can take place in collaboration with community members and students” (44). Yet there has been very little joint scholarly production between those in the field of Rhetoric and Composition and the community members with whom they work—at least in terms of the substantial, visible presence of community voices in published scholarship (by this I refer to co-authored articles, essay responses, etc.). Even Cushman—who advocates “creating knowledge *with* and for community members”—

learned and new perspectives gained (on both their essays and institutional containment) with the class.

- 5 This definition was developed with my community partner, a prisoner in a medium security facility who participated in the peer reviews and who has served as co-investigator and respondent to this essay. I use quotations because although my community partner and I have developed this definition together, this phrasing is his own.

limits her claim by recommending that research “*harmonize*” with “community needs and perspectives” rather than more fully involve community members as co-investigators in, and fellow contributors to, scholarly production (Cushman 46, *italics mine*).

My community partner and I hope to demonstrate how a reciprocal orientation can foster not only productive outcomes for students and communities, but also a new type of scholarship—one more fully enriched by community voices. We take our cue from Lorelei Blackburn, who has recently argued for the importance of “organic relationships” in service and community-based learning. According to Blackburn, an organic (versus product-based) orientation privileges connections between scholars and community members that are rooted in respect and ongoing collaboration. This reorientation promises to “positively change the way we engage with communities, the way we teach students, and the way we conduct research” (6). This essay springs from one such organic relationship. It is a study that my community partner, a prisoner in a medium security facility, has helped define, develop, and write.⁶ It is a study that has progressed in stages “within a sustainable and reciprocal relationship” that has outlasted the community-based learning project analyzed here (Blackburn 5).

Our reciprocal examination of this project reveals ways in which student-prisoner peer review fosters personal dialogue carrying political implications. Through a qualitative analysis of student reflection papers and prisoner oral reflections, we show how an emphasis on the personal during this project did not prelude systemic considerations, but rather produced productive, political outcomes (for the most part). Political in the context of prison outreach means several things: 1) carrying implications for impacting or changing

6 A word about methodology. This research study emerged organically through a shared interest in (and subsequent investigation of) an outreach project *as it unfolded*. Consistent with Eli Goldblatt’s advice that we develop relationships “before we...set up research projects,” I did not enter the service site with a pre-defined research methodology (283). Rather, a voluntary essay by my community partner entitled “Students Exploring Freedom: A Reaction to the Interaction” (written immediately after the peer reviews took place) sparked the research study. For this reason, I do not have tapes or transcripts of the peer reviews. I draw instead from student reflection papers and prisoner oral reflections gathered during a debriefing after the outreach project took place.

public attitudes and policies; 2) raising student awareness of the systemic reasons for this social problem; and 3) mutually involving/engaging those who are incarcerated in the process of working to ameliorate the American prison industrial complex. In conjunction with this definition, we understand “systemic” to mean of or relating to social structures—particularly as these structures perpetuate inequalities and “influences and biases, both realized and unrealized, that affect how a person thinks (and in this case, how a person writes and analyzes).”⁷

To challenge students to confront and critically reassess these influences and biases, peer review was chosen as a means by which to initiate mutual dialogue between students and prisoners by dividing tasks equally between parties. Each of the two authors was asked to initially assess his/her paper, to read his/her paper out loud while the partner followed along (making notes to use during review), and then to discuss the paper with his/her partner. Unlike certain other forms of prison outreach, this project did not involve a facility tour (which tends to promote voyeurism) or tutoring sessions (which tend to maintain hierarchal boundaries between students and prisoners). Rather, students entered the exchange familiar with peer review—a practice that had taught students to work collaboratively with others and consider new perspectives. As one student reflected prior to the trip, “this would be a great opportunity for me to open my horizons.” Another noted that “[p]eer reviewing in general is very interesting and I think peer reviewing with someone different will be an interesting experience and I will be able to learn from someone different.” This project’s ability to build a learner-to-learner environment was further facilitated by both the prisoners’ welcoming demeanor and the cozy library and classroom in which the peer reviews took place (an interior starkly distinct from more austere buildings throughout the facility). These inviting conditions, along with the peer-review model, helped cultivate an exchange that promoted personal dialogue and complicated cultural representations of prisoners.

Indeed, in this particular exchange, peer review fostered intimate conversations that challenged my students to look past “fragmented

7 The phrasing in quotes is that of my community partner. The definition was collectively assembled.

representations” of prisoners in *People* magazine, on CSI, and on CNN (Sloop 194). Students discovered that their partners were nothing like “what movies, television, and media portray as truth.” As another put it, “I thought [this experience would be] eye-opening, but I didn’t realize how much of a reality check it would be.” These awakenings occurred alongside reciprocal dialogue. Students and prisoners conversed, questioned, and laughed with one another. “[The exchange] reminded me of any other class consisting of friends,” a student wrote later. “[W]e were all students, we were all teachers,” remembered another, “ready to learn and show the ideas that rest on the plains and corners of our minds.” This last student comment is particularly notable. Much like the literacy tutors Nancy Welsh discusses in a 2002 CCC article, this student foregoes common binaries⁸ such as “subject-object, active-passive, knower-known” in favor of “a subject-subject logic in which all participants . . . are understood and composed as active, as knowing” (247).

Yet besides fostering reciprocal dialogue and complicating cultural representations of prisoners, this exchange was intended to illuminate systemic reasons for crime such as poverty, insufficient schooling, and unstable home environments—steering students away from solitary conceptions of personal responsibility. At several points during the exchange, however, prisoners volunteered such conceptions—embracing personal responsibility for their crimes and admonishing students against following a similar path. One prisoner, for instance, told students out loud during the debriefing that they “could have been me had I made different choices while in high school, and can still be me if [students] don’t keep [their] choices as being the right ones.” Another prisoner, according to one student’s reflection paper, “drilled” into his partner’s head “that he made a mistake and he knows he has to pay his dividends for his doing.” A third student’s reflection paper reported, “[w]hat surprised me was that [my partner] told me not to feel bad for him. He said that he made the decisions that put him in there.” Finally, in a spontaneous essay entitled “Students Exploring Freedom: A Reaction to the Interaction” (written immediately after the peer review), my community partner and essay respondent, Wes,

8 As Patricia Webb, Kirsti Cole, and Thomas Skeen recount, much service learning in the 1980s-90s “posited the student as ‘knower’ and the members of the community as the ‘other’ who needed the ‘knower’s’ expertise” (238-39).

characterized his prison community as those “finding grace to bloom within any set of circumstances, even when those circumstances are self-created consequences.”

While this emphasis on “self-created consequences” appears initially problematic (the majority of these prisoners were primarily lower-class African American males, many serving time for crimes related to drugs and gang violence), my students (unlike Herzberg’s tutors) did *not* leave with reinforced notions of individualism that curbed their search for systemic explanations. Rather, students’ reflection papers indicate how a reciprocal, relationship-based orientation—anchored in the personal—produced political implications.

It gave me the revelation that he and I are not two completely different species on different axes of the universe. We are both human and capable of doing the wrong, *the difference being that our society saw fit to punish his behavior.*

Darryl⁹ really drilled in my head that he made a mistake and he knows he has to pay his dividends for his doing, but he seriously regrets what he did and would never do it again. He started to tell me about how life at a prison is a life that no one should end up with. They have no rights practically and they have no ‘say’ in what the United States does as a whole, inmates are just imprisoned in buildings and are a ‘nobody’ until they are released. Darryl will not get out until he is 63 years, and this made me feel for him because he was talking about all the dreams he has outside of prison. No one wants to die alone and no one wants to be told what to do every minute of every day. *Some crimes I believe are not worth the time they are given.*

It also gives you a reality check on...making good decisions because one screw up and any of us could end up in the system, just another number...[This experience] *really opened my eyes to the justice system now and how I perceive so many issues without really taking the time to see how the issues affect everyone. Also I feel that a lot of people argue against rights in prison but I wonder how many people*

9 All prisoner and student names have been changed to pseudonyms.

have ever known someone in that position? Would they still support taking away their rights and all of the same legislation that they have up until this point?

After the prison trip, my mind was changed about education in the prison system. Hearing about James's life story and his future plans it is obvious that this education system has helped him prioritize his life and realize what is really important.

These passages, to varying degrees, transform the personal into the political. Student one begins by aligning herself with her partner—both equally “capable of doing the wrong” but separated by *social custom* rather than interior moral agency. Her statement indicates an initial movement from individual to structure, with promise for further critical thought. Student two relates the story of Darryl’s “mistake,” but soon segues into a discussion of institutional dehumanization.¹⁰ Rory notes that “[n]o one wants to die alone” or “to be told what to do every minute of every day. Some crimes,” he concludes, “are not worth the time they are given.” Here, Rory employs a train of logic that moves from personal to communal to political. Rory first reflects on Darryl’s day-to-day injustices, then applies these injustices to collective human rights, and finally concludes with a political assessment. For student three, the personal promotes critical thinking about prisoner rights and plants seeds for further public involvement. Rhetorical questions indicate her reassessment of the justice system—one attuned to structural considerations and carrying “implications for other, more extensive efforts” (Schutz and Gere 136).

Student four goes even further by acknowledging a change of political opinion as a result of the outreach experience. Notably, this student posits a direct correlation between James’s assumption of individual responsibility and her own support of prison education. A fifth student crystallizes the power of the “politicized” personal when she confessed during the car ride home, “This makes me change my mind about the death penalty. I could never stand to see any of those guys in there killed.” Notable, this student had been paired with Jay—the

10 Note that Darryl himself politicizes the personal when arguing that despite his “mistake,” “life at a prison is a life that no one should end up with.”

prisoner who most fervently embraced individual choice. Like Kim, Kara left not contented by Jay’s “just dues,” but rather newly opposed to the death penalty. She extrapolated the personal to make it both political and collective.

Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere worry that “personal” forms of service and community-based learning will remain unconnected to larger communities. As newly independent adults, however, my students will carry their critical thinking into the voting booth, onto their campus, and into their eventual careers—where it is my hope that they will “populate” public discourse both “productively” and responsibly (Coogan 150). More immediately, many students carried their critical thinking into future assignments for our course. Essay three, for instance, asked students to prepare a researched argument on a topic of their choice. Over half of those who participated in the prison writing exchange argued for increased educational opportunities for prisoners. One student, moreover, converted his essay into editorial form and submitted it for publication in the student paper.

Dan W. Butin recently lamented in his book *Service-Learning in Theory and Practice* that “while researchers have begun to articulate *what* positive outcomes may accrue from service-learning, there is almost no solid research on *how* such outcomes occur” (16). I maintain that outreach relationships built on strong mutuality can foster productive outcomes from community work. As one prisoner, Darryl, told me during a debriefing, the “struggles” he and Rory shared were the reason the peer review “went further than writing. It started a relationship—and produced good writing *because* it produced a relationship.” Here, Darryl offers one answer to Butin’s question about “*how*” positive outcomes occur, while also echoing Coogan’s call for outreach projects that “center on writing and the relationships that writing can form with community partners.” Positive outcomes stem from the personal relationships and sense of identification that peer review facilitates between students and community partners. Importantly, however, Darryl posits “good writing” as the *product*, not precursor, of outreach relationships built on strong mutuality.¹¹

11 While Coogan posits writing as a conduit for relationships, Darryl suggests that good writing *stems from* strong relationships.

Other prisoner and student comments support the link between strong mutuality and productive outcomes. Ricky, for instance, remembered

[w]hen they came in they were scared, but when we started talking you could almost see them struggling. There's things they'll ask me as a fellow man. Certain things they'll ask me that they won't ask you [the teacher] because we're worried about what everyone else thinks. He could ask me questions without feeling dumb.

Ricky recounts students' process of critical thinking ("when we started talking you could almost see them struggling") and inquiry ("[h]e could ask me questions...") rooted in a sense of mutuality. Ricky perceives himself as his partner's "fellow man"¹²—a position that affords the student a more genuine conduit for critical inquiry than that of the teacher. Importantly, students perceived incarcerated persons in similar ways: those who were "prisoners" and "criminals" before the peer review became "partners," "classmates," and "friends" during and after the exchange (a few students and prisoners even created nicknames for one another). This relationship-based orientation enabled students to (as one put it) "gain respect for the kind of person they are" and "learn from someone that has a unique understanding of this topic that I would never have."

For one prisoner, James, this process was anchored in humor—a means of deconstructing "Hollywood" representations of prisoners. "We crack jokes to let them know we're people too," James explained, "[t]hat's what I believe happened with your students. 'Oh man, I never would have expected that.'" A student's reflection paper recounts a similar process, remembering that during the debriefing, "we made jokes" and "talked like we had known each other for years." This lighted-hearted, relationship-building atmosphere helped students feel comfortable enough to ask "any questions that we had" and pursue the type of critical thinking that Coogan believes can invest students in social change. "It takes time," James qualifies, but "little by little it's broken down."

12 Ricky articulated a reciprocal position at other points as well, remembering for instance that "[t]hey [students] young and wild and I remember the days I was young and wild."

Ultimately, this outreach project demonstrates the value of a relationship-based orientation in community-based learning. In addition to producing a variety of political outcomes, the strong mutuality present during the exchange carried equally meaningful (and entirely unanticipated) personal effects for one community partner. “I had a selfish interest,” Ramone confessed. “I have a son that age. [The peer review] was an opportunity to get some idea how he thinks . . . probin’ . . . figuring out how to bridge the gap and relate to him.” “It was challenging,” Ramone concludes, “but also began to provide some ways of thinking to help me meet [my son] where he is . . . I hope one day I’ll have a relationship with him.” This passage posits the value of the “personal” in its own right—reminding us that community-based learning outcomes assessment must make room for the unexpected results that community partners find meaningful.

I want to close by acknowledging that this article would likely not exist if my community partner had not initiated critical analysis of this outreach project. Shortly after the peer reviews took place, he composed a voluntary essay entitled “Students Exploring Freedom: A Reaction to the Interaction.” This essay made several important observations about the outreach project as a whole, including its relationship-based nature¹³ and the “commonality” forged between students and prisoners, who “both want freedom in the most desperate terms. For the one,” Wes explained, “freedom is defined as being released to make choices about the future; for the other, it is being released from the choices of the past.” This essay crystallized two noteworthy aspects of the exchange: 1) a sense of mutuality between students and prisoners (albeit one underlined by crucial differences); and 2) prisoners’ emphasis on personal choice. In doing so, his essay convinced me that this outreach project warranted further, scholarly investigation. I began the research process and continued my conversations with Wes, who offered further evidence (in the form of a counterpoint) that a reciprocal, relationship-based orientation yields productive community-based learning outcomes.¹⁴

13 Wes wrote that “what happened” during the project “is proof-positive that humans are social creatures rather than merely intellectual; Bartleby served as a platform of learning, but it was life lessons that dominated the conversations.”

14 Wes said to me: “Think about what didn’t happen with [my peer review partner] that did happen with all the others—it never got personal.” Wes will

The 2012 CCCC theme, “Writing Gateways,” provided an occasion for Wes to enter scholarly discourse in a more formal, written capacity. “How does the discipline welcome in new teachers, scholars, and students?” the call for proposals asked; this question seemed ripe for building a gateway for community voices at our convention. I formed a roundtable entitled “Lessons from the Inside: Reconsidering Rhetorical Concepts through the Lens of the Prison Writing Classroom” that would feature three scholarly presentations followed by a series of prisoner responses. In January 2012, I completed a conference version of this article and sent it to Wes (now at a different prison having graduated from the associate degree program). He sent back a four-page written response that was read, along with my essay, at the 2012 CCCC Convention. From here, the next natural step seemed revision and development, followed by submission to a scholarly journal. *Reflections* was chosen because of its commitment to community-based writing, and we hope that our article will make an original contribution in this area.

To close my portion of this essay, I return to Blackburn, who asserts that when outreach relationships “gro[w] organically, around mutual interests and respect,” they will not necessarily end when the service project does. What has made this outreach relationship so remarkable is our mutual interest in the outreach project itself—our shared desire to better understand its dynamics and contribute to a body of knowledge about prison literacy work. It is worth considering how more of these types of scholarly collaborations might enrich the fields of Community-Based Learning and Service Learning studies.

RESPONSE TO: Prison Collaborative Writing: The Outcomes of Community-Based Learning Relationships Built on Strong Mutuality

I believe it is wise that I preface all of my observations within the proper context of my own qualifications, or the lack thereof. I have been graciously invited into a conversation with wise scholars, and in that respect I see myself as the guest in this discussion. Yet I am a member of a marginalized community that so many educators reach out to affect, and in this respect my observations carry some weight. So I humbly offer my observations to the brilliant minds of the scholars while realizing that I speak as a sophomore in the truest sense of the word—a “wise fool.”

I was deeply impressed by the approach of Dr. Grace Wetzel’s peer review project *because* of its relationship-based nature. My original voluntary essay reflecting on the project emphasized two important observations relative to this collaborative article. The first regards the impact I experienced from being allowed to be viewed as a “peer” by university students who were not incarcerated. Specifically, I was intrigued by how the peer review morphed into conversations about life lessons in a manner that clearly indicated prisoners and university students related to one another as true peers. The second observation regarded the sense that I had that a project of this nature could actually impact the institution of American prisons if the university students were truly affected by the experience. I wrote, “University education should actually be combined with practical application lessons so students can actually *live out what they learn*” (emphasis added). I now understand this concept as the hope that the students would politicize their experience; that is, that they would critically analyze their views about crime and punishment and engage in a productive stance regarding criminal justice issues. I had no idea at the time that my simple set of honest observations would speak to the heart of a discussion about service learning models.

As Grace began to converse with me about a deeper analysis of the project, she shared with me copies of articles, encouraging me to consider the implications of my observations through the lenses of the scholars. Among others, I read Linda Flower's concern about the "social systems and logics that create a world of 'Others'" and how she feared the "mere personal" would continue to enable those systems. I considered the observations of Aaron Schultz, Anne Ruggles Gere, and Margaret Himley concerning the potential weaknesses of tutoring in breaking down individualism and meritocracy. And then David Coogan's idea that service learning projects could create "social movements" and Tom Kerr's discovery of the potential of "embodied personal dialogue" as a catalyst for critical thinking about the prison industrial system expanded my considerations of the learning project in which I had participated with Grace. I noted a similarity between these two scholars and her motives to use our peer-review project to level hierarchal structures and promote "positive service outcomes" and, in this case, possibly produce "productive, political outcomes." But it was while reading Lorelei Blackburn's description of an "organic relationship" model, which values "relationships" above service learning projects and products, that an original observation came into focus for me.

Evidence suggests there is a difference between the personal element in this community-based project and the "mere personal" about which the scholars warn. While the "mere personal" may "preserve the status of giver and receiver, expert and client" and continue to enable systemic influences, the personal in the instant project was a *mutual* element that did not flow only in one direction *from* the students to prisoners. This personal functioned in a reciprocal relationship, flowing from one learner to the other regardless of whether that learner was a member of the marginal or the majority community. My portion of this article will attempt to demonstrate how I see mutuality as the dynamic that allows for a personal interaction which enables positive community-based learning outcomes (in the instant case politically productive outcomes), while simultaneously contributing to the field of scholarship.

To recap my university partner's observations about the benefits the personal element created for her university students, notice how this

personal is distinguished in its function in this project. Without the dialogue stemming from personal interaction there would have been no “reality check,” no realization that the students and the inmates were not “two completely different species on different axes of the universe.” There would have been no humanization of Darryl as a fellow man with rights and “dreams,” and no insight that “any of us could end up in the system.” Without the personal element, James would still be a faceless prison number without “future plans” and life priorities, and men on death row would not have been transformed into the affectionate handle of “those guys in there” who could be executed. The realizations sprouting from this person-to-person dialogue were apparently more than students simply relating to prisoners as their fellow-man. Grace demonstrated how the students moved from the individual to critical thinking about political and systemic issues such as “social custom,” “institutional dehumanization,” reassessment of the criminal justice system, and the death penalty. Even though the prisoners had emphasized self-created consequences within their individual stories, the students were still able to recognize where the lines of personal culpability were drawn and where the influences of social and political systemic factors began. One might argue that systemic factors were highlighted through the personal stories of the prisoners as preconceived hierarchies were deconstructed and the students were able to consider how they themselves could make similar choices and become entrapped by the social system. It seems mutual dialogue privileged a relational exchange, which in turn prevented the students from hiding within safe confines away from the world of “Others.” Therefore systemic factors were obvious rather than obscured. I conclude that mutuality functioned as a catalyst which allowed objective consideration of larger social issues.

In fact, evidence of this project suggests when mutuality is absent, revelation of systemic influences may also be absent. Consider a counterpoint. When I first read my university partner’s initial paper which highlighted the responses of the university students to the project, I naturally sought for comments from my own peer review partner. When I found no reference of his remarks, I inquired of Grace and found the student had confessed that his preconceptions of inmates had not changed at all. Although I felt a bit narcissistic, I remember the emotions I experienced as I considered the fact that, after spending over an hour with me, he was unmoved about

whether my punishment was just, untouched by my unique set of circumstances, and generally unaffected with my plight as a prisoner. Needless to say I had been hoping for results such as these and I remember wondering whether I was *that* bad of a guy. I then began reflecting upon the time I had spent with my peer partner and I remembered how I had attempted to help him relate to me by being approachable and open to any personal questions he might have had about me. However, he chose not to ask any personal questions about my life, family, or crime.¹⁵ He was a great guy with a good paper, but he never heard my story, preferring rather to let the conversation comfortably center around the writing project alone. It was then that I said to Grace, “Think about what didn’t happen with [my peer review partner] that *did* happen with all the others - it never got personal.” And without the presence of a reciprocal relationship perhaps “Other” structures were maintained and political affect never happened. It seems that the evidence of this project leans in favor of mutuality as a benefit for the students, not a barrier.

However, mutuality did not yield positive outcomes only for university students. As an objective investigator reading the reflections of my fellow prisoners, the relational element of the project stood out to me in its value to the incarcerated. It is without any bitterness against society that I suggest the personal element is noticeably absent within the prison community in general. I suspect most prisoners would lament that we are seldom spoken *to* as much as we are spoken *about*. Inmates are often grouped together and misrepresented by the social media and entertainment industry, and even by the security system of the department of corrections,¹⁶ which robs the prisoner of his individuality while creating that world of “Others” at the same time. If followed to its extreme, in my experience, the non-personal works in my sub-society to promote dehumanization. But note how the

15 These observations about my peer review partner should not be taken as contrary to the initial impression given in my voluntary essay (that of feeling like a “peer”). My initial reflection paper had reviewed the project as a whole, based mainly on the statements and responses I had heard during the group debriefing following the one-hour peer review. Furthermore, the essay was written before I was aware of my peer review partner’s lack of response.

16 *University partner’s note on this point:* It is worth mentioning that when I sent Wes a manila envelope of scholarly articles for this project over the summer, the articles were confiscated as a potential threat to security and held and examined for over a month before they were deemed appropriate and finally delivered to Wes.

prisoners grasped at rehumanizing themselves through reciprocal relationship. Darryl chose to speak of the good writing the project produced in terms of *shared* “struggles” with his peer partner. Ricky recognizes himself as his partner’s fellow man and admits his partner had an avenue of inquiry with him that the instructors did not have, but he phrases his description in terms that shows how *he* relates to the same challenges. “Certain things they’ll ask me that they won’t ask you [the teacher] because we’re worried about what everyone else thinks.” Ricky’s use of the inclusive term is insight into his desire to relate to his peer. He is not thinking in terms of inquiry benefitting the service learning project, he is rehumanizing through relationship. James also strove for a sense of humanization through humor. He admittedly worked through “crack[ing] jokes . . . to let them know we’re people, too” until perceived misrepresentations “little by little” were “broken down.” My own reflection paper sought to demonstrate the importance that I placed on being permitted to be viewed as a fellow student among peers. (Imagine what being invited to co-author a scholarly article is doing for my self-esteem!)

This evidence of how mutuality benefitted my community is not just the value of the personal in its own right, as Grace described it in Ramone’s case. Prisoners often assume people in different social classes cannot relate to their plight—not *will not*, but *cannot* relate. While my fellow prisoners and I resisted the misconceptions we perceived in those who were outsiders to our community, our own assumptions were inevitably affected once we felt we were on common ground with peers. Rehumanization as a positive outcome brought with it the hope that we are not so different from those reaching out to educate us. This demonstrates how the personal was flowing *from* us *to* the university students in mutual benefit.

Prisoners also further benefitted from the community-based learning project’s mutuality by being allowed to analyze the project along with Grace. While we are aware of the social challenges we face as prisoners, we are mostly ignorant of how educational scholars view our challenges. We can express how we would like them to be viewed, but are not always privileged to listen in on the discussion. Therefore, we remain ignorant of the social discourse of our plight and unable to objectively examine it without the bias that our own pain creates.

However, when reciprocal relationship produces joint collaboration and analysis, we become aware of the potential of our society toward improvement, aware of the challenges facing our educators, and even aware of which data is most valuable for analysis. Without scholars involving my community in relationship, we remain blinded to the discipline as a whole. Grace returned post-project and asked for our analysis, allowing us to glimpse the social discourse for ourselves. This knowledge seems directly proportional to the prisoner's hope for the future.

This particular aspect of mutuality within this project truly intrigued me. Consider that Grace's desire for producing positive outcomes was geared in part toward the political activism of her students. She desires them to "carry their critical thinking into the voting booth, onto their campuses, and into their eventual careers" where they might "'populate' public discourse both 'productively' and responsibly." *But what about the inmates?* I wondered. *Can we politicize through the personal, too? Are we limited to only participating in the activism process by allowing ourselves to be subjects of study?* Actually, it seems to me that a reciprocal relationship may have powerful political potential for a project's community members through mutuality that the "mere personal" can never obtain. Once I realized that the personal element in this project was not limited to merely being an ingredient in the one hour peer review but that it also extended to the analysis of the project, specifically *this* collaborative article evolving from an organic relationship, I realized that my and my fellow prisoners' participation in the political process was no longer indirect. Therefore by extension, perhaps marginalized groups that are allowed to analyze community-based learning projects side-by-side with scholars have an avenue to *directly* participate in both the grander issues affecting their communities, and the scholarship of the discipline, ultimately creating a new type of scholarship. I want to make the case for this observation in two ways.

First, I submit that a community member's analysis is valuable to the scholars; that is, it is true analysis and not merely one's opinion about a project's strengths and weaknesses. Grace did not inquire of prisoners after the project merely to gather data. For my part, for example, she invited me to consider implications and affects of

both systemic structures in service and community-based learning and the dangers of the “mere personal” in such projects. When I shared my thoughts in my response to her essay through the 2012 CCCC Convention, she validated my observations as true analysis. Allow me to briefly summarize those thoughts that I shared in that response.

I noticed that her initial impression of the service learning project lacked insight about certain systemic affects *upon* the personal simply because, as an outsider of my community, she was not aware of certain contributing factors. While I clearly argued in favor of keeping the personal in community-based learning projects involving prisoners, I felt it should probably be emphasized that systemic influences should never be completely removed from consideration. No learning project occurs in a systemic vacuum, and even the individual person involved in a relational exchange brings with him his own systemic influence. For example, much might be read into our actions of volunteering our own personal culpability for our crimes, but it should be noted that the particular program that sponsored our education is a religious based program that emphasizes personal culpability in light of a Biblical world view. Perhaps then this personal element was a systemic influence, at least in part. Furthermore, such a world view holds to a type of mutuality as a foundational conviction of education; specifically that Christ-like love and charity to one’s fellow man is the most effective means to educate him. It should be asked, then, how much those systemic convictions influenced my own initial critical observations of the peer review project that I wrote about in my voluntary essay, where I celebrated the relational nature of an educational experience. After all, it is easy to observe what one already believes and is already expecting to see. And one more example may be found in the case of Jay, who so drastically affected his peer review partner’s opinion on the death penalty. Prior to entering the educational program, Jay was actually trained to share his personal story in another program which brought troubled youths into the prisons in order to hear stories of convicted criminals for the purpose of helping to steer the youths away from making poor choices that may lead to a life of crime. Perhaps it was not the “personal” at all that affected his peer partner as much as it was Jay’s former training in motivational speaking. Each of these observations highlight that

the personal itself may have been an element of another system—a system motivated by a particular political point of view.

Although my analysis lacks the depth and insight that scholarly training might produce, Grace's validation of my analysis from a scholar's perspective highlighted the strength and potential that a relational side-by-side collaboration can produce. Without an organic relationship continuing beyond the boundaries of the initial peer review project, she would never have known the facts about Jay's prior training, and may never have considered the systemic effects upon the personal element that I noticed because of being *in* the community affected by those unique systems. At the least, my analysis uniquely contributed to the field of scholarship by providing a data source for this study while provoking critical thinking about the balance of personal and systemic considerations in service and community-based learning.

Therefore, and my second point in arguing the unique productive potential of mutuality in learning projects, because a community member's analysis *is* valuable to the public discourse of his community's larger issues, giving voice to that analysis privileges the member with influence toward an ever-widening audience with that discourse. The reciprocal relationship in the instant case, allowed me to politicize the personal through this collaborative article, thus being heard by those in the voting booths, on the university campuses, and those whose career choice is in the field of education. Mutuality is here demonstrated to be a productive element for community members in that it empowers their voices to break out of the confines of the project at hand, join in with the social discourse, and be heard by the field of scholarship. I do not believe the "mere personal" that allows service learning participants to be the "knower" and the community member to be the "known" (Welsh)—a personal element that flows in one direction—could allow such a productive effect.

In conclusion, I believe the evidence of the analysis of this peer review project supports my university partner's claims that the personal can be productive in community-based learning and can clearly contribute to scholarship in the field of pedagogy, but only if the personal aspect flows in mutual exchange. I am honored that my

opinions and observations in this matter were not only asked for, but were allowed to be represented in my own words. I’m excited to see how other collaborative articles and discussions may contribute to and refine the analysis of future community-based learning projects. I am also excited at the potential of affecting my incarcerated community through such an approach.

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“Wes” is currently completing a 20 year sentence in a state department of corrections. He serves as an accountability mentor to other prisoners, small group leader, and assistant for certain religious programs at the institution where he is housed.

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